YOUTH RELATIONSHIPS WITH LAND AND PLACE IN THE NECHAKO WATERSHED

by

Tavia Stein McKinnon

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Abstract

Scholars have been calling for the integration of the natural environment within social work for over thirty years. However, the literature provides little insight into youth perspectives on their relationships with land and place, particularly in rural and remote communities. In fall 2022, I interviewed twelve students ages 14-17 at Fort St James Secondary School in BC's Nechako Lakes District (School District 91) about their experiences spending time outdoors. By student choice, half of these interviews took place inside their school and half took place in outdoor settings nearby the school. Through reflexive thematic analysis, I developed five themes from our interviews, including (1) Specificity in relationships: Where we are (and who we are) matters; (2) Pathways to negotiating relationships with land and place; (3) Intersections of community, land, and youth resilience; (4) People are connected through place and time; and (5) Youth have agency and responsibility. My discussion links youth relationships with land and place to social work practice and highlights connections between the resilience of youth, their communities, and the land and water they rely on. This research contributes to a growing body of literature on social work and the environment and identifies future avenues for the integration of land and place within research.

Keywords: connection to land, connection to place, critical place inquiry, eco-social work, environmental social work, Fort St James, Nechako watershed, rural and remote social work, secondary students, youth resilience

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Acknowledgements

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[1] No assumptions should be made about the identity of youth contributors based on the name used to identify them within the research. Please see p. 55 for more information about contributor names and pseudonyms.

Dedication

Dedicated to Nana and G'pa (Helen Maxime Stein & Paul Stein), in loving memory, and to future generations of land and place relationships.

Definition of Terms

Eco-Social Work: Theory and practice that situate human experiences within our natural ecosystems and attend to connections between social work and the environment. Similar terms include ecological social work, environmental social work, and green social work.

Koh-Learning in our Watersheds ("Koh-Learning"): An interdisciplinary collaboration of BC's School District 91 and University of Northern British Columbia. The **Koh**-Learning program aims to transform education by connecting students to each other, their communities, and their local waterways.

Land: A concept foundational to many Indigenous cultures and knowledges, referring not only to the physical earth and its components (rock, soil, minerals) but also to the water, air, and living systems we are part of and in relation with.

Place: A physical location and the dynamic meanings attached to this location. Both human and more-than-human actors can contribute to the creation and experience of place.

Remote: See "Rural and Remote", below.

Research Contributor: I use this term to refer to the youth who participated in interviews in my research (see also "students" and "youth"). I use the term 'contributor' rather than the more common 'participant' to highlight the youth's active contributions of time and knowledge to the research through their interviews.

Resilience:
Community Resilience: The "social capital, physical infrastructure, and culturally embedded patterns of interdependence" that enable a community to withstand and learn from challenging situations (Ungar, 2011, p. 1742).

Individual Resilience: The ability of individuals to access the resources they need to experience health and well-being in the face of adversity, including the ability of their communities to make these resources available in culturally relevant ways (Ungar, 2008).

Rural and Remote: I use these terms to describe the non-urban context of my research. My use of the term "rural" is based on low population density and distance from the nearest urban centre (Statistics Canada, 2017; Statistics Canada, 2023). In Canadian social work literature, "remote" (compared to rural) places are typically more physically isolated and experience more challenging access to services and neighbouring communities (Pierce, 2017). I generally choose not to differentiate between "rural" and "remote" throughout my research, as I interviewed youth living in communities with varying levels of rurality and remoteness. These communities include Fort St James (a community with low population density and which some youth contributors described as "isolated") as well as smaller and more remote communities.

Students: I use this term to refer to the youth who contributed to my research by participating in interviews (see also "research contributors" and "youth").

Watershed: An area of land that collects rain and snow and eventually drains (or 'sheds') all of this water into another body of water. In the Nechako watershed, all creeks and streams eventually flow into the Nechako River and from there into the Fraser River.

Youth: Generally used in the literature to indicate age groups from late childhood through adolescence to young adulthood (Evans, 2008). I use this term to refer to the students (ages 14-17) who contributed to my research by participating in interviews (see also "research contributors" and "students").

Glossary of Dakelh Words

Dakelh is an Indigenous language connected to the Athabascan language family (First Voices, 2022a; Poser, 2009). The words below are consistent with the Nak'azdli Dakelh dialect (also called Central Carrier) specific to the area around **Nak'al Bun**, B.C. The Dakelh words below are bolded throughout the document.

Chuntoh: Bush or forest[1]

Keyoh: Town, territory, home[2]; trapline, village or camp[3]

Koh (also 'ukoh): A word for river or waterway[2]

Kw'eh (also Kw'ah): Means "Power protecting him like a shield"[3]. Chief Kw'eh is a renowned and highly respected Dakelh leader who lived from about 1755 to 1840. Many Dakelh people today are descendants of Chief Kw'eh[4].

Nahounli (also Nehoonli): "Where people live"[3], referring to a specific hunting place. Used here in reference to Nahounli Creek (also Nahoonlikoh[5]).

Nak'al (also Nak'al Dzulh[1]): Mount Pope[6].

Nak'al Bun (also Nak'albun[5]; also Nak'azdli Bunghun[6]): Stuart Lake

[1] Carrier Linguistic Society (2014)
[2] First Voices (2022b)
[3] Sam (2001), pp. 114-115
[4] Sam & Klippenstein (2017)
[5] Poser (2011)
[6] Hall (1992)

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Chapter One – Introduction

Social workers have long focused their interventions at the points of interaction between people and their social environments. Amidst calls for "all hands on deck" approaches to climate action internationally (United Nations, 2015) and for intersectoral collaboration to address the psychosocial impacts of climate change in Canada (Hayes et al., 2019), questions are increasingly surfacing about social work's role in addressing complex issues that span social and ecological concerns (International Association of Schools of Social Work et al., 2018; Powers & Engstrom, 2020; Zapf, 2009). These questions hold relevance for social workers in north-central British Columbia (BC), where the effects of climate change and environmental degradation are not "what if" scenarios but present-day realities affecting the health and well-being of people, natural ecosystems, and communities (Northern Health, 2021; Picketts et al., 2017).

Within this context, I explore youth relationships with land and place in the Nechako watershed and the resulting implications for social work practice. Using qualitative exploratory methodology, my thesis is guided by the following two research questions:

(1) How do youth in the Nechako watershed perceive their relationships with land and place? and

(2) How do these relationships contribute to youth experiences of resilience?

Fuelled by my personal and professional experiences, grounded in the academic literature, guided by established research methodologies and methods, and brought to life through the insights of twelve inspiring young people, my hope is for my research findings to spark new opportunities for knowledge exchange regarding eco-social work and youth relationships with land and place, in the Nechako watershed and beyond.

Personal Positioning

On the wall above my desk is a painting about the size of a postcard. It shows a young girl standing by a lake, silhouetted against the fading glow of a sunset on the opposite shore. She wears a too-big shirt, wrapping the ends around herself as though to stay warm. She stands, listening to loons calling out across the water, as the full moon rises silently behind her and the long evening eases into night.

When I was a child, my identity was rooted in belonging to two places. I was born and raised in Winnipeg, Manitoba, a city at the confluence of the Assiniboine and Red rivers. Each summer – and some winters – my family and I would pack our things and leave the prairies behind for weeks at a time, heading eight hours north to a small cabin on a lake. Just as "Winnipeg" to my young self meant a suburban house and city streets, "The Cabin" referred not just to the little building itself but to the far reaches of the lake and the surrounding landscape – including secret spots along rocky shores where a young girl might stand and watch the sunset. The time spent with my family along this lake was formative for my identity, my sense of belonging and resilience, and my perception of nature as a source of recreation and healing.

My childhood experiences of connection to the natural world were strengthened by stories my father told of his mother and grandmother, women of Mi'kmaq descent who gathered wild medicines and had intuitive ways of knowing that defy Western rationalization. Although my knowledge of this side of my family and the meaning this knowledge holds for my identity continue to evolve, it is important to me not to lay claim to Indigeneity that is not my own or use my Indigenous ancestry to wield more power than I have already. Rather, I intend to come from a place of respect for many ways of knowing and use my heritage as a reminder that we are all connected: to each other, to all living things, and to the land.

As an undergraduate student, I pursued a degree in social work, which led to a practicum placement and subsequent employment with an adventure therapy company based in Winnipeg. For several years I worked as a social worker and adventure therapist with youth and families in Winnipeg and in remote northern communities across Manitoba; I also gained experience working with an equine-assisted learning program for children and youth. Over time, I developed a strong professional belief that spending time outdoors provides opportunities for young people to experience personal success, develop positive relationships with others, and connect physically, spiritually, and emotionally with the natural world.

Working in northern Manitoba had a profound effect upon my perception of nature and of the social (and more-than-social) determinants of health. My own bias of appreciation for northern landscapes became clear through conversations with children, youth, families, and Cree and Anishinaabe Elders. I learned that land and water can indeed hold positive memories, be sacred and healing, and help facilitate transformative change. I also learned that in remote communities, land and water can contribute to experiences of isolation, present hazards to health and well-being, and hold scars of colonial harms done to communities. As a social worker I became increasingly aware of the complexity of broader structural and "upstream" factors – such as colonization, recent and historical traumas, systemic racism, and poverty – which at times felt beyond my reach as a frontline worker and which too often led to youth "falling through the cracks" of existing systems of support.

Cognizant of the limits of my existing skills and knowledge and keen to reflect upon five years of heart- and thought-provoking practice, I sought out graduate studies as one way of deepening my understanding of the connections between community resilience, relationships with land and place, and youth development in rural and remote Indigenous and northern

communities. Shortly after my arrival in Prince George in 2020, I began working as a research assistant with Dr. Margot Parkes on an interdisciplinary program called ***Koh**-Learning in our Watersheds* (**Koh**-Learning), which fuelled my curiosity about the Nechako watershed and led to my decision to centre my research in this context.

Over the course of my thesis research, my relationships with people and ideas have doubtless been influenced by the Euro-Canadian lens through which I perceive and interact with the world. My worldview is shaped by my experiences and my privilege as a young, White, able-bodied social worker with the resources to devote time to academia. I am privileged in having had many opportunities to recreate outdoors and in continuing to be able to do so safely and often; these experiences also contribute to my perceptions of land and place.

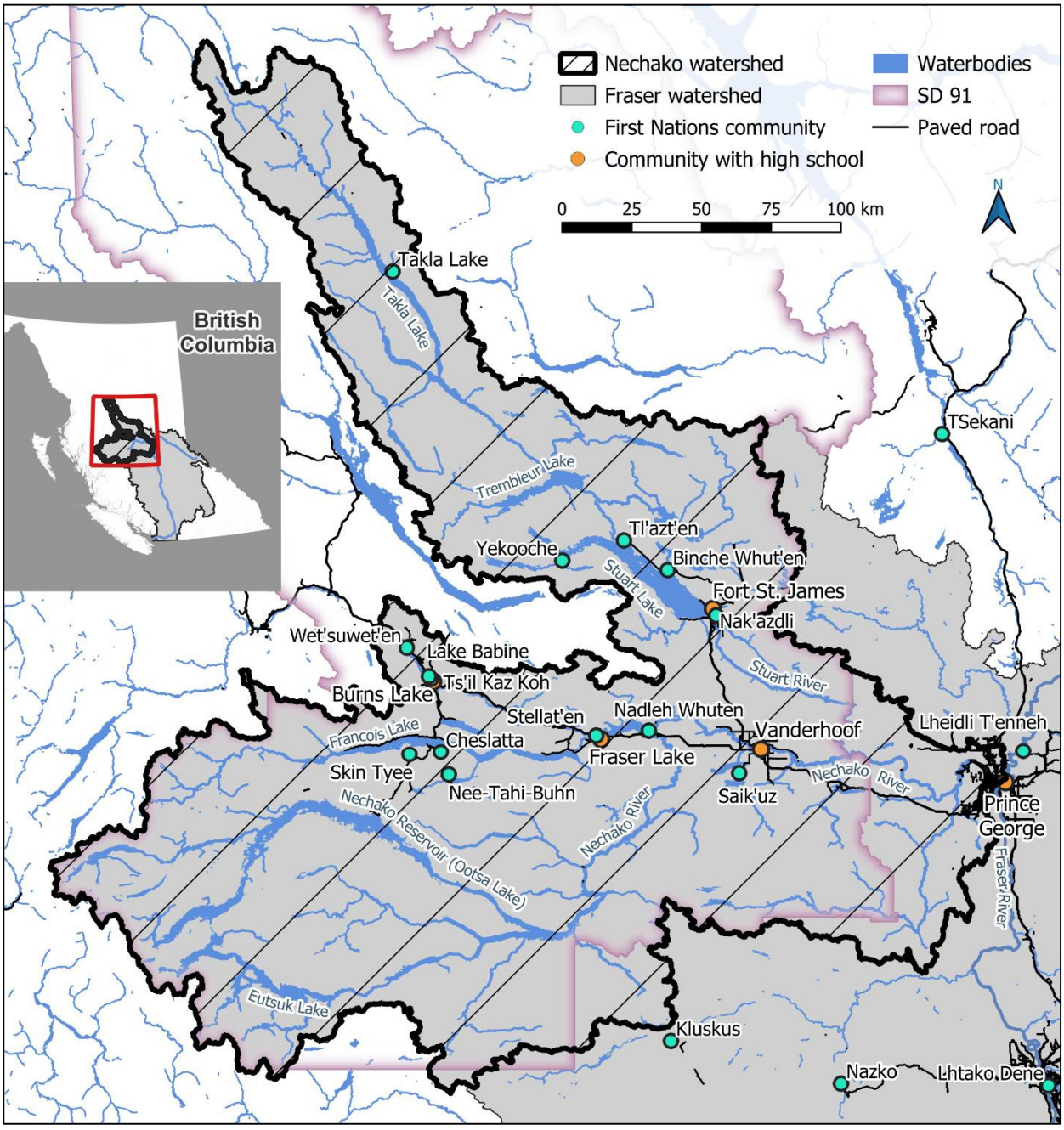
In returning to academia after several years of social work practice, I realized I could not (and indeed, ought not to) write about social work, connection to land, or colonial traumas without remembering the very real people and communities whose stories I have the honour of carrying. In this spirit, I go forth with gratitude for all the young people I have had the privilege of working with, for their families of many forms, and for the land and waterways that have held us throughout our journeys.

Research Context

My research is situated in a nested social and ecological context within School District 91 (SD91) and the Nechako watershed. With a catchment area of over 70,000 square kilometres, SD91 serves rural and remote Indigenous and northern communities to the west of Prince George (SD91, 2022). This catchment area includes four municipalities – Burns Lake, Fraser Lake, Fort St. James, and Vanderhoof – as well as fourteen First Nations, including Takla, Yekooche, Tl'azt'en, Binche Whut'en, Nak'azdli Whut'en, Ts'il Kaz Koh,

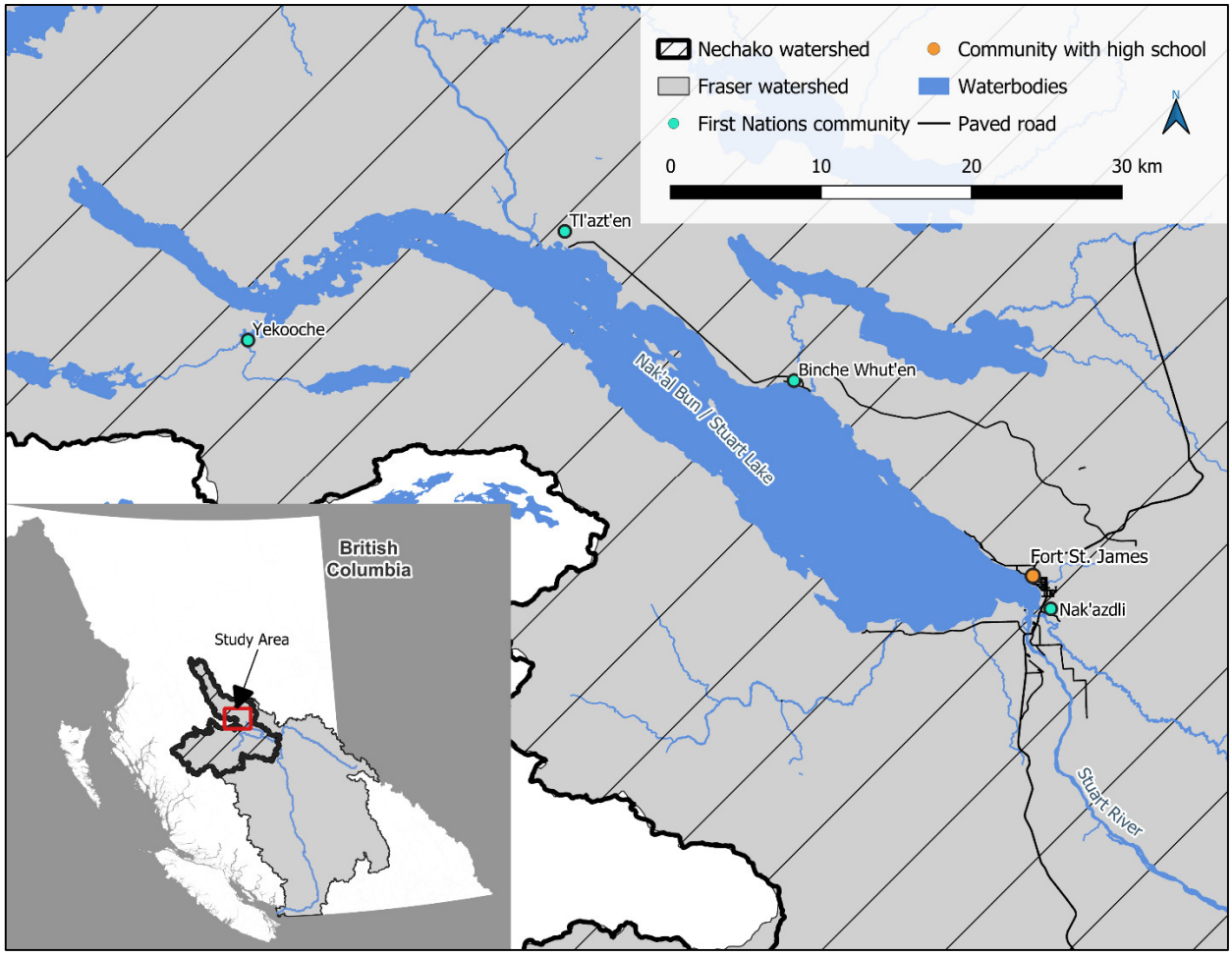
Wet'suwet'en, Lake Babine, Skin Tyee, Cheslatta, Nee-Tahl-Buhn, Stellat'en, Nadleh Whuten, and Saik'uz. As indicated in Figure 1, the region served by SD91 also overlaps closely with and extends beyond the natural boundaries of the Nechako watershed.

Figure 1. Nested Setting of SD91 and the Nechako Watershed (map produced by Aita Bezzola, 2023)



Specifically, my research centres on the experiences of students attending grades 8 to 12 at Fort St James Secondary School (FSJSS). With a student population of approximately 325 in the 2022-2023 school year, FSJSS serves youth from Fort St James and nearby communities (Fort St. James Secondary, 2023), including Nak'azdli Whut'en First Nation, Binche Whut'en First Nation, Tl'azt'en First Nation, and Yekooche First Nation (see Figure 2, below).

Figure 2. Fort St James and Surrounding Area (map produced by Aita Bezzola, 2023)



Situating in Place: The Nechako Watershed

Located in northern B.C.'s interior plateau, the Nechako watershed is part of the "sub-boreal spruce" biogeoclimatic zone (BCMoF, 1998). The watershed's rolling terrain is

populated with dense coniferous forests and home to abundant wildlife (BCMoF, 1998). With both the Stuart and Nechako rivers originating in the Coast mountains, water flows primarily south- and east-ward through the watershed towards Prince George, where the Nechako river flows into the Fraser and onward south to the Pacific ocean. The waterways in the watershed are home to the endangered Nechako white sturgeon, a genetically distinct species of sturgeon unique to the watershed (NWSRI, 2022), as well as runs of chinook and sockeye salmon (Levy et al., 2007; Gateuille et al., 2019; Reynolds, 2016).

The Nechako watershed has been stewarded by Dakelh peoples for thousand of years and traditional Dakelh lands remain unceded. However, the watershed has seen significant changes to its landscape, ecosystems, and social systems since the arrival of European settlers in the early 19th century. Early settler interest in fur trading was soon followed by resource development, which continues to be central to social and economic life in northern B.C. (Sloan Morgan, 2020). Resource development in the watershed has included forestry, agriculture, mining, hydroelectric power, and oil and gas industries (Picketts et al., 2020). Over the years, the cumulative impacts of these industries and a shifting regional climate have effected significant changes to ecosystems, human-nature interactions, and ultimately community well-being within the watershed (Picketts et al., 2017).

Resource development, climate change, and settler colonization impact Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth in intersecting ways and contribute to the ways in which past, present, and future relationships to land and place are experienced and conceptualized by youth within the watershed. In research with grade 10 to 12 students in SD91, Sloan Morgan discovered that Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth across the school district "care deeply for their communities and the environment [and] are redefining community and environmental wellbeing

by profiling relational ways to re-envision relationships with land and with one another" (2020, p. 458). Sloan Morgan's research suggests not only that further research into youth relationships with land and place in the watershed is timely, but that youth are interested in and capable of addressing the links between social and ecological concerns in their communities.

Research Relevance and Rationale

My research design was informed by my experiences as a research assistant with the ***Koh**-Learning in our Watersheds* (**Koh**-Learning) program, a collaboration between SD91 and University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC) that seeks to transform education by connecting students, communities, and waterways (Integrated Watershed Research Group, n.d.). Although my thesis is a distinct research project with independent research questions, my research built on existing relationships between SD91 and UNBC, including relationships developed through my work as a **Koh**-Learning research assistant.

In the two years preceding my research, students and communities in SD91 faced considerable adversity. The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic compounded an already ongoing drug toxicity crisis in what the provincial government termed an intersection of "dual public health emergencies" (Government of B.C., 2020, p. 2), with the impacts of these intersecting crises falling heavily on many communities in the school district. The discovery of unmarked graves at the Kamloops residential school on Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc Territory, as well as the damage to lives, ecosystems, and infrastructure by heat waves, wildfires, flooding, and mudslides across the province, contributed to making 2021 a particularly challenging year.

In the midst of these challenges, and as evidenced by the **Koh**-Learning program, SD91 educators were increasingly showing interest in and commitment to bringing learning outside the classroom. In keeping with an asset-based approach to social work in rural and remote

communities (e.g., Pierce, 2017) and in recognition that access to natural spaces is readily available within many rural and remote communities, I chose to focus my research on relationships to land and place as a potential resource for youth who are facing adversity. From my experience working in outdoor contexts with youth, I entered this research with the belief that youth relationships with land and place are relevant for social work. At the same time, I knew that the work of fostering these connections is often done by people who are not social workers (such as educators in the **Koh**-Learning program, for example) and sensed that learning from youth experiences in these settings would offer valuable insights for social work. Noting the relevance of these topics across related fields, I similarly hoped for my findings to prove useful beyond social work, including for people (such as educators, youth workers, and family members) working with and caring for youth in other capacities.

Inviting youth themselves to participate in the research process was intentional, as youth voices – and particularly youth in rural and remote communities – are under-represented in the existing literature on connection to land and place. I contend that it is important to hear and amplify youth perspectives, not merely as a means of empowering youth, but in recognition that youth are the experts on their own lived experiences and capable of being meaningfully involved in research and decision-making that concerns their lives and the living systems they depend on (Gislason et al., 2021; Sloan Morgan, 2020).

Complex experiences of social and ecological adversity are not unique to youth in the Nechako watershed. Locally and globally, social workers are grappling with how to address ecological concerns among already-pressing agendas of social justice (Coates, 2003; Powers & Engstrom, 2020). Despite an increasing number of social work scholars urging for human well-being and social justice to be situated in relation to the natural world (Besthorn, 2012;

Hetherington & Boddy, 2013), questions remain about what such an "eco-social" perspective looks like in practice (Ramsay & Boddy, 2017). For social workers in rural and remote Indigenous and northern communities, insight into youth's experiences of land and place may help inform the development of place-based "eco-social" practice that situates youth well-being within the ecological *and* social context of youth's lives.

