

# Evaluation of the Youth Today Language Leaders Tomorrow Program

## Synthesis Report

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## Synthesis Report

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### Introduction

The Youth Today Language Leaders Tomorrow (YTLTT) language training program was launched in December 2021 by the Yukon Native Language Centre with a cohort of 20 Yukon First Nations youth. The program aims to use a holistic approach to develop and train youth to revitalize, normalize and perpetuate Yukon First Nation languages. The program recognizes the importance of building capacity and supporting youth to develop skills needed to advance skill-based strengths in language advocacy and revitalization. Participants in the Youth Today Language Leaders Tomorrow Program were employed on a full-time basis. The objectives of the program are to:

- develop Yukon First Nation language speakers;
- document and preserve Yukon First Nation Languages;
- support language education and access to Yukon First Nation language resources; and,
- support capacity building and language programming in Yukon communities.

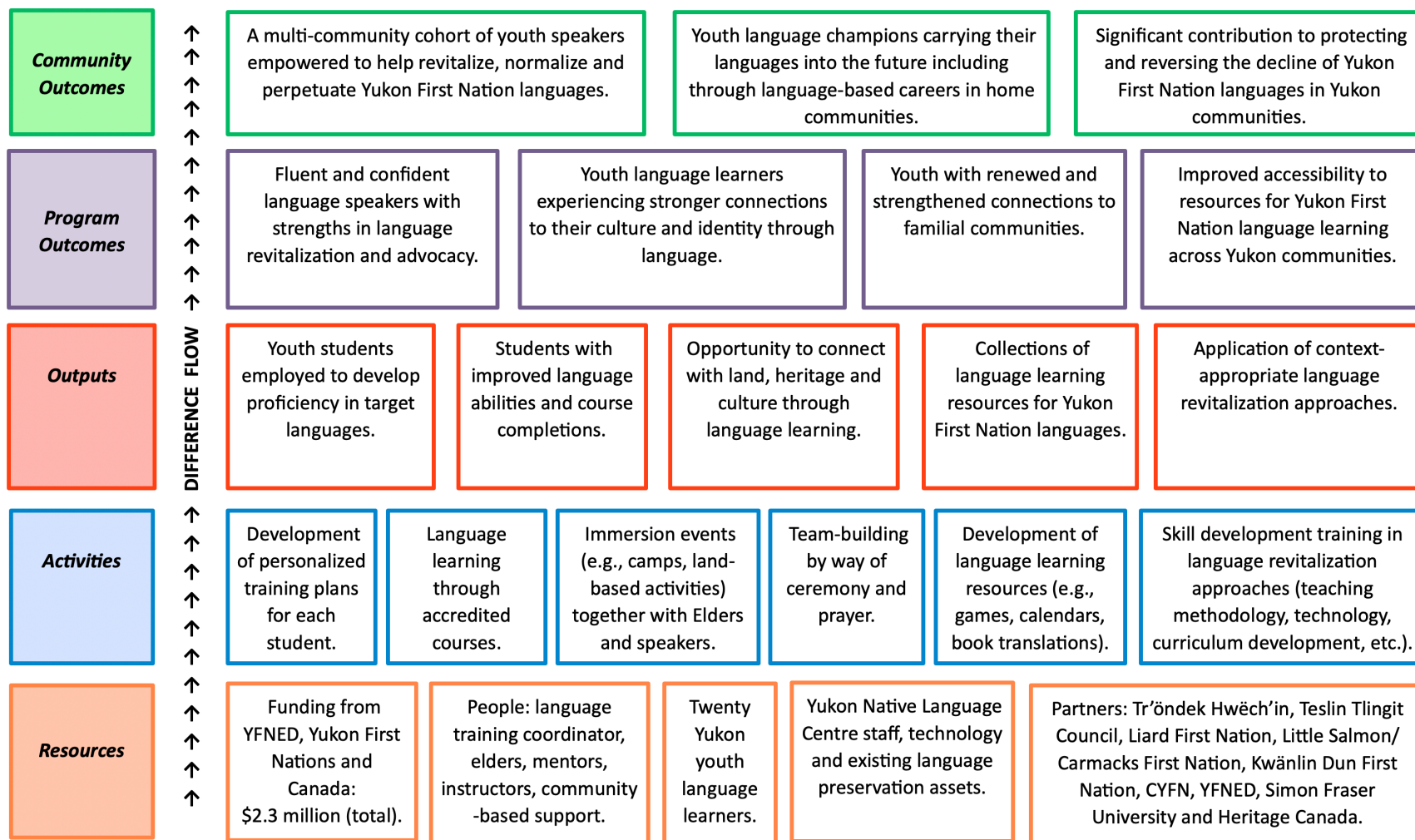
The Youth Today Language Leaders Tomorrow Program was made possible with financial and program delivery support from the Teslin Tlingít Council, Kwanlin Dün First Nation, Ta'an Kwäch'än Council, Kluane First Nation, Liard First Nation, Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in, Little Salmon Carmacks First Nation, Yukon First Nations Education Directorate, Heritage Canada and the Yukon Native Language Centre.

The initial offering of the Youth Today Language Leaders Tomorrow Program concluded in December 2023. To learn what could be improved for a future offering of the program by the Yukon Native Language Centre, Vector Research was engaged by the Council of Yukon First Nations to conduct a formative evaluation to assess program effectiveness during the fall and winter of 2023.

The evaluation was based on the logic model, developed collaboratively with program staff, shown on the following page. Multiple lines of evidence were used to generate quantitative and qualitative data for the evaluation of the Youth Today Language Leaders Tomorrow Program, including:

- a review of administrative and program documents including funding proposals, policies, memorandums of agreement (MOAs) and memorandums of understanding (MOUs);
- a review of available financial data;
- descriptive analyses of Simon Fraser University course completion records; and,
- semi-structured interviews (in-person and by phone/Zoom) with key informants: program staff (n=5), current and withdrawn students (n=13) and current and withdrawn program partners (n=7).

