NURTURING OUR GARDEN: THE VOICES OF URBAN ABORIGINAL YOUTH ON ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION IN DECISION MAKING

Cheryl Matthew - BA (Anthropology/Sociology) Simon Fraser University, MA (Leadership) Royal Roads University - is from the Simpcw First Nation in British Columbia and is a Senior Policy Analyst with the Office of the Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians of INAC.

ABSTRACT / RÉSUMÉ

This paper explores the perceptions of urban Aboriginal youth on engagement and participation in decision making processes in the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community. It also explores the barriers and enablers of Aboriginal youth participation. The research uncovered a myriad of challenges to Aboriginal youth participation including poverty, discrimination, and tokenization. Though faced with these challenges the youth remain optimistic and hopeful for the future. The paper concludes with an exploration of protective factors and recommendations on how communities can best engage youth in a meaningful way that goes beyond tokenism to legitimacy and equality.

Cet article explore les perceptions de jeunes Autochtones en milieu urbain relativement à l'engagement et à la participation aux processus décisionnels dans les communautés autochtones et non autochtones. L'auteure explore aussi les obstacles et les éléments qui favorisent la participation des jeunes Autochtones. La recherche a révélé plusieurs difficultés faisant obstacle à la participation des jeunes Autochtones, notamment la pauvreté, la discrimination et les mesures purement symboliques. Malgré ces difficultés, les jeunes demeurent optimistes et pleins d'espoir pour l'avenir. La communication conclut par une exploration des facteurs de protection et des recommandations quant aux meilleurs moyens pour les communautés de mobiliser les jeunes de manière satisfaisante, allant au-delà des gestes symboliques vers la légitimité et l'égalité.

I just think there needs to be more nurturing and more capacity building... When those younger youth are downtown or slangin [selling drugs] we as a community messed up, WE messed up, WE let them fall through the cracks because WE weren't there to support them. (Jeri-lynn, 22)

INTRODUCTION

This study began as a *Discussion Paper on Aboriginal Youth Engagement* (Matthew 2005) as a result of discussions between the Centre for Native Policy and Research, Knowledgeable Aboriginal Youth Association, RedWAY BC, Broadway Youth Resource Centre, the Child and Youth Office of BC and Redwire Native Youth Magazine in

Vancouver. The purpose of the discussions and the initial paper were to address the dissatisfaction of youth and youth organizations on how Aboriginal youth were being engaged, represented, and participated in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal government and organizations.

The initial discussion paper set out a protocol and guidelines for Aboriginal youth engagement and participation that was reviewed by 91 Aboriginal youth from throughout British Columbia at the *Inclusion, Involvement Inspiration 2005: The First Annual Policy Forum for Aboriginal Youth* (Barudin and Corigan 2005).

After the initial consultations were undertaken with youth on engagement and participation, face-to-face interviews were conducted with active youth advocates and representatives. A series of interviews was undertaken with 10 Aboriginal youth ranging from 15 to 31 years of age in the Greater Vancouver area, which sought to address the question: are Aboriginal youth currently participating in decision making in the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community? Participants were asked to explain if they had input into decision making in their community, and to identify enablers and barriers to their participation in the urban sphere.

All of the youth interviewed self-identified as Aboriginal with 60% of the participant being male and 40% female. Of the participants they were equally divided between the two age cohorts with 50% being 15-24 and 50% being 25-34 at the time of the interview.

The purpose of the research was to explore the perceptions and realities of the participation of urban Aboriginal youth in decision making. At the international and national level it has been affirmed in convention and policy that children and youth have agency in decisions that affect their lives. However, the reality for urban Aboriginal youth is quite different, as they are yet to realize equal participation and representation in decisions that affect them. It is exemplified in the beginning quote, that urban Aboriginal youth are imploring all of us to nurture and support them – otherwise, we have failed them.

This paper will first provide some background and context on youth participation and engagement. The paper will then provide a brief summary of three of the main themes of the study: assessing youth participation in decision-making; barriers to Aboriginal youth participation; and enablers to Aboriginal youth participation. The paper will conclude with recommendations on how we can best nurture youth participation and engagement.