Theoretical Grounding

My research is grounded in an understanding that humans do not exist in isolation from nature. Rather, my ontological stance is that "there is a natural world that both includes and is influenced by human social systems" (Brown, 2010, p. 112) and furthermore that humans are fundamentally dependent on healthy natural ecosystems. Conscious of social work's traditional focus on human relationships and social systems, I expand my social work lens in the context of this research to explicitly consider relationships with land and place. In outlining my research framework, below, I begin by drawing upon Warren's (1990) writing on ecological feminism and Wilson's (2008) insights into an Indigenous research paradigm. Next, I turn to Tuck and McKenzie's (2015a, 2015b) description of critical place inquiry; together, these concepts assisted in guiding my research.

Karen Warren (1990) describes the central role of relationships with the environment in shaping human identity and experience. Although Warren's broader discussion on ecological feminism is not the focus of my research, the following excerpt resonates strongly with my perspective. She writes:

> Humans are who we are in large part by virtue of the historical and social contexts and the relationships we are in, including our relationships with nonhuman nature. Relationships are not something extrinsic to who we are, not an "add on" feature of

> human nature; they play an essential role in shaping what it is to be human. Relationships of humans to the nonhuman environment are, in part, constitutive of what it is to be a human. (p. 143)

Relationships with nonhuman nature remain a peripheral focus within mainstream social work (Jones, 2010; Boetto, 2017). However, the interconnectedness of humans with other living systems has been known for millennia to many Indigenous peoples around the world. Shawn Wilson (2008), an Opaskwayak Cree scholar originally from northern Manitoba, describes the significance of relationships in an Indigenous research paradigm as follows:

> Identity for Indigenous peoples is grounded in their relationships with the land, with their ancestors who have returned to the land and with future generations who will come into being on the land. Rather than viewing ourselves as being *in* relationship with other people or things, we *are* the relationships that we hold and are part of. (p. 80)

In addition to grounding the identity of Indigenous peoples, the centrality of relationships with the land in an Indigenous research paradigm holds implications for epistemology and validity in research. If "[k]nowledge itself is held in the relationships and connections formed with the environment that surrounds us" (Wilson, 2008, p. 87), then thoughtful consideration of relationships to land and place becomes – to paraphrase Warren – not simply an "add on" feature but, in part, constitutive of what it is to do research.

Critical Place Inquiry

Tuck and McKenzie (2015a, 2015b) have developed an approach to social science research called "critical place inquiry" which grew out of their observations of the intersecting – yet often incommensurable – concerns of environmental and Indigenous scholars. In bridging the gap between these approaches to research, Tuck and McKenzie locate social science within the

"overlapping contexts of globalization and neoliberalism, settler colonialism, and environmental degradation" (2015a, p. xiv). This integrative perspective is highly relevant to the geographical, political, and socio-cultural context of my research and offers a strong theoretical foundation for my exploration of land and place within social work. Importantly, critical place inquiry includes a commitment to engaging Indigenous methodologies, methods, and social and political theory at the center, rather than the periphery, of research (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015b).

Another central tenet of critical place inquiry is the concept of relational validity, which – contrary to dominant narratives of neoliberalism and anthropocentrism – emphasizes human participation in and dependence upon reciprocal relationships with the natural world. With a return to Wilson's (2008) description of relationships in Indigenous research, Tuck and McKenzie (2015b) assert that critical place research goes beyond simply learning about or documenting instances of relationality and equally goes beyond critiquing neoliberal or economic paradigms. Rather, relational validity suggests that the very act of *doing* critical place research creates change (however insignificant) and thereby "impels action and increased accountability to people and place" (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015b, p. 636). As a social worker doing research, the notion of contributing to place-centred social change is highly compelling and fits well with my personal and professional values.

Chapter Summary and Thesis Overview

In the local context of the Nechako watershed, in a global context of climate change and environmental degradation, and at a time where social workers around the world are seeking integrative approaches to social and ecological problems, research at the intersection of land, place, and youth resilience is both relevant and timely. Zapf (2009) poses the question: "Can social work be a contributor in the evolving multidisciplinary efforts towards building a

sustainable future on this planet?" (p. 185). Given the imperative of collaborative, interdisciplinary efforts towards ecological and social justice in our current context, and informed my past experience engaging in place-based work with youth, I believe the question is not *whether* social work can participate in these efforts, but *how*. My hope is for my research to serve as one pathway towards exploring this question.

This chapter opened with my personal positioning and the rationale for my interest in youth relationships with land and place. I additionally introduced the geographical context and theoretical grounding of my research, setting the stage for the chapters that follow. Chapter 2 provides an overview of literature on eco-social work, relationships with land and place, and youth resilience. Chapter 3 describes my research methodology, including methodological approaches, research methods, ethical considerations, and methodological integrity. Chapter 3 also provides a detailed introduction to the youth who contributed to the research. Chapter 4 outlines the five thematic findings from my analysis, supported by direct quotes from youth contributors. Chapter 5 presents a discussion of the research findings, offers reflections on the research process, and concludes with the implications of my findings for social work practice, education, and future research.

Chapter Two – Literature Review

The focus of my research was informed by academic literature on eco-social work, relationships with land and place, and youth resilience. The literature review below was primarily researched and written in the early stages of my research, between November 2020 to December 2021. Rather than providing an exhaustive review of the literature, this chapter aims to present key aspects of seminal and recent literature by drawing on knowledges both within and beyond the field of social work. Weaving together these topics (eco-social work, relationships with land and place, and youth resilience) provides a conceptual foundation that highlights convergences and missing pieces within the literature and identifies promising opportunities for research.

Eco-Social Work

A variety of terms are used to indicate environmentally focused social work in the literature, including green social work (Dominelli, 2018), environmental social work (Gray et al., 2013), eco-social work (Boetto, 2017; Peeters, 2012), and ecological social work (Berger & Kelly, 1993). In this thesis, I use "eco-social work" to refer to the overarching theme of social work and the natural environment, while other terms are used as applicable when referencing specific bodies of literature. My choice of the term "eco-social work" intends to prioritize an integrative social and ecological approach and highlight an ecocentric (as opposed to anthropocentric or "egocentric") perspective that situates humans within a complex web of relationships with the natural world, as advocated by Besthorn (2012) and Jones (2010). This section explores the history of social work perceptions of the "environment", social work responses to current environmental crises, and applications of eco-social work in practice.

A History of Person-in-Environment

Social work has long attended to the health and well-being of people in their environments (Kemp, 2011b). Although acknowledgement of the physical environment was present in social work's early beginnings at the turn of the 20th century (Kemp, 2011b), references to the environment within social work since the latter half of the 20th century have focused predominantly on *social* environments (Besthorn, 2012; Zapf, 2009). Nonetheless, the past several decades have seen a growing number of social work scholars and practitioners questioning the modernist separation of social and ecological issues and advocating for more holistic approaches to theory and practice (Berger & Kelly, 1993; Besthorn, 2012; Coates, 2003; Gray et al., 2013; Hoff & Polack, 1993; Jones, 2010; Powers & Engstrom, 2020; Ramsay & Boddy, 2017; Zapf, 2009). As one example, social work's "person-in-environment" model, often lauded as one of the defining features of social work theory and practice, has been criticized in recent years for focusing on individual factors and proximal social relationships (such as within school or family systems) with a relative neglect of the broader structural, geospatial, and ecological determinants of social and health equity (Besthorn, 2012; Kemp, 2011b).

Social Work in the Face of Environmental Crises

The Earth's climate is changing at unprecedented rates, a fact which has been linked unequivocally to the past 200 years of human activity (International Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2021). With climate change already impacting every human-inhabited region of the planet and global surface temperature projected to keep increasing until at least the mid-21st century (IPCC, 2021), it is unsurprising that concerns about the health of our planet and the resulting implications for human health and well-being are surfacing within social work discourse.

The intersecting impacts of climate change, pollution, environmental degradation, natural disasters, and biodiversity loss are disproportionately affecting marginalized people worldwide, including Indigenous people, racialized people, women, people living in poverty, and people in rural areas (Hetherington & Boddy, 2013; Hoff & Polack, 1993; Kemp, 2011b). Some scholars contend that social workers have a responsibility to attend to this reality as a social justice issue (Besthorn, 2012; Hetherington & Boddy, 2013). Certainly, the social challenges and inequities confronted daily by social workers are exacerbated by the pressures wrought by increased exposure to environmental hazards and resulting political and economic instability (Hetherington & Boddy, 2013; Kemp, 2011b).

Connected to these challenges, social workers also face the combined social and ecological effects of neoliberal paradigms, which exert a currently dominant influence on global governance systems and social and economic policy (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015a; M. G. Wilson et al., 2011). Neoliberal paradigms support economic growth through "free market" capitalist economies and feature values of individualism, globalization, privatization, and reduced governmental responsibility (Seelig, 2019). For decades, a neoliberal focus on commercial freedom and interests has exacerbated social and environmental injustices in Canada and worldwide, with implications for social workers seeking to reduce social and environmental inequities (M. G. Wilson et al., 2011). Neoliberal policies permit and promote the extraction of resources, capital, and labour from rural to urban places, resulting in uneven and unsustainable development (Seelig, 2019; Tuck & McKenzie, 2015a). Furthermore, the consequences of this rural-to-urban resource extraction tend to act largely to the benefit of urban economies and to the detriment of rural communities and ecosystems (Seelig, 2019; Tuck & McKenzie, 2015a).

While ecological concerns, place-based inequities, and the resulting injustices experienced by marginalized people may ultimately be social justice issues, it is equally becoming clear that a "business as usual" approach to social work will not suffice in preventing the cascading consequences of further environmental deterioration (Besthorn, 2012; Peeters, 2012; Ramsay & Boddy, 2017). Besthorn (2012) observes pragmatically that if social work's focus remains limited to social justice without taking action on ecological issues, "[t]he natural world will not care […]. The earth system will collapse whether social workers are successful at those [social justice] efforts or not" (p. 255). Rather than discouraging attempts at further action, however, Besthorn (2012) emphasizes the necessity of integrating new ways of thinking, being, and doing within social work in order to best meet the needs of current and future generations.

Eco-Social Work in Practice

Taking up Besthorn's (2012) challenge of integration is easier said than done. Despite an exponential increase in publications integrating social work and the environment in recent years (Ramsay & Boddy, 2017) and evidence that eco-social work is being practiced on the margins of the profession (Gray et al., 2013; Labron, 2022), tangible applications in research and practice remain unclear, particularly in "developed" nations (Kemp, 2011b; Ramsay & Boddy, 2017). A concept analysis by Ramsay and Boddy (2017) identifies four key attributes that appear across the academic literature on "environmental social work" and related terms, providing a useful springboard for future explorations of eco-social work in practice.

The first key attribute is a consensus that **the skills cultivated within social work are relevant and applicable** in responding to and mitigating environmental problems (Ramsay & Boddy, 2017). For example, social work competencies in relationship-building, community development, political advocacy, and working across micro to macro scales can all be applied in

creative and useful ways to intersecting social and ecological concerns (Kemp, 2011b; Ramsay & Boddy, 2017).

Second is an **openness to different values and ways of being or doing**, including a shift to "ecocentrism", or placing natural ecosystems at the centre of theory and practice (Ramsay & Boddy, 2017). This openness also includes integrating the natural environment within social work education, appreciating the innate value of non-human life as well as its instrumental role in supporting human well-being, and learning from spirituality and Indigenous cultures (Ramsay & Boddy, 2017). In this context, spirituality refers not to organized religion, but rather to a sense of connectedness with the larger world and living well in one's place within humanity (Jones, 2013; Ramsay & Boddy, 2017). By moving from individualistic to more holistic and inclusive worldviews, Coates et al. (2006) suggest that eco-social approaches make space for meaningful dialogue with Indigenous beliefs and practices. Indigenous ways of knowing are also embedded in Jones' (2013) description of a "transformed" eco-social curriculum for social work education, wherein Indigenous worldviews both constitute essential curricular components and provoke important questions about the ways in which curricula is taught.

Third is a **renewed orientation to societal change**, which includes taking political action for social and ecological justice and critiquing the neoliberal paradigm (Ramsay & Boddy, 2017). Eco-social workers are urged to take political action on issues such as climate change and environmental degradation, as well as develop new narratives to counter multiple forms of social and ecological oppression (Hetherington & Boddy, 2013; Ramsay & Boddy, 2017).

Fourth and lastly is the imperative of **collaboration across and beyond disciplines**, including work with both individuals and communities (Ramsay & Boddy, 2017). Social workers are arguably well-positioned for such integrative work, given that social work regularly involves

crossing disciplinary boundaries and working at multiple systems levels (Berger & Kelly, 1993; Moore et al., 2018).

Ecological (Dis)Connection

Jones (2010) contends that the global ecological crisis is rooted in a profound sense of disconnection from the natural world which is also reflected in mainstream social work. In the context of eco-social work, Coates et al. (2006) highlight the importance of developing a "whole system consciousness", or an awareness of the interconnectedness of all life on the planet (p. 392). Coates et al. challenge social workers to engage personally and professionally in the challenges of striving to live in harmony with the global ecosystem and of recognizing our deep interconnectedness with all people and living things. Could such an endeavour begin by cultivating a sense of connection to land and place? The next part of my literature review explores this possibility.

Relationships with Land and Place

Connection to land and place first emerged as a core objective of my practice while I facilitated therapeutic outdoor experiences for children and youth. I was later intrigued to discover a similar emphasis within SD91's *Seasonal Rounds Diagram for Education* (developed by Leona Prince, then SD91 District Principal of Aboriginal Education) – and to find that in both cases, the goal of connection to land and place is intimately linked to goals of connection to self and connection to others. The lack of social work literature addressing the links between these three modes of connection (connection to land and place, connection to self, and connection to others) suggests a knowledge gap between practice and research. The following pages explore the meaning of place and land, land in the context of colonization, and the possibility of healing people and places through reciprocal relationships.

Defining Place

Zapf (2009) proposes a fundamental shift from social work's person-in-environment model to a metaphor of "people as place" that intentionally aligns humans as *part of* the natural world. This "people as place" perspective would see people and the environment as reciprocal co-actors, rather than relegating the environment to an inanimate backdrop to human action. In this context, Zapf describes place as a location imbued with social meaning. Meanwhile, Kemp (2011a) suggests that place is dynamic (as place and time are inextricably linked) as well as relational (place must be understood in its interactions with individuals, communities, and structures within society). She notes that any place can carry multiple histories at any one time, such that places – and their histories – are perceived and experienced differently by different people(s). Human geographer Tuan similarly contends that place is "a reality to be clarified and understood from the perspectives of the people who have given it meaning" (1979, p. 387). Place, then, can be understood as a physical location and the dynamic and relational meanings attached to this location.

Land and Connection to Land

While the terms "place" and "connection to place" speak to the relationships built by all people with the places we inhabit, I use "land" and "land-based" as terms inextricably linked to Indigenous cultures and knowledges. The use of these terms is one way to centre Indigenous perspectives on land and colonization within narratives of relationships with place (Greenwood, 2019).

In exploring the meaning and significance of "land" for Indigenous peoples, I turn to the words of Kep'tin J. J. Sark of the Micmac Grand Council:

> Land means not just the surface of the land, but the subsurface, as well as the rivers, lakes (and in winter, ice), shorelines, the marine environment and the air. […] The way people have related to and lived on the land (and in many cases continue to) also forms the basis of society, nationhood, governance and community. Land touches every aspect of life […]. (as cited in the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, p. 439)

Sark's description not only touches on the physical components of land but recognizes human relationships and interaction with the land as foundational to his people's collective identity and ways of being. Relationships with land are often also spiritual for Indigenous peoples. Cyndy Baskin of the Mi'kmaq and Celtic Nations explains:

> From an Indigenous perspective, everything has a spirit and impacts upon everything else. Part of the human condition is that we have a kinship to *all* living things, and also to those things that are considered to be inanimate objects. (2016, p. 150)

A similar sense of holistic connectedness to land – that is, physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual connection – is common across many Indigenous cultures (Baskin, 2016).

Land and Colonization

Just as land is foundational to the culture and identity of many Indigenous peoples, the disruption, manipulation, and exploitation of Indigenous connections to land has long been a devastating colonial tool in Canada (Baskin, 2016; Leduc, 2018). Woroniak and Camfield (2013) observe that the displacement of Indigenous peoples and the disruption of Indigenous relationships to land were key to the settler colonial objective of eradicating Indigenous societies and allowing settlers full access to land. Baskin (2016) posits a causal link between the systemic violence wrought by colonization and "the near destruction of a land-based way of living, economic and social deprivation, substance misuse, the intergenerational cycle of violence, the

breakdown of healthy family life, and the loss of traditional values for many Indigenous people today" (p. 7). Canada's history has been marked with injustice towards Indigenous peoples, including the Indian Act, the residential school system, the "sixties scoop", and the continued reluctance of federal and provincial governments to take responsibility for adequate service provision to Indigenous peoples (Baskin, 2016).

The fact that settler-colonialism remains ongoing and continues to centre around issues of land (T. King, 2012; Tuck & Yang, 2012) raises questions about social work's roles and responsibilities in stepping forward to address land- and place-based injustices. Although settler-colonialism in Canada was well underway before the advent of social work, the profession of social work is certainly not inculpable in perpetuating colonial harms (Blackstock, 2009). Leduc (2018) notes that social workers followed swiftly on the heels of the Indian agent in Indigenous communities, removing children from their homes, families, and communities as early as the 1960s. In removing children from their homes, social workers and Indian agents were also removing them from the land and from the relationships, knowledge, language, and culture that came from the land – a reality that remains true for many children and youth involved in child welfare and education systems in Canada today (Kennedy-Kish et al., 2017; Simpson, 2014).

Restoration Through Relationships

Maori scholar Tuhiwai Smith (2012), writing in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, asserts that Westerners have both altered the physical geography of the landscape and affected the ways in which Indigenous people relate to the land. In Canada, multiple scholars have advocated for connection to land to be recognized as a significant determinant of Indigenous peoples' health (de Leeuw, 2018; M. King et al., 2009; Lines et al., 2019). Sharing the

perspectives of Cree and Dene Elders in northeastern Alberta on Indigenous determinants of health, Steinhauer and Lamouche (2018) specify that

> the issues that have arisen are not caused by the land, the language, or the culture in question. They are caused by damage to the personal and community relationships to each of these, and the way back to good health is through the restoration of these relationships. (p. 88)

The restorative potential of relationships to land is mirrored in the words of Potawatomi scholar Robin Wall Kimmerer. Reflecting on ecological devastation caused by human mismanagement, Kimmerer (2013) writes:

> What if we could fashion a restoration plan that grew from understanding multiple meanings of land? Land as sustainer. Land as identity. Land as grocery store and pharmacy. Land as connection to our ancestors. Land as moral obligation. Land as sacred. Land as self. (p. 337)

The idea that relationships to land can provide reciprocal benefits to people and ecosystems is directly relevant to the question of social work's role in responding to social and ecological concerns. Zapf (2009) observes that while social workers generally strive to consider issues of injustice at both global and local scales, much of the literature on social work and the environment is focused on large-scale threats to the Earth as a whole, with limited attention to local, place-based issues and interventions. As social workers struggle to "think globally and act locally" (Zapf, 2009, p. 73), a focus on literally "grounding" interventions within physical spaces and cultivating connections to land and place is one concrete way for social workers to take eco-social action.

While local, place-based, Indigenous knowledges have much to teach a world dominated by Western "egocentrism", the responsibility to engage in reciprocal relationships with the land – and with other people – ought not to fall solely on Indigenous peoples, nor does the cultivation of such relationships stand to benefit only Indigenous peoples. Kimmerer (2013), for example, challenges people who are not Indigenous to the land they inhabit to strive to become "naturalized to place" (p. 214), which she describes as living:

> as if this is the land that feeds you, as if these are the streams from which you drink, that build your body and fill your spirit. […] To become naturalized is to live as if your children's future matters, to take care of the land as if our lives and the lives of all our relatives depend on it. Because they do. (pp. 214-215)

Importantly, Kimmerer's call to become naturalized to place is *not* justification for non-Indigenous people to claim rights to Indigenous land, sovereignty, nationhood, or culture. Rather, it is a call to collaborative action. As Kimmerer adeptly captures in the quote above, our collective ability to recognize our relationship with the natural world – and, ultimately, to act in ways that respect this relationship – are key to the health and well-being of current and future generations.

Youth Resilience and Experiences with Land and Place

Young people today are growing up amidst overlapping environmental and social crises, with climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic as prominent examples. The social and emotional challenges of navigating these crises are as much the inheritance of today's youth as are the ecological consequences of climate change. This section reviews the literature on youth resilience, land as a determinant of health for Indigenous youth, and the value of nature connection for children and youth. Gaps between these areas of the literature are also discussed.

Youth Resilience

Over the past 30 years, research on child and youth development has evolved from a focus on risks and deficits to a focus on the strengths, skills, and external conditions that enable some young people to live healthy lives despite experiences of adversity. The ability of youth to be successful in this way is often referred to as *resilience*. As described by social worker and resilience researcher Michael Ungar:

> In the context of exposure to significant adversity, whether psychological, environmental, or both, resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to health-sustaining resources, including opportunities to experience feelings of well-being, and a condition of the individual's family, community and culture to provide these health resources and experiences in culturally meaningful ways. (2008, p. 225)

In contrast to earlier writing on resilience that sought primarily to determine protective factors at an individual level, Ungar's definition of resilience highlights the importance of culture and local resources in addition to individual capacity. Although his focus remains on *social* resources and environments, Ungar emphasizes the diversity of processes and perceptions of resilience in different cultural and community contexts. In particular, he notes that – despite the resonance of some aspects of resilience among cultures around the world – resilience is a Western construct, and particular care should be taken to avoid imposing Western assumptions about resilience, well-being, and health upon people and communities within research.

With ideas that overlap closely with the concept of resilience, Brendtro et al. (1998, 2019) explore the characteristics of social environments that support the healthy development of children and youth. Drawing from Indigenous and Western knowledges, Brendtro et al. identify four values that are essential to supporting youth "at risk", or who are facing adversity. First is

belonging (developing attachment and trusting relationships), second is **mastery** (experiencing success), third is **independence** (developing a sense of autonomy and responsibility), and fourth is **generosity** (engaging in reciprocity). Brendtro et al. also highlight the important role of teachers and educators in developing trusting relationships with youth.

Indigenous Youth: Land as a Foundation for Health and Well-Being

Spending time with nature, learning from Elders and traditional knowledge keepers, participating in land-based cultural activities, and practicing reciprocity with the land have been identified by Indigenous youth as important determinants of health and well-being for themselves and their communities (Big-Canoe & Richmond, 2013; Hatala et al., 2019; Lines et al., 2019). Connection with land and nature have been shown to support resilience in Indigenous youth by reducing stress, strengthening a sense of connectedness to loved ones, fostering hope, and offering metaphors for resilience through natural cycles of growth and renewal (Hatala et al., 2020). Land-based activities that include learning and practicing Indigenous Knowledge are seen as strengthening cultural continuity for youth (Big-Canoe & Richmond, 2013), which has previously been identified as a protective factor against youth suicide in First Nations communities in B.C. (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998).

Hatala et al. (2019), studying processes of land-making among urban Indigenous youth, identified four pathways through which the youth in their study developed relationships with nature: First, youth described a reciprocity of family-like caring with the land, including experiences of feeling secure and loved by nature in ways that had been lacking in their own families. Second, youth recognized the land as having agency and being capable of giving gifts, while they also found ways to give back – for example, through offering prayer and tobacco in keeping with cultural teachings. Third, youth received insights or teachings through their

interactions with the land; and finally, youth experienced a sense of emotional regulation and calmness by spending time with nature. These findings, while not necessarily transferrable to youth in the Nechako watershed, demonstrate some of the ways in which relationships with land have been experienced and described by Indigenous youth in diverse social and geographical contexts.

Nature Connection for Children and Youth

In addition to research specific to Indigenous youth, engagement in outdoor activities has been shown to provide benefits for young people in general. Simply spending time in natural settings has been shown to reduce stress and promote mental health resilience among youth (Jackson et al., 2021; Touloumakos & Barrable, 2020). Outdoor activities additionally provide opportunities for increased physical activity and social cohesion, which support youth mental health and resilience in times of crisis or stress – including global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Jackson et al., 2021). Participation in outdoor activities has further been linked to positive development and increased markers of well-being and resilience for marginalized youth (Parry et al., 2021).