### Youth Today: Language Leaders Tomorrow - Logic Model



DIFFERENCE FLOW

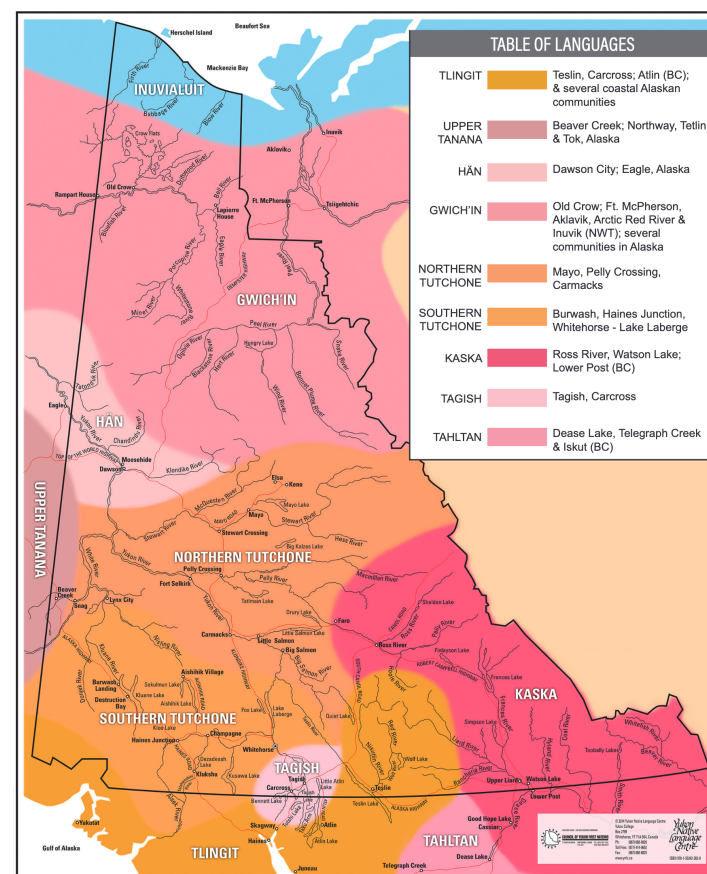
### Program Context

The YTLTT program was hosted by the Yukon Native Language Centre at the Whitehorse campus of Yukon University (known as Yukon College prior to 2020). Operational responsibility for the Yukon Native Language Centre was transferred to the Council of Yukon First Nations in 2017. The transfer of responsibility was accompanied by a shift to a mandate focussed on supporting strong and vibrant Yukon First Nation languages for future generations within the context of self-governance and the established language capacity among Yukon First Nation communities. Delivery of the YTLTT program through the Yukon Native Language Centre is well-aligned with the Centre’s new mandate.

The inaugural offering of the Youth Today Language Leaders Tomorrow Program had several unique characteristics. *First*, an invitation to participate in the program was extended to youth from all 14 Yukon First Nation communities in the fall of 2021. Prior to that date, language revitalization efforts in the Yukon tended to be specific to an individual Yukon First Nation community with a focus on a single language.

*Second*, program intake was open to youth interested in learning one of eight Yukon First Nation languages (as illustrated in the map to the right): Tlingít, Upper Tanana, Hän, Gwich'in, Dän K'í (Northern Tutchone), Dän K'è (Southern Tutchone), Kaska and Tagish. At program launch in December 2021, the 20 students accepted into the program (out of the approximately 40 youth who applied to the program) brought representation from five of the eight language groups: Tlingít, Hän, Dän K'í, Dän K'è and Kaska. Thus, the Youth Today Language Leaders Tomorrow Program can be characterized as a multi-community *and* multi-language program.

*Third*, the program was delivered to a cohort of Yukon First Nation youth ranging in age from 18 to 30 years old. The Yukon has a long history of Yukon First Nation language instruction at the elementary school level, and many examples of Yukon First Nation courses and workshops designed for adult learners. The YTLTT program is, however, thought to be the first example of a language program targeted at new generation of speakers who can raise children in the language, fill needed language roles in Yukon communities and become advocates for Yukon First Nation languages.



Source: Yukon Native Language Centre Strategic Plan 2018 to 2021.

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A *fourth* unique characteristic of the initiative, while not precedent-setting in the Yukon, was that students in the YTLTT program were paid full-time employment wages to study and learn a First Nation language. The 2018 cohort of the Champagne and Aishihik First Nations Dän K'è Kwänje Ghäkenīdän (We Are Learning Our Native Language Program) was the first Yukon example of providing sufficient funding for students to be able to focus full-time on learning a Yukon First Nation language (Dän K'è). Dän K'è Kwänje Ghäkenīdän students were paid a stipend by the Champagne and Aishihik First Nations. YTLTT students were paid an hourly wage plus benefits and were employees of the Council of Yukon First Nations. Both are examples of how space can be created for students to learn Yukon First Nation languages without having to juggle dual demands of work and school.

The design of the Youth Today Language Leaders Tomorrow program was a balance between Western and Indigenous approaches to language revitalization in a post-secondary learning environment. Students who completed the program received both a Certificate and a Diploma in Indigenous Language Proficiency from Simon Fraser University and studied in an office-like setting with limited culturally appropriate and private spaces. Within the same program, YTLTT students participated in immersion camps at different land-based locations in the Yukon and received mentoring from elders and fluent speakers. Many students were afforded opportunities through their First Nation to experience language revitalization programs, conferences, and knowledge sharing on work time in locations outside the Yukon including Alaska (Juneau and Sitka) and Hawaii.

