

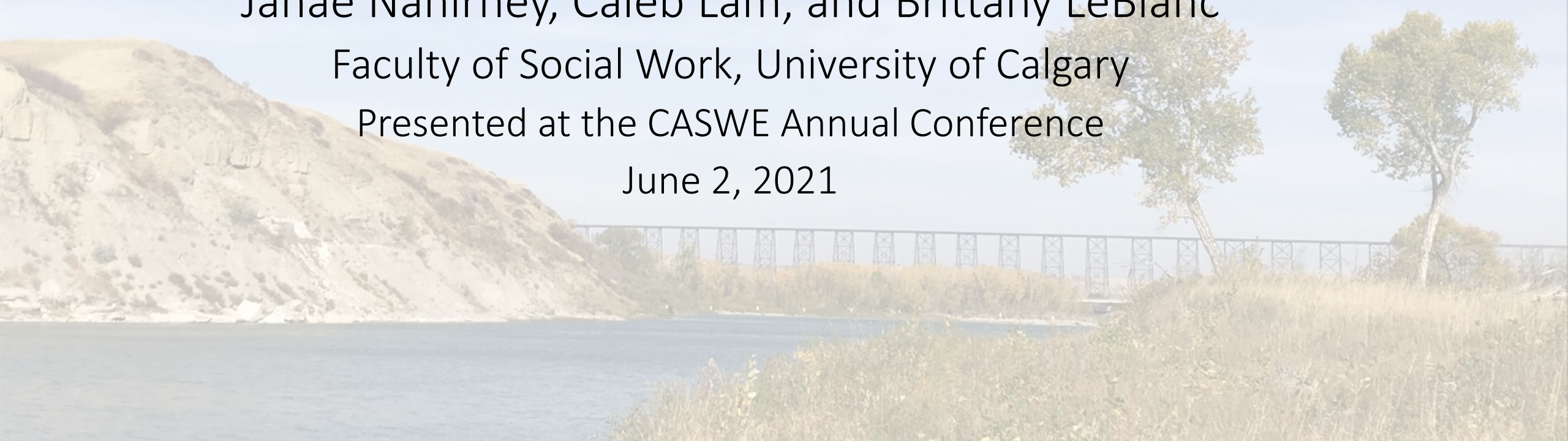
Children and Youth Mental Health in a Global Pandemic Context: Learning from a Canada-China Collaboration

Dr. Dora M.Y. Tam, Dr. Siu Ming Kwok, Dr. Patricia Samson,
Janae Nahirney, Caleb Lam, and Brittany LeBlanc

Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary

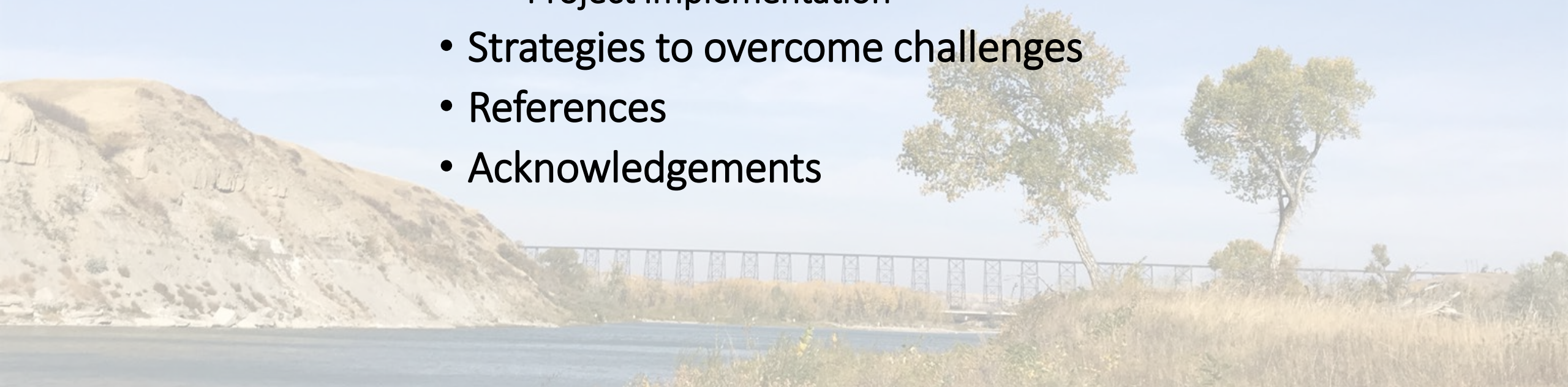
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Presentation Outline

- Background
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 - Theories
 - Definitions
- Challenges under the pandemic
 - Service users in general
 - Underserved groups
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 - Project implementation
- Strategies to overcome challenges
- References
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Project Background

- Overarching Goal of the Project
 - To engage children and youth, parents/guardians, and community partners in the development of service user-focused initiatives for the promotion of mental wellness among children and youth aged 12-17 in Canada and China
- Theories
 - The project is informed by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and the concept of Gamification
- Definitions
 - Mental Health is an integral part of health and well-being...(this) is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being...Mental health...can be impacted by a range of socioeconomic factors that need to be addressed through comprehensive strategies for promotion, prevention, treatment and recovery in a whole-of-government approach (WHO, 2013).

Challenges Under the Pandemic: For Service Users in General

- For children and youth, particularly those in locations with fewer agencies that provide supports for mental health and wellbeing, schools are a key resource
- Student cohorting, social distancing measures, and recurring school closures restricted the capacity of students to access embedded mental health and wellbeing supports such as
 - Counselling
 - Mental health promotion activities, workshops, presentations
 - Student clubs and peer support groups
 - Extra-curricular activities
 - Academic and learning supports
 - Cultural supports and activities
 - Post-secondary guidance and support

Challenges Under the Pandemic: For Underserved Groups (1)

- Program/Service type and availability varies between urban and rural locations
 - Many that were available in-person pre-pandemic were impacted due to Covid-19 restrictions, resulting in a reduction of services and/or transition to virtual delivery for some services
- Children and youth with specific needs or interests for mental health and wellbeing supports are limited by the availability of such programs in their location
 - LGBTQ2S+ and gender and sexually diverse inclusive supports
 - Individuals with disabilities
 - Newcomers to Canada or culturally specific supports
 - Homeless and/or street-involved
- In more rural/remote/northern locations, where one city serves as a regional hub (e.g., Grande Prairie), some programs are under increased pressure and some individuals may encounter a longer waitlist for access to specific or unique programs/services

Challenges Under the Pandemic: For Underserved Groups (2)

- Children in low-income families may not have adequate internet access or devices for learning, and their parents may not be available to support home learning during school lockdown
- Children with learning disabilities and other complex needs exacerbate existing learning inequities and mental health challenges
- Some children are experiencing increased food insecurity due to school lockdown
- Some children of vulnerable groups are more at risk of family violence

Challenges Under the Pandemic: For Service Providers (1)

- **Social Service Agencies**

- Public health measures implemented to slow the spread of the virus impacted the capacity for agencies to provide in-person service delivery
- Agencies deemed essential remained operational but found it challenging to support children and youth while many of the community resources, including libraries, support services, youth groups and youth friendly spaces, remained closed
- Agencies transitioned some programming to virtual service delivery through Zoom, phone calls, email and text support; however, not all agencies have the infrastructure, technical staff, or funding for transition to virtual program delivery

Challenges Under the Pandemic: For Service Providers (2)

- **Teachers and Support Staff**

- Echoed with the literature (Public Health Ontario, 2020), the closure of schools resulted in a disruption of routine, a loss of structure, limited opportunities for social connections and extra-curricular activities
- In addition to other stressors, the public health restrictions increased anxiety, stress, irritability, and depressive symptoms in students
- Teachers indicate an increase in the frequency and intensity of behavioural and mental health challenges in the classroom
- Teachers expressed that observing public-health measures while meeting the academic and mental health needs of students is leading to feelings of burn-out

Challenges Under the Pandemic: For Social Work Practicum Students

- "The purpose of field education is to connect the theoretical/conceptual contributions of the academic setting with the practice setting, enabling the student to acquire practice skills." (CASWE, 2021)
- As a result of COVID-19, field education placements were either suspended or replaced with remote learning plans. Required placement hours were also reduced to 75%. (CASWE, 2020)
- Perceived challenges as the practicum began:
 - Reduction in hours
 - Loss of interaction with service providers and service users
 - Barriers for supervision and observing practicing social workers
 - Adapting to new technology and work styles

Challenges Under the Pandemic:

For Project Implementation

- Community partners both in Canada and China experienced a tremendous amount of stress to balance service delivery with funding cuts. Agencies with program cuts could not offer the same kind of support to the CYMH project as they originally committed
- Due to social distancing restrictions, the project team has to invest more time and manpower to modify program design and to develop more versatile project activities
- The pandemic itself and the online learning/home schooling add extra layer of stress, family responsibilities, and time demand to both research team members and project assistants/practicum students that slowed the project development/implementation

Strategies to Overcome Challenges: Within the Project Team

- Stronger mutual support within the team specific for those with school age children, aging parents, or those who experienced losses (e.g. seasonal cards, celebration cards, sympathy cards)
- Provide flexible work hours and self-care time for practicum students and project assistants
- Meeting over Zoom allows more team members from five different time zones in nine different regions to join team meetings
- Successful transition of practicum students to program assistants that helps maintain consistency for project development and implementation as well as mentoring student evolving their roles from consumer to practitioner-researcher

Strategies to Overcome Challenges: With Community Partners

- Reach out to community partners for input on project activity design (e.g. virtual vs. face-to-face delivery of Photovoice groups)
- Capitalize on the local networks for their practice wisdom and knowledge input
- Provide regular updates and season's greetings to maintain connection and support
- Continue building community partnerships
 - Successfully recruited two youth advisory committee members, one youth volunteer, and three research associates

Strategies to Overcome Challenges: With Practicum Students

- Challenges and Opportunities
 - Reduction in hours
Focused hours
 - Loss of interaction with service providers and service users.
Different ways of interacting.
 - Barriers for supervision and observing practicing social workers.
More connections.
 - Adapting to new technology and work styles.
Innovating how we work.
- Commitment to Student Training
 - Take on more practicum students, specifically those who experienced unexpected cancellation of their clinical placements, or those who need more flexible practicum schedule due to family/personal needs. So far, this Project has taken on six practicum students in just 12 months

Strategies to Overcome Challenges: For Project Sustainability

- Successfully secured additional funding to hire project assistants for project implementation
- Successful application to the CATALYZE Program through Innovate Calgary at University of Calgary
 - A master of engineering student is being placed as an intern for the development of the gamification phase for the Project
- Adopt a more flexible approach in terms of project development and implementation given the uncertainty during the pandemic and post-pandemic
- Shift to remote work/virtual practice enhanced and created new opportunities to engage partners across the province and beyond

Looking Forward: E-Mental Health Programming

- Digital technologies are always evolving and have great potential to connect people to health services in new ways (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2017)
- Children, youth, family members, etc., are spending more time learning and working remotely and virtually
- Creating accessible, free or low-cost options for e-mental health programs, services, or digital apps would help individuals gain access to beneficial resources that may not be available due to a number of barriers
 - Limited/reduced mental health services in their local community
 - Transportation concerns
 - Financial concerns
 - Covid-19 restrictions on social distancing, school closures, etc.

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4. Department of Family and Community Support Services in the County of Grande Prairie
5. Centre for Young Parents (formerly called Society for Support to Pregnant and Parenting Teens in Grande Prairie)
6. Big Brothers Big Sisters of Lethbridge and District
7. McMan Youth, Family and Community Services Lethbridge and areas
8. Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary



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If you have any feedback/question,
please email Dr. Dora Tam, Project Lead,
at dtam@ucalgary.ca