Growing interest in the value of nature connection for children and youth has been accompanied by movements to take learning outdoors. In a study that sought feedback on school-based outdoor learning from "expert commentators" in 19 different countries, the most common types of outdoor learning reported internationally were field studies, outdoor activities for early years children, and outdoor and adventure education experiences (Waite, 2020). Notably, "school-based outdoor learning" in this context extends from "nearby nature" experiences, such as in a school playground or within walking distance from the school, to overnight expeditions in remote settings. In Waite's (2020) study, the primary reasons cited

internationally for offering school-based outdoor activities were "children's health and well-being, developing social, confident, and connected people, and care for others and the environment" (p. 6). More locally, study respondents in Canada identified the development of positive social skills and self-confidence as the most important driving factor (Waite, 2020). These findings, although likely not representative of all schools engaged in outdoor learning, indicate that the impetus for taking students outdoors often extends beyond curriculum goals to support broader social, emotional, and physical youth development.

Research Gaps: Youth Resilience and Connection to (Rural and Remote) Place

Despite increasing attention to the potential benefits of outdoor activities for young people, there remain significant gaps within the literature. For example, Bowers et al. (2021) identify a need for further research studying the effects of nature exposure on health outcomes for youth, as a majority of research on these topics so far has been carried out with adults. Bowers et al. additionally call for more strength-based research exploring ways in which nature connection can promote positive outcomes for youth. Touloumakos and Barrable (2020) advocate for future research on how youth engagement with nature can act as a protective factor against adverse childhood experiences, while Chawla et al. (2014) recommend further research exploring the connections between youth resilience and access to nature.

Furthermore, despite a growing literature on connection to place for children and youth, there remains a lack of research on the outdoor experiences of children and youth in non-urban areas (Bowers et al., 2021; Larson et al., 2019). The role of land and place in rural and remote communities may differ significantly from that of land in urban areas. Youth in rural communities may experience different and/or more opportunities to engage with the outdoors compared to their urban peers (Bowers et al., 2021; Larson et al., 2019) and may be more likely

to perceive nature as "a place of work as well as recreation and restoration" (Chawla, 2020, p. 627). Youth in rural and remote communities are also more likely to be immersed in land- and place-based realities specific to rural and remote living, including facing the long-term impacts of resource extraction (Sloan Morgan, 2020) and witnessing first-hand the effects of climate change and environmental degradation on local economies, livelihoods, cultures, and human health and well-being (Picketts et al., 2017).

With a notable lack of literature at the intersection of youth resilience and connection to nature (Chawla et al., 2014) and on the outdoor experiences of youth in rural areas (Bowers et al., 2021), I believe my research is well-placed not only to explore these gaps but also to make connections between these topics and existing social work literature.

A Note on Further Literature

As noted earlier, my above review of the literature took place primarily in the early stages of my research. As my research progressed and I engaged in recruitment, interviews, data analysis, and writing (see Chapter 3 for more on research methods), I continued to explore the literature that held relevance for my research. I became familiar with new writing that had been published since my initial review, as well as existing literature that aligned with new ideas emerging through my research. Examples of these additional forays into the literature include aspects of youth resilience and positive youth development that hold particular relevance for my research findings (e.g., Brussoni, 2012; Hatala et al., 2017), literature focused on the applications of eco-social work in practice (Labron, 2022) and in social work education (Reu & Jarldorn, 2022), and writing on outdoor and walking methodologies (Springgay & Truman, 2018). These and other sources are referenced in more detail in my discussion (Chapter 5) as I consider the implications of my findings and bring together my learnings from the research as a whole.

Chapter Summary

This literature review explored the academic literature on eco-social work, relationships with land and place, and youth resilience. With increasing attention to environmental and "eco-social work" in the literature, social work scholars are increasingly considering the significance of *where* we are and *how* we relate to land and place. Even as social workers explore ways of putting these questions into practice, Indigenous and non-Indigenous people alike are exploring the restorative potential of reciprocal relationships with the natural world. Although land and place relationships are shown to promote resilience and well-being among young people, including rural and Indigenous youth, further research in this area is warranted that prioritizes youth experiences and amplifies youth voices. Together, these pieces of the literature provided the academic foundation to inform and strengthen my research focus and design.

Chapter Three – Methodology

In this chapter, I outline my methodological approaches, describe my research design and methods, explore ethical considerations that came up during my research, and finish with a discussion of the methodological integrity of my work.

Methodological Approaches

In keeping with Tuck and McKenzie (2015a), I use the term 'methodology' in the context of my research to signify "an approach to gathering and validating information, making decisions, and beliefs about knowledge and knowing" (p. 88). Primarily guided by qualitative exploratory methodology, my research was also informed by key concepts from Indigenous research methodologies as described further below.

Qualitative Exploratory Research

Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest that qualitative research is well-suited to researchers who intend to study "the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (p. 42). Accordingly, in the context of my research, I gathered information about youth perspectives on their experiences with land and place. Qualitative researchers also often prioritize an emerging approach to inquiry, place themselves within the research process, and ask open-ended questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018), all of which are well-suited to my interests as a researcher as well as the nature and focus of my research.

Rendle et al. (2019) state that qualitative exploratory research "aim[s] to generate new knowledge by exploring [a] novel topic where little or no data exist" (p. 3), as was the case in this research project. Rendle et al. further characterize exploratory research as inductive, with researchers approaching their topic of interest without preconceived ideas of what they will find, and explain that the "research design and approach may shift dramatically as [researchers] learn

more about the phenomena of interest" (2019, p. 3). At the beginning of my research, I determined that a qualitative-exploratory approach would allow me to be responsive and adapt the focus of my research as new information emerged.

Indigenous Research Methodologies

Tuck and McKenzie (2015a) identify four "epistemic touchstones" of Indigenous research methodologies that can be relevant when applying critical place inquiry to practice, all of which are connected to relationships with land: relationships, reciprocity, "the long view" of time, and decolonization (pp. 94-95). These four principles informed my research design and strengthened my commitment, as a White researcher, to prioritizing diverse ways of knowing and engaging in ethical, relational approaches to research with youth. More detailed implications of these epistemic touchstones are discussed later in this chapter.

Research Design & Methods

My research consisted of three phases with each phase informing the next. As this was an exploratory project, I strove for each phase to remain responsive to the people and places involved in the research. My in-person research activities took place in person and in or around Fort St James and adhered to the provincial and regional public health guidelines, UNBC policies, and SD91 policies on COVID-19 mitigation that were in place at that time.

Phase 1: Scoping Discussions & Relationship-Building

The first phase of my research included scoping conversations to inform my research design and building relationships with youth and adults at Fort St James Secondary School (FSJSS) and in the community. This phase continued throughout the research process through ongoing communication with SD91 staff and students, local community members, and the youth contributors themselves.

Scoping Discussions. The initial design of my research was informed by my experiences in the **Koh**-Learning program and by early scoping conversations in Fort St James, where I knew innovative outdoor learning opportunities were taking place at the secondary school and where I already had connections through my work as a **Koh**-Learning program research assistant. Throughout my research, conversations with youth contributors, SD91 educators, social workers, and other community members remained key to my research design.

Relationship-Building. Early in my scoping conversations with teachers and community members in Fort St James, I learned that building a strong foundation of relationships with youth would be important prior to beginning recruitment. This fit well with my professional experience working with youth, my personal values, and my commitment as a researcher to centre relationships in my research. I undertook to build relationships with youth and in community through various activities. First, in my role with the **Koh**-Learning program, I assisted with planning and facilitating a number of outdoor learning experiences for youth at FSJSS in conjunction with SD91 and UNBC. Second, I visited FSJSS on my own time in spring and fall 2022 to participate in outdoor learning activities alongside students, including water quality testing and a visit to Tsilkoh Falls. Where appropriate and upon request by teachers, I dug into my existing knowledge of nature-based activities to contribute to student learning, fun, and relationship-building. Third, after initial conversations with individuals at the Nak'azdli Whut'en Education Program, I was invited to spend time with youth during the Nak'azdli youth summer program. I attended the program for several days in July and August 2022, meeting two groups of youth and participating in indoor and outdoor recreation activities and field trips. Fourth, I worked as the teaching assistant for a UNBC field school in May 2022. The field school, based

near Fort St James, involved interactions with secondary students as UNBC students taught outdoor skills to FSJSS classes.

Each of these opportunities provided me with a deeper understanding of local context, interactions with potential youth contributors to my research, and connections with other community members around my research topics. They also contributed to my own relationship with land and place locally.

Phase 2: Recruitment, Data Collection, & Member-Checking

The second phase of my research consisted of recruitment, data collection, and member-checking. This phase of my research was primarily carried out through in-person activities at FSJSS as well as outdoors near the school.

Recruitment. My research recruitment sought students in grades 8-12 at FSJSS who had participated in school-based outdoor learning activities within the 2 years prior to recruitment. An email and recruitment poster were sent to FSJSS teachers, other community members, and local youth-serving agencies who had expressed interest in the research project during scoping conversations. The recruitment information was also sent to the FSJSS administration for distribution to all teachers at the school. Early in the school year, I offered classroom presentations at FSJSS to share information about my research directly with students, as well as one lunchtime presentation. The lunchtime presentation included a free pizza lunch and was held in the Carrier language and culture classroom. Open to all students, the lunchtime presentation was arranged to attract students who may not otherwise have heard about my research. The Nak'azdli Whut'en student mentor who had facilitated the Nak'azdli summer program assisted by encouraging their students to attend the lunchtime presentation.

Initially, my goal was to recruit 4 to 6 students in grades eight to ten and 4 to 6 students in grades eleven and twelve, for a total of 8 to 12 contributors. If more students were interested in participating than I had the capacity to include in my research, youth were to be selected at random within these grade groupings from those who expressed interest prior to the deadline on the recruitment poster. Due to low recruitment numbers by my initial recruitment deadline, I dropped the grade grouping requirement and switched to ongoing recruitment after the deadline had passed. Between meeting with interested students and conducting my initial interviews, I continued recruiting through classroom presentations as well as by reaching out to students recommended by FSJSS teachers. I ended recruitment after meeting with the 12th student, such that every student who indicated interest in contributing to the research was able to do so.

Data Collection & Member-Checking. Youth contributors were invited to meet with me three times throughout the interview process. Each of these meetings took place one-on-one. I first met with each student at least once prior to their interview. During this initial meeting, we reviewed the youth information letter and assent form and discussed confidentiality and how the information from their interview would be used. I shared information about what to expect in the next two meetings and we decided when and where their interview would take place. These initial meetings took place in an indoor classroom to provide confidentiality for youth contributors as they were introduced to the research.

The second meeting consisted of a semi-structured individual interview. At the beginning of their interview, each student was offered a $20 gift card to a local shop or restaurant of their choice. As outlined in my Interview Guide (Appendix A), I informed each student that the gift card was theirs to keep regardless of whether they chose to continue with the full interview, skip questions, or end the interview early. Interviews were primarily held after school, with some

scheduled over the students' lunch hour, and took place either inside the school or outdoors near the school. Of the 6 students who opted to do their interviews outdoors, 2 elected to sit down during the interview while 4 (as the weather became colder) chose to participate in walking interviews. Indoor interviews were held in an available classroom.

Interviews took between approximately 30 to 70 minutes and each interview was audio recorded using a digital recording device. Interview questions (Appendix A) explored students' experiences spending time outdoors and the importance of these experiences to them. Students were invited to bring an item with them to the interview that was meaningful and connected to an outdoor experience they had had, with the intention of encouraging reflections on personal connections to land and place and support rapport-building early in the interview. Questions encouraged contributors to reflect on specific outdoor places that were particularly important to them and share their thoughts on the history and future of land and place locally. After the topic of the COVID-19 pandemic came up organically during the first interview with relevance to my research questions, I included a question about the pandemic in all subsequent interviews.

After our interview, I met a third time with each youth contributor to review their typed interview transcript, review questions either of us had about the content of their interview, modify their transcript if desired, and confirm the name or pseudonym they wanted to have used in association with their transcript. Students had the option of reviewing their transcript with me, reviewing it independently during our meeting, reviewing it on their own time, or not reviewing it at all. Most contributors also chose to receive a copy of the transcript for their own records, which was sent to them by email in an encrypted and password-protected document. At our third meeting, I reiterated how I planned to use the information from their interviews and sought feedback on future knowledge exchange about my research findings. These third meetings took

place indoors in the school, largely out of convenience, as winter had arrived by the time the transcripts were complete.

After completing data analysis and writing my research findings, I reached out to each youth a fourth time in the spring of 2023 to share the direct quotes I planned to use in my thesis and to confirm their choice of name or pseudonym to be used in association with these quotes. I connected with the youth by email, by text, and/or in person to confirm the quotes. The youth I met with in person chose to meet outdoors on the school grounds. Of the twelve contributors, ten responded to my request to review and confirm their quotes. Two of these students requested minor changes by asking that I remove filler words such as "like" that did not affect the meaning of their quotes, and one student requested a change to the name used to identify them in the research.

Phase 3: Data Analysis

In the third phase of my research, I analysed interview transcripts using thematic analysis. My analysis was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019, 2022) writing on reflexive thematic analysis. Thematic analysis has been criticized for being less clearly defined than other qualitative methods, leading to inconsistency and lack of rigour in analysis (Nowell et al., 2017). However, Braun and Clarke's recent writing (2019, 2022) builds on their seminal 2006 paper to bring considerable detail and clarity to their approach to thematic analysis. In particular, rather than leaning on quantitative measures of accuracy, validity, and replicability, Braun and Clarke (2022) situate their approach firmly within a qualitative (or as they say, "Big Q") paradigm. Within the Big Q paradigm, Braun and Clarke (2022) emphasize the importance of critical reflection by the researcher throughout the research process. This reflexive approach to analysis

provided me with many opportunities for integration with critical place inquiry through journalling and self-reflection.

In my research proposal, I outlined Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps to thematic analysis with the caveat and recognition that this process might not always proceed in a linear fashion. Indeed, eight months later I found myself struggling to piece together my inductive, qualitative codes into themes that made sense in a linear way. Below, I outline my meandering route through data analysis in relation to Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps of data analysis.

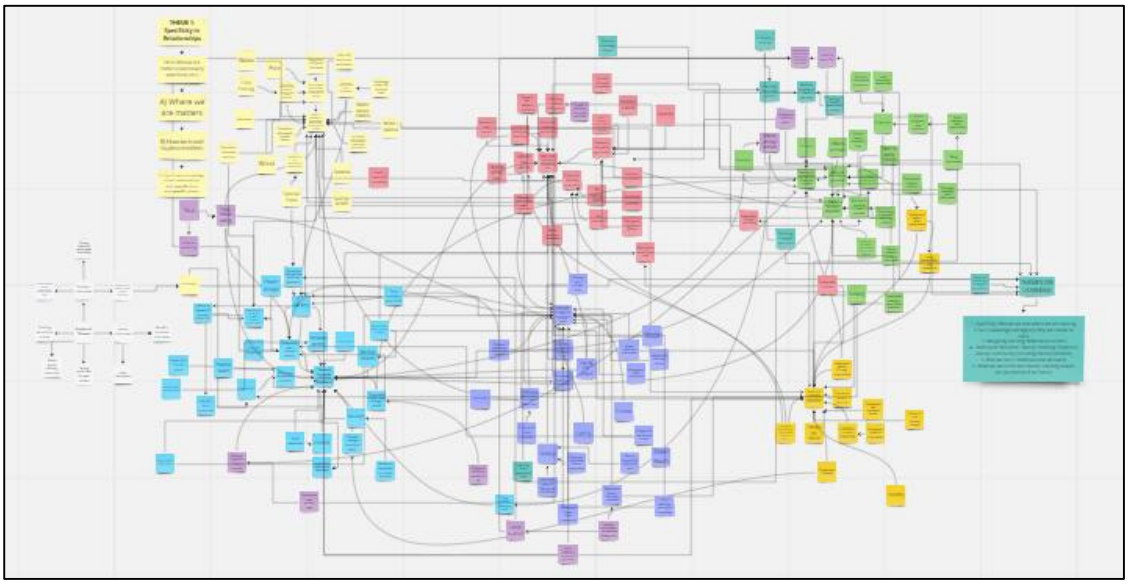
1. Familiarizing Yourself with Your Data. Familiarizing with my data first occurred naturally through the research process. I was not only actively involved in each interview, but often listened to the audio recordings of our interviews as I drove home to Prince George afterwards. I gained further familiarity with the data as I listened to and manually transcribed each interview. I was later grateful to have manually transcribed the interviews, as the verbal cues of tone, hesitation, and laughter remained present for me even once I began working with the transcripts in written form. While transcribing, I developed notes on each transcript with my initial thoughts and highlighted areas to clarify or review with the youth. During member checking, I clarified these sections with the youth and reviewed any other parts of the interview they asked to discuss, adding to my understanding of and familiarity with the transcripts.

2. Generating Initial Codes. Once transcripts were finalized, I began generating codes through inductive analysis in keeping with Braun and Clarke (2022). I first reviewed and annotated a printed copy of the transcripts to develop an initial sense of potential codes and connections across the dataset. Next, I moved to NVIVO software, where I switched up the order in which I reviewed the transcripts and continued with manual coding. My coding in NVIVO was very similar to my coding of printed transcripts, though was made more efficient by my

increased familiarity with the data. In both cases, I highlighted transcript sections that were relevant to my research questions and ascribed one or multiple codes to each section as I went along. My use of NVIVO differed from my physical coding only in that the software made it easier to keep track of my codes and navigate the transcripts. For example, in NVIVO, I was able to view all interview quotes associated with any individual code. Additionally, every code I created in NVIVO was added to a comprehensive list (rather than remaining in the scribbled margins of paper transcripts), facilitating the subsequent step of theme development.

3. Developing Themes. Once I felt that all segments with relevance to my research questions had been sufficiently coded, I began grouping codes into themes. I started with physical copies of the codes, which I found helpful in sorting codes into initial themes. However, finding these physical copies unwieldy to work with (and prone to mixing inconveniently with other groups of codes or swooshing off the table when someone walked by), I later moved to the web-based app "Miroboard", pictured in Figure 3, which not only freed up my kitchen table but allowed for colour-coding, directional arrows to show relationships between codes, and easy adjustments as needed.

Figure 3. Developing Themes on Miroboard



4. Reviewing Themes. In my research proposal, "reviewing themes" seemed a simple process of ensuring that the data is accurately reflected in the codes and themes. In practice, this process was messy, circular, and time-consuming – and (sometimes) fun! From the initial themes I had developed, I grouped my codes together in Miroboard. From there, I went back and forth between themes in Miroboard, the draft of my Findings chapter, the codes I had created in NVIVO, and the transcripts themselves. I adjusted themes and codes as I slowly untangled the interconnected themes and wove them back together into a written document.

5. Defining and Naming Themes. The names of the themes were dynamic throughout analysis, shifting to best represent the codes captured within each theme. Once themes were finalized, I refined their names until I was satisfied that the name of each theme captured the significance of its underlying codes. I checked that the themes made sense in relation to each other and to the broader focus of my research.

6. Producing the Report. Writing my Findings chapter turned out to be an integral part of refining the themes themselves. Once my themes were written up, I was able to turn my focus to discussing the connections between my findings (Chapter 4), existing academic literature (Chapter 2), and applications for future social work practice and other work with youth in the Nechako watershed (Chapter 5).

Throughout data analysis, I found myself balancing Braun and Clarke's (2022) approach to reflexive thematic analysis, which emphasizes the importance of inductive approaches to data analysis, with the 'critical' aspects of critical place inquiry (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015a). I wanted to honour the youth's personal experiences, knowledge, and contributions to the research while also situating their perspectives in the context of local and broader issues of land and place, colonization, and environmental and social justice. I found it helpful to reflect about these

sometimes-conflicting goals through both written and audio journalling. I found audio journalling to be a convenient way of recording my thoughts while driving home from Fort St James, and I especially enjoyed listening back to these 'real-time' reflections later. During analysis and while writing my Findings chapter, I would note connections and disconnections between the youth's perspectives and my own knowledge of local context, academic literature, and critical theory, recording these thoughts in another document to return to once I had established solid themes from my research. In this way, I was able to continue making these mental connections while immersed in the data, without getting sidetracked or inundating my findings with critical perspectives that had not been expressed by the youth.

Data Management

Throughout the research, completed consent and assent forms and all research data were stored in a locked storage box at my home. Data linked to contributors' identity (such as their names, contact information, and other personal information collected in consent forms) was stored separately from raw data (interview recordings and transcripts) such that interviews would not be linked to specific contributors. Digital copies of interview recordings and transcripts were kept on a password-protected and encrypted hard drive and stored within the locked box. Only I had access to completed consent forms. During my third meeting with each contributor, the youth had the option of requesting a copy of their interview. For youth who wished to have a copy, I shared an encrypted and password-protected document of their interview transcript by email and sent the document password by text message. All identifying and raw research data will remain securely stored for 5 years after the completion of my research and then destroyed.

Knowledge Exchange

While my thesis will be made publicly available online through the UNBC website, throughout the research process I have been exploring other (and more accessible) ways to share my research results. I presented preliminary research findings during UNBC's Research Week in March 2023 and intend to continue sharing back about my research through multiple avenues following the completion of my thesis. Following up on relationships established earlier in my research, I intend to present my findings to SD91's Indigenous Education Council, to FSJSS students and teachers, and to community members and organizations in and around Fort St James.

I also intend to continue exploring ways of sharing my research findings in ways that are accessible, engaging, and pertinent for youth contributors and their communities. Informed by feedback from students at our post-interview meetings, I aim to develop a youth-friendly summary of results that includes visual features, such as an infographic featuring key findings or a short video about my research. I would additionally like to share back my results through interactive sessions or workshops that support dialogue and exchange between educators, social workers, youth, and other community members interested in youth relationships with land and place, serving as a catalyst for future action and collaborations in the watershed. Interactions with SD91 teachers and administrators through the **Koh**-Learning program have prompted reflections on the applicability of my findings within education settings. Opportunities for knowledge exchange in this context might include the (co)development of educational resources and activities, with **Koh**-Learning colleagues, based on the findings discussed in Chapter 4.

I anticipate that specific plans and processes for knowledge exchange will emerge through ongoing interactions with youth contributors and other interested parties including

SD91, local social work organizations, First Nations community members, and the **Koh**-Learning program. Research results may additionally be shared with the academic community through journal articles, conference presentations, or targeted presentations through organizations such as the B.C. Association of Social Workers (BCASW)'s Northern Branch.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics relating to consent, confidentiality, data management, and research with youth were considered throughout the research design process and well before recruitment began. This planning was reflected in my research proposal, which was reviewed by UNBC's Research Ethics Board (REB) and received approval on July 18, 2022 (see Appendix B). Through my interactions with youth, teachers, and other community members during the research process, more nuanced ethical considerations emerged related to engaging youth in research, managing confidentiality of people and place, and engaging in outdoor interviews.

Youth in Research

In research, children and youth should not be assumed to be vulnerable nor excluded from research due to their age (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2018, p. 54). However, inviting secondary school students to contribute to research does have ethical implications. When designing my research, I was aware that existing power imbalances caused by my age and social positioning in relation to those of each contributor could be accentuated due to our respective roles as "researcher" and "interviewee". My aim was to be clear with the youth about my role and responsibilities in the research while also including them as active contributors to the research rather than as "subjects" to be studied. To address potential power imbalances with the youth, I prioritized building relationships with them throughout the research process. I participated in school and community events prior to and during recruitment, met with

each student multiple times individually, attended to potential risks and benefits for the youth, engaged in reflexive journalling before and after our interactions, and invited their feedback on avenues for future knowledge exchange. During interviews, I intentionally engaged in conversation with the youth, occasionally sharing stories of my own and allowing us to go off-script rather than insisting on a one-way flow of information.

Recognizing that the youth invited to participate in interviews were also in relationship with their teachers at school where recruitment information was circulated – and where some teachers were more directly involved in recruitment – I emphasized in my information letters and consent/assent forms that each youth's decision to participate or not in the research would not impact their relationships with their teachers or their school. I felt I had done well at prioritizing relationships with youth when, during our post-interview meeting, many of the youth and I found ourselves chatting about topics related and unrelated to my research, with more ease than during our first interactions and without the obligation of a formal interview or recording device.