Learning to speak a Yukon First Nation language is challenging, as each language has unique tones, sounds, utterances, and pronunciations not likely encountered prior to learning a Yukon First Nation language. Yukon First Nation languages are polysynthetic meaning that a word may contain several discrete language units (morphemes), such that a single word can convey complex concepts that in other languages would require whole sentences to communicate. The eight Yukon First Nation languages also host multiple dialects, with dialects specific to certain land areas, presenting another layer of learning for students.

At their core, Yukon First Nation languages are orally centered and traditionally passed down orally. Orthographies, which embody the structure, phonetics, and meaning of Yukon First Nation languages, are at various stages of development across the eight Yukon First Nation language groups with some languages having multiple orthographies.

On a fiscal year basis, the value of funding received by the Yukon Native Language Centre for delivery of the two-year Youth Today Language Leaders Tomorrow Program was \$0.4 million in the 2021/22, \$1.1 million in 2022/23 and \$0.8 million in 2023/24. On a funding source basis, the Yukon Native Language Centre received YTLTT funding from the Yukon First Nation Education Directorate in the amount of \$1.1 million, \$0.6 million was received from Yukon First Nation governments and \$0.6 million was received from Heritage Canada. The total value of funding received for the YTLTT program was \$2.3 million. The total does not include the limited circumstance where salaries were paid directly to students by a Yukon First Nation government.

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In terms of YTLTT program development and operations, the transition from program design to program launch was very rapid and was carried out over weeks rather than months. The short time frame limited the amount of planning work that could be completed before students arrived at the Yukon Native Language Centre to begin the YTLTT program. Yukon Native Language Centre staff turnover, and associated vacancies, in the formative stage of the program added complexity to the delivery of the pilot program. The on-boarding of 20 new staff members in one group by the Council of Yukon First Nations, an organization with about 60 staff at the time, was an administrative feat.

What now follows in this synthesis report is organized according to the top three rows of boxes in the logic model presented on page two, beginning with outputs, followed by program outcomes and then community outcomes. The evaluation has been completed with a strengths-based approach which focusses on what is working well and what can be improved for future program offerings.

The assessment of outputs looks at how completion of the activities listed in the logic model were transformed into outputs. The outputs produced by the YTLTT program are the building blocks for achieving outcomes at both the program and community levels. The assessment of program-level outcomes considers the experiences of YTLTT students (both program graduates and students that withdrew from the program) and how the program has made a difference for them. Part of the focus at the program outcome level is on understanding how program delivery can be improved in future offering of the program, and to ensure lessons learned are readily available for Yukon First Nation language programs.

The assessment of community outcomes reflects on how the YTLTT program is making a difference at a broader community level. A focus at the community outcome level is the *contribution* of the program to achieving the intended program outcomes in the midst of other economic, social and cultural factors. In the context of the YTLTT program, community refers to both the communities external to the Yukon Native Language Centre and Yukon First Nation communities located outside of Whitehorse.

### Program Outputs

Five outputs were identified for the Youth Today Language Leaders Tomorrow Program as part of the collaborative development of the logic model: (1) *Youth students employed to develop proficiency in target languages*, (2) *Students with improved language abilities and course completions*, (3) *Opportunity to connect with land, heritage and culture through language learning*, (4) *Collections of language learning resources for Yukon First Nation languages*, and (5) *Application of context-appropriate language revitalization approaches*. An assessment of each of the five outputs follows below. The output assessments are based on data and information contained in administrative and program documents, available financial data, course completion records and the semi-structured interviews with students (current and withdrawn), staff and program partners (current and withdrawn).

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1

*Youth students employed to develop proficiency in target languages.*

Approximately 40 youth applied to participate in the Youth Today Language Leaders Tomorrow Program in the fall of 2021. The 20 students accepted into the program brought representation from five of the eight Yukon First Nation language groups: Tlingít, Hän, Dän K'í, Dän K'è and Kaska. Seventeen of the twenty students were employed by the Council of Yukon First Nations, with three students directly employed by a Yukon First Nation (two at the beginning of the program and one hired in the second year of the program). Students employed by the Council of Yukon First Nations were compensated at a rate of \$30 per hour (plus benefits at 24%) for 37.5 hours per week, equivalent to \$72,540 per student, per year. At the beginning of the program, YTLTT students were living in Dawson City, Teslin, Watson Lake and Whitehorse.

2

*Students with improved language abilities and course completions.*

Standardized benchmarks for language proficiency in each of the eight Yukon First Nation language groups have not yet been developed, a circumstance consistent with the critically endangered state of the languages. Student evaluations were instead based on available frameworks from other language programs, and observations of student interactions with mentors, elders and speakers. All students interviewed for this evaluation, including students who withdrew from the program, indicated significant improvement in their language abilities as a result of participation in the Youth Today Language Leaders Tomorrow Program. Program staff and representatives of partner organizations spoke repeatedly to the vast improvement in language proficiency across the cohort of students.

