

Amplifying Indigenous Youth Voices :

# The Wharerātā Declaration



**Wharerātā** is a Maori word, pronounced "*Far' re rah' ta*".

*Whare* translates to "house".  
*Rātā* translates to "tree with bright red flowers and a large canopy".

**Wharerātā** means "a house of wisdom and understanding, a house of shelter and protection".

The Thunderbird Partnership Foundation is a leading culturally centred voice in Canada on Indigenous substance use and mental wellness research, advocating for partnerships that involve integrated and wholistic approaches to healing and wellness for First Nations. Thunderbird promotes research and collaboration to empower Hope, Belonging, Meaning, and Purpose within First Nations communities. Thunderbird's mandate is to implement the Honouring Our Strengths: A Renewed Framework to address Substance Use Issues Among First Nations People in Canada (HOS) and the First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum (FNMWC) framework.

The Thunderbird Partnership Foundation is a non-profit organization and a division of the National Native Addictions Partnership Foundation Inc.

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## The Wharerātā Declaration

In recognition of the Wharerātā Declaration's significance in championing the strengths of and acknowledging the challenges faced by Indigenous communities, Indigenous youth have come together to share youth perspectives and lived experiences.

In the spirit of inclusivity and collaboration, this group was invited by the Thunderbird Partnership Foundation and First Peoples Wellness Circle, to continue adding to the Declaration. This document serves as a platform to amplify the voices of Indigenous youth and to identify five core qualities and priorities that the group has found necessary for fostering Indigenous leadership that is rooted deeply in our collective cultural heritage on Turtle Island.



## Collaboration

Collaboration, a universal value among Indigenous Peoples, holds great significance for Indigenous youth, particularly in the context of the Wharerātā Declaration. Indigenous collaboration is rooted in the cooperative and interdependent relationships that Indigenous Peoples highly value, such as the relationship between people, the land, and the collective relationship that forms the cultural identity of communities.

**Priority:** Collaboration is a key priority for Indigenous youth, as recognized in the Wharerātā Declaration. This declaration acknowledges the importance of working collectively to address the unique challenges faced by Indigenous communities worldwide. Collaboration allows Indigenous youth to preserve their cultural heritage and traditions by coming together and sharing experiences, knowledge, and skills.

Collaboration motivates Indigenous youth to advocate for their rights and interests, enabling them to amplify their voices and have a greater effect on decision-making processes. Through collaboration with like-minded individuals and organizations, Indigenous youth can combine their efforts, resources, and expertise to create positive change in their diverse communities and society as a whole. This collaborative approach respects the collective wisdom and strengths of Indigenous communities that foster resilience and unity, leading to peace-making and living a good life for youth. By working together Indigenous youth become agents of change, driving progress and shaping a future aligned with their cultural values and aspirations.

**Quality:** Collaboration is a vital concept for Indigenous youth, serving as an important quality cultivated in their lives. As Indigenous youth engage with the principles outlined in the Declaration, collaboration becomes a guiding value that shapes their actions and interactions through relational and grounding collaboration in reciprocity. Collaboration allows Indigenous youth to embrace the strength of unity, building on their diverse perspectives, experiences, and talents to address community challenges.

Collaboration as a personal quality encourages Indigenous youth to participate in decision-making processes, advocate for their rights, and contribute to the well-being of our communities and the promotion of our cultural heritage, leading to a more holistic approach to wellness, meaning and belonging. The Declaration highlights the transformative power of collaboration in the personal lives of Indigenous youth, encouraging them to forge meaningful connections, build strong networks, and engage in cooperative actions. By embodying collaboration as a personal quality, Indigenous youth can amplify their voices and aspirations, challenge stereotypes, and promote positive change.





## Communication

Communication, specifically the sharing and transmission of information, holds great importance among Indigenous youth. Indigenous communication is deeply rooted in the understanding of the relational nature of Indigenous languages, which are intricately tied to the land and how people have interacted with it. Indigenous languages reflect the deep connection between the land and its ancestral caretakers, with words often derived from describing the land and the relationships between animate beings that might otherwise be defined as inanimate objects in English.

**Priority:** Communication that cultivates understanding is a well-respected priority for Indigenous youth, particularly in the context of the Wharerātā Declaration. The Declaration recognizes the transformative power of effective communication in fostering understanding, unity, and collaboration within Indigenous communities. For Indigenous youth, communication becomes a fundamental aspect of their personal growth and development; by cultivating strong communication skills, they can express their thoughts, concerns, and aspirations clearly and with confidence. It also serves as a way to honour their cultural heritage, since Indigenous languages capture the essence of land-based traditions and the relationships between humans and the natural world.