Consent, Assent, and Confidentiality

Inviting youth to take part in interviews required careful consideration of who can and should consent to youth participation in research. At the institutional level, I received support from SD91 (Appendix C) prior to beginning my research at FSJSS. Recruitment was open to FSJSS's diverse student population, including youth from Fort St James and nearby communities (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous). Student identity or belonging to any one community was not part of my recruitment criteria. Consent from parents or guardians and assent from youth contributors were sought prior to beginning interviews.

Although I engaged in local scoping conversations prior to recruitment, I did not seek or receive formal consent for my research at the community level, including from the communities

whose youth ultimately chose to contribute. This approach was consistent with the design of my research, which was based in SD91 with recruitment focused on students at FSJSS. However, towards the end of my research, it came to my attention that not seeking formal community consent may have been a missed opportunity for broader community input regarding youth participation in my research. While it would have been challenging to seek consent from all communities whose youth attend FSJSS, such a process might have been more respectful of local communities and of the sovereignty of local First Nations in particular.

The question of who ought to consent for youth in research has led to much critical reflection and learning for me as a researcher. For me, this question remains in some ways unresolved and is a consideration I will bring with me to future work. As researchers and universities move towards more community-based and decolonizing approaches to research, I suspect important questions such as this one will continue to emerge – and that resolving these questions will require ongoing work by individuals and institutions as we seek respectful, genuine, and locally relevant ways of engaging communities in research. Within the present research, I intend to reach out to local communities to ensure they are aware of the research that was done and to seek feedback on how my findings will be shared moving forward.

As all youth contributors were under the age of majority, I sought parent or guardian consent for youth participation in interviews and asked the youth to assent via a separate form. Verbal assent to be recorded was additionally sought from each student immediately prior to their interview. At the start of their interview, youth were reminded that they could choose not to answer questions and could withdraw from the interview with no negative consequences. As specified in the information and consent/assent forms, contributors had the option to withdraw from the research project up to and including the review of their interview transcripts. They were

informed that once transcripts were finalized and data analysis had begun, they would no longer be able to withdraw from the research project. None of the youth chose to withdraw from the project.

As Fort St James is a small community, complete anonymity was not a guarantee for youth contributors and I acknowledged this lack of guarantee in the information and consent/assent forms sent out to youth and their parents or guardians. However, particular care was taken throughout the research process to promote youth anonymity and protect their confidentiality. In my consent and assent forms, I invited youth and their parents or guardians to reach out to me with any concerns about confidentiality so we could discuss and address these concerns prior to the interview process. Each time I met with contributors, I took time to explain the measures in place to protect their confidentiality and discuss any concerns they had about being identified in the research.

During the member-checking process, contributors had the option of removing or changing interview content they were uncomfortable with or that they felt might be identifying. A few of the contributors requested minor changes, with one student removing a reference they wished not to have included and a couple of students making clarifying changes or filling in a gap where I had been unable to identify a word when transcribing their interview.

Youth contributors were invited to select a pseudonym during their interview that would be used throughout the research process and in any writing or presentations about the research. They were encouraged to choose a word that holds meaning to them in their interactions with land and place; however, they were advised *not* to choose a word commonly associated with them or that would be identifiable by other people in their community. Contributors were asked to review and confirm their chosen pseudonym during the member-checking process after having

had an opportunity to review their interview transcript. Afterwards, in writing up my research findings, I kept potentially identifying demographic information about contributors (such as grade level and ethnicity**)** separate from interview content as an added layer of confidentiality.

Identifying Youth. During our initial, pre-interview meetings, more than one student expressed interest in having their name used within the research rather than using a pseudonym. I submitted an amendment to UNBC's REB to allow youth to the option of using their first name (or a name of their choosing) in association with quotes from their interview, even if this name might identify them within the research to people in their community. My initial forms (parent/guardian consent forms and youth assent forms) remained unchanged. I created an additional consent and assent form (Appendix D) to allow for the use of youth names in the research project and only youth who expressed interest in using their name were provided copies of this form. The additional form added to the process of informed consent for participants and their guardians, as choosing to use their name in the research required an additional step. The use of names was discussed at each of our meetings and youth were asked to sign their name assent form only after they had had the chance to review their interview transcript. Names were confirmed a final time with youth in their review of the direct quotes I intended to include in my thesis (recalling that ten of the twelve youth contributors responded to my invitation to review their quotes). At this time, one youth requested a change to the name used to represent them in the research and signed a new name consent form to indicate this change.

My decision to open this opportunity to youth was consistent with my professional social work values of self-determination and empowerment as well as my orientation to Indigenous research methodologies in my research. As Wilson (2008) writes, "in an Indigenous research paradigm, it is almost unethical not to name [participants]" (p. 115). I felt that naming the youth

who had contributed to the research upon their request was a way of honouring my relationship with them and respecting the knowledge they had shared. Although my research topic and questions were adequately low-risk for me to offer this choice to youth, our conversations during member-checking involved discussion of the content of their transcripts in case there were sections that the youth would have preferred not to have associated with their name.

Naming Place. Upon deciding to base my research in Fort St James, an additional consideration came up regarding place names. I was aware that anonymity and confidentiality can be particularly hard to come by in a small rural community and for this reason I could have chosen not to identify Fort St James in the research – and had my research topic or interview questions been more emotionally sensitive or politically charged, I might have chosen to do so. However, I felt that to not name the location of my research would be a disservice to the people and place where the knowledge was rooted. With the intention of sharing my findings back to local schools and community agencies, I knew that many people locally would know the research was based at FSJSS and I felt uncomfortable about not being able to acknowledge the people and places that contributed to the research.

Conscious that small, rural, remote, and industry-driven communities often receive negative, deficit-based attention, my choice to name Fort St James in my research was driven by an intention to celebrate the strengths of local communities and highlight youth skills and knowledge in ways that would not have been possible had I chosen to conceal the location of the research. I was aware that providing detailed information about research context can help readers determine the potential relevance of qualitative findings within their own context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My decision additionally aligned with the tenets of relational validity and

"accountability to people and place" emphasized within critical place inquiry (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015b, p. 636).

While anonymity in research can be appropriate and important in certain contexts, multiple social science researchers have made the case that "masking" or anonymizing information about people and places should no longer be defaulted to in qualitative research (Guenther, 2009; Jerolmack & Murphy, 2019; Seelig, 2021; Tuck & McKenzie, 2015b). Seelig (2021) asserts that "the methodological practice of place anonymization in qualitative research *necessarily* distorts and obscures specificity of place" (p. 860), acting in rural research as a "form of methodological erasure akin to the material process of place erasure under a neoliberal system[8]" (p. 865) by devaluing the particularities of rural places. The youth's stories, knowledge, and experiences shared in Chapter 4 are not representative of the experience of youth in all small, rural, industry-driven communities in British Columbia. They are specific to time, place, people, and the land around Fort St James.

Outdoor Interviews

I presented outdoor interviews as an option to students within the intention of bringing land and place more tangibly into the research. While doing some interview indoors and some outdoors may have had implications on the content and quality of the data collected, it was important to me that students have the agency and opportunity to participate in interviews in whichever space would be most comfortable for them. I also wanted to avoid having students decline to participate due to discomfort in doing an interview outdoors.

In offering students the option to participate in outdoor interviews, additional ethical considerations emerged regarding our interactions with each other in the community. As outdoor

[8] For more context on the relevance of neoliberalism in rural places, see *Social Work in the Face of Environmental Crises* in Chapter 2.

interviews took place in public places (either on school grounds or trails nearby the school), these interviews required prior discussion with students about the possibility of being seen with me by other people in their community during the interview.

Methodological Integrity

Drawing upon the concepts of catalytic validity (Lather, 1991) and provocative generalizability (Fine, 2008), Tuck and McKenzie (2015a) discuss the potential for critical place inquiry to serve as a catalyst for social change by provoking readers to go beyond "what is" to imagine "what might be". At the same time, they assert that critical place inquiry must maintain "an ethic of meaningfulness for home" (p. 156). Expanding on this assertion in the context of relational validity, Tuck and McKenzie also explore a broader ethic of accountability to people across places, to land, and to future generations. Keeping in mind these accountabilities to people, place, and social change, my methodological integrity was rooted in my understanding of Indigenous research epistemologies (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015a) and credibility in the context of qualitative research. Each of these is described below.

Epistemic Touchstones of Indigenous Methodologies

As noted above, Tuck and McKenzie (2015a) identify four epistemic touchstones across literature on Indigenous research methodologies: relationships, reciprocity, 'the long view' of time, and decolonization. While foundational to my research design and important for guiding my decisions along the way, these ideas were not constantly front of mind. At times I hesitated to return to them, concerned that in the interim I had missed the mark entirely. However, and for this reason, the term 'touchstone' rings true. I found it grounding to return to these concepts throughout my research and especially so when ethical dilemmas arose.

Relationships. In Chapter 1, I mention the notion of 'relational validity', which Tuck and McKenzie (2015b) discuss as a way of being accountable through relationships to local people and place. As discussed throughout my research design and methods, relationships were central to my research from the beginning, including relationships with people at FSJSS and in the local community as well as the relationships I developed with youth prior to and during the research process.

During my research, I also felt the need to acknowledge my accountability to the people and places that have influenced me personally and professionally and that informed the initial development of my research. As a nod to these relationships, I attached a braided craft bracelet to my audio recorder from a past program I had facilitated in Manitoba. Present throughout my interviews, the bracelet served as a reminder of where my knowledge comes from: a way of respecting my past relationships and the people, places, stories, and values held within these relationships.

I additionally recognize my personal relationships with land and place as important contributors to my sense of well-being, creative thinking, and reflective capacity throughout the research process. During my research in Fort St James, I saw spectacular sunsets and sunrises over **Nak'al Bun** (Stuart Lake), had my laptop dusted in layers of bright green spring pollen, and navigated winter roads on my way to and from FSJSS. I developed my connections to land and water locally as I hiked, paddled, camped, and swam, and took part in outdoor activities in the community and with the school. Throughout, my experiences in relationship with the watershed, though few compared to the experiences of the students I interviewed, grounded my learning and critical reflections in land and place locally.

Reciprocity. Reciprocity was enacted through my relationships, including prior relationships and those developed through the research process. During my time at FSJSS, beyond the presentations I did for recruitment purposes, I would join classes upon request to share knowledge I had learned through the **Koh**-Learning program or personally as a student, facilitating discussion or activities on topics such as watershed health and what it means to do research. During interviews, I intentionally chose to make interviews conversational, prioritizing my relationships with the youth and allowing myself to share stories of my own when appropriate. My intention is for this reciprocity to continue past the completion of my thesis through ongoing knowledge exchange, specifically by sharing my research findings with adults working with youth in Fort St James and nearby communities.

The long view of time. In my research, taking a long view of time included considering how the choices made by and about the youth in my research might impact them and their communities in the future. On one hand, I considered the change-making potential of my research. How could I make this experience positive for the youth? Could I present my findings in ways that would strengthen and enhance the work already being done in local communities? On the other hand, potential negative impacts were equally on my mind. What if youth consented to using their first names now, but changed their minds months or years later? During analysis and when writing my findings, were there possible negative ramifications for students based on direct quotes I decided to use? I made these decisions using my best judgement, in consultation with the youth themselves and through consent received from their parents or guardians, and by seeking additional guidance from my contacts locally as well as my supervisory committee. At present, there is no way to know what effects my research will have in future, but I hope that being part of this research is something the youth will be proud of for many years to come.

Decolonization. As I prepared for and engaged in my research, I queried what decolonization means to me personally and professionally and in the context of this work. As Barker (2010) observes:

> One of the frustrating implications of the decolonizing, unsettling, and, ultimately, respectful approach to becoming a Settler ally […] is that there is no 'plan,' no universally applicable model […]. There is only a set of principles, and the individual commitment to follow those principles. (p. 327)

For me, these principles were to engage in relationships, reciprocity, the long view, and decolonization as respectfully as I could and knowing that at no point would I have suddenly "transcended colonialism" (Barker, 2010) or 'achieved' decolonization of myself or my work. To the extent that I could, I entered my research with humility and an openness to learning, akin to "the unfamiliar space of not knowing" (A. Jones & Jenkins, 2008, p. 16) which Regan (2010) identifies as an important part of decolonization for settler allies to Indigenous people.

This touchstone was about deepening my learning about the meaning of decolonization, what it means to be a settler ally, and implications of decolonization for social work, researchers, and educational institutions. At times, it meant allowing myself to sit in the emotional discomfort of (un)learning, grapple with past mistakes and future uncertainty, and "ask the question, 'What do we do?' from a profoundly uncomfortable place" (Barker, 2000, p. 323).

Credibility in Qualitative Research

My evaluation of the methodological integrity and credibility of my research has been informed by Braun and Clarke's (2022) writing on reflexive thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2022) describe methodological integrity as coherence throughout the research process, from theoretical assumptions and research questions through to research design and methods (p. 167).

As I discuss in my final chapter, I realized towards the end of data analysis that there was a third, 'emerging' research question (What can social workers learn from youth about their experiences spending time outdoors?) that had previously been an unwritten assumption within my research. I felt that putting this question into words – even at this late stage in the research – and reflecting on its intersections with my first two research questions improved the coherence of my findings with the rest of the research process.

Cautioning against the assessment of qualitative research through a positivist lens, Braun and Clarke also encourage researchers undertaking reflexive thematic analysis to focus on "immersion, creativity, thoughtfulness and insight" (p. 268) – that is, self-reflection – to ensure the quality of data analysis. Following their guidance, I practiced reflexive journalling throughout my research process through written and audio-recorded journal entries. Journalling was a means of reflecting critically on my assumptions, prior knowledge, and emotional responses during the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2022), including interactions with youth contributors, ethical dilemmas that came up throughout the research process, and connections and disconnections with critical place inquiry.

In choosing to do qualitative research in a small community, I chose the qualitative values of specificity, local relevance, and depth of meaning over generalizability of data. This place-based nature of my research aligns with Tuck and McKenzie's (2015b) writing on place in research, which urges reconsideration of the significance of place "not because it offers a generalizable theory or universal interpretation, but because generalizability and universality are impossibilities anyway, in no small part because **place matters and place is always specific**" (p. 637, emphasis added).

Overview of Youth Contributors and Interview Contexts

In this section, as additional context for the findings presented in the following chapter, I provide a brief overview of the demographic information of youth contributors and share a few memories from our outdoor and indoor interviews to further situate my research in context.

Introduction to Youth Contributors

During my research, I interviewed twelve students at FSJSS. Four of the youth were in grades 8 to 10 and eight were in grade 11 or 12, with at least one student participating from each grade level. The youth were 14 to 17 years old at the time of our interviews. Seven of the twelve students identified as Indigenous (First Nations or Métis) or Indigenous-Canadian, while five identified with a range of Caucasian Canadian and European heritage. Five of the students identified as female, six as male, and one as non-binary. Some students chose to use their first name, some chose a name other than their first name, and some chose a nature-themed pseudonym. Given this diversity, **no assumptions should be made about the identity of youth contributors based on the name used to identify them within the research**. Seven of the twelve students shared that they had lived all or most of their lives in the community where they live now, while the remaining students indicated they had lived there for less than a year to six years or more. Many of the contributors identified family ties to Fort St James and/or surrounding communities, however, family ties to the area were not necessarily indicative of having grown up in the area (e.g., some contributors had family ties to the area but had not lived locally for most of their lives, and vice versa).

All contributors demonstrated interest in and commitment to participating in the research. Each contributor met with me at least three times over the course of the research, with most of our meetings taking place on the students' own time (during the school lunch hour and after

school). Most meetings took place indoors at FSJSS, with half of our interviews and some follow-up meetings taking place outdoors nearby the school, by student choice. Most, though not all, of the youth had interacted with me in some capacity in the year preceding our interviews, not including my presentations at the high school about my research – although in a couple of cases, one or both of us did not recall our previous interactions until we happened upon shared experiences during our interview!

Adrian, Fox, Gabe, Khai, Kirby, Molly, Natalie, Raven, Sloane, Steven, Tree, and Willow have my deep gratitude for their willingness to contribute their time and knowledge to this project. I am moved not only by the thoughts they shared with me in our interviews, but also by the privilege of getting to know and learn from them during our less formal interactions.

Introduction to Interview Settings

As additional context for my research findings, I share a few of my recollections from our interviews in the (sometimes literal) field below.

Outdoors, there were the aspen leaves, ochre and brilliant in the October sun, a backdrop to one interview. There was laughter and joking, the reminiscing about past shared experiences, the deciding of which trail to take next. There was fog settling in the school field at the end of one day as we looked down from trails behind the school; the sound of water running under the **Nahounli** Creek footbridge as we raced sticks in the creek; a view of the sun setting over the lake beyond a snowy street. There were logging trucks rumbling past on the road. There was freshly melted snow that glittered on spruce branches and latched on, became a brief extension of us, when we stuck out a careful fingertip to touch a water droplet.

Indoors, there was sitting in an upstairs classroom at the secondary school, the audio recorder silent but present between us, natural light trickling in through a window in the upper

corner that looked over the school rooftop. There was appreciation of staying inside as a warm and welcome reprieve from the cold outdoors. There were school announcements over the intercom, and the school dog who was coaxed into the room to say hello during one interview. These interviews were with specific people and these interviews occurred in places.

Chapter Summary

This chapter traced an introduction to the methodological journey of my research, beginning with the influences of qualitative exploratory and Indigenous research methodologies. I next described my research design and methods, including details of participant recruitment, data analysis, and plans for knowledge exchange. I reviewed several ethical considerations that arose at various stages of the research, discussed the methodological integrity of my work, and concluded with an introduction to the research contributors and the settings of our interviews.

Chapter Four – Findings

At the beginning of my research, I set out to explore the following research questions: (1) How do youth in the Nechako watershed perceive their relationships with land and place? and (2) How do these relationships contribute to youth experiences of resilience? In this chapter, I summarize five themes that I developed through thematic analysis (see also *Figure 4*, below). As much as possible, I share the ideas expressed by youth contributors in their own words (and their words are worth attending to!). I emphasize that all interviews provided valuable contributions to the themes below, and the presence or absence of quotes in my thesis is not necessarily indicative of the value or number of contributions each of the youth made to the research.

Figure 4. Thesis Themes and Sub-Themes

Themes	**Sub-Themes**
1. Specificity in Relationships: Where We Are (and Who We Are) Matters	• Description of Fort St James and area • Special places: Freedom, identity, and belonging • Journeying: Place is more than just a destination • Land as awe, wonder, magic
2. Pathways to Negotiating Relationships with Land and Place	• Resources supporting relationships with land and place • Informal and formal pathways to time outside • Barriers to time outside • Navigating risk and safety
3. Intersections of Community, Land, and Youth Resilience	• Community identity and resilience • Youth resilience • Social and ecological health and resilience
4. People are Connected through Place and Time	• History is held within the land • Intergenerational connections through land and place • Childhood outdoor experiences • Future concerns • Future hopes
5. Youth have Agency and Responsibility	• Developing independence and mastery • The land is alive: Respect and reciprocity • Advice for children and youth • Advice for adults working with youth

Throughout this chapter, I primarily attribute youth quotes within the body of the text. Occasionally, quotes (both from youth contributors and other sources) that particularly embody an important message are emphasized at the beginning of a section and attributed directly below the quote. Although my inclusion of each quote was intended to highlight a specific aspect of the findings, I find it important to note that many quotes are illustrative of more than one theme (or sub-theme) across this chapter, even when the quote itself appears only once. Square brackets [such as these] within contributor quotes signify a deletion or alteration to the original, verbatim interview transcript for the sake of clarity or brevity, or to avoid sharing identifying information.

Theme 1: Specificity in Relationships: Where We Are (and Who We Are) Matters

'Land' and 'place' are useful terms, but their broad definitions in the abstract can lose the threads of personal connection, emotion, and story that weave through people's concrete experiences of being on the land and developing a sense of place. Although my interviews with students began with generalities, our discussions ultimately centred on stories that occurred in specific places, with specific people, and at specific times in each youth's lives. The theme of *Specificity in Relationships* encompasses students' local knowledge of the area where they live; experiences of freedom, identity, and belonging in 'special' places; the importance of travel and journeying; and perceptions of land as awe, wonder, and magic.

Description of Fort St James and Area

> *"It is beautiful. Especially with […] Mount Pope back there, especially in the fall and the winter […]. And the lake, when it's all frozen over during the winter, […] it's awesome, especially with the, uh, sun setting or sun rising […] it's nice, all around […] every year."*
>
> - Kirby, Youth Contributor

During our interviews, I asked the youth to describe the land where they lived, including Fort St James and surrounding communities. They spoke about local waterways and ecosystem

biodiversity; described their town as small, isolated, and northern; and identified a wide variety of activities they participate in outdoors.

Local Waterways and Ecosystems. For many of the youth, Stuart Lake (**Nak'al Bun**) and other local waterways were central to their descriptions. Sloane described the connecting role of water as follows:

> *[O]ur lake is really huge compared to other lakes and especially being for a small town, with other smaller communities around it, it is fairly large, and there's so many adjoining lakes around the area too that all kind of connect together through streams and stuff. […] Lots of water, lots of fish, different animals that use both.*

The youth described their communities as home to diverse and complex ecosystems, including an abundance of animal species, trees, and creeks and streams. Raven talked about how ecosystems shift based on proximity to Stuart Lake (**Nak'al Bun**) and at different elevations. He stated:

> *The natural environment? It's pretty complex, because, like, near the lake, you have [a] pretty diverse amount of trees and stuff, but as you get like higher up into like Mount Pope or Mount Dickenson is right next to you, yeah that would be, it's more of like, more set on like pine trees. […] You get a lot more like unique animals once you get, like, higher up in the mountain.*

The youth acknowledged that their local ecosystems are not static but have changed over the course of their lives. They identified concerning changes such as seeing trees being cut down and fish populations dwindling, as well as positive changes such as creek remediation efforts and the reopening of a local fish hatchery.

Small, Isolated, Northern. The youth identified their home communities as small, isolated, and northern. Natalie joked, "*When you drive into Fort, um, you'll see a little town – if you blink, you'll miss it*". As relatively isolated communities, highway driving was described as

commonplace, with access to outside services challenging for people without a driver's license or access to a vehicle. Being a "northern" community situated only mid-way up the province also puts Fort St James in a unique position. Describing the unpredictable weather – sometimes snow, sometimes rain – that comes with this location in B.C.'s central interior, Sloane described, "*I feel like we're at an oddly placed location being in the north, kinda like up this far but not too far up, so it's like, get half and half, and it's kind of an awkward position."* Other youth described winters as very cold and recalled memorable years with deep snowfalls.

The youth identified other consequences of living in a small, relatively isolated community, including increased access to nature and a stronger culture of spending time outdoors compared to larger cities. Steven described that:

> *nature's definitely a big part of, […] adults' and kids' lives here because there's…that's what there is to do. I mean, being outside is really, aside from video games or TV, that's our number one entertainment, and I think it's great.*

Fort St James' history and identity as a forestry town also figured strongly in the youth's descriptions of local place and their perceptions of human and ecosystem interactions.

Special Places: Freedom, Identity, and Belonging

In one of my favourite interview questions, I asked the youth to think of a place in nature that was special to them and share what it was like to be there. For many of the youth, their special place was somewhere they had been many times, with some of the youth returning to their special places since early childhood.

For many of the youth, a sense of privacy and freedom were key to what made these places special. Adrian described his special place as:

> *kinda refreshing, it's like super calm. There's isn't like actually something that makes you angry but also nothing that actually makes you happy, so it's like kinda neutral, I would say. But it's like also a special place, because it feels like* ***your*** *place, so in your*

> *room you still have like your family, you know and your family's like downstairs, but [at the special place] there's like nobody who could hear or see you, and you could technically do whatever you want to for the…only time of the day. [...] So I think at the [special place] it's like, kind of feeling of freedom.* (Emphasis added)

Adrian was not the only youth to note this "feeling of freedom" in association with a special place in nature. Special places provided an opportunity for privacy, seclusion, and a sense of "their place" that could not be found in a household with other people or elsewhere in their community. Khai shared a similar sense of escaping household pressures in his special place:

> *It's nice, […] I find it's kinda the one place I really have privacy. Like, if I'm talking to someone over the phone in my room, people hear me. If, you know I'm upstairs doing things, people are watching. But, you know, down there it's secluded by trees, it's just me and this…funky looking waterfall!*

Meanwhile, Kirby spoke about the privacy and seclusion he enjoyed at his family's cabin, sharing that he liked "*the seclude-y, basically, just, you're by yourself and with family and whatnot. Yeah, it's nice. […] It feels…feels…kinda…nice, like, comforting, and whatnot*."