Eleven students completed the Youth Today Language Leaders Tomorrow Program and earned both a Certificate and Diploma in Indigenous Language Proficiency from Simon Fraser University. The chart to the right lists the certificate and diploma-level courses completed through Simon Fraser University by the 11 YTLTT graduates. Courses included both language-specific and multi-language content to ensure students could acquire language revitalization skills and knowledge (transcribing, teaching methods, curriculum development, etc.) alongside language learning. Of the 11 program graduates, seven learned Tlingít and four learned Dän K'è. The graduating students have familial relationships with the Yukon communities of

### *Courses for the Certificate in Indigenous Language Proficiency*

- Practical Phonetics for Indigenous Languages
- Introduction to Indigenous Languages I
- Introduction to Indigenous Languages II
- Introduction to Grammar in an Indigenous Language
- Description and Analysis of an Indigenous Language I
- Description and Analysis of an Indigenous Language II
- Indigenous Language Immersion I
- Indigenous Language Immersion II
- Language Revitalization

### *Courses for the Diploma in Indigenous Language Proficiency*

- Indigenous Language Intermediate Level Proficiency I
- Indigenous Language Intermediate Level Proficiency II
- Advanced Grammar of an Indigenous Language
- Indigenous Language Immersion III
- Indigenous Language Immersion IV
- Indigenous Language Mentoring I
- Indigenous Language Mentoring II
- Language Teaching Methods I
- Language Teaching Methods II
- Curriculum & Materials Development I
- Curriculum & Materials Development II
- Language Learning & Technology I
- Transcribing, Translating, and Recording II



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Carcross, Burwash Landing, Haines Junction, Lake Laberge, Teslin and Whitehorse. Yukon communities with youth participating in the first year of the YTLTT program included Dawson City, Carmacks and Watson Lake.

3

*Opportunity to connect with land, heritage and culture through language learning.*

Five language immersion and cultural camps were hosted during the two-year YTLTT program. Each camp was planned for one week and all YTLTT students participated in the same camp. The dates and locations of the five language immersion camps are shown in the table to the right. During the YTLTT program, each student was also paired with elders and language mentors for Mentor Apprentice Programs. Students also took part in community-based placements in the summer of 2023. Note that due to COVID-19 restrictions, gatherings on the land and in large groups was not possible until the fourth month of the program.

**YTLTT Immersion Camps**

Date	Location
March 2022	Ātà Kù (Annie Lake Road)
May 2022	Helen's Fish Camp (Lake LeBerge)
August 2022	Brooks Brook (Teslin Lake)
May 2023	Xhastin's Healing Journey (Carcross Cutoff)
August 2023	Shakat Tun Retreat Centre (Kluane Lake)

In the semi-structured interviews students were asked to reflect on their experiences in the program and what it meant to them to be able to learn a language through connections to land, heritage and culture. Respondents suggested that more language immersion and culture camps, and culture camps with a greater focus on language, would improve the program, noting the land-based locations of the culture camps to be very conducive to learning a First Nation language. As shared by a respondent, 'the classroom setting did not exist traditionally, so being on the land to learn my First Nation language really made a difference.' Another respondent noted that 'being on the land gave students a better grasp of who they are and how to focus on language learning.' And as articulated by another respondent 'you don't need to invent words when you are on the land, because when on the land communication is in the right social and cultural context.'

4

*Collections of language learning resources for Yukon First Nation languages.*

Program participants created an extensive variety of language learning resources for Yukon First Nation languages. The purpose of creating the language learning resources was two-fold. First, creating language learning resources was a way for YTLTT students to improve language proficiency in a Yukon First Nation language. Second, the resources created can be used to help new and future students learn languages and increase available teaching and learning language resources. Examples of resources created by YTLTT students are shown in the table below.

### Examples of YTLTT Language Resources

• Calendars	• Posters with audio (e.g., Train your dog)	• Tlingit orthography chart
• Lesson Plans & Materials	• Recipes	• Videos for numbers, holidays, seasons, emotions
• Games (e.g., Go Fish, Boardgames)	• Story-books and audio	

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Student and staff interview participants were asked in the semi-structured interviews about the importance of creating learning resources in different First Nation languages. Student respondents generally agreed on the importance of developing language learning resources. Opinions diverged, however, on the degree of emphasis that should be placed on developing language learning resource within the overall YTLTT program. While some students found the resource development requirements of the program to be of significant benefit to their language learning, others suggested that having to create so many resources was a distraction, and took time away from language learning.

As noted earlier, Yukon First Nation language resources are at various stages of refinement across the eight Yukon First Nation language groups. For some students, this meant less freedom to choose project topics aligned with their interests and being directed to complete more basic projects to round out the range of resources available for future learners. In addition, some respondents perceived an imbalance in assigned resource topics, with topics more performative in nature favoured over more 'technical' topics such as, for example, deconstruction of perfective and imperfective verbs.

Limited access to speakers, linguists and individuals with advanced fluency created challenges in confirming the accuracy of the language resources developed by YTLTT students, and was noted as a source of stress for some students, with that stress articulated in two ways. First, some students noted with now-very-small numbers of fluent First Nation language speakers in the Yukon, all language revitalization work carries with it a huge weight of correctly communicating deeper meanings of a language. Second, and related to the first, some students felt that they were being asked to create public language resources too soon in their language journey and that others will *learn their mistakes* rather than *learn from their mistakes*.

The distinction between language students being employed (and paid a wage) *versus* being paid a stipend (i.e., not employed) was noted to be of importance in the context of language resource development and intellectual property rights. Case law is clear that the intellectual property rights embodied in the inventions and creations of an employee automatically become the property of the employer. In contrast, intellectual property rights embodied in the inventions and creations of individuals not employed remain with the inventor or creator unless transferred in a written contract. Such a distinction is relevant to who gets to decide what language resources may be placed in the public domain at what point in time.

5

Application of context-appropriate language revitalization approaches.

Youth Today Language Leaders Tomorrow students learned a variety of context-appropriate language revitalization approaches during the program, through formal courses accredited by Simon Fraser University and informally through other program activities. The table below lists some of the language revitalization approaches learned by YTLTT students.