The Wharerātā Declaration prompts Indigenous youth to prioritize communication as they navigate the challenges and opportunities within their diverse communities. It emphasizes the importance of effective communication in promoting culture, creating safe spaces for learning, self-discovery, growth, self-determination, and social progress. By making communication a priority, Indigenous youth can assert their identities, share their cultural knowledge, and honour their heritage. Meaningful and respectful communication helps challenge stereotypes, advocate for rights, and contribute to decision-making processes that shape our daily lives. Moreover, strong communication skills allow Indigenous youth to foster collaboration, form partnerships, and engage in collective action, thereby amplifying their influence and creating positive change for themselves, their communities, and the next seven generations.

**Quality:** Communication is a crucial quality that allows Indigenous youth to engage meaningfully in our communities, as recognized by the Wharerātā Declaration. Through effective communication, youth can express their ideas, concerns, and aspirations, ensuring their voices are heard and understood. It facilitates the building of bridges of understanding, fostering dialogue and cooperation for the betterment of our communities.

Furthermore, communication plays a vital role in preserving cultural heritage as we share our stories, ancestral knowledge, and cultural identity. This sharing contributes to intergenerational healing and connections. The Wharerātā Declaration serves as a framework that highlights the transformative power of communication in the lives of Indigenous youth. It encourages the development of strong communication skills to articulate their own needs and advocate for the needs of their communities. By authentically expressing the voices, perspectives, and experiences of Indigenous youth, they can address socioeconomic disparities and promote the protection of their diverse cultures. Communication, when utilized positively, becomes a tool that allows youth to engage in meaningful dialogue with leaders, stakeholders, and community partners. This engagement helps shape policies and initiatives that effect their lives. Strong communication skills allow youth to become influential voices that ignite change for the future while upholding their identities as Indigenous Peoples.



## Resilience

Resilience in the context of Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island refers to the ability to overcome adversity, adapt to challenging situations, and revitalize cultural identity, Ancestral Knowledge, and self-determination. Resilience could embody the collective movement of Indigenous peoples towards resurgence, resistance, and reclaiming lands, languages, cultural practices, and governance systems. Therefore, resilience is a deeply rooted spiritual value that has been grounded in ways of being since time immemorial.

**Priority:** Indigenous Peoples have different stories of Creation, Language, Identity, Lands and Culture and yet there are common threads across these differences. One of these commonalities is the belief that the ability to overcome adversity and life challenges comes from a person's spirit. The word resilience fundamentally describes the historical and ongoing experience of Indigenous Peoples and colonialism. Resiliency is described by author Leanne Simpson, as "resurgence and resistance". Leanne says these words are best understood in the context of the teachings of the Seven Fires creation story. She goes on to describe the challenges experienced by Gzhwe Manidoo (The Creator) when creating the world. Leanne says "Gzhwe Manidoo didn't research about creating the world or think about creating the world. Gzhwe Manidoo created the world by struggling, failing, and by trying again and again .."<sup>1</sup>. We believe this interpretation is grounded in the belief that resiliency is a quality of the Creator. As such, it is a virtuous quality to have and promote.

**Quality:** To have resilience is to have grace and fluidity, in a colonial state and society. To work within these institutions and structures and value our indigeneity is resilience. This quality assures us that failure and challenges are part of a process that has been a practice since time immemorial. As Leanne reminds us in their creation story: "Mistakes produce knowledge. Failure produces knowledge because engagement in the process changes the actors embedded in the process and aligns bodies with the implicate order"<sup>2</sup>. As youth continue to reemerge to reclaim their roles as leaders in community, they must recognize that their journey into these roles is inherently resilient and must be acknowledged as a leadership quality.



1 Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake. *As We Have Always Done : Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance*, 2017. Pg 20  
2 Simpson, 2017, pg 20





## Empathy

Empathy is ‘the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another’. This action is and has to be rooted in kindness; a value that has been gifted to Indigenous Peoples from the Great Spirit. The original languages of Indigenous people often have a root element in their concept for naming the nation of people that represents or conveys an understanding of kindness. For example, Anishinaabe is a word that describes human-being lowered from the Spirit realm (from the Great Spirit) that have been gifted with a certain road of life that is a good path (nishin) and the first syllable of the word Anishinaabe is the sound of “aa” and means invested with kindness. So Anishinaabe is a kind being lowered from the Spirit world with a good path to follow. A guiding force, the ability to put ourselves in someone else’s moccasins is critical to this work of helping and advocating for our communities. As leaders we are responsible for bringing the stories of our communities to spaces and people of influence and to be able to relay these messages requires a deep understanding of others and their experiences.