CONTEXT

Since 1985, the International Youth Year, there has officially been a movement to support the rights of young people. This movement has recognized the intellectual capacity and agency that young people hold in making decisions that have relevance to their lives. The *Lisbon Declaration on Youth Policies and Programmes,* adopted in 1998 by the UN and the World Conference of Ministers Responsible for Youth, committed to active participation of youth in all decision making processes, gender-sensitive measures for equal access, and the promotion of education and facilitation of access for youth in the policy-making process (UNESCO 1998). The commitments of the *Lisbon Declaration* were further strengthened and affirmed for implementation by the *World Programme of Action for Youth to the year 2000 and Beyond,* adopted by the United Nations in 1995 and it outlines special protection for Indigenous youth (UN 1995). As well, the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* outlines in Article 12 that children have the right to participate in decision-making processes that are relevant to their lives, and the right to influence decisions taken on their behalf (UNHCHR 1989).

At the national level, *A Canada Fit for Children* is a national action plan, which is a commitment to support children's rights by implementing the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Implementation was required in local governance settings by the Canadian federal government in response to the United Nations Special Session on Children in May 2002 (UNESCO 2006).

In the Aboriginal context the *Royal Commission on Aboriginal People* (1996, para. 4.4.9) recommended that all governments pursue the goals of developing and implementing a Canada-wide Aboriginal youth policy of "youth participation at all levels, leadership development, economic development and cultural rebirth, youth involvement in nation building, and cultural and spiritual development." The *Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal People's* 2003 report similarly called for policy and program initiatives for urban Aboriginal youth. As well, key national Aboriginal organizations including the Assembly of First Nations, Métis National Council, Native Women's Association of Canada, and Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, have affirmed the need for Aboriginal youth participation through the development of youth councils within their respective organizations.

Although policy has affirmed participation of youth in decision making for the urban Aboriginal youth population, it remains a challenge to implement. With such a young Aboriginal population in Canada, with almost half (48%) below the age of 25 (Statistics Canada 2006), active involvement of youth in decision-making is necessary to ensure representativeness. However, achieving this level of representativeness in urban settings poses significant challenges: the *Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal People* (Chalifoux and Johnson 2003) highlighted how urban areas lack defined Aboriginal governance structures; further,



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urban Aboriginal people are not homogenous, making it difficult to define representation. This creates further difficulty in determining how urban Aboriginal youth are represented.

As such a large portion of the Aboriginal population both on and off-reserve, youth need to be involved in decisions that affect their lives. It is acknowledged that steps have been taken to move towards youth participation within governments and organizations both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal but there must be a move towards entrenching the principles and guidelines for youth participation and engagement.

THEME I: IS OUR GARDEN GROWING? ASSESSING YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN DECISION-MAKING.

DIFFERENT INVOLVEMENT AT DIFFERENT LEVELS

The participants resoundingly agreed that, as a whole, we are failing to support and nurture them at the government and organizational level. The participants felt that governments and organizations have not supported their growth by providing equal and respectful opportunities for them to participate in decision making that affect their lives. At the non-Aboriginal community, governmental, and organizational levels most of the youth did not believe that they had input into the broader decisions that affected them. There was a general consensus that there was a long way to go in having true and meaningful representation that was beyond tokenism at all levels of government and organizations.

Participants explained that in the Aboriginal community they believed they were somewhat involved in decision-making. They expressed concern that representation of youth as a whole within the Aboriginal community was inadequate. All of the participants were actively engaged in the Aboriginal community but not in decision making. A resounding theme that emerged was the role of parents in initiating community participation; some identified the beginning of their involvement as the moment they were born Aboriginal. Many youth described how involvement was just something they did with their family,

from attending meetings, events and feasts to becoming involved in community activism and protests. Interviewees also discussed how there was a community responsibility to be involved – it was normal and expected.

The good news is that the young people interviewed believed that on a personal level they had input into decisions that affected their lives directly. They felt that self-reliance and having personal choice was important and empowering to them.

CONCERN OVER NEGATIVE ENGAGEMENT

There was concern expressed regarding the number of youth negatively engaged: in care or incarcerated; facing poverty; with health concerns (i.e., addictions) and/or low educational outcomes; homeless; and being exploited. These phenomena contribute to Aboriginal youth being negatively engaged within society and thus having no, or very little, influence over decisions that affected them.