SFU courses with language revitalization aspects:	Other language revitalization approaches:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Indigenous Language Revitalization</li> <li>Language Learning and Technology</li> <li>Transcribing, Translations and Recordings</li> <li>Language Teaching Methods (e.g., spaced repetition, immersion)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Paul Creek Methodology</li> <li>Total Physical Response</li> <li>Language sessions with elementary school students in Yukon communities</li> <li>Public speaking events hosted in community and by various organizations</li> </ul>

Student and staff interview participants were asked whether the language revitalization approaches learned through the program were useful. While it was seen that introducing a variety of language revitalization approaches helped students understand which approaches work best for them, others noted that classroom learning is not the same thing as language immersion, with language immersion holding greater potential for fluency in a language. It was stated that the best language revitalization approach is exemplified in language acquisition for infant and toddler-age children by being cared for in a traditional language, such that the language is *absorbed* rather than *taught*. Other respondents mentioned the importance of always distinguishing between language revitalization and acts of community service (e.g., introductions at gatherings, sign translations).

### Program Outcomes

Four program outcomes were identified for the Youth Today Language Leaders Tomorrow Program during the collaborative development of the logic model: (1) *Fluent and confident language speakers with strengths in language revitalization and advocacy*, (2) *Youth language learners experiencing stronger connections to their culture and identity through language*, (3) *Youth with renewed and strengthened connections to familial communities*, and (4) *Improved accessibility to resources for Yukon First Nation language learning across Yukon communities*. The assessment of program outcomes which follows below relies mainly on thematic analysis of the semi-structured interview responses. The Youth Today Language Leaders Tomorrow program successfully achieved all intended program-level outcomes and has advanced Yukon First Nation language learning beyond the expectations of program funders and administrators.

1

*Fluent and confident language speakers with strengths in language revitalization and advocacy.*

Students were asked in the semi-structured interviews to describe their language journey, from the starting point, compared to the conclusion of the YTLTT program at the end of 2023. In terms of their starting point, many students referenced experiences at elementary and secondary school ages and being glad they could now advance past those memories and feel more effectively supported in learning their language. Respondents indicated making 'big leaps in my language journey', 'making it up steep learning curves' and that the program was 'challenging in the best way'. Others spoke to how learning a First Nation language has changed how they think day-to-day and altered their worldviews. Many students expressed dismay that the program has ended so soon, suggesting that it is not reasonable to expect full fluency in a two-year program, and that four years would be a better program length.

The YTLTT program involved more than one type of journey for students; it was not just a language journey. And while the language journey was challenging for many all on its own, with so much new learning followed by sometimes frustrating plateaus in progress, the YTLTT program was also a journey of self-discovery. The journey of self-discovery involved new connections with traditional cultures, learning about family history and higher levels of personal self-awareness. As any journey of self-discovery may come with its own plateaus, achieving progress in learning a First Nation language was a many-faceted endeavor that for each student involved advancing beyond more than one plateau.

Many interview respondents spoke to differences in language learning opportunities available across the five Yukon First Nation languages featured in the YTLTT program. The need for a coordinator for each language, rather than one coordinator serving all languages, was noted by many respondents. Students in the Tlingit cohort were resident in both Whitehorse and Teslin without a YTLTT program coordinator fluent in Tlingit located in either location. Having a fluent YTLTT program coordinator readily available in both locations was suggested as way to help advance conversational fluency. Students outside of Whitehorse also received a significantly greater proportion of language and course instruction by Zoom video instead of in-person. The absence of language-specific program coordinators for students learning Hän, Dän K'í and Kaska in communities located outside of Whitehorse was also noted by interview participants.

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Youth Today Language Leaders Tomorrow students were asked to reflect on how their confidence in understanding and speaking a Yukon First Nation language has changed over the last two years. Overall, students indicated confidence levels around understanding their language had vastly increased. With respect to speaking the language, students learning Tlingit reported feeling more confident in understanding the language and less confident, or shy, speaking the language. Students learning Dän K'è indicated feeling as confident speaking the language as understanding the language. That there are different dialects within each language group was noted to be relevant to confidence in speaking, as encountering a speaker of the same language group who speaks a different dialect, especially if that speaker is an elder, can have profound effects on a student's confidence.

Staff and partner interview respondents were also asked to consider how students' confidence in speaking and understanding a traditional language has changed over the last two years. Overall, responses from staff and partners were similar to the responses received from students regarding confidence in understanding and speaking Yukon First Nation languages. From the perspective of YTLTT program partners located outside of Whitehorse, more evolved planning and improved communication would make it easier to bolster students' confidence by being better able to respond to questions about the program.

Students who withdrew from the program, staff and program partners were asked in the semi-structured interviews how they think the program could be changed to help students stay enrolled until the end. The themes identified are discussed below:

*Introduction and timing of cultural connections:* The YTLTT program was blend of Western and Indigenous approaches to language learning. Much of the program delivery was, however, weighted more towards Western methods, specifically, classroom learning in an institutional setting. Providing enough time to build cultural connections, including time with elders, before classroom learning begins was suggested as a way to help students feel grounded enough to continue all the way through the program.

Delivering more culturally-based content at the beginning of the program would provide a foundation for student success in two ways. *First*, program staff would have an opportunity to assess the cultural, physical, spiritual, mental and emotional readiness of each student to participate in the full program and identify student supports needed. *Second*, all students, especially students in communities outside of Whitehorse, would have time to develop peer relationships and a sense of belonging within the YTLTT program that can be drawn on for strength when learning and life circumstance plateaus are encountered later in the program.