Colonization and Indian Residential Schools (IRS) have intentionally disconnected Indigenous Peoples from the land and their communities. Through that process, individualism has taken precedence in mainstream society which has resulted in an oversight of meaningful connections and care for others. This reintroduction of community care and understanding is critical to the establishment of good leadership practices.

**Priority:** Empathy is a component of Indigenous youth leadership that enables them to lead with an understanding of others and themselves. In the context of youth mental health leadership, the ability to see and feel the experiences of others is pivotal to the role youth have in advocating for change and equitable access to programs and services. The pure nature of this work is centred around the mutual understanding that we all have a story, experiences and perspectives that need to be heard. As young people, youth have an inherent responsibility to listen and act on what they hear. Doing that with an open mind and open heart is how youth can truly turn what they are hearing into transformational change.

**Quality:** To lead with empathy in a way that keeps our spirit and emotions intact requires a sense of compassion and emotional intelligence. Overcoming patriarchy and ethnocentrism (e.g., the attitude that one’s own group, ethnicity, or nationality is superior to others) through learning to lead with our hearts is how Indigenous youth will heal their communities. These qualities lead to meaningful relationships founded on trust. When someone feels heard, understood and accepted then healing becomes possible. In Indigenous communities, individual gifts and perspectives are valued and considered in decision-making. As emerging leaders, embodying empathy as a guiding principle in our leadership journeys is foundational to the work we as youth hope to do in the mental health space and beyond.



## Culturally Rooted

Indigenous Peoples have a rich history due to their culture, their social behaviour, institutions, and norms that exist within human societies. A vibrant amalgamation of knowledge, beliefs, arts, laws, customs, capabilities, and habits shape the identity of individuals within these groups. Culture serves as a source of strength, binding communities together through shared values and traditions. It acts as a powerful tool for communication, enabling the transmission of ideas and experiences across generations. Culture also provides a platform for gathering, fostering a sense of belonging and unity among its members. It is through culture that people acquire knowledge and wisdom, learning from the wisdom of their ancestors and the collective experiences of their community. Our languages, traditions and ceremonies are the strength of who we are. It is within cultural ceremonies that communities come together to celebrate their heritage and reinforce their shared identity. Finally, culture holds a great respect for Elders, as they embody the accumulated wisdom and traditions of their culture, guiding and passing on their knowledge to younger generations. Culture is a multifaceted and essential aspect of human existence, shaping our lives and contributing to the richness and diversity of our global society.

**Priority:** Culture is important for Indigenous Peoples because culture is their way of life. There is not just one culture for Indigenous Peoples because culture is what informs the foundation of life, language, land, ancestry, values, and belief in spirit. Culture is Indigenous People’s original languages, ceremonies, way of life, and how they work together to have respectful and meaningful relationships. By definition culture is social behaviours and norms that are found in human societies, a collection of arts, beliefs, customs, and laws that govern a group of people. For leaders, it is a great priority for them to have. Indigenous youth are given strength by being a part of our community and learning about our culture. Culture gives Indigenous Peoples strength and the knowledge to connect with those around us, living humans, plants, and animals other than human beings, recognized in Indigenous languages as living.

**Quality:** Culture is an invaluable quality in a leader, fostering an environment where collaboration, diversity, and innovation thrive. A leader who understands and appreciates culture recognizes the unique perspectives, experiences, and talents of their team members. By embracing cultural diversity, a leader encourages open dialogue, creating a safe space for individuals to express their ideas and opinions. This inclusive approach cultivates a rich tapestry of thoughts and fosters creativity, leading to innovative solutions. A culturally attuned leader promotes harmony and understanding among team members, fostering a sense of belonging and unity. Such an environment enhances motivation, engagement, and productivity, enabling individuals to contribute their best to the organization’s success. Ultimately, a leader who values culture not only empowers their team but also sets an example for the wider community, emphasizing the significance of embracing diversity and creating a harmonious and inclusive world.



