

An Exploration of Aboriginal Youth Engagement

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For over ten years now, Aboriginal youth in Canada have persistently and strongly been advocating for equal representation at all levels – from government to communities, from the regional to the international level – and for good reason: over half (50.5%) of the Aboriginal population are youth ages 0 to 24 (Stats Can 2003). The Aboriginal youth in Canada have experienced lives drastically different than previous generations; in particular, being the first generation not legally forced to attend residential schools. However, Aboriginal youth are still strongly affected by the inter-generational issues that resulted from the schools.

With 49% of the total Aboriginal population residing in urban areas, this also raises important questions regarding representation of Aboriginal youth in urban areas (Siggner 2003). The Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal People's Report, *Urban Aboriginal Youth: An Action Plan for Change* (Chalifoux and Johnson 2003), highlights the fact that urban areas lack the defined Aboriginal governance structures of their on-reserve counterparts. Even more complicated is the simple fact that urban Aboriginal people are not homogenous, making it difficult to define "who speaks for the community and in fact what is the community" (Chalifoux and Johnson 2003, 32). Arguably, all Aboriginal youth should be represented in relation to their proportion of the population whether it's in a First Nation reserve or in an urban area. Since urban areas lack established urban Aboriginal governance structures, the question of youth representation becomes complicated. *How are Aboriginal youth to be represented?* Certainly there has been a movement in urban centres to establish Aboriginal youth seats on various Board of Directors, in addition to the creation of youth councils for some national Aboriginal organizations and federal departments. Although, realistically, there is a far difference between creating a youth council or having youth representatives on a Board of Directors, and providing real capacity for youth to have complete control over youth-specific funding through youth budgets.

In exploring the topic of Aboriginal youth participation and engagement, it is prudent to listen to the recommendations that youth themselves have provided. The following provides an overview of some of the key recommendations provided by youth.

Involvement in Policy Development

It is unfortunate that more youth have not been directly engaged in the process of policy development. Oftentimes policy is left to 'adults,' whether they are leaders, government, or organizations. While there is often an opportunity for youth to voice their concerns, recommendations and opinions, it is rare when they are actually engaged to assist in the development of the actual policy that follows. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) documents the necessity for the development of a National Aboriginal youth policy with the goals of participation at all levels, leadership development, and in particular, youth participation in nation building.

Involvement in the 3 D's: Design, Development, and Delivery

In order to design effective programs and services for Aboriginal youth, youth must be centrally involved in their creation, or even better, leading the design, development and delivery (RCAP 1996; Chalifoux and Johnson 2003). It's difficult to estimate how many programs and services have not met the needs of Aboriginal youth because they were not needed or wanted by those being served. The only way to know for sure is to have the direction come straight from Aboriginal youth.

Administration by Youth

To truly empower Aboriginal youth and establish true equality in their participation would require providing youth with complete control over their own decision-making. To ensure efficacy, youth “must have youth-accountable and youth-administered projects” (Chalifoux and Johnson 2003, 34). In other words, government (whether First Nations, urban, or Canadian), and organizations must establish youth budgets specifically for youth to allocate how they see fit, without intrusion or influence. This also means that youth should be starting and administering their own organizations that are youth driven.

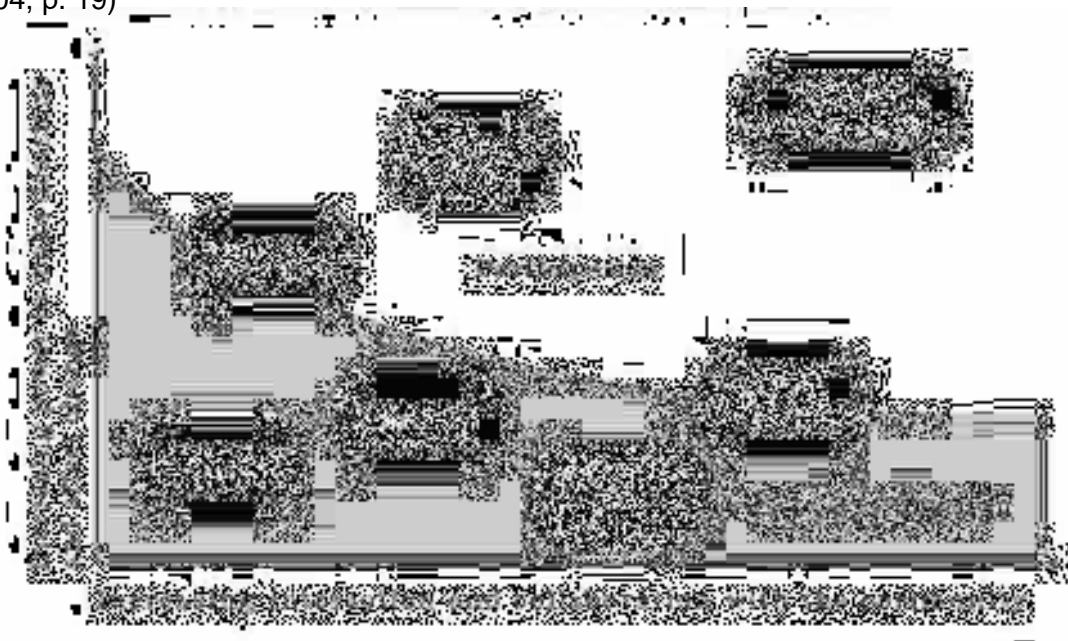
Tokenism vs. True Youth Engagement

It is apparent that youth need to be meaningfully engaged at all levels of decision-making, and especially in relation to research and policy that affect them. This begs the question, how do we know what constitutes tokenism and true youth engagement? Meaningful youth participation occurs when the perceptions, ideas and actions of youth are

Taken seriously and recognized as equal to the formal knowledge of adults. Real participation requires both the recognition and redistribution of power. It requires taking actions through creating strong adult and child-youth partnerships that encourage equitable decision-making. (Driskell as cited in Ragan & McNulty 2004, 19)

The following model illustrates youth participation that is based on two dimensions (see Figure 1). The first is a measure of the youth’s power in making decisions that will effect change; the second assesses youth’s interaction and collaboration with the people within their community. Taken together, the two dimensions distinguish between tokenism and true youth engagement (Ragan & McNulty 2004).

Figure 1. The dimensions of young people’s participation (Driskell as cited in Ragan & McNulty, 2004, p. 19)



Over the last ten years, Aboriginal youth have been demanding true representation, participation and engagement at all levels. It's apparent that people, organizations, and governments have been listening. There have been many strides made in the development of youth councils nationally, and the development of the Urban Multi-purpose Aboriginal Youth Council and the National Aboriginal Youth Strategy. With that said, the work must not stop, and we must continue to develop our organizations and agencies to truly engage Aboriginal youth. The coming years will be exciting in particular in the urban Aboriginal communities across Canada, as the question of urban Aboriginal governance continues to be explored, and youth will be there to assist in defining this important question. Aboriginal youth will be at the policy tables of the future to explore and define the question of how they will be represented.

References

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