*Wrap-around supports:* While the original program application envisioned wrap around supports for YTLTT students, the approved budget did not include funding for staff positions for support workers or language mentors located at the Yukon Native Language Centre or in communities outside of Whitehorse. When life circumstances such as housing issues, unsafe living conditions or mental wellness concerns were impacting the ability of students to participate in the program, effective supports were not always available to the students. As stated by a respondent, 'some students simply needed more one-on-one support.'

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*Employment support:* Entry by youth into the workforce typically involves piecemeal, gig or part-time employment opportunities. As the YTLTT program involved full-time employment, students entering the program with limited work experience faced a sometimes-overwhelming adjustment to the role of fulltime employee with new-to-them expectations around hours of work and learning behaviours. Student support specific to the employment-related aspects of the program was suggested as a positive change for a future version of the program.

*Space for families:* For YTLTT students with young children, taking part in the program meant juggling not just the demands of school and employment but also the need to be present for their children and their partners. To better accommodate those students, it was suggested that more and better space be create for whole families to be part of language learning, including during the land-based immersion camps.

*In-house language mentors:* Many interview respondents noted a gap in the program design, the absence of language mentors (fluent speakers) co-located with all language learners. While YTLTT students were eventually able to make connections with elders and other language mentors as the program was rolled out, having a fluent speaker for each language group available for interaction on short notice or 'in the moment' was noted as being essential in advancing language speaking ability. Online Zoom conferencing was noted by many respondents as an ineffective way to interact with fluent speakers.

*Minimum student cohort size:* Learning to speak a new language requires constant and consistent interaction between language speakers. YTLTT students with one or no other students in their language cohort faced a daunting task to learn on their own without benefit of peer support from students learning the same language. The tonal nature of Yukon First Nation languages also makes it important that new speakers can hear the language in both male and female voices. Future offerings of the program should consider a minimum size for student cohorts.

*Safe spaces for students:* Being a brand new program, many things were sorted in real time as the YTLTT program was being delivered, including establishing connections with program supporters both in Whitehorse and in communities outside of Whitehorse. Students without those connections in place did not always feel safe as they had to build relationships on their own and in some cases had to travel to communities outside of Whitehorse on their own without knowing how they would be welcomed in a community.

*Program coordination support scaled to a multi-language, multi-community program:* The pilot YTLTT program was a multi-language, multi-community program. Effective support for each language / community node in the program needs to be fully mapped out if students are to feel fully supported in their language journeys. The number of program coordinators and language mentors should match the number of languages being learned. Achieving effective support will also involve the Yukon Native Language Centre continuing to build relationships and pathways with Yukon First Nation governments and individuals working to revitalize and protect First Nation languages in Yukon communities.

2

*Youth language learners experiencing stronger connections to their culture and identity through language.*

Student interview respondents were asked whether they feel they now have a stronger connection to their culture through language. Overall, students clearly indicated that the YTLTT program, specifically new relationships with elders, have helped them create a stronger connection to identity and language. Many respondents suggested that the connection between language and culture is inseparable, that 'it is not possible to have one without the other.' As described by one respondent, 'the YTLTT program gave me a whole different worldview, learning from my elders helped me switch the channel.' Another noted that 'the program has made my connection to my culture a lot stronger.' As mentioned earlier, most of the YTLTT program was delivered in a classroom-based and institutional setting. As stated by a respondent, 'the program would do better to implement language learning within culture, not within a classroom.' As phrased by another respondent, 'there was not enough focus in the program on cultural aspects.'

Staff and program partner interview respondents were also asked whether YTLTT students now have a stronger connection to their culture and identity through language. From the perspective of staff and program partners, the program has had profound and positive impacts on student's identities, even if the students themselves cannot see it, suggesting that 'students morals have changed, the way they interact with the world, both people and systems, is different now.' Another respondent stated 'these are not the same students as two years ago, there has been a radical transformation, even if the student seems to be struggling with the language.' Students were described as now being able to 'apply protocols of understanding and respect' even when speaking English. Students without connections to fluent speakers before the start of the program were noted to now have relationships with fluent speakers and have ongoing opportunities to learn about their history through stories.

3

*Youth with renewed and strengthened connections to familial communities.*

Student interview respondents were asked whether they feel they now have strengthened connections to familial communities through the program. In general, student respondents agreed that the YTLTT program helped strengthen connections with familial communities, with YTLTT experiences for some being seen as a starting point. It was noted that the question of which Yukon First Nation language a student should learn can be complex as family lineages can span communities and language groups within those communities.

Staff and program partner interview respondents were also asked for their perceptions about whether students strengthened connections to familial communities through the YTLTT program. Student placements in the summer of 2023 were noted as an important way for students to strengthen community and familial bonds. Other respondents indicated that the YTLTT program has helped start conversations about First Nation languages within families and that 'people are generally excited to see language learning happening, definitely more so than three years ago.' Other respondents commented that the YTLTT program has also changed understandings of what is meant by family, towards a First Nation understanding of clans and extended relations.

4

*Improved accessibility to resources for Yukon First Nation language learning across Yukon communities.*

To learn whether Yukon First Nation language learning resources are now more accessible in Yukon communities, YTLTT student interview respondents were asked whether the benefits of renewed language learning have begun flowing into Yukon communities. The idea of “benefits flowing into Yukon communities” was based on a premise that all Yukon communities are ready to accept the flow of language learning. The degree of community readiness was suggested to be mixed among the six communities with which graduating students have familial connections. The YTLTT program was seen to be successful in all communities in generating excitement and interest about learning Yukon First Nation languages.