To some of the youth, knowledge and familiarity with specific places came with a sense of belonging, identity, and acceptance during a stage of life – adolescence – where finding any one of these can be a struggle. As Khai observed, "*Trees don't care who you are.*" Reflecting on the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic when many places were shut down and school was taking place online, Khai also noted that going outdoors helped him to regain a sense of belonging:

> *I think when I started actually going out and trying to do stuff, […] I suddenly got that, you know, sense of something to do and somewhere to contribute to back, I had my chance to, you know, physically engage with the world around me again. You know, I couldn't exactly walk around the halls of my house and go from one class to another. […] But [going outside], it gave a sense of belonging back when I needed it.*

Journeying: Place is More than Just a Destination

Throughout our interviews, the youth often described where their stories took place and how to get there. Gabe's reflection below is a good example of this specificity. He describes not only where his place is located, but also the mode of transportation, the route he takes, and even the time of day he is normally there:

> *Doing morning runs, there's this big glade I go to, it's down on the black diamond trail, but…off through the bushes and you come to this big open glade, and especially in the morning when it's still dark, it's so fun*.

Molly, introducing her special place, similarly detailed the path to get there:

> *You know that mountain that I was telling you about, where we go up, and we drive up there? Like along there, like, just a little ways up the road, there's like this turn-off, and it goes into like a V, and you can either go like up the mountain, or you can go like down, on the side. And then, if you go down the side, then there's a little trail that leads to like, springs. Like, fresh springs and water, like, right from the earth.*

In sharing these stories, the youth demonstrated understandings of their special places as specific, physically located, and partly characterized by each place's relation with and location within its surrounding environment.

Land as Awe, Wonder, Magic

Several of the youth indicated a sense of awe, wonder, magic, and gratitude for their experiences connecting to land and place. Steven, describing how it feels to be in his special place, shared his appreciation for having opportunities:

> *to see this amazing wildlife you don't really get to see anywhere else […] It kinda amazes you every time you look at it, that that's what you get to do and just relax for a couple of hours, just be in nature and be with the animals.*

Reflecting on her own experiences of special places, Sloane described going up the T-bar at the local ski hill, where "*you can just enjoy the scenery and it's kind of magical when like, it's either*

snowing or when the wind and the snow is blowing around and stuff". She went on to speak about spending time on Stuart Lake (**Nak'al Bun**), where "*it's cool getting to see all the different kind of cliff faces and how the tiniest tree can grow in the most astonishing place, like, in the middle of the cliff, nothing around.*"

Sometimes, the sense of magic and wonder associated with experiences of land and place can be difficult to put into words. Khai described it this way:

> *There is something about how being outside affects me. […] it is a sense of belonging and a sense of awe, just, you know, how well it all works together, how many components there are, and just how…yeah. It's hard to explain, but I hope you get what I mean.*

Khai later spoke to the significance of this sense of awe, reflecting:

> *We were taught that being outside, it's kind of awe-inspiring, like you go see a waterfall, a really pretty mountain, and it's just, wow. And that sense of awe is what drives us to be better people, you know, it's what drives our sense of kindness, you know. Seeing how amazing of a world we live in and just, things we're contributing to, it just drives you so much more to really work towards maintaining it.*

Khai's words have stayed with me since our interview. In my experience, children and youth are exceptional at asking, *Why?* Perhaps supporting youth in developing a sense of land as awe, wonder, and magic is one way of helping them to answer, or at least explore, questions of *why* land and place are worth caring for.

Theme 2: Pathways to Negotiating Relationships with Land and Place

I found that youth relationships with land and place are negotiated between the resources available to youth in their communities and each youth's unique way of experiencing and navigating the world. This theme includes resources that support youth in going outside; informal and formal pathways to outdoor experiences; barriers to spending time outside; and youth reflections on navigating risk and safety.

Resources Supporting Relationships with Land and Place

The youth shared many resources that support their access and connection to outdoor spaces, including proximity; supportive, skilled, and knowledgeable adults; and equipment and technology.

Proximity. Access to nearby outdoor spaces was identified as a benefit of living in a small community, allowing youth to engage in a wide range of outdoor activities because the land and water are, as Sloane described, "*just right there*". This proximity was described as part of what made living in or near Fort St James special. Steven asserted that easy access to nature in and around town meant there were less barriers to spending time outside. He stated:

> *all of Fort [St. James] is out in nature and outside, so, it's not uh, a big city where you're just walking down the sidewalk or something, […] you go a kilometre and you're walking the trails, you're walking Mount Pope or you're doing something […] or, you're down at the lake.*

Supportive Adults. Family members and other community adults played an important role in facilitating youth opportunities outdoors. They introduced youth to outdoor activities, encouraged youth to go outdoors on their own, supported them in accessing the resources they needed to go outside, taught them survival skills and how to be safe outdoors, shared traditional ecological knowledge and skills, and provided additional resources of time, funding, and transportation. While all of the youth talked about the role of family members (parents, grandparents, and other extended family) in facilitating their time outdoors, supportive adults also included teachers, coaches, program leaders, work colleagues and supervisors, and community Elders. The important role of family members and other supportive adults is exemplified in many quotes throughout this chapter.

Equipment and Technology. While some of the youth's outdoor activities required little to no equipment (going for a walk, for example), access to equipment such as bikes, skis, boats, and sports equipment changed the way youth were able to relate to the land and waters around them and provided access to a wider variety of activities. For some youth, equipment was also something to be proud of. Specific outdoor or sports gear, for example, was associated with strong positive memories of success for some students.

While difficulty accessing equipment is identified below as a barrier to time outside, Sloane indicated that "*having a close-knit community is nice, because then if you needed something, to be able to do something that you wanted to do, you could just ask and, if you're reliable then they'll probably say yes.*" In what Sloane described as a very "*outdoor-driven community*" with many people being involved in forestry, many people are well-resourced to help youth access the tools and equipment they need to pursue their outdoor interests. Other youth similarly described their families, school, and communities helping them access the equipment they needed to be safe and successful outside.

Time outdoors was described by some youth as a positive alternative to spending time indoors on technology. However, youth also shared ways that technology supported their outdoor learning and experience. Whether accessing online videos to learn about outdoor survival and safety, using radar to find the depth of the lake, using geospatial tools for navigation, or recording outdoor sights and sounds through digital media, the youth reporting using technology to enhance their interactions with and knowledge of land and place.

Informal and Formal Pathways to Outdoor Experiences

The youth accessed outdoor experiences through both formal and informal pathways. Informal pathways are discussed first, followed by the more formal opportunities provided through school, community, and employment opportunities.

Informal Pathways. Each of the youth shared experiences of connecting to land and place with family and friends. Family – including immediate and extended family and other caregivers – were influential in making outdoor opportunities available to the youth. With a great depth and diversity of outdoor knowledge available through the adults around them, youth spoke of the richness of learning from multiple family members, often learning distinct skills or forms of knowledge from different people. For some youth, this meant both Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge about physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual connections to the land was being passed down to them from previous generations. Molly described some of her learnings from different family members as follows:

> *my dad, […] he's more like the big ideas of outdoors, but then my mom, […] they like complement each other, and she teaches kinda like the smaller things […] beading, or like, preparing meals, […] me and him would go out and get the animal, but then she would teach me how to like prepare it. […] Both of my grandpas, […] they were big into outdoors, too. But my grandpa, he has more of like the cultural knowledge, and then like, my other grandpa is more like […] facts about the area […]. My…great-auntie and uncle […] every fishing season, we go up there at five in the morning, and then we head out onto the river and take out fish nets and that, and then we'd spend all day just doing fish.*

Friends were also identified as key facilitators and motivators for time outside. Youth shared stories of playing games, having fun, being goofy, challenging themselves physically, and taking risks with friends outdoors. For some of the youth, being with friends made it easier, safer, and more fun to be outside. Willow captured aspects of this in the following quote:

> *I'd say mostly with friends I could go outside cause I'm not alone, just mostly cause I don't like going outside alone. Just seeing other people, like go out, […] bringing someone else with me, it just always cheers me up cause it helps me not be awkward and quiet […].*

Time outdoors with friends provided youth the privacy and independence to socialize away from the pressures of adults and other peers. *Whom* youth spent time with outside was significant, and friends held important roles in the youth's stories of time outdoors.

School and Community Programs. Youth accessed outdoor, land- and place-based experiences through school and community programs. An asset of both school and community programs was the presence of committed adults who were organizing and leading activities, teaching, and offering opportunities to the youth. Youth spoke about the commitment and caring of adults who contributed their time and effort to develop these programs. For example, Kirby spoke highly of the adults who ran his sports program: "*they're good people, they got us out for, during the summers and, yeah. [Our coach] really likes to help us practice and whatnot, and same with [the team manager]. […] yeah, it's fun […].*"

Certain teachers at their secondary school intentionally sought and created outdoor and land-based learning experiences; students also benefitted from school district-wide outdoor learning opportunities. The students' outdoor experiences through school included learning about and gathering medicinal plants; learning other traditional Dakelh teachings and practices; learning about the social, cultural, and natural history of the local area; gaining outdoor safety and survival skills; engaging in water quality assessments, environmental monitoring, and ecosystem restoration; visiting the local fish hatchery; gaining forestry knowledge and skills; and participating in overnight trips both within and beyond their local area. The significant and

memorable nature of these school experiences is woven through many of the quotes that are shared across this chapter.

Those classes with a focus on outdoor learning provided a wealth of unique and hands-on experiences for students that equipped them with first-hand knowledge of and curiosity about their environment. The community resources already discussed – such as proximity to natural spaces and the availability of skilled, supportive, and knowledgeable adults and Elders – appeared to strengthen the school-based outdoor learning available to students. Students also shared memories of outdoor and land-based learning in elementary school. At their secondary school outdoor experiences were limited to those specific classes where outdoor activities were intentionally integrated into the curriculum by their teachers and to occasional other field trips.

Meanwhile, community programs included sports programs, summer programs, First Nations band-run programs, and outdoor camps and expeditions. Through these programs, youth shared stories of having had many unique outdoor experiences that they would not otherwise have had. Some examples of these opportunities include paddling the length of **Nak'al Bun** on a canoe trip (which was "*pretty hard*" and involved paddling through wind and rain); building a shelter, sleeping in it overnight, and meeting wildlife along the way; and connecting with Indigenous knowledges and practices such as medicine-picking, fishing, and hunting. The youth indicated that through these experiences, they were able to experience new places, build social connections, and gain new skills and confidence.

Employment and Volunteering. Many of the youth expressed experience and/or interest in paid or volunteer work during their interviews. Outdoor chores, gardening, and yard work at home were common ways that youth found themselves outdoors on a regular basis. Youth also identified work experience and interest in the fields of outdoor recreation, environmental

education, ecosystem monitoring and restoration, firefighting, and childcare. These experiences empowered youth to develop skills and confidence, explore potential career options, complete training and certifications programs, and ladder into employment opportunities elsewhere.

Through employment, youth were able to interact with the land, their peers, their community, and other skilled workers in ways they would otherwise not have done. Youth demonstrated confidence in their abilities at work, a sense of belonging within their workplace, and pride in the contributions they were making or had made through work. Some of the youth indicated having applied their work skills and knowledge elsewhere in their lives or having shared unique stories and learnings from work with others around them. Sloane recalled:

> *I would tell [my family], oh yeah, like we went out and we caught hummingbirds, and stuff and my dad would be like, you're doing all of these cool stuff that I wish that I had, and like, I've lived here for how long and I never have been able to even be close to a hummingbird without it flying away.*

Barriers to Time Outside

Despite the many supportive resources in their communities, youth identified several factors that reduced the likelihood that they or other youth would spend time outdoors. These factors included a lack of access to transportation; family, school, and work responsibilities; equipment theft or vandalism; and challenging environmental conditions.

Access to Transportation. Lack of access to a vehicle and a driver's licence restricted options available to youth in communities where public transportation is not available. Youth living outside of Fort St James had more barriers to participating in activities taking place in town, while youth living in town required transportation to access outdoor activities elsewhere. However, even in town, access to the 'outdoors' was low-barrier in some ways – youth could

step outside and go for a walk – and lack of access to transportation meant some youth spent more time walking or biking as a way of travelling from place to place.

Family, School, and Work Responsibilities. Being a young person comes with expectations and responsibilities. Youth identified commitments to family, school, and work that sometimes reduced their ability or motivation to go outdoors on their own time. At times, and understandably, spending time outdoors was prioritized when it aligned with or contributed to fulfilling these commitments and less prioritized when it got in the way. However, and as discussed later, spending time outdoors was also prioritized by some youth in its own right.

Theft and Vandalism. Several youth identified outdoor activities that they had previously enjoyed but no longer had access to because their equipment, such as bikes, skis, or more specialized gear, had been stolen or vandalized. Fox recalled an instance of bicycle theft:

> *I had my bike at the school, first day, it was gone, someone stole it, and after a few days, my cousin found it in the lake up, up there (pointing), that way from the high school. And the tires were slashed, and the seat was [taken].*

For some, the cost of replacing this gear or concern that the equipment would get stolen again meant that they had not had the equipment replaced, reducing their choices in outdoor activities and in some cases their access to independent transportation.

Environmental Conditions. Spending time outdoors was sometimes described to be physically under- or over-stimulating in ways that made youth less likely to venture outside. Hot, cold, wet, or windy conditions can be inconvenient and dressing for these conditions can pose sensory challenges; for example, bundling up to stay warm in cold weather requires clothing and layers that can feel itchy or uncomfortable. As discussed below, environmental conditions also influence safety.

Navigating Risk and Safety

Youth discussed the fun of engaging in risky outdoor activities – such as climbing trees or going fast on downhill skis or mountain bikes – as well as the responsibility that comes with needing to look after their own safety in outdoor environments and the sense of accomplishment that can come with navigating risk and safety successfully. While safety issues including wildlife, environmental conditions, and interactions with people were cited as making it more difficult to go outside, youth generally expressed that they were capable of navigating their way (sometimes literally) to safety through preparation, appropriate training and equipment, and problem-solving. Khai offered the following reflections on navigating risk and safety outdoors:

> *[The outdoors is] definitely a force to respect […] It's kinda like tough love, it's…it's a nice friend when you need it, somewhere to be, somewhere sheltered, it's…mostly safe, most of the time in the daylight. You kinda get your ass kicked if you're out there in the night when it's cold, but…. Yeah, there's always ways for you to survive in it, you just have to know what to do.*

When I invited the youth to share memorable stories of time outdoors, they often shared stories of near-misses – times when situations went poorly or risky incidents occurred. Often present in these stories were recollections of frustration or fear during the incident as well as humour in recalling the unexpected turn of events. However, the youth's retelling these stories tended to include two other significant features. First, they often shared important lessons learned about safety considerations that had stayed with them since the incident (regardless of whether they reported following these safety considerations since!). And second, in telling these stories of adversity, the youth were also highlighting the strengths, ingenuity, and resilience of themselves and others.

Theme 3: Intersections of Community, Land, and Youth Resilience

Although the youth did not use the term 'resilience' in our interviews (and neither did I), our discussions surfaced many related topics that, together, hold relevance for individual and collective resilience. Through my analysis, I identified themes of community identity and resilience, students' personal experiences of resilience, and ways in which both of these are connected to the health and resilience of the land.

Community Identity and Resilience

Through their stories of spending time on the land, the youth provided a glimpse into the social and ecological fabric of their communities. Their interviews offered insight into their perceptions of community identity and the influence of rural and remote living upon their health and well-being. I noticed that the students' understandings of 'community' included human and more-than-human relationships, while 'place' referred to social as well as land-based environments. Sloane referenced this social identity of place, describing, "*another thing about this place is that…maybe it's just me, but I find that it's very heavily like family-connection sort of […] It's kind of just more like family-related communities*". She spoke about the benefits of this emphasis on family and the hope and optimism that comes from seeing young adults choosing to return to their community to raise families of their own. The land was also described by many of the youth as an important part of their community identity.

Through their stories, the youth indicated the presence of both social capital (through descriptions of adults and Elders with extensive skills and knowledge about the land), as well as physical infrastructure (access to outdoor opportunities and to the land itself) in their community, both of which hold relevance for community resilience[9]. Molly shared that many of her key

[9] See Definition of Terms.

learnings from being outside came from going out on the land all together with her family, where they would "*all kinda like teach each other, and then they like, all teach me at the same time […].*"

For many youth, spending time outdoors included opportunities to connect with and learn about Indigenous culture and ways of knowing and being. For youth who were Indigenous to the lands where their learning took place, culturally relevant programs and outings with family were ways of connecting with their cultural identity and with previous generations who had stewarded those lands. The Dakelh language came up in our interviews in relation to the land, primarily through place names (e.g., **Nahounli** Creek) and through reflections on land-based learning. The youth indicated a range of culturally meaningful opportunities that were made available by the people and resources in their communities.

Steven, reflecting on changes he had seen locally on land and water over the years, provided examples of seeing people pull together from across the community to improve the health of land, water, and fish and to support youth connection with the land:

> *it's a lot different than it was before, […] we have less fish, but I think now people are starting to realize that it's a problem. And so, with the salmon hatchery opening up, […] and with the groups like* ***Koh****[-Learning], and with* ***Chuntoh*** *[Education Society], working towards bettering our, our creek health has really made a difference […] I definitely think that people have taken a concerned effort to make it better for everybody. With [FSJSS] programs that […] get different resources into the classroom, and even in the summer, to help kids have that connection with the land that I think is very important […] I think that, at least in Fort St James we're having […] more connection with the land than we did in past years.*

The reflections shared by youth about growing up in a small, relatively isolated community also intersected with human health and well-being in a variety of ways. Sloane described:

> *our health care here is, it's not great […], it's definitely not the worst in the world, but it's not the best, and like, some of the things we have to wait to get shipped up to us, and there's delays and then…not very many doctors or nurses on call either, which can be rough, especially in a pandemic.*

As Sloane and I went on to discuss, a new hospital build is currently underway in Fort St James[10]. However, limited access to health care remains a local reality and is especially the case in more remote communities.

At the same time, the rural and remote nature of Fort St James and surrounding communities means that the youth have had access to rich local resources and health-promoting outdoor activities that they might not have access to in an urban centre. For example, Sloane shared that by living in an isolated community and having access to more outdoor opportunities,

> *you get to see the beauty in little things. […] Driving along a highway that I've been on for [all of my] years, I still look out and be like, "oh, that's new" and get to see kind of the growth of new plants and trees around you over time […] compared to driving in a city, like, buildings, on buildings, on buildings kind of get tiring over time […].*

This way of living, which seems to have made Sloane's observations of her local environment particularly astute, also aligns with what Adrian termed living not just *in*, but *with* nature – as discussed further under Theme 5.

Youth Resilience

Throughout our interviews, the youth brought to light many ideas that resonate with my understanding of individual resilience[11]. They also identified a variety of influences of time outdoors on their physical and mental health. Physical health effects included opportunities to stay active, as exemplified in the following reflection by Kirby:

[10] The new Stuart Lake Hospital build is scheduled to be completed in 2024 (Government of B.C., 2023).
[11] See Definition of Terms.

> *I think [spending time outside] affects me in a good way, 'cause it keeps me healthy, happy […] It keeps me moving about, not just sitting down, every day, which I still do (both laugh). Um, yeah it keeps me in a happy mood whenever I'm out running, doing sports […] it helps me with my breathing as well.*

Time outdoors also impacted youth's mental health. Youth recalled noticing positive shifts in their mood or mental state after spending time outdoors. As Sloane reflected, "*we'd be [at school] and I'd be dreading going outside, going and doing work and stuff, but then afterwards going home […], I'm like, I actually feel better, and like, calmer and more…rejuvenated, I guess?*" Youth described positive outdoor experiences as calming, grounding, comforting, peaceful, and relaxing, and many reported seeking out time outdoors to "clear their head" when feeling stressed or when they had a lot going on in their lives.

The early months of the COVID-19 pandemic intersected with outdoor experiences in diverse ways. Multiple of the youth recalled having lower mental health during the first months of the pandemic due to less socializing and a lack of structure and purpose in their lives. Some youth reported benefits to their mood and mental health upon going outdoors when schools were closed. Some found that they spent more time outdoors when their interactions with friends were limited to outdoor spaces, while others declared their outdoor activities were not affected. Upon returning to in-person activities (including school) and as restrictions on in-person interactions loosened, being able to socialize more freely with peers, make social plans at school, and recreate outdoors together were recognized as supporting mental health. For some, the challenges of the pandemic led to new learnings about the importance of time outside. Sloane observed:

> *I wasn't really going outdoors as much with the pandemic, […] but definitely post-pandemic I've found that like, I actually really missed it and I probably should have been out there more, during it, and that it actually really helps with mental health and everything.*

Beyond the pandemic, youth reported learning other mental health-supporting skills outdoors. Steven talked about how spending time outdoors had helped him learn:

> *how to kind of just relax and decompress […] we all get anxious from time to time and have a tough time just relaxing, and just letting ourselves be, and I think being outside and just listening to the birds or listening to skates on the ice or whatever that you're doing I think is a great way to relax and kinda just clear your head for a while.*

Raven described going for nearby walks when his life gets stressful: "*It's just, sort of a way to…you know, get calm and collected, and sort of like not worry about life, pretty much.*" He shared that when he has more things going on or times are more stressful, he would go walking more frequently and found that taking these walks helped him "*a lot*".

However, the relationships with land and place described by the youth were not solely positive. Spending time outdoors could be associated with feelings of sadness, anxiety, or fear as youth either felt the loss of positive past experiences (e.g., by being reminded of changes in the landscape or people who were no longer there) or were reminded of negative past experiences.

Fear and anxiety around climate change, deforestation, and declining fish and animal populations locally were shared by many of the youth. They spoke about the challenge of collectively facing new problems (as in the case of climate change) that do not have simple solutions and expressed concern that collective anxiety around climate change is preventing and will prevent people from taking action to address climate-related concerns.

Some negative emotions were tied to specific environmental conditions or traumatic experiences. For example, in describing the place where they lived, Willow shared, "*I'd say it's like mostly calm, mostly, but […] say if like a windstorm comes along, that happened before, it's like really, really windy and everything's just scary for me*." Khai, recounting the aftermath of a challenging experience of being too cold outdoors, recalled:

> *I guess while I was out in the woods my brain kinda […] went into like a survival mode where it was like, I need warmth, if there is even a chance I can not be warm here, I am going to freak out. And I was very anxious for like a few days after, just thinking, like, I can't handle being cold.*

Therefore, although many of the youth reported seeking out time outdoors as a means of improving their mental health, effects of outdoor experiences could be positive or negative and the circumstances of their interactions with land and place mattered.

Social and Ecological Health and Resilience

The youth brought up the interconnection of humans and ecosystems in a variety of ways. From knowledge of trees talking to each other underground (Simard, 2021) to the cascading impacts of pollution and deforestation across ecosystems and animal species, the youth demonstrated awareness of interconnection within and beyond natural ecosystems.

Land as Healing. The youth spoke of the land itself as healing and important to human health. Students shared knowledge of a variety of local medicinal plants, often sharing who had taught them, how the medicine was prepared and used, and what it was used for. Medicine-picking and learning about medicinal uses of plants were ways that some youth connected to the land and to Indigenous knowledges.

Knowledge of land as medicine also extended to considerations of the importance of healthy lands and waters to human health and well-being. Steven made these connections while reflecting on a school program he participated in the previous summer. He recalled:

> *this summer with [FSJSS teacher] when we went out […] they had set traps the day before so we got to look at the, the size of the fish and what kind of fish we caught, and [community member] came out and talked to us about […] the health centre […] kinda what their job is and how it connects to our watershed.*

Multiple youth made connections between their own health and that of local waterways and fish. In addition to local human and nature connections, the youth discussed the impacts of climate change, environmental degradation, and resource extraction on human health – and the role of humans in these issues – at both global and local scales. Steven reflected:

> *I think our impacts on where we live and how it affects us directly is a big [learning from being outdoors], I've really only learned that I think the last three years with* ***Koh****[-Learning], um, about what the fish being in our creeks, our rivers and our creeks mean, and how it affects us catching fish in Stuart Lake […] and then going down and learning […] about how we use our water and how we should be using our water, that kind of stuff has been new to me […] it's really helped my view of what we should be doing and what I should be doing, to help, uh, the land that we live on.*

The interconnections between human and ecosystem health are well demonstrated by the complexities of forestry in Fort St James and surrounding communities.

