



“Keep Us Coming Back For More”

Aboriginal Youth Speak about Indigenous Knowledge & Wholistic Education

Research Summary

Community Report

The overall goal of my Master thesis was to gain insight into the experiences of Aboriginal youth who were participating in Aboriginal youth organizations in Vancouver, British Columbia. This community report presents a brief overview of the “Who, What, When, Why and the How” of my research; as well as a summary of the key findings and lessons learned from the youth.

WHO I AM

To begin, I would like to acknowledge the Musqueam & Squamish people for providing me with a place to live and study while carrying out my research on their traditional and un-ceded territories. On my mother’s side of the family, I am Nisga’a from the Nass Valley of Northwestern British Columbia. My Nisga’a name is Nox Ayaa Wilt (one who is close to or near to her mother). We are part of the McKay family, from the House of Ni’isjoohl and belong to the Ganada (Frog) Clan. On my father’s side, I am French and German. I grew up in Hazelton and have lived in the Vancouver area for ten years. I finished my Master of Arts degree in Education in September 2009. I am currently completing my doctorate in Education at UBC.

WHY I DID THIS STUDY

Over the past eight years, my involvement with the Urban Native Youth Association (UNYA) has motivated me to do research with Aboriginal youth to understand the impacts of community based education in their lives. Given that 5000 Aboriginal youth per year access UNYA, their experiences have substantially enriched my understanding of the potentialities and challenges of community-based education (Urban Native Youth Association, 2006). While at UNYA, I saw many youth learning and excelling in a range of cultural, physical, leadership, educational and social activities. I learned that the programs and services that are offered to youth must reflect their own aspirations and cultural dispositions in order to be meaningful. However, there are very few studies which have focused on community- based education in the Vancouver Aboriginal community and an even less studies that have included youth voices on this matter. I felt it was extremely important to include the voices of youth in research that will directly impact them if we are to transform our communities.

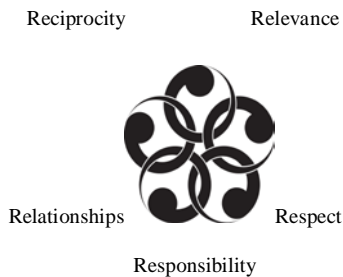


WHERE I AM COMING FROM

I realize that any research I do inherently implicates me as researcher who is contributing to a larger conversation about Aboriginal people. As an Indigenous scholar I feel it is important to negotiate and resist mainstream stereotypes and their misconstructions of Aboriginal people and their lived experience. This means that Indigenous knowledge, voices and experiences are privileged in all of my research. Historically, Indigenous people have been subjected to research practices by outside ‘experts’ who often misappropriated and exploited us and our knowledge. These negative experiences accentuate the need for research to be grounded in the needs, concerns and perspectives of Aboriginal peoples.



THE FIVE R'S



As a result I feel it is important to do research that is reciprocal¹, relevant, responsible, respectful of Aboriginal communities (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991). It also means that I maintain relational accountability to my family, community, Nation and the living world in everything I do. In my work I also value the perspectives of non-Indigenous allies (who are critical of the historical structures that have created unequal power relations in our society) and who are supportive of Aboriginal peoples’ self determination.

HOW I DID MY STUDY

In March of 2009, I hosted a sharing circle with Elder Jerry Adams from the Nisga’a Nation. The purpose of the sharing circle workshop was to co-construct the meaning of wholism and Indigenous knowledge (IK) with the youth through a variety of activities: storytelling, games, group activities, and art. In April 2009, I was able to interview six of the youth who had participated in the sharing circle workshop. I also interviewed Jerry in order learn about his understanding of Indigenous knowledge and wholism and to listen to his reflections from the sharing circle workshop.

Sharing Circle with Aboriginal Youth: 8
Interviews with Aboriginal youth: 6
Interview with Elder: 1

¹ Other words that can be used to describe reciprocal are: given, felt, or performed in return. To me, all research conducted with the Aboriginal community should be a reciprocal process. I have interpreted this to mean that I will share my knowledge with participants and community members as they share their knowledge with me for the benefit of future generations.



MY RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How do urban Aboriginal youth articulate, conceptualize and view Indigenous knowledge?

What are Aboriginal youths' experiences of wholistic education provided by urban Aboriginal organizations?

Do these organizations meet their needs in terms of a wholistic understanding?

From the Aboriginal youth's perspective, how can urban Aboriginal organizations integrate a more wholistic approach?

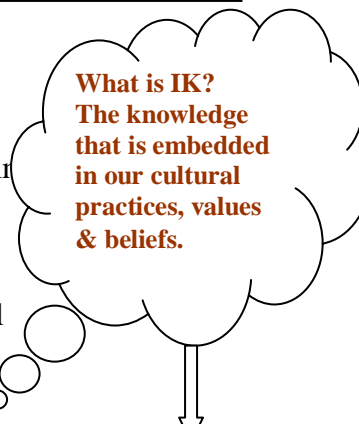
THE EXPERTS

I would like to raise my hands high in appreciation to: Ben, Courtenay, Cloudy Days, Leo, Dimicia, Tyrone, Stephen & Jimmy who were kind enough to share their expert knowledge with me. I borrow words from Robin Gray who describes the youth as being "Indigenous revolutionary intellectuals" in their own right (personal correspondence). I would also like to show my sincere appreciation to Mr. Jerry Adams for his guidance, mentorship and support throughout my research process.

WHAT THE YOUTH HAD TO SAY ABOUT INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE (IK)

Indigenous Knowledge is Important!

The youth provided a wide range of responses that highlighted the ways in which IK positively influenced their lives. Leo confidently stated that IK meant "everything" to him. Dimicia identified IK as being integral to the continued growth and revitalization of Indigenous communities. She asserts "If we are not educating ourselves with traditional knowledge then our strength as a community is not going to grow, we are not going to continue to get stronger teaching each other." Courtenay felt uplifted by the positive impacts of IK. She states: "for me, Indigenous knowledge is extremely important. Especially, knowing your personal history and also getting to know the Aboriginal community. There is a lot of hope in that too because you get to meet other people who are doing good and staying on track. It inspires you."



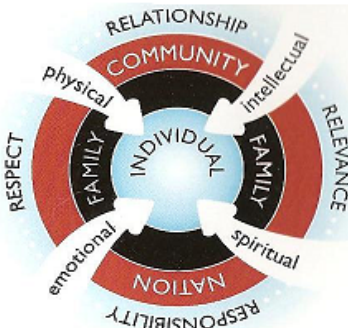
What is IK?
The knowledge that is