While YTLTT students made sustained efforts to initiate the flow of language learning into Yukon communities, with some graduating YTLTT students already teaching individuals and families on their own initiative, some respondents felt that the intent of their efforts to bring language fluency approaches back into communities was not always understood within those communities. This was apparent to the students, for example, when distinctions were drawn around having membership or residency in a particular First Nation or not, rather than openly welcoming the potential language learning benefits all new language holders could bring to a community. Now holding traditional worldviews learned from understanding and speaking a First Nation language, the varying degrees of acceptance was troubling for some YTLTT students. In the future, YTLTT students should be well-supported in their interactions with communities according to how ready a community is to accept the flow of benefits being offered by the students.

Staff and program partners were also asked in the semi-structured interviews whether the benefits of renewed language learning have begun flowing into Yukon communities. Staff and program partner respondent perceptions echoed those of the student interview respondents, with one respondent noting that ‘how YTLTT program benefits are harnessed is dependent on each community.’ Clearly, YTLTT language learners, and the Yukon Native Language Centre itself, need to be supported in enhancing the understanding across Yukon First Nation communities of the value of supporting new First Nation language learners with employment opportunities and welcoming them into Yukon communities. Other respondents suggested that most students are still focussed on their own language journeys and that expecting language learners at an intermediate language level to initiate language learning initiatives in communities is a pressure-filled ask of YTLTT students.



### Community Outcomes

Three community outcomes were identified for the Youth Today Language Leaders Tomorrow Program during the collaborative development of the logic model: (1) *A multi-community cohort of youth speakers empowered to help revitalize, normalize and perpetuate Yukon First Nation languages*, (2) *Youth language champions carrying their languages into the future including through language-based careers in home communities*, and (3) *Significant contribution to protecting and reversing the decline of Yukon First Nation languages in Yukon communities*. The assessment of community outcomes which follows below relies mainly on thematic analysis of the semi-structured interview responses. The Youth Today Language Leaders Tomorrow program has made significant progress towards achieving all intended community-level outcomes.

1

*A multi-community cohort of youth speakers empowered to help revitalize, normalize and perpetuate Yukon First Nation languages.*

Interview respondents were asked to reflect on whether a multi-community cohort of youth speakers has been empowered to help revitalize Yukon First Nation languages. On the basis of the interview responses, it is clear that the YTLTT program has successfully created a cohort of youth speakers now poised to help revitalize, normalize and perpetuate Yukon First Nation languages. In addition, the cohort of youth learners transcends community locations and dialects within language groups. Those community locations include Carcross, Burwash Landing, Haines Junction, Lake Laberge, Teslin and Whitehorse. As phrased by an interview respondent, 'the YTLTT graduates have made pathways together and now live as symbols for other people, by showing that not only can people learn First Nation languages, people that they themselves know can learn First Nation languages.'

Interest in First Nation language learning was also sparked in Yukon communities which had youth participate in the first year of the YTLTT program including Dawson City and Watson Lake. All youth involved in the YTLTT program are now seen as role models for others to learn Yukon First Nation languages.

Interview respondents again pointed out that a two year program is not long enough to bring language learners from a beginner proficiency level to full fluency. The voices of YTLTT students indicating that they would like to continue their language journeys, and continue having time with elders and fluent speakers, should be heeded if Yukon First Nation languages are to be normalized and sustained. Multi-year funding for intensive language programming from various government agencies is also required. It also needs to be remembered that graduating YTLTT students are from just two of the eight Yukon First Nation language groups: much work lies ahead to help advance language revitalization across the Yukon and for all language groups.

Interview respondents were also asked to reflect on the extent to which youth language champions are now available for language-based careers in home communities. Many types of careers and employment opportunities were mentioned by interview respondents, including (in alphabetical order):

- Cultural revitalization specialists;
- Daycare language staff;
- Government decolonizers;
- Language nest leaders;
- Linguists and language researchers;
- Language revitalization workshop leaders;
- Paul Creek Method facilitators;
- Teachers in Yukon Education elementary and high schools;
- Transcribers of Yukon First Nation language recordings made over the last 50 years (e.g., NNBY radio shows, General Assembly recordings, recordings housed at Yukon Native Language Centre);
- Youth and adult immersion leaders;
- Yukon First Nation Government language department staff; and,
- Yukon First Nation School Board program staff in 11 YFNSB elementary and high schools.

As described earlier in this report, the 11 YTLTT graduates are clearly well on their way to increasing the number of Yukon First Nation language champions. However, the readiness of employers and the availability of language-focused positions is less clear. As noted by an interview respondent, while 'YTLTT students are absolutely ready for language careers, many potential employers are not.' While this circumstance has meant challenges for the current cohort of YTLTT students, the YTLTT program should be recognized for raising the level of discussion around language-based careers in Yukon communities, a discussion from which students in future offerings of the YTLTT program will benefit. One respondent indicated being worried that non-Yukon First Nation-led entities will try to 'scoop up' the YTLTT graduates before students are fluent, inadvertently jeopardizing the progress made through the YTLTT program in revitalizing Yukon First Nation languages.

As noted earlier in this report, YTLTT students now see the world in a different way, their worldviews have been altered through learning Yukon First Nation languages. Interview respondents were clear that the language career opportunities which will be most of interest are opportunities which embrace the worldviews embodied in Yukon First Nation languages *and* which are offered by entities and institutions which respect those

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worldviews. By way of example, employment opportunities in Yukon Government-run schools overseen by School Councils that operate within Western systems may not be the best fit, nor may employment opportunities in organizations which are overly hierarchical in structure.

3

*Significant contribution to protecting and reversing the decline of Yukon First Nation languages in Yukon communities.*

As part of the semi-structured interviews, students, staff and program partners were asked to reflect on whether the YTLTT program has begun to make a meaningful contribution to protecting and reversing the decline of Yukon First Nation languages in Yukon communities. On the basis of the responses received, the Youth Today Language Leaders Tomorrow program is very clearly seen to have made a significant contribution to protecting and reversing the decline of the Tlingít and Dän K'è languages.