Forestry and Health. The impact of human activity on the health of trees and forests was prominent among the youth's concerns about the future of the land and place in their community. Fort St James is a forestry town, with logging trucks regularly driving down the main road. Many of the youth had relatives in forestry or other connections to the industry and recognized the importance of trees as a resource for humans and for local ecosystems. They were cognizant of the challenge and complexity of managing a resource so integral to the economic life of local communities.

The youth acknowledged a tension between the demand for forestry – to provide jobs as well as resources – and the challenge of foresting in a sustainable way. Steven reasoned that:

> *there's a time and a place for everything. I think that we've definitely over-forested, and […] now we're kind of paying the price for that, and I think the stuff like planting trees and, um, cleaning up our forests and uh doing everything we can to keep them healthy is, um, a big part […] I mean, we've been doing this for a long time and because of that we*

have kind of destroyed our land. […] I think it's important to acknowledge that we are going to keep foresting, but also how we can do it in a healthy way, and […] a fair way to everybody […].

In discussing the complexity of forestry issues, the interconnectedness of ecosystems and the impact of human actions within these ecosystems was stressed by the students. Khai reflected:

But just, you know learning about the effects we have on, you know, specifically trees? Cause they affect everything else, you know, those that die, they become habitat for smaller animals, they break it down, nutrients come back again, it's just a whole big cycle and we kinda cut that cycle short when, you know, we're taking trees out, especially at the rate that we have to now, cause we have such a rapidly growing population.

Youth noted that trees take a long time to grow back and that cycles of forestry impact the health of the land as well as the economic and social well-being of their community. Looking back at forestry over time, Gabe observed:

I can definitely see like the cycle in the community, it's like…back in the 50s and 60s, it was like a good little town, like it was like, amazing economy, tons of business. […] And then like…logs started to run out, and businesses started to close down.

This cycle of resource availability and economic success, familiar to many of the youth, demonstrates one form of connection between human and ecosystem health and well-being.

Local to Global Thinking. Hands-on experience and learning about local places contributed to youth knowledge of the interconnections between their local community and events unfolding on a regional, provincial, national, and global scale. Sloane, when asked about what changes she would like to see in the future, reflected:

just, overall people's views, and their knowledge of how important all of this is and that it's not just something like, oh yeah, it's just my backyard, it's…they need to look at it in a bit more of a bigger scale and connected more to others and other communities and how…it's…I keep just repeating the same stuff, it's all connected!

This sense that *it's all connected* echoed through many of the interviews. From the health of fish and forests to climate change, pollution, and food and water security, the youth made it clear that events elsewhere in the world were both affecting and affected by realities at home.

Theme 4: People are Connected Through Place and Time

As our interviews progressed, it became clear to me that the students' relationships with people were central to their descriptions of relating with land and place, and that the development of all of these relationships takes time. This theme explores ways in which land-based experiences and stories connect people to each other, to the land itself, and to past and future generations.

History is Held Within the Land

"*[W]hen you die, [the] tree is still going. And it's got, like, memories."*

– Tree, Youth Contributor

Students identified ways that history is held within the land, including physical signs left behind by previous generations and stories passed down from one generation to the next. Some of the youth reflected on impacts of Residential Schools and the 60s Scoop, with one student reasoning that in addition to deeply affecting the lives of many people, they affected the land by disrupting Indigenous land stewardship practices and ways of living. Below I share a few of the students' reflections on Indigenous and historical ways of taking care of the land.

Several of the youth mentioned Chief Kw'eh[12], a renowned historical Dakelh leader. Willow shared the following in connection to his actions:

> *I have heard about like how Chief Kwah came here and stuff like that, I've heard of it and like they always teach us […] like he did take care of like everyone around us, like*

[12] For further reading I recommend *Chief Kw'eh Remembered* (Sam & Klippenstein, 2017), a collection of stories about Chief Kw'eh by Dakelh Elders.

Tache, Binche, just everywhere, basically. Like, having to fish every day, the…what's it called again, um… (Tavia: Nets?) Yeah the nets mostly, and hunting, and how we were, like […] where you stay somewhere for not that long and then you have to move.

Molly shared a similar reflection about moving from camp to camp:

I think about how crazy it is that we like never used to stay in one place […] Because, like, you couldn't really stay in one spot for a long time, because then your resources would like …. What's that word, diminished? (Tavia: Deplete?) Yeah. So, they'd move, […] and then we come back to that same place, it's like all grown back and everything is like replenished. So, yeah. I think about that a lot.

While not all the youth specifically referenced traditional Indigenous land-based practices of taking care of the land, others spoke about the impacts of industrialization and a waste-producing economy on the land and relationships with land. Steven posited that:

five hundred, six hundred years ago, I think that the land was used properly and our resources was used properly, and then kinda when everything became more industrialized and manufactured, I think that we've gone away from respecting our land and respecting the way we get our food and what we do with our food […]. And so I think, um, throughout history we, we did do a good job with that and we've kinda gone away from it, but I think with our generation, we're trying to get back to using our resources properly and treating the land the way it should be.

Intergenerational Connections through Land and Place

"*Be a good Ancestor with yourself*

Children become adults
Adults become leaders
Leaders become Elders
Elders become Ancestors"

- Leona Prince & Gabrielle Prince (2022), *Be a Good Ancestor*

The thread of intergenerational connections supporting relationships with land and place – and vice versa – became evident to me early in the interview process. While the youth often referred to the importance of family, intergenerational connections also included coaches,

teachers, community Elders, and younger children with whom the youth had no direct family ties. This sense of connection to other generations was not limited to living or even known individuals, as the youth spoke of past (ancestral or community) as well as future generations.

To some of the youth, intergenerational connections were an integral part of their relationships with land and place and vice versa. On the impacts of time outdoors, Molly stated:

> *I think it affects, like, my entire life. Because, I dunno, it's just the way that…I live, and that like, my family lives, and that like, the people before me lived. Just stuff like that. So…it's really like, I just feel like, closer to it kinda, from like, other people.*

Meanwhile, when asked about who he had learned from about being outside, Raven reflected:

> *A lot of different people. […] But, this person who's [a] strong reason why I enjoy being outside, would have to be because of my grandpa. Cause, he told me a lot of stories about being out in the, in the bush. And, you know, what, what his personal experience is and what his parents told him, his grandparents and whatnot […].*

Nested within a cycle of interconnectedness and knowledge exchange with past and future generations, youth are in the important position of receiving knowledge from older generations (who in turn received knowledge from their Elders), generating new knowledge among themselves, and beginning to share their knowledge with younger generations.

Natalie spoke about how her passion for working with younger youth at a summer camp had led her to spend more time outside. She spoke about being motivated by "*The kids, making sure that they're, they're having a fun time, swimming, and doing all the fun stuff. I really like helping out with the kids, so…if they're having fun, then I'm having fun.*" Her experiences working with children at summer camp translated to spending more time outdoors at home as well, demonstrating that teaching and learning about relationships with land and place can go both from younger to older generations and the other way around.

Stories from many of the youth underscored the significance of intergenerational cycles of learning and connection. When these positive cycles are disrupted, important teachings and learnings are lost – and as one youth observed, trauma and negative coping patterns, once begun, can also be passed down through generations. However, land-based experiences appear to offer pathways by which healthy connections can be created, strengthened, and enjoyed between past, present, and future generations.

Childhood Outdoor Experiences

Many of the youth shared stories from their early years, including stories of 'special places'. One student reflected on memories of visiting their **Keyoh**, or traditional territory, when they were younger, and wanting to go back again now even though they hadn't been keen on visiting when they were a child. Molly, reflecting on reasons why she spends time outside, shared the significance of spending a lot of time outdoors as a child:

> *I think it's just because the way I was like brought up, kinda. Cause like, when I was raised, like we were mostly outside, so like, I don't know, it's just something about being outside, for like…that much of my childhood, just makes me like, want to stay outside.*

Early memories of times outside stuck with the youth, whether they were memories of land-based learning at elementary school, community programs, or outdoor experiences with friends or family. Willow recalled getting to help with salmon as an elementary school student:

> *we'd usually go down to the lake where they would take us onto a boat, like a tiny group of us […] and they would always tell us, like oh, help with this, help pull up the fish, and we'd do that and we'd see all the fish and all – I always heard my classmates go, 'whoa, the fish, that one's so big', […] when I was like in grade…four to three I think, or five to six, […] but we always did help with that. And we did help, like, we did, like, see how they would cut everything and […] my classmates always saw the hearts and they like wanted to pick it up cause the muscles would be still moving. […] And like a day before it, they're like, they always remind us, 'don't wear good clothes. Wear your bad clothes.'*

These experiences provided Willow with memories of tangible connection with and contribution to land, community, and culture. Sloane reflected on the impact of her early experiences in an outdoor community-based program:

> *there's so many adults but they kind of disperse so it makes it feel like you're kind of on your own but you know that you could just walk like ten feet to the left and you'll be like, "hey! Can you help me with this?" […] I feel like really what is helpful with learning and stuff is like the, the thought of doing it independently but knowing that you also have support right there […].*

Growing up in environments where they felt safe, supported, independent, and that they were contributing to their community contributed to students' relationships with land and place.

Future Concerns

Connections through place and time included future-oriented thinking. Youth expressed concerns about the future health and well-being of land, water, and people due to pollution, climate change, population growth, and environmental degradation.

Pollution. Multiple youth noted the presence of pollution and litter in their community and expressed a desire for both adults and youth to be more proactive in preventing and picking up litter to take better care of the environment. Student comments about pollution were detailed, often including what kind of pollution they had observed, where it was found, how its presence could impact different parts of the ecosystem, and actions people could take to improve the situation. As Raven succinctly put it, "*Don't litter. Cause […] that's bad*." These concerns also extended beyond their local community to consideration of pollution as a global issue.

Climate Change. Multiple youth expressed concerns about the effects of climate change, locally and globally, and the consequences of human inaction in preventing climate change from accelerating further. For example, Steven voiced concern that:

> *people aren't gonna take climate change and global warming as seriously as they should be. […] I think, in the back of our mind we might acknowledge that that's happening, but because we don't want to see it as the problem it is, and have to worry about it and be anxious about it, uh, we choose not to do anything about it. So my concern is just, we don't do anything to make our situation better, and we just keep on going down and down until there's nothing we can do anymore. It's just gonna be, um, our land's not going to be the way it should be, it's gonna be tough to grow food, we're not have enough drinking water, that type of stuff is concerning*.

Steven's words highlight a fear of helplessness: concern that if humans continue to act in ways that are harmful to the land – remembering that humans are not separate from the land! – we will reach the point where nothing more can be done to improve the health of people and the land.

Population Growth, Relocation, and Urbanization. Youth observed that as the world's population continues to grow, more people are relocating to cities and the expansion of these urban centres is leading to increased pressure on the land. These concerns were connected to issues of climate change and environmental degradation. Adrian predicted that in ten or twenty years, as the climate crisis continues:

> *more and more people will come here because it's just impossible to live where they currently live. [In] 2016 or '17 […] a lot of people from the Middle East countries came to, to Europe, because it wasn't just, it was just impossible for them to live there. Not just because of the climate change. Also war, but the war was because of the climate change. I mean, they needed water. So…if this is like still going on, I think a lot of people would flee into the colder regions, like Greenland or Canada.*

While climate change is leading to the displacement of people, youth also observed that growing populations could also have lasting impacts by placing higher demands on local ecosystems.

Environmental Degradation. Youth were concerned about the combined impacts of pollution, climate change, population growth, and resource extraction – locally and beyond. The effects of these environmental stressors centred on fish, water, and forests. Molly shared:

> *I think that a concern that everyone has would be about the salmon and that, […] it's like dying off, you know? Or not really like dying off, but like […] the numbers are dropping. […] So…yeah. Just like stuff like that. […] Like, species going extinct in this area. Just from like the logging and like the mining, like, all that other stuff.*

Kirby similarly noted:

> *my one and only concern is about the land. Like, um… deforestation, and…the…the water purity and whatnot […]. it's…not good, 'cause…back in the day, we used to be able to catch about a hundred and something fish in one net, but now we, we can just barely get three or something like that.*

Many of the youth's concerns were rooted in experiences they had had on the land, such as finding litter in their creeks, experiencing effects of climate change locally or globally, or observing low fish populations. However, some of these same experiences brought them hope.

Future Hopes

Despite the concerns described above, the youth shared hopes they have for the land and place in their community as well as experiences and actions that nurture their sense of hope for the future. Envisioning what a healthy community would look like in the future, Steven wished for:

> *a place where we can still be outside and […] go swimming and go hiking and have the trees be there and have nature be around us, and not have that in just Fort St James or just, like, Fraser Lake or Vanderhoof, but have that all over the place […]. I think that having a healthy land and […] healthy food and clean water, that's going to be a big thing for the future.*

Youth hoped to see the Nak'azdli fish hatchery succeed and have salmon and fish populations return to how they used to be. Some expressed hopes for more sustainable ways of foresting and producing energy. Amid the hopes expressed by youth, there was recognition that believing in a

positive future for the land could be difficult in the face of information about escalating climate change and struggling wildlife populations. For example, Sloane acknowledged:

> *I really wanna be optimistic, but with how […] climate change, global warming, logging, all of those things impact our community […], and impacts like the forest around us, like I…I'm hoping that it's a good future, but, um, honestly I don't really know.*

Within this context, some students identified experiences that contributed to their hope for the future, including learning about sustainable energy innovations and witnessing adults engaged in caring for the environment. For example, Steven noted that when he sees:

> *people committed to recycling, to cleaning up […] the garbage on our beaches, to composting and saving your food to eat again, and that type of stuff that is going to help, uh, create a healthier environment for all of us to live in and create a healthier land to live on […] I think that's got me hopeful for the future.*

Youth also spoke about the importance of being attentive to the land locally as well as seeking accurate information about environmental initiatives and the health of ecosystems on a broader scale. Molly hoped to see:

> *more people get more into […] being outdoors […] and just being a little bit more mindful of the land. Just […] even people being […] a little bit more knowledgeable about […] what's happening in the area, cause like, when you know something, then, […] don't you want to do something with that knowledge?*

Theme 5: Youth Have Agency and Responsibility

In our interviews, the youth expressed a sense of personal agency and responsibility and demonstrated these qualities through the insights they shared. This theme illustrates youth agency and responsibly by sharing youth experiences of independence and mastery, thoughts on respect and reciprocity, and advice for children, youth, and adults in their communities.

Developing Independence and Mastery

Youth demonstrated agency and independence in how they navigated their way to resources in their communities, and they indicated that spending time outdoors (or not) was often an intentional choice. They related their outdoor experiences with confidence and indicated having a wide variety of outdoor skills and knowledge, including hunting and gathering; outdoor survival; recreating outdoors in all seasons; and ecosystem monitoring and restoration. This self-perceived competence extended to social interactions, with some youth sharing stories of successful interpersonal dynamics and social competencies such as instruction, teamwork, and childcare that they had developed in outdoor settings. While youth seemed aware of the limits of their skills and knowledge, they spoke enthusiastically about their accomplishments and demonstrated pride in their outdoor experience, knowledge, and skills.

Youth Choose to Go Outside. As described above, youth had diverse interests in the outdoors. Sometimes youth were motivated to go outdoors by external forces, including school or work obligations, or encouragement by family, teachers, or other adults. Meanwhile, some youth described time outdoors as a way a life, as part of their identity, or as the way they had grown up. Steven recalled a time when he was unable to go outside as much as usual:

> *I still worked and did as much as I could, uh, outside 'cause* ***I don't want to miss that part of me*** *[…] I'm outside as much as I can, like I said, and so not being able to for an extended amount of time was especially tough, so, um, as soon as I could I was outside doing as much as I could.* (Emphasis added.)

Youth saw spending time outdoors as a break from technology; a chance to connect, play, and socialize with friends and family; a way to be physically active; and a positive alternative to drug and alcohol use by young people in their community. Many youth sought out time alone outdoors as an escape from external pressures and obligations and a way to reduce their stress

levels, “decompress”, or “recharge”. Other youth preferred to spend time outdoors with others, including friends and family. The opportunity to interact with animals – including walking dogs, taking care of farm animals, and seeing wildlife – was also a motivator for some youth.

Although youth perceptions of time outdoors were generally positive, several noted there are times when being indoors is preferable. Although our interviews focused on outdoor experiences, land and place relationships were also supported by indoor activities such as swapping stories with family, food preparation, sewing and crafting, and learning at school.

The Land is Alive: Respect and Reciprocity

The youth spoke of the land as animate, alive, and deserving of care and respect. They also shared examples of engaging in reciprocity with the land, for example through environmental stewardship. Fox, talking about the importance of teaching kids that trees have feelings, shared that they and their parent had given names to their plants at home. They described, “*we talk to them sometimes, like ‘hello’, like, trees, and animals, plants, have feelings too […].*” The youth offered diverse ideas of what it means to treat the land with respect. While some advocated for practical ways of respecting the land such as picking up trash, others made connections beyond these local actions to consider the impact of respect for land on a broader scale. Adrian observed that people in Fort St James seem to live not only *in*, but *with* nature, suggesting that:

> *[t]hey have to work together, it’s not just the humans come, the humans come and take whatever they need, if that would be like the case, Canada would, and really, really fast into like, I don’t know, catastrophic, you have to care about your yard and stuff like that.*

Adrian’s words provide an example of the need for reciprocity, a notion that was relevant to human relationships as well. At one point, Sloane was recalling what it felt like to share stories with her family of unique hands-on field experiences she had had at her summer job. After

having heard stories about the outdoor knowledge and skills she had learned from many family members, it was moving to see this storytelling come full circle.

Some youth had learned specific ways of showing respect to the land from family members. Raven recommended treating *"any area you go into with respect. […] Because the less respect you have coming into an area, the more likely something bad might happen.*"

Stewardship Through Monitoring and Restoration. Youth demonstrated a sense of care and responsibility for the land both by paying attention to local changes over time and through active restoration efforts. Discussing the impacts of growing up in a northern, relatively isolated community, Sloane shared the impacts of developing an awareness of the connections between their local environment and broader issues facing the world:

> *I definitely feel like it's grounded me a bit more, like, compared to living in the city where there's not this much richness and…nature around you and stuff, it's just buildings and stuff, it's definitely made me more aware, kind of, the threats that face our world with losing all of this, and…has angered me a little bit with it, but has also made me more educated and wanting to educate others in it, and hopefully make a difference.*

A desire to make a difference was shared by many of the students, and they spoke about monitoring and learning about their local ecosystems as ways of taking care of the land.

Advice for Children and Youth

I asked the youth what advice they had for local children and youth who were interested in going outdoors. They emphasized the importance of taking outdoor opportunities, learning from knowledgeable adults and Elders, respecting the land, and having fun while being safe.

Take Opportunities and Go Outside. "*If you get an opportunity, take it*". This advice from Gabe was echoed by many of the youth. Raven elaborated:

> *take every opportunity you can [to go outside]. Cause, not only would it be a great opportunity to clear your head space, but at the same time you can learn new skills, that can be […], you know, more applicable in the future.*

Some youth emphasized the freedom that can come with taking advantage of opportunities, by trying new experiences and seeing if they are a good fit. Natalie advised:

> *just volunteer for everything. If you don't like it, you can leave. I doubt that anyone would be really mad at them, or upset, if they, like, if it wasn't their passion, and so, just try everything. Cause I almost didn't go to [place of outdoor employment], and it was one of the best experiences I've ever had.*

Sloane similarly reflected on outdoor employment where she had been encouraged to try different field experiences, realizing that:

> *I wouldn't get those opportunities anywhere else and so like, might as well try it and I would try and be like, okay, this is super interesting or like, okay, I'm not really interested, like it was fun, but not my thing, don't have to try it again.*

Some of the youth suggested seeking out adults, programs, or organizations in the community who can help connect them with different opportunities. They recommended joining school or community sports teams, volunteering in the community, getting involved with band-led programs for First Nations youth, signing up for school classes oriented towards outdoor activities, and taking advantage of the many recreation opportunities available nearby in all seasons. Sloane reflected:

> *if I could go back and tell my younger self things, it would probably be to get more involved with the community and more involved with…just like being outdoors more, if that's possible for me, now. But as a kid, definitely try and get outdoors as much as possible, and…yeah just do that, educate yourself and then find ways to help educate others who might not know.*

Spend Time with Elders and Knowledgeable Community Members. In addition to sharing knowledge they had learned from older generations – including both Indigenous and non-Indigenous elders – students advised children and youth interested in spending time outdoors to seek out knowledgeable adults in their community. From teachers, Elders, and family members to local programs and volunteer training, the youth identified many ways of connecting with knowledgeable people locally. Khai suggested the following:

> *I know there's a lot of Elders in town, that want to pass this information on to kids. There's a lot of great resources here in town, and it, you know, is a very wilderness-oriented town, it's what we built our whole city on, so. It's a lot of people out there you could learn from, maybe you should.*

The youth also spoke about learning through inquiry and asking questions. Molly emphasized the importance of learning through spending time with people. She said:

> *ask questions to people who know a lot about it. Like, even if they're like dumb questions – well, not, well, they're not dumb questions […] if you're curious, then ask about it. Or…spend a lot more time with that person or that relative that's going outside a lot. And just like, be there with them. Listen to them. Stuff like that.*

"Being there" was echoed by other youth as they spoke about the importance of awareness of and attentiveness to the land as means of respect and stewardship.

Respect the Land and Cherish Your Time Outside. Earlier, I identified respect for the land as a sub-theme. Appreciation of and respect for the land were also present in the youth's advice for their peers. The youth wanted today's children and youth to notice and appreciate their access to land and outdoor places. When discussing what it means to enter an area with respect, Raven advocated for "*more attentiveness to your surroundings. And sort of like taking a look at them and appreciate them. Because, I mean you never know, it might be one of the last times you*

might see the place like that." Other youth spoke more directly about challenges they see facing the environment. Adrian spoke about changes he has seen on the international stage:

> *I would say, be glad that you have the nature you have right now because especially the last couple of years showed how quickly things could change. […] after the fire in Australia a few years ago, where like, a lot of the trees like just burnt down, that could happen to Canada too, right? And so, I think when I could like send a message to the younger people to go outside I would just say, go outside and see the nature you currently got, otherwise you just will be disappointed from the upcoming nature.*

Meanwhile, Steven advised youth to enjoy time outdoors while they can:

> *I think just cherish your time outside, and with the animals and nature, because you never know what's going to happen in ten or twenty years with the environment and the land that we live on, so, every moment you get to spend outside, try and do everything you can, go for a walk, go for a run, go look for, um, bunny rabbits and owls, and do the type of stuff that might not have the opportunity or for your kids to have that opportunity in the future and just cherish those moments and make those memories while you can, and, because if you do at a younger age, you'll want to when you're older, you'll want to be outside and work outside and just spend your time, and I think that's the best way you can spend it, is outside in nature.*

Have Fun and Be Safe. Some of the youth had more concrete advice for their peers. Tree wanted other children and youth to know that going outside is "*good exercise*" and that they can "*just have fun being outside. Like, playing leapfrog or, um, hide and seek, or tag. […] Or you could, like, sit on the ground because the sky has the clouds, just moving.*" However, students also advised other youth to take safety precautions. Willow distinguished between having adventurous fun and being "too" adventurous, recommending:

> *be more adventurous, but like not too adventurous to the point where you're in danger, […] stay safe obviously, cause like it's, like, like going out with friends, exploring trails, like, there's a trail over there (pointing) where people take, like around, and I guess,*

mostly go outside with family for hunting, going for a drive through the bush, mostly. Just having fun, in general.

And Natalie offered pragmatic safety advice for young people interested in going outside:

Drink water, put on sunscreen – unless you're allergic, and if you're allergic, put on some actual, like, sunscreen you can wear! […] and eat. […] Eating is very important.