PARTICIPATION A PART OF PERSONAL GROWTH

A number of older youth expressed that, when they were younger, they did not feel they had much input into their lives but as they became more involved and gained confidence they came to have greater input. Wayne Eagle (pseudonym), 27, said he took opportunities to help himself to make positive changes in his own life, as he was not given much to start with: "I was hungry, thirsty for a better life".

Gaining confidence and self-esteem was described by Stan, 30, as a "journey of learning to use your voice". He added that being involved in decision-making is a right which must be practiced: "We have rights to participate in decision making processes… It's your right and it's there but it's also your responsibility to practice that. If you don't practice that responsibility it diminishes the quality of that right" (Stan, 30).

THEME II: WEEDS ARE STIFLING THE GROWTH OF OUR GARDEN. BARRIERS TO URBAN ABORIGINAL YOUTH PARTICIPATION.

URBAN ABORIGINAL YOUTH CHALLENGED WITH DAILY SURVIVAL

It was heartbreaking to discover the myriad of challenges that these urban Aboriginal youth experience on a daily basis. Amanda, 24, discusses her life as a single mother: "Sometimes it's really overwhelming. Life's really overwhelming. I'm a single mother. I live in low-income housing". All of the youth discussed extreme barriers as a result of socio-economic factors, with poverty being the greatest factor impeding their participation and well-being in general. Youth discussed at length the issue of poverty and the inability to have basics for survival due to difficulty finding work, food and transport and homelessness/housing issues.

INEQUALITY, DISCRIMINATION AND TOKENISM A COMMON OCCURRENCE

All participants expressed frustration with having only token involvement in decision-making. They discussed their dissatisfaction with not being treated respectfully and with equality. This often involved being treated differently than adults, such as not having a vote within a Board of Directors or being limited to an advisory capacity. Some also said that older people and even older youth were holding onto decision-making positions too long.

One of the greatest barriers raised by the youth was the challenges with racism and stereotyping. Many of the youth talked about how it was difficult to be taken seriously by adults who often tokenized them and often racially profiled or stereotyped them.

LEGACY OF INDIAN RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

Participants spoke eloquently about inter-generational residential school issues within their families and communities. Most saw the connection between these issues and the need for healing within Aboriginal communities. They discussed the challenges of growing up in an unhealthy environment, without the support of family or in foster homes, and having to navigate through family and community dysfunction which made it extremely difficult to participate and be engaged in decision making when pressed with these issues on a constant basis.

THEME III: THE BASICS FOR GROWING OUR GARDEN. ENABLERS FOR URBAN ABORIGINAL YOUTH PARTICIPATION.

AUTHENTIC REPRESENTATION AT ALL LEVELS

To get beyond the tokenism discussed in the previous theme the participants recommended that youth must be represented in governance at all levels of government and organizations - both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal – though initial emphasis should be on representation in existing Aboriginal organizations. What is essential is that this participation be based on equality, including full participation in all levels of decision-making. not just those relevant to youth. Youth must also be afforded the same full and equal powers as their non-youth counterparts including the ability to speak at all meetings and with equal voting powers.

Authentic representation also means that an Aboriginal youth is recruited having the requisite knowledge, background, and experience to provide input. The participants also recommended gender parity that there should be both male and female youth representation.

ECONOMIC SUPPORT AND CAPACITY BUILDING

Participants stressed the importance of incentives to encourage participation, including food at meetings, honoraria, transportation to and from meetings, and child-care. These measures mitigate against economic barriers, and show youth their contributions and time is valued.

The majority of interviewees cited the importance of resources for programs and services, including core funding. They stressed the importance of youth being the central decision makers, developers, administrators, and evaluators of their own programming. Funding gaps in the past have resulted in the closure of offices and programs, which could easily result in death as Aboriginal youth are left to become drawn into crime, drugs, drinking and violence. Participants also identified training and capacity building as essential, as they enable Aboriginal youth to meaningfully participate in processes such as Board of Director governance by training to help them understanding financial statements and proposal assessments.