The YTLTT program is also seen to have established the viability of directing language revitalization efforts towards youth-aged language learners. In addition, the program has opened the door for youth to learn a Yukon First Nation language whether resident in the community of their extended family or another Yukon community. Interview respondents again reminded that this was only the first cohort of YTLTT students and that much more revitalization work remains to be done for all Yukon First Nation languages be protected and their use normalized.

In different ways throughout the interviews, YTLTT students expressed concerns about being 'held up for show' at events being hosted by the program host and/or funders. At the events, such as celebrations, general assemblies and graduation ceremonies, students would be asked to say a few introductory phrases in a Yukon First Nation language or otherwise demonstrate language proficiency. Despite the importance of such events in increasing visibility of Yukon First Nation languages, some students felt as though they were being put on display to demonstrate that the program was worthwhile. The concerns expressed by the YTLTT students speak to the concept of phatic language use.

Language is used in a phatic manner when spoken for social purposes without the intent of communicating meaningful information and includes speaking to people who do not understand what is being said. The response of some YTLTT students to being asked to speak in a phatic manner shows that the students deeply understand the communicative intent of language and confirms that the YTLTT program has had profound ideological impacts on participants. Thus, the wariness of students to speak in such situations was noted to be a positive indicator of the success of the Youth Today Language Leaders Tomorrow program.

### Recommendations

This formative evaluation was undertaken to assess the effectiveness of the initial delivery of the Youth Today Language Leaders Tomorrow program to learn what could be improved for a future offering of program by the Yukon Native Language Centre. The Youth Today Language Leaders Tomorrow program successfully achieved all intended program-level outcomes and has advanced Yukon First Nation language learning beyond the expectations of program funders and administrators. The Youth Today Language Leaders Tomorrow program has made significant progress towards achieving all intended community-level outcomes. Recommendations to improve a future offering of the Youth Today Language Leaders Tomorrow program are presented below:

- 1\.** Start the program by introducing and upholding Yukon First Nation understandings of language revitalization so that students have time to build cultural connections, including time with elders, as a way to help students feel grounded enough to continue all the way through the program. A more culturally-based grounding in the YTLTT program would also provide program staff with an opportunity to a) through use of an assessment rubric, determine the cultural, physical, spiritual, mental and emotional readiness of each student to participate in the full program and identify student supports, and b) allow students, especially students in communities outside of Whitehorse, time to develop peer relationships and a sense of belonging within the YTLTT program.
- 2\.** Establish wrap-around support positions to assist YTLTT students as they encounter life circumstances to effectively support successful participation in the YTLTT program. The wrap-around support positions should serve students across all language groups and build relationships with existing support and guidance workers in Yukon First Nation communities to help provide community-specific supports to YTLTT students. The wrap-around support worker should also assist those students with less labour market experience with the employment-related aspects of the program. Follow-up support should be provided to students who withdraw from the YTLTT program in a way that honours the progress in language learning achieved while participating in the program.
- 3\.** For each new offering of the YTLTT program, recognize the multi-language, multi-community design of the program and hire a cohort coordinator for each Yukon First Nation language being studied. The language-specific cohort coordinators can help ensure the program components are fully planned out before the start of each program offering, assist with bringing language mentors in each community on board, facilitate the participation of Yukon First Nation elders and assist with the logistics of community travel, outreach and placements. The language-specific cohort coordinators can also collectively assist with organizing the common YTLTT program elements such as immersion camps and celebration events.
- 4\.** In recognition of the dispersion of YTLTT students, staff, community partners, mentors and fluent speakers across the Yukon, identify and implement a software tool such as Slack or Hive to improve the effectiveness of program communications.

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- 5\|. Minimum and maximum student cohort sizes should be adopted to ensure constant and consistent interaction between language speakers. A minimum language cohort size of three students would help ensure all YTLTT students have benefit of peer support from other students learning the same language and the ability to hear a tonal Yukon First Nation language in a range of tonal voices. A maximum language cohort size of six students would help ensure that all students receive an effective level of instructional and mentoring support in the language being learned.
- 6\|. For each new offering of the YTLTT program, hire language mentors (fluent speakers) that are co-located with all language learners so that a fluent speaker for each language group is available for interaction on short notice or 'in the moment' to help advance language speaking abilities. All language mentor support should be provided in-person, and only online by Zoom when absolutely necessary.
- 7\|. Future offerings of the YTLTT program should include supports for students with young children to help balance the demands of school and employment and being present for their children and their partners, including during land-based immersion camps.
- 8\|. Introduce culturally-appropriate physical locations for the classroom portions of the YTLTT program that have suitable amenities for elders, cooking facilities, as well as quiet and private spaces for students.
- 9\|. The Yukon Native Language Centre should continue to build relationships and pathways with Yukon First Nation governments and individuals working to revitalize and protect First Nation languages in Yukon communities. With benefit of those relationships, YNLC should offer support in enhancing the demand side for language career opportunities that are aligned with the language-enabled worldviews of YTLTT program participants.
- 10\|. Acknowledge YTLTT students' depth of understanding of Yukon First Nation languages and cultures learned through the YTLTT program and limit requirements for phatic language use in public settings and continue to promote context-appropriate language use to increase speaking confidence.
- 11\|. In response to the repeated observation that a two year program is not long enough to become fully fluent in a Yukon First Nation language, investigate the feasibility of offering a four or five year YTLTT program for Yukon First Nation youth. The enhanced program should include a second and advanced level of Yukon First Nation language development intended to develop cohorts of fully-fluent Yukon First Nation language speakers across all eight Yukon First Nation language groups.