In sum, youth advised for other youth to take advantage of opportunities available to them, spend time outside, seek out Elders and other knowledgeable people in their communities, respect and cherish the land as it is now, and seek outdoor adventure and fun in safe ways.

Advice for Adults Working with Youth

I asked the youth what they would want adults in their community to know about the importance of the natural environment and of youth spending time outdoors. The youth advised adults to be aware of their influence on children and youth, support youth in spending time outdoors, and actively respect and take care of the land.

Be Aware of Your Influence.

"Careful the things you say
Children will listen
Careful the things you do
Children will see and learn
Children may not obey, but children will listen
Children will look to you for which way to turn
To learn what to be
Careful before you say 'Listen to me'
Children will listen"

- Stephen Sondheim, "Children Will Listen"

As Sondheim (1987) cautions in this excerpt from his musical *Into the Woods*, adults are influential people in the lives of children – often whether we wish to be or not! Children and youth learn not just through formal education at school; they are constantly learning about the world and their place in it by observing the adults around them. In what we do and what we say, adults influence the ways in which children and youth build relationships with land, place, and

people. Steven (the youth contributor, not the composer) talked about the importance of adults role-modelling positive relationships with land and place:

> *as an adult, spending time outdoors, it creates an example for the younger […] children to follow, […] you're just going to create a cycle of people wanting to spend time outdoors and wanting to be committed to having a healthy land […] and treating our resources the way they need to be. And I think* ***knowing that you have that impact on kids is very important for adults to know****, because if they're just indoors, or they don't try to push people to go outside and spend their time doing activities like running or swimming, […] the amount of people doing it is going to go down and we're not going to have that kind of community that wants to be outdoors and do everything we can to help the land.* (Emphasis added)

In addition to active role modelling, youth shared examples of everyday learning from family members. Khai emphasized a need for adults to be well-informed about environmental issues:

> *I know I formed a lot of my opinions when I was younger just off, like, offhanded things my parents would say, like, you know, oh, the landfills are all getting full, and…the ocean's all full of trash, like…and it's such a heavy thing for a kid to bear. So, I guess my advice to them would be, be well-informed, you know, really spark that sense of optimism and hopefulness in your kid while you can, before they deal with you know, the constant pessimistic views that you get in the real world.*

Curious, I asked Khai if kids still needed to learn about these 'heavy' things. He responded:

> *of course you have to break it to them at some point, but […] there's different ways you can teach it, you know, telling a kid, 'hey. You choose a straw, you're gonna kill like fifty turtles'. There's better ways of putting things, […] like, 'hey, […] we can skip plastic lids, cause you know, it's small changes that matter and then it won't end up in the ocean or in a landfill'.*

It is not only the words we use, but the way we say them and the messages behind them – hope versus despair, agency versus helplessness – that influence youth perceptions and experiences. Sloane spoke about this messaging in relation to Fort St James, encouraging adults to:

> *[let] kids know that it's […] actually quite an honour to be growing up in a place like this, because there's just so much richness everywhere, […]and that it's just really important to know like who you are, where you're from and how you can help preserve what you have and make it better.*

Youth articulated the importance of understanding and inclusivity when working with young people. Some youth shared personal experiences of neurodiversity and identified a need for adult understanding of their behaviours, abilities, and needs. Fox advised:

> *Don't yell at kids if they do something dumb as well, like, forgetting their coat, or…forgetting something that's really small, like a toy, […] or gloves, or a toque. […] Cause, if you yell at them, they'll lose, uh, trust into you, they don't wanna talk to you, they wanna be left alone […] and they'll become depressed.*

Understanding and inclusivity also extended to accessibility. Sloane recommended that adults:

> *[…] try to make [outdoor experiences] a little more accessible for people who might not know exactly if they're comfortable with it, and […] make it more of a safe zone, and […] accessible to people with disabilities too, because […] there's some people in the school that have disabilities either with like learning or just in general, and that could be hard with being outdoors and stuff, so just trying to make it more inclusive.*

Support and Encourage Youth to Go Outside. Youth contributors advised that adults support and encourage youth to spend time outdoors – even when this might not be the youth's first choice. Natalie suggested that adults:

> *encourage kids as much as you can, to try something new, but not force them to do it. Because no one wants to do something that they're forced to do. […] I feel like there's so many more opportunities that people would know about if people just talked to them about it?*

Sloane similarly advised adults to "*be a little more persistent with trying to get more kids outdoors, because I know as a kid, I definitely did not wanna do all the things that I've done and*

actually have enjoyed a lot". Many students shared memories of going outside reluctantly with family or school and noticing afterwards that they had enjoyed themselves and felt better for it.

Some of the youth reflected in more detail about the benefits of adults supporting youth in going outdoors. Kirby wanted adults to know that spending time outdoors is:

> *a very important thing […] a lot of the kids nowadays are glued to their screens and whatnot, same with me (both laugh), yeah but it helps, I'd say it helps us get a different point of view on how we should view the world and what's actually happening.*

Youth wanted adults to know that spending time outside is not only "*fun*" and "*good exercise*" (Tree) for children and youth but supports connections between young people and can be a positive alternative to other forms of recreation or coping. Raven advised that outdoor opportunities would "*definitely connect and ground the youth. And plus, having more summer programs would, you know, get the opportunity to help youth who want to do other stuff other than doing illegal activities such as underage drinking or drug use*." As shared in an earlier quote, Khai encouraged adults to recognize that spending time outside can support youth's sense of awe and appreciation for the world around them, cultivating generosity and reciprocity.

Respect and Take Care of the Land. While the youth were clear that adults can support young people in building meaningful relationships with land and place, they also advocated for adults to think and act themselves for the well-being of the land and that of future generations. Willow's request of adults was "*mostly like, respecting the land 'cause I have seen a lot of beer cans, beer cans, beer boxes, stuff like that everywhere*." Meanwhile, Adrian suggested adults "*keep up the memories, how it was, what was better, try to get back to the…better times, maybe. Make some pictures for the upcoming generation*", acknowledging that with climate change and other environmental impacts, future generations may experience the land much differently than

we do at present. In addition to taking action to reduce and mitigate these impacts, adults can play a role in documenting and remembering stories of the way the land is now.

The way that adults think and communicate about relationships with land was also identified as important. Molly reflected:

> *I think that, now, people kinda separate, […] people are like separating themselves from the outdoors, but like, I mean, we all like come from here, like we, we're all a part of it, we're not like* a-*part from it. Kinda. Cause like in the end we'll all go back to it, right? So…I dunno, just…just kinda like, think of that, and […] you're not separated from it, because you are a part of it, right?*

Whether by planting trees, picking up trash, teaching children and youth to see the land as feeling and alive, acknowledging that we are a part of the land, or simply "*taking care of [the land]*" (Willow), youth contributors asked adults to step up and make a difference.

Chapter Summary

Through reflexive thematic analysis of my interviews with twelve students at Fort St James Secondary School, I produced five thematic findings exploring youth experiences of spending time outdoors. My findings include (1) Specificity in relationships: Where we are (and who we are) matters; (2) Pathways to negotiating relationships with land and place; (3) Intersections of community, land, and youth resilience; (4) People are connected through place and time; and (5) Youth have agency and responsibility. These findings set the stage for the following and final chapter, where I return to my research questions and discuss the implications of my research for social work practice.

Chapter Five – Discussion and Conclusion

My research was designed to explore youth relationships with land and place in the Nechako watershed and the resulting implications for social work. Through this research, I also aimed to address a gap in the literature at the intersection of resilience and connection to nature for youth in rural areas (Bowers et al., 2021; Chawla et al., 2014). This chapter begins with a discussion of my research findings in relation to both of my original research questions along with a third, 'emerging' question that connects my research to relevant learnings for social work. I next share methodological learnings from my experiences of outdoor interviews, as well as reflections on the process of the research overall. Lastly, I present my research limitations, identify avenues for future research, and conclude with final reflections on my thesis journey.

Many of my reflections throughout this chapter focus on the implications of my research for social work. However, I believe my findings in Chapter 4 (as well as many points of discussion below) hold relevance well beyond the scope of social work, including for adults engaging with youth in formal settings (education, for instance) and in less formal community settings. I therefore hope readers both within and beyond social work feel encouraged to make connections, where applicable, between the learnings I share from my research and their own areas of knowledge, practice, and experience.

Research Question 1: Youth Relationships with Land and Place

My first research question asked: **How do youth in the Nechako watershed perceive their relationships with land and place?** As illustrated in detail in my findings, the youth I interviewed perceived their relationships with land and place to be nuanced and complex. Each youth's relationship with land and place was layered with memories, stories, and emotions; rooted in connection with specific places and people; and deeply personal. Although my findings

suggest that youth relationships with land and place cannot be summarized without losing the very specificity that defines them, I discuss here two aspects of these relationships that particularly stand out to me: connections to social (and especially intergenerational) relationships and the notion that *where we are* matters.

Linking Social Relationships to Experiences of Land and Place

My interview questions primarily focused on youth experiences of spending time outdoors and on the land. However, in answering these questions, the youth shared many stories of relationships with people. I question whether this connection would equally have occurred the other way around: Would stories of the land have emerged from questions about social interactions? I am particularly curious about this connection as it relates to social work practice, as I wonder what aspects of people remain hidden when we ignore relationships with land and place and what new insights into individual or community strengths might emerge through exploration of place-based experiences. Just by virtue of acknowledging that relationships with land and place *might* exist – as I did with the youth contributors in my research – social workers may open the door to new avenues of self-reflection, self-knowledge, and local resources for the people we work with.

In my findings, the role of intergenerational relationships and knowledge-sharing came through strongly. The importance of youth connections with community Elders is consistent with literature on Indigenous relationships with land and place, including intergenerational storytelling and land-based healing contexts (Redvers, 2020; Spiegel et al., 2020; Walsh et al., 2020). Additionally, the youth's concern for the well-being of younger children and future youth aligns with research demonstrating Indigenous youth interest in supporting the continuity of land relationships among future generations (Lines et al., 2019).

Through their stories of spending time outdoors with friends, family, and others in their communities, the youth made it clear that time on the land supports the development of positive social relationships and social skills. They indicated that time outdoors helps promote self-regulation skills, strengthened connection to self, and a positive personal and community identity. Consistent with my prior professional experiences working outdoors with youth, my findings suggest that to ignore the positive potential of connection to land would be a missed opportunity for social workers and other adults working with youth.

Where We Are Matters: (Un)Settling Narratives and Notions of Land-Making

In reflecting on their experiences of spending time outdoors, the youth made it clear that where we are matters. As described in my findings, experiences of connection to specific places can help foster a deep empathy and care for the land (Bang et al., 2014). However, throughout my research I have also felt an unresolved tension about these topics – both personally as a settler woman and social worker, and as a researcher interviewing youth who had diverse historical relationships with the land we were on. This tension has highlighted questions for me about how social workers can approach youth relationships – as well as our own relationships – with land and place in a good way, especially when the land in question was and remains a fundamental driver for settler colonial progress (Woroniak & Camfield, 2013).

In considering these questions, I returned to the literature and noticed that the specificity of land, this notion that 'where we are matters', is also an important tenet of decolonization. Tuck and McKenzie (2015a) refer to this specificity as the "non-abstraction of land", emphasizing that Indigenous lands are "locatable, walkable, material" (p. 148). A focus on this tangible quality of land is highlighted by multiple Indigenous scholars as countering settler-colonial narratives (Bang et al., 2014; Goeman, 2012; Tuck & McKenzie, 2015a; Tuck & Yang,

2012). Bang et al. (2014) contend that to make space for decolonizing narratives and ways of living with each other and the land, the development of connection to place must go beyond a sense of personal connectedness and empathy to "include consciousness of the historical memory of a place, and the tradition that emerged there, whether these have been disrupted or conserved" (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008, as cited in Bang et al, 2014, p. 42). In supporting the development of youth relationships with land and place, it is important to attend to the historical realities of these places and the ways these intersect with experiences of the present.

In reflecting on the perspectives shared by youth contributors in my research, I recognize that youth positionality in relation to the history of land and place can be complex. For example, land is increasingly being recognized as a determinant of Indigenous health (Lines et al., 2019; Richmond, 2018) – but what does this mean for Indigenous youth who do not reside on their traditional or ancestral territories or even consider these places "home" (Hatala et al., 2019)? While Hatala et al. (2019) explore processes of "land-making" among urban Indigenous youth who are creating a sense of home and belonging to place in urban areas, I assert that questions of land-making are equally relevant (and seldom explored) among both Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth in rural areas who are living on lands not their own.

Research Question 2: Learnings for Youth Resilience

My second research question asked: **How do these relationships with land and place contribute to youth experiences of resilience?** My research suggests that youth experiences of resilience are closely linked to the resilience of their communities and the resilience of the land. For many youth contributors, land was seen as part of their community identity, both in the presence of natural environments and in the youth's conceptualizations of place. In discussing links to youth resilience, I focus here on three main topics: First, circling back to Ungar's (2008)

definition of resilience, I explore land as a health-sustaining resource for youth. Second, I look at the importance of early childhood experiences and outdoor risk-taking. And third, I consider the implications of youth conceptualizations of the future of land and place.

Land as Health-Sustaining

By Ungar's (2008) definition, resilience is partly "the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to health-sustaining resources, including opportunities to experience feelings of well-being" in the face of adversity, and partly the ability of families and communities to provide these health-sustaining resources to individuals in culturally relevant ways (p. 225). I contend that relationships with land were indeed health-sustaining for the youth in my research. Youth contributors made explicit connections between the health of the land and the health of themselves and their communities. My findings additionally show that the youth purposefully sought outdoor opportunities as a means to support their physical and mental health and were supported by their families and communities in doing so.

Theme 2: Pathways to Negotiating Relationships with Land and Place outlines the many outdoor resources made available to youth through the combined efforts of parents, extended family, and community, including 'formal' and 'informal' opportunities to spend time outside. Some youth's descriptions of spending time outdoors as a way of life emphasize the important role of these informal pathways. Informal pathways are a good reminder of "how indelibly and intricately the land is linked with the practice of everyday living, including the acquisition and sharing of Indigenous knowledge(s)" (Richmond, 2018, p. 180). Cognizant of the unique importance of informal land-based practices in supporting Indigenous cultural continuity, I nonetheless affirm that spending time on the land as part of everyday living and as a way of learning about Indigenous knowledges holds relevance and potential benefits for all youth.

The youth described their time on the land as fun, awe-inspiring, grounding, and providing opportunities for meaningful growth and connection. These findings correlate with literature that indicates time outdoors for youth as calming and stress-reducing (Hatala et al., 2020); a source of belonging, reciprocity, learning, and emotional regulation (Hatala et al., 2019); and providing opportunities for youth to socialize and be physically active (Jackson et al., 2021). In keeping with Khai's description of awe in Chapter 4, a sense of awe in response to nature has been shown to increase both prosocial and proenvironmental behaviours among adults (Diessner et al., 2022; Piff et al., 2015). While nature-related awe among children and youth is referenced anecdotally in the literature (e.g., Charles, 2009), the significance of awe and wonder for children and youth appears to be considerably less studied and would benefit from further research (Allen, 2018). Research in this area could be particularly interesting to explore in connection to youth perspectives on climate change and experiences of mental health.

Building on the notion of land as health-sustaining, my findings also correlate with the core *Circle of Courage* values of belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity identified by Brendtro et al. (2019) as key to positive youth development. These values come through in my findings through students' articulation of their sense of connection and belonging with specific places and people, the development of their skills and confidence, experiences of agency and freedom, and their engagement in acts of reciprocity with land and place in their communities.

Risk-Taking and the Importance of Early Childhood Experiences

Many of the youth I interviewed brought up memories of land and place from their younger years or early childhood. I found this notable because my interview questions – while open to recollections from any time in the youth's lives – specifically inquired about youth experiences in the two years prior to our interview. This finding correlates with an extensive

knowledge base in the literature on early childhood development. The importance of early childhood experiences is well-established both in its influences on positive youth development in general (Alderton et al., 2019; Bagdi & Vacca, 2005; Spencer et al., 2019) and in the importance of early *outdoor* experiences in particular (Ardoin & Bowers, 2020; Brussoni, 2012; Ernst et al., 2018). While my findings focus on relationships with land and place in youth, or adolescence, I note the connection to early experiences here as a reminder that the development of relationships with land and place begins in early childhood. These early outdoor experiences are an area deserving of further study.

Considerable literature on outdoor experiences in early childhood addresses the benefits of children's risk-taking during outdoor play, also called "risky play" (Brussoni, 2012; Sandseter et al., 2023). Risky play, defined as "thrilling and exciting forms of physical play that involve uncertainty and a risk of physical injury" (Sandseter, 2010, p. 22), is most often applied in early childhood settings but also holds relevance for older children and adolescents. The literature on risky play resonates with my findings that youth are interested in outdoor risk-taking and experience a sense of skill and accomplishment through experiences of navigating risk and safety.

As Brussoni (2012) observes about managing risk with children and youth in outdoor settings, "[t]he goal should not be to eliminate all risks, but to control risk, and teach children and adolescents how best to manage risks" (p. 3138). However, and despite the benefits of risk-taking described in the literature, the perception of risk and liability associated with outdoor activities can pose significant barriers to the implementation of land-based programs (Labron, 2022). Risk, safety, and the perception of risk are areas that warrant further attention as social workers consider ways of integrating land and place within their practice.

Youth Conceptualizations of the Future

When asked to share their thoughts on the future of the land, the youth in my research expressed feelings of both hope and hopelessness. Although they did not overtly connect these feelings to their mental health, conceiving of a healthy future for the land in their community was difficult for some due to their perception of the challenges facing the land around them. Climate-related hopelessness among youth and related mental health challenges are present in the literature (Gislason et al., 2021), with pro-environmental behaviours positively correlated with more hopeful orientations among youth (Martin et al., 2022; Ojala, 2012). Interestingly, although connection to and concern for the land appeared to motivate youth in my research to engage in pro-environmental behaviours (Masterson et al., 2017), adult and community engagement in pro-environmental behaviours were also identified as important in supporting youth hopefulness about the future.

For Indigenous youth, an ability to see themselves as continuous in time is understood to support positive youth development and resilience (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998; Hatala et al., 2017). This sense of continuity in time includes youth's ability to envision a positive future for themselves and feel connected to their culture's past, present, and future (Hatala et al., 2017). I found youth expressions of uncertainty and pessimism about the future of the land in their communities to be notable in my interviews. These outlooks on the future are significant and concerning, particularly for those youth in rural and remote communities whose personal, cultural, and community identities are strongly linked to the land and where mental health resources may be limited.

More optimistically, *positive* perceptions of the future have been shown to support youth resilience (Hatala et al., 2017). I find it important to stress, however, that the youth's negative

perceptions of the future in my research, though concerning, were well-founded. The key takeaway is *not* that the youth demonstrated problematic or excessive environmental despair to be rectified through interventions at the individual level. On the contrary, youth concerns were coherent with their first-hand experiences of environmental change and their knowledge of local to global realities and climate change projections.

Park et al. (2020) critique resilience theories in social work for focusing on individual adaptive capacity rather than challenging the oppressive systems and structures that create and maintain inequitable conditions of adversity. Certainly, youth should be supported as they navigate towards an uncertain future. However, I believe responding to youth despair about the environment must also include action towards ecological and social justice. Similarly, Gislason et al. (2021) assert the importance of undertaking strength-based community approaches to supporting youth mental health *along with* the implementation of climate change mitigation strategies. Gislason et al. suggest that engaging children and youth in the development of climate and mental health policies and practices may support youth hopefulness and sense of agency about the future. Moreover, inviting youth to share their knowledge in these spaces has the potential to make new and meaningful contributions to ongoing climate change mitigation efforts (Gislason et al., 2019).

Research Question 3: Learning from Youth Experiences Outdoors

According to social work researchers Potts and Brown (2005), "[q]uestions usually change as the inquiry moves. Sometimes we never do find the question; instead, it finds us - at the end of the day, when the new knowledge from the analysis tells us what question we just answered." (p. 25) As I finished analyzing my findings and began writing my discussion, I felt there was a gap between my research questions, my findings, and my goal of identifying

implications for social work. Encouraged by the quote above, I pondered what question was being answered by my research findings that might help bridge this gap. Although I term this an 'emerging question' – as it has emerged through my research process – I also see it as a 'silent' or unspoken question that was present and influencing my work from the beginning, including the development of my research design and interview guide, but was not explicitly identified at the start.

My emerging research question is: **What can social workers learn from youth about their experiences spending time outdoors?** To answer this question, I return to the final theme of my findings, where I identify youth as having agency and responsibility and share their advice for adults working with youth in their communities. Given that my research was premised on a belief that youth are capable of being meaningfully involved in decisions that concern them, serious consideration of their advice seems an appropriate and necessary response to my findings. Below, I explore the youth's advice for adults to be aware of our influence, to support youth in spending time outdoors, and to actively respect and take care of the land.

Be Aware of Our Power and Influence

The youth asked adults to be aware of the power we have and the roles we play in influencing youth perceptions of and relationships with land and place. Whether social workers are working directly or indirectly with youth, this power is a potent thing to be aware of. My findings demonstrate that family, identity, home, culture, community, and resilience all have points of connection with youth relationships with land and place. It is therefore worth considering how relationships with land and place might be intersecting with other aspects of youth identity and experience.

In the literature on eco-social work, some scholars call for social workers to reflect on our personal and professional relationships with the natural environment and to recognize our interconnectedness with all living things (Coates, 2006; Jones, 2010). I contend that social workers must additionally be aware that the relationships we have with land and place, the ways in which we communicate our beliefs about land and place, and the social spaces of interaction, empathy, and inclusivity we create and uphold in outdoor contexts can all influence the youth we work with. Adults are often perceived – and often rightly – by youth as having more power and influence in the world than they do, and the professional role of a social worker adds more power still. It is worth considering how social workers can use this power to address youth concerns and promote youth interests in relation to land and place.

Support and Encourage Youth to Go Outdoors

The youth asked adults to support and encourage children and youth to go outdoors. This piece of advice can lead to an interesting dilemma – which I have faced in my experience working with youth – where youth may not *want* to go outside but would likely benefit from spending time outside anyway. The youth provided advice on this point, asking adults at the very least to make outdoor opportunities consistently available and to be persistent in encouraging youth to get involved in land- and place-based activities. Social workers and other adults working with youth can engage in health promotion by supporting youth in accessing outdoor opportunities for recreation, social connection, and self-regulation.

Respect and Take Care of the Land

The youth requested that adults respect and take care of the land. The youth described ways of thinking and acting that demonstrate care for the land, including hands-on action such as picking up trash. Some youth suggested that adults document changes in the land as a record for

future generations as climate change progresses, a stark statement underlining the reality of youth perceptions of the future. These recommendations bring me back to the literature on eco-social work that emphasizes the impacts of intersecting environmental crises and the resulting precarity of human well-being (Besthorn, 2012). When we realize, as some of the youth I interviewed certainly did, that human health and well-being fundamentally rely on the health and well-being of the land around us, the perceived importance of our relationships with land and place may shift as a result. And as the literature reminds us, social workers are well-placed to expand our existing focus and skills of social justice advocacy to address the connected issues of ecological and place-based justice (Ramsay & Boddy, 2017).

Methodological Insights from Outdoor and Place-Responsive Interviews

As described in greater detail in Chapter 3, six of my interviews took place inside Fort St James Secondary School (FSJSS) while another six took place outdoors near the school. Referencing the literature on outdoor and walking interviews as well as my own journalling from interviews and analysis, in this section I discuss outdoor interviews as situated and relational, consider the role of place-responsiveness, and reflect on ways that outdoor and walking contexts may have influenced the accessibility of my research and the quality of the data.

Outdoor Interviews as Situated and Relational

I noted in an audio journal entry regarding outdoor interviews that "*being outside allows [me and the youth] to point to Mount Pope and the lake, and we're just oriented in this place and the creek is right there, and, so we're situated in place […].*" While this sense of being situated in place was true for me during outdoor interviews regardless of whether we were seated or walking, Springgay and Truman (2018) identify similar attributes in walking methodologies,

affirming that "[w]alking is a way of becoming responsive to place; it activates modes of participation that are situated and relational" (p. 4).

I found that walking interviews, in particular, reduced interviewer-interviewee power dynamics, an aspect which is reflected in the literature on walking methodologies (Anderson, 2004; Lynch & Mannion, 2016). I encouraged the youth to lead the way as we walked and felt we developed more collaborative dynamics as we created and engaged in shared experiences together. Although I was still the 'researcher' asking interview questions, together we were navigating deep snow; cautioning about hazards on the trail; checking in with each other along the way about timing, comfort, and which way to go next; and pausing to look, listen, and interact with the land. As I supported our forays into inquiry and contributed place-based knowledge of my own, I felt these interactions with each other and with the land made our time together more reciprocal.

With both seated and walking outdoor interviews, I appreciated the process of leaving and returning to the school with students. In my journal, I reflected that "*Journeying together [before and after the interview] allows for an entering into the space together and a leaving of the space together*." These transitions signaled a natural beginning and end to our time and provided opportunities for relational connection outside of the more formal interview context.

Benefits and Drawbacks of Place-Responsive Interviews

Lynch and Mannion (2016) describe "place-responsive methodologies" where the land is acknowledged as having an active role in relationships between people and place, while Springgay and Truman (2018) contend that walking methodologies provoke sensory and affective experiences through interactions with the environment. Our outdoor interview

transcripts note many so-called 'interruptions' where the youth or I were led off-track (sometimes literally) to investigate something in our environment.

While these interruptions sometimes distracted us from the topic at hand, they also served two important purposes. First, at times the 'distractions' were themselves answers to my interview questions, allowing students to 'show, not tell' by sharing their knowledge of animals, plants, and places along the way. And second, what began as a distraction sometimes redirected our conversation in new ways that prompted deeper dialogue about a particular topic. For example, logging trucks passing by resulted in a discussion of the forestry industry and the interdependence of human and natural ecosystems with one student. Although indoor classroom settings came with their own distractions (school announcements over the intercom, for example), indoor interruptions tended not to have these same features of provoking relevant interview content.

The place-responsive nature of outdoor interviews also came with drawbacks. I found that the youth and I tended to 'stay on track' more during indoor than outdoor interviews. It is possible that as an interviewer, I was sometimes distracted by the physical and mobile aspects of our interview and therefore less attuned to our conversations. After one interview on a chilly fall day, I noted in my audio journal that, although the student I was interviewing had not appeared to mind the cold,

> *I think I was getting colder by the minute […]. And so I think I was talking maybe a bit fast because of that, I wasn't as relaxed. Which is something to consider, it's not something I would have thought of…you know, my plan had been for us to walk around, but we didn't do that.*

Despite these potential drawbacks, which certainly led to learnings for me as a novice researcher, I appreciated these outdoor interruptions for the way they disrupted the easily-assumed, unequal

roles of interviewer and interviewee. To me, the place-responsive nature of our outdoor interviews brought land and place into the research in a very real way. Akin to Lynch and Mannion's (2016) description of unexpected interactions with the environment "transform[ing] the walking interview itself through changing its focus" (p. 335), I found that the land was literally inserting itself into our interviews and changing the course of our conversations.

Reducing Barriers for Participation

The youth in my research were of different ages, grade levels, and abilities. I suspect that due to the outdoor (and in some cases, active) context, some of our interviews provided richer and more relevant content than they might otherwise have done. After one walking interview, I reflected in my audio journal that the youth I had just interviewed

> *might not be the kind of person who excels in school, for example […] they had trouble with abstract concepts […]. But then [the youth] would notice these things, had this knowledge about [the historical and medicinal uses of plants], and was very observant of [animal] tracks and planned ahead […] and was really proud to guide me along this path they'd been on before, and had so many fun stories of playing outside.*

After having interviewed a number of youth outdoors, including some who were very capable of discussing abstract concepts, I noted that while certain benefits were prominent in the interview described above, all the youth seemed to benefit from these outdoor settings in similar ways. In the audio journal entry above, I conclude that although

> *I hadn't exactly planned [outdoor interviews]* because *of this […] I think that doing the interview outside actually helped. It reduced the barrier for participation, because even if we weren't able to, like, talk about the abstract concepts, [the youth] was able to show off [their] skills and knowledge […].*

Sometimes showing is easier than telling, and the youth were able to demonstrate their knowledge through their interactions with me and with the land. Memories can be spatially

located (Anderson, 2004) and as I walked with students, the land provided physical cues for the youth to share their memories and knowledge.

Reflections of a Social Worker-Researcher

Learning to conceptualize complex problems is in itself a complex task (Rogers et al., 2013), and juggling concepts that I *know* – through personal and professional experience – to be connected, but that in the literature are quite distinct, has been a challenge throughout my research journey. As a researcher, I found myself putting many of my social work skills to use, including building relationships in community, navigating ethical dilemmas, developing rapport with youth contributors, and advocating for their voices to be heard. It has occurred to me that the challenges of pulling together interdisciplinary ideas as a researcher are similar to the obstacles facing social work practitioners also wishing to engage in this boundary-crossing work. Below, I share several reflections on the lessons I have learned as a researcher and their applications to social work practice.

Openness to Different Ways of Knowing, Being, and Doing

Engaging in this research emphasized for me that notions of land and place remain – for now – on the 'fringe' of social work. Throughout my studies, a common response to learning of my research topic and field of study has been a quick recategorization: "that sounds like a geography project!" (Or a natural resources project, or an outdoor education project…). I believe that interrogating the relationship between social work and the environment is uncomfortable *because* there has so long been a disconnect between the two (Zapf, 2009). For me, this research has been one way of stepping across that gap and legitimizing the entangled co-existence of land and place with the human experiences that lie at the heart of social work.

Integrating land and place within social work requires challenging the status quo by moving past disciplinary siloes and being open to ways of being and doing beyond 'mainstream' approaches to social work (Ramsay & Boddy, 2017). Just as the findings from my research come from the insights of youth, an openness to other ways of knowing means recognizing the value of experience and knowledge beyond academic and even 'professional' spheres. Much work in the area of land-based healing, for example, is being led by people with important skills and knowledge but who do not identify as social workers (Labron, 2022).

Social work education is an important pathway to promoting openness to diverse ways of knowing, validating land and place as legitimate areas of focus within social work, and offering opportunities for students to apply eco-social theory to practice (Jones, 2013; Reu & Jarldorn, 2022). I believe that honouring the significance of relationships with land and place within social work education would support greater acceptance of the diverse and valuable ways of knowing, being, and doing that students bring to these formative social work spaces. Reu and Jarldorn (2022) provide a starting place for integrating eco-social work across the social work curriculum. Social work educators and students alike may also take inspiration from – and find opportunities to collaborate with – scholars and practitioners who are seeking similarly transformative approaches to learning, teaching, research, and practice in related fields (see for example Parkes et al., 2020; Redvers et al., 2023; and Webb et al., 2023).

A Note on Incommensurability

Earlier in this chapter, I touched on the tension between advocating for the importance of relationships with land and place and recognizing the role of settler-colonial narratives of land in historical and present-day realities of colonization. This tension is relevant for social workers to consider in practice, particularly for those of us who are not – and/or who work with people who

are not – Indigenous to the lands where we live and work. Tall (1996), writing on settler experiences of dwelling and placelessness in North America, claims that

> mobility has created the circumstances for widespread fragmentation and damage – to people, communities, and the land. The avoidance of ties to a place, which takes years to build, removes constraints, allows us to be indifferent to our towns and cities, to ignore their human and environmental plights, to say *but this isn't mine*. (p. 108)

By contrast, if our aim is decolonization, settlers (including settler social workers) saying 'but this isn't mine' may be a move in the right direction. In Tuck and Yang's (2012) well-known article *Decolonization is Not a Metaphor*, meaningful decolonization includes the recognition of settlers as occupiers of stolen lands and the repatriation of these lands to Indigenous peoples. And yet, Tall's reproach is that a lack of place attachment allows settlers to detach themselves from the ethic of caring that comes from connection to the history and future of a place.

A refusal to be rooted allows settlers to ignore the place-based wisdom that "to endanger the land is to wound one's collective body" (Tall, 1996, p. 112). This dissonance between notions of settler *settling* and *unsettling* is a return to the "incommensurability" between decolonizing and other social or ecological justice agendas: that while these agendas share commonalities, they also have conflicting goals (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015a; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Social workers may take up such points of incommensurability as "opportunities for solidarity" (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 28); and at the very least we can use them as a starting point for reflection on the implications of our own relationships with land and place.

Returning to Practice

In my introductory chapter, I reflect on ways that my practice experiences as a social worker informed my decision to pursue graduate studies and explore youth relationships with

land and place in my research. As I near the completion of my research and turn my focus back towards social work practice, there are four principles from my research that I intend to bring with me – and that I hope will be useful for other social workers as well.

First, from the beginning of my research I was deliberate in prioritizing youth voices and providing an opportunity for youth perspectives to be heard. While youth's experiences are place-based and unique to each individual, the principle of listening deeply to youth and honouring their perspectives is valuable and applicable across social work contexts.

Second, in my research design I consciously brought land and place into the research by offering outdoor interviews and including interview questions that encouraged youth to reflect on memories of time outdoors. Incorporating land and place within social work may take many forms – ranging from direct practice, to advocacy, to policy development – and does not need to be limited to taking youth outside. Rather, the relevant principle is to plan ahead and be intentional in finding ways of honouring land and place relationships within social work practice.

Third, my reflections above on outdoor and place-responsive interviews hold relevance for social work as well. Going outdoors can change power dynamics and support relationship-building by interrupting routinized ways of relating that have been established in indoor spaces. Outdoor settings additionally provide opportunities for hands-on and place-based ways of teaching, learning, and interacting that can reduce social barriers and increase opportunities for success.

Fourth, my experiences throughout the research process emphasized the importance of local and place-based knowledge and relationships. My prior connections with people through my work with the **Koh**-Learning program and through my early scoping conversations supported my ability to engage with, recruit, and ultimately interview youth contributors. The youth

similarly demonstrated the value of local knowledge through the many place-based insights shared within the research findings and through our experiences walking together on the land.

Research Limitations

In this section, I identify five limitations of my research to be taken into consideration. First, my research findings are specific to people, place, and time. Informed by Braun and Clarke's (2022) "Big Q" approach to qualitative research – and heartened by the discovery within my research that specificity also mattered to the youth – I maintain that this specificity is an asset, allowing my research to dive deep into the experiences of these twelve young people and celebrate the knowledge rooted in their relationships with particular places. However, the specific and qualitative focus of this research means my findings are likely not reflective of the experiences of all students at FSJSS and are not necessarily transferrable to other youth in Fort St James, elsewhere in B.C., or across Canada.

Second, my findings are not linked to demographic information such as youth age, ethnicity, or gender. Combined analysis of all the interview data was intended to provide a measure of confidentiality for students in an otherwise fairly identifying project (as their school and some of their names are already identified). A consequence of this combined analysis is that it is not possible to ascribe my findings to any specific group within the research (for example, female-identifying students, students at a certain grade level, or Indigenous-identifying students), limiting the applicability and transferability of my findings in some contexts.

Third, I chose not to distinguish between indoor and outdoor interviews in my analysis. While all interviews contributed relevant data to the analysis and findings, it is possible (even probable) that the location of interviews affected the content of our conversations. Given that my

analysis did not account for differences in interview settings, the impact of these settings on my findings remains unclear.

Fourth, my data collection was limited to individual interviews and at no point did the youth and I come together to discuss the research topics as a group. Such a gathering might well have uncovered new information and similarities or differences in opinion that were not present in individual interviews. Additionally, although I met with each youth at least three times during the research, our interviews captured their perspectives at one time in their lives. Engaging in recurring interviews over a longer period might have added depth to the findings by giving youth time to mull over our conversations and return to these ideas in subsequent interviews.

Lastly, as indicated by the youth in our interviews, not only did the students' relationships with land and place exist within a web of connections with other people, but they identified the adults and Elders in their communities as having a wealth of knowledge about the land. I have no doubt that interviews with adults and Elders in Fort St James and surrounding communities would have brought additional layers of context and depth of knowledge to my findings. I hope my research acts as an impetus for future intergenerational work in this area.

Avenues for Future Research

As a social worker with experience working outdoors with children and youth, it is evident to me that the significance of land and place in supporting positive youth development is not reflected in the literature. I firmly assert that the place- and land-based work already happening, both within and beyond the sphere of social work, has much to offer the profession (see Labron, 2022) and that more research in this area would be useful for social work practitioners wishing to integrate land and place into their practice (Boetto et al., 2020).

In addition to the gap between eco-social work literature and practice, there remains a lack of research connecting theories of youth resilience with youth relationships with land and place (Chawla et al., 2014) as well as a lack of research on the outdoor experiences of youth in rural and remote communities (Bowers et al., 2021; Larson et al., 2019). Building on the limitations of my research discussed above, I would be particularly keen to see intergenerational research on these topics bringing together the perspectives of Elders, adults, youth, and younger children (see Spiegel et al. (2020) for an intergenerational example). Given the importance of early childhood experiences identified in my findings, further research on early childhood outdoor experiences in Fort St James and other rural and remote communities could provide relevant insights, including longitudinal research to explore how early childhood experiences of time outdoors might influence youth resilience and relationships with land over time (e.g., Evans et al., 2018).

While my research explores the perspectives of a diverse group of youth, more research exploring the land and place relationships held by specific groups of youth could lead to useful insights, for example through gender-based analysis. Further place-based research in other rural and remote communities might also help shed light on the commonalities and distinctions across youth experiences in these places.

Finally, having noted in my research that outdoor settings bring an interesting dynamic to interviews with youth, I would like to see more work exploring the integration of land and place within research design and methods. The effects of outdoor settings on interview content and research results, and the potential for outdoor, place-based, and kinaesthetically engaging methods to increase accessibility for diverse populations (including youth) are areas worthy of further study.

Conclusion

"[N]o matter what happens, online or in the world or whatever, at the end of the day, the sun is still gonna set. So, any worries that come up will eventually fade."

- Raven, Youth Contributor

Just as the interviews in my research captured a snapshot of the perspectives of twelve youth in a particular place and time, this thesis is part of my ongoing and iterative learning (and unlearning) about social work, youth development, relationships with land and place, and what it means to do research. Through individual qualitative interviews with students at Fort St James Secondary School in north-central B.C., my research explored how these youth perceive their relationships with land and place. Using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), I developed five themes from our interviews, including (1) Specificity in relationships: Where we are (and who we are) matters; (2) Pathways to negotiating relationships with land and place; (3) Intersections of community, land, and youth resilience; (4) People are connected through place and time; and (5) Youth have agency and responsibility. My findings indicate that youth relationships with land and place are nuanced, specific, relational, and complex. They further suggest that the resilience of the youth contributors is tied to the resilience of their communities and of the living land and waters these communities depend on.

As a social worker and researcher, I have felt the dissonance of not seeing my personal and practical knowledge of land and place reflected in social work discourse. Certainly, the lived realities of relationships with land and place do not need to be affirmed within the literature to be true and to be wholly felt. Nonetheless, I hope that one day other social workers – and other adults working with youth – will pick up this thesis and in it find validation of the many insights, positive potentials, and stories of human connection held within youth relationships with land and place.

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UNBC UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN BRITISH COLUMBIA

Appendix A – Interview Guide

Introductory Information:

Hello and welcome! Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview process. Before we begin, I'd like to review a few important things with you.

1. Everything we discuss during this interview will remain between us (unless I have safety concerns about you or someone else). Your responses may be included in my final results, but they will be anonymous so no one will know it is you.

2. To thank you for agreeing to share your time and knowledge, I have a gift card for you. This is yours to keep even if you decide you don't want to continue with the interview.

3. At any point in the interview, you can tell me you don't want to answer a question, or you can say that you'd like to stop the interview. This is totally your choice and there won't be any negative consequences for skipping questions or choosing to end early. If you'd like to skip a question and return to it later, we can do that, too. There are no right or wrong answers.

4. We're going to start with a little questionnaire. You do not need to write your name on this and can choose to leave questions blank if you would like. Let me know if you have any questions or would like to go through it together.

5. Are you okay with me recording the interview audio and taking notes as we're talking?

(Verbal assent) YES NO

Upon assent, begin recording.

Interview Questions:

Question 1: In this research project, I will not be using the real names of people being interviewed. What name would you like me to use instead?

Question 2: At our first meeting, I asked you to bring something with you today that represents an experience you've had on the land. Could you tell me about what you brought with you?

Question 3: In my research, I would like to describe the Nechako watershed so that people have an idea of what it's like here. In general, how would you describe the natural environment where you live, as though I'd never been there?

Question 4: I'd like you to think of a place in nature that is special to you. You don't need to tell me where it is, but what it is like to be in that special place?

Question 5: Thinking about your overall experience outdoors over the past 2 years, what kinds of outdoor activities have you taken part in?

Question 6: Could you tell me a story about an outdoor experience from the past couple of years that stands out as particularly memorable?

Question 7: When you think about your experiences outdoors, how would you say they affect your life?

Question 8: Who, or what, has taught you what you know about being outdoors, and what have you learned from them?

Question 9: Overall, what have you learned from the time you've spent outdoors?

Question 10: Is there anything that makes it challenging to spend time outdoors?

Question 11: What resources do you have access to that help you to spend time outdoors?

Question 12: What comes to mind when you think about the history of the land where you live?

Question 13: When you think about the future of the land where you live, what concerns do you have?

Question 14: When you think about the future of the land where you live, what hopes do you have?

Question 15: What advice or information would you want to share with younger people in your community who are interested in spending time outdoors?

Question 16: There are lots of adults in your community who work with youth (teachers, social workers, youth workers, caregivers and parents). What would you like them to know about the importance of the natural environment and spending time outdoors (in your life and in your community)?

Question 17*: In the last two and a half years we have been living through a global pandemic. How has the pandemic affected your experiences spending time outdoors, if at all?

Question 18: Are there any questions you would like to return to or anything else you would like to add?

*Question 17 emerged during the first interview and was included in all subsequent interviews.

Appendix B – Letter of Approval from UNBC's Research Ethics Board

UNBC UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN BRITISH COLUMBIA

RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD

MEMORANDUM

To: Tavia McKinnon
CC: Joanna Pierce

From: Davina Banner-Lukaris, Chair
Research Ethics Board

Date: July 18, 2022

Re: **E2022.0509.022.00**
Youth Relationships with Land and Place in the Nechako Watershed

Thank you for submitting revisions to the Research Ethics Board (REB) regarding the above-noted proposal that includes in-person research. Your proposal has now been approved by the REB. Your Safe Research Plan has also been approved by the Safety Department, a copy of which is attached.

We are pleased to issue approval for the above-named study for a period of 12 months from the date of this letter. Continuation beyond that date will require further review and renewal of REB approval. Any changes or amendments to the protocol or consent form must be approved by the REB.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

Davina Banner-Lukaris
Chair, Research Ethics Board

3333 University Way, Prince George, BC, V2N 4Z9, Telephone (250) 960-6735

Appendix C – Support Letter from School District 91

SCHOOL DISTRICT 91 NECHAKO LAKES

P 250.567.2284
F 250.567.4639

P.O. Box 129
Vanderhoof, BC
V0J 3A0
www.sd91bc.ca

Excellence
Innovation
Community

April 11, 2022

Dear UNBC Research Ethics Board,

We are writing as the Principal of Aboriginal Education and Superintendent of Schools in School District No. 91 (Nechako Lakes) (SD91). We are pleased to write a letter outlining our support for Tavia's proposed graduate research, *Youth Relationships with Land and Place in the Nechako Watershed*.

We feel comfortable supporting Tavia's proposed research project for several reasons. First, over the past year and a half, we have had the opportunity to get to know Tavia through her work as a research assistant with Dr. Margot Parkes. In this capacity Tavia has been a key member of the *Koh-Learning in our Watersheds* program – an innovative program engaged in building a long-term relationship between SD91 and University of Northern British Columbia. Second, our school district has had a relationship with Dr. Parkes and her colleagues for over 10 years, and Tavia's research shows the potential to contribute to this ongoing collaborative work in the years to come. Third, support for this research project is consistent with the Memorandum of Understanding signed between SD91 and UNBC in 2017 to strategically strengthen opportunities for students within our school district.

On March 8, 2022, Tavia presented an overview of her thesis research to the SD91 Aboriginal Education Council (AEC). We have since also had the opportunity to review Tavia's proposed research activities and understand that her research will include holding outdoor individual interviews with SD91 students in grades 8-12 who have participated in school-based outdoor learning experiences in the past 2 years.

We also understand that Tavia's proposed research has been informed by, and will contribute to, the SD91 and UNBC partnered *Koh-Learning in our Watersheds* program. Over the past several years, the Koh-Learning program has evolved from targeted stream monitoring projects to a broader commitment to place-based learning by many educators across the school district. Within SD91, outdoor learning that connects students to their local land and waterways is increasingly being viewed as a means to support

not only curricular outcomes, but also social and emotional well-being for both learners and educators. We see that Tavia's graduate research holds the potential to engage conversations within and beyond SD91 around youth relationships with land and place, creating opportunities to enhance learning for our students, teachers, and community partners in the coming years.

We offer our support for this proposed research project and look forward to future updates of Tavia's research within SD91 and the Nechako watershed.

Sincerely,

Manu Madhok
Superintendent of Schools

Leona Prince
District Principal Aboriginal Education

MM/LP/ta

cc: District Leadership Team, School District No. 91 (Nechako Lakes)
Board of Education, School District No. 91 (Nechako Lakes)

UNBC UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN BRITISH COLUMBIA

Appendix D – Consent for Identification in Research Project

Project Title: Youth Relationships with Land and Place in the Nechako Watershed

Funded by: BC Graduate Scholarship, UNBC Graduate Scholarship, with additional in-kind support from the Vancouver Foundation and NSERC PromoScience

Dear Youth Participant,

Thank you again for participating in my research project!

You and your parent/guardian are receiving this additional consent form because you have expressed interest in having your first name used in the research project, *Youth Relationships with Land and Place in the Nechako Watershed*. Using your name is a way of honouring the knowledge you are bringing to this project, but it also comes with additional risks. Please read the page below carefully.

How will my name be used?

If you agree to be identified by name, only your first name will be used in the research project. Your name may be used in connection with things you have said in your interview, including direct quotes. You would also be acknowledged by name at the beginning of the thesis document in a thank-you to all participants. My published thesis will be made publicly available online and in the UNBC library. I may also share the results of my research (including your name) in future writing, publications, and presentations.

What are the risks of using my name?

Having your name used in the research brings an additional risk of identification within and outside of your community. Remember that publications of the research (including your name) will be around for a long time.

Although the interview questions are focused on your experiences spending time outdoors, other topics may come up in the interview that you would prefer not to have associated with your name. You will be given two weeks to review a written copy of your interview with the researcher and make any changes. During this time you may remove any parts of your interview that you would not like associated with your name. After the opportunity to review your interview, you will be asked to choose if you want to use your name (or not) by signing this form. If you do not want to be identified by name, you will be invited to choose an alternate word or name to represent you in the research.

Who do I contact if I have questions or concerns?

If you have any questions or concerns about this project, please contact myself, Tavia McKinnon at 204-330-5991 (text or call) or by email at tmckinnon@unbc.ca. My supervisor, Dr. Joanna Pierce, can be contacted at 250-960-6521 or by email at joanna.pierce@unbc.ca.

For any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant or your experience in this research project, please contact the UNBC Research Ethics Board at 250-960-6735 or reb@unbc.ca.

Parent/Guardian Consent:

I understand that the use of my child's **first name** in this research project brings an additional risk of identification and I agree for my child's first name to be used in publications and presentations of this research project.

YES NO

I understand and agree that my child will have the choice to use their name, or choose an alternate name, once they have reviewed their interview transcript with the researcher.

YES NO

I have been given a copy of this form to keep.

YES NO

Name of Youth Participant: _____

Name of Parent/Guardian: _____

Signature (**or note of verbal consent**): _____

Date: _____

Participant Assent:

I have had the opportunity to review my interview with the researcher and make any changes.

YES NO

I understand that the use of my **first name** in this research project brings an additional risk of identification.

YES NO

I agree for my **first name** to be used in publications and presentations of this research project in connection with the knowledge I have shared and reviewed in the written copy of my interview.

YES, I agree

NO, I want to use the following name or word instead of my name:

_____

I have been given a copy of this form to keep:
YES NO

Signature (**or note of verbal assent**): _____

Date: _____