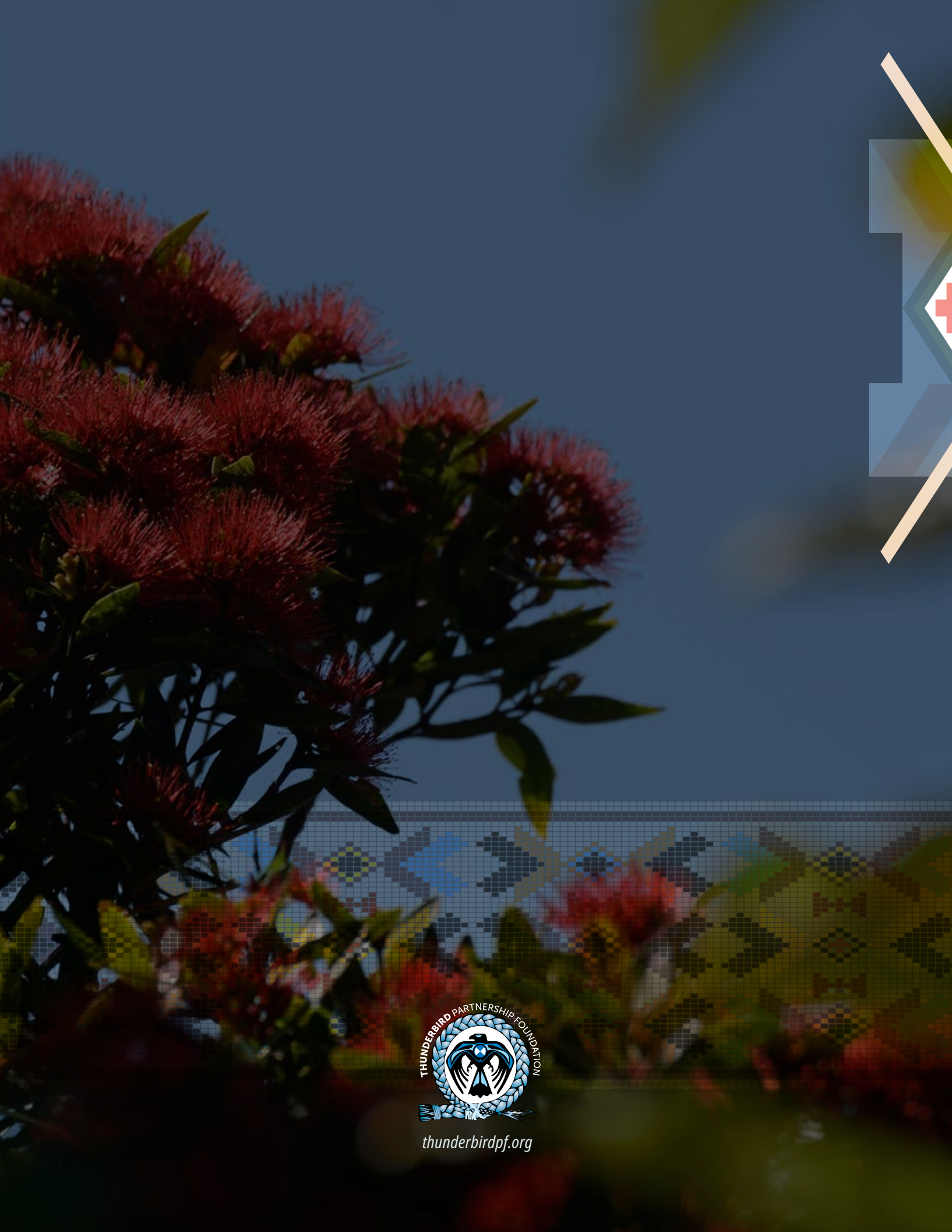


## Conclusion

These qualities reflect the worldviews of Indigenous Peoples across Turtle Island with respect to relationality and kinship. Each youth that collaborated on this document comes to the table with a grounded view of their cultural practices and ways of being. The group acknowledges that although they may represent Indigenous youth across Turtle Island, not every group has their voice represented in this document. However, the youth that worked collectively on this document are in their own ways deeply in relation with and connected to Indigenous communities and peoples across Turtle Island and Indigenous Peoples worldwide. The members of this group of youth are experts in their own right and carry with them invaluable knowledge and wisdom.

This group is proud to continue this work and share perspectives on the Wharerātā Declaration. The youth-focused qualities and priorities for Indigenous mental health leadership are informed by their lived experiences and knowledge as youth leaders in their communities and beyond.





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