CREATING SAFE SPACES AND A SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR YOUTH

The concept of "safe spaces" for youth here refers to both physical spaces that they can create and have ownership over, and emotional "spaces" in terms of supportive and validating relationships and interactions with adults and among youth. In terms of physical spaces, many interviewees mentioned the importance of fora where they could engage without fear of marginalization. They also suggested holding events in culturally appropriate community spaces rather than sterile government offices.

Another major theme in the interviews was the role that networks had in initiating and sustaining their involvement in the community. Interviewees described how attending an event helped them establish their peer network, later this involvement lead many of them to work in the Aboriginal community.

In terms of emotional spaces, many youth discussed the importance of respect, of supportive and validating relationships, and of knowing their opinions were legitimized by adults. This included emotional support from family and friend: all interviewees spoke about the role their families had in their community involvement, and of the importance of a strong peer network. Mentorship and role models are also important: participants talked about how being inspired by older youth and adults who mentored them was essential to their growth and their work in the community.

EMPOWERING YOUTH – THEIR WAY

Although enhancing involvement and participation of youth is important, it is equally important that youth have a say in how they become involved. An important theme to emerge was the necessity for youth to find their own voice which helped them build self-esteem. This includes encouraging involvement in the arts: finding their voice and building self-esteem through singing, rapping, painting or theatre. Opportunities for youth to speak truth and express themselves in an open way helped them to deal with their frustrations and sorrows.

Respect for Aboriginal cultures within meetings and events is also key. Of great importance to many of the interviewees was knowledge sharing from Elder to youth, and of revitalizing traditional governance structures that maintained a role for Elders, youth, women, and men within the community.

PART IV: HARVESTING – BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER.

Perhaps the most important theme to emerge was that of resilience and self-reliance in Aboriginal youth, and the key role of community involvement in building that resilience. The emphasis on resiliency underscores that protective factors can reduce negative outcomes. This research has shown that participation promotes resilience, reduces risk, develops youths' competencies, enhances physical and emotional health, improves youth programs and services, and promotes youths' commitment to programs (McCreary Centre Society 2006). This is especially true for those growing up in poverty as their feelings of alienation and anomie from society can be overcome through volunteer experience that provides them with a sense of purpose and coherence (Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement 2003).

Aboriginal youth today face tremendous challenges, including economic disparity, stereotyping and addiction. Nevertheless, participants in this study remain optimistic despite the challenges they faced, and felt they were positively affecting those around them through their involvement in the community. While many acknowledged negative experiences and disappointments, most felt that community participation kept them out of trouble, and connected them to their community and peers: "I can go out and play hockey, instead of going out and doing drugs or whatever and drinking" (Cameron, 16). The staggeringly

high incidence of Aboriginal youth who are negatively engaged (i.e., are incarcerated, facing addiction, have health problems) is well-documented; it is essential to provide opportunities for youth to engage positively early and keep them there so they can go on to inspire others.

For the Aboriginal youth in the study finding their own voice – whether it be through speaking at conferences, rapping, singing or drama – is an important step in empowerment, decolonization, and healing through the acknowledgement of the tradition of oral history and storytelling. It is important to acknowledge the necessity of young people to speak for themselves in their own voice, with their own ideas, thoughts and opinions, particularly as they have historically gone unheard (Eckersley *et al.* 2006).

Participants in the study were clear that the best way to support youth involvement is by properly resourcing programs and providing training and capacity development opportunities. Principles and guidelines for engaging youth speak to the importance of meaningful participation of youth that goes far beyond tokenism to legitimacy and equality (Hart 1992; Sazama, Young and Bates 2002). A number of the participants of the study as well as from the youth forum (Barudin and Corrigan 2005) proposed developing an Aboriginal youth engagement policy, such as that proposed by the *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* and *The Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal People's Report* to be adopted by organizations as a framework for engaging Aboriginal youth: participants felt this would set a standard for involving youth and protect them from tokenization and exploitation. Further work is needed at at the national level to define what an Aboriginal youth engagement policy would look like and how it would be implemented at the various levels.

Through this research it was a privilege to hear the inspiring voices of the participants as they spoke in stark terms of the need for adults, programs, services and community to rally around youth and nurture them as one would a garden. Their courage, resilience and commitment stand as reason for real hope and optimism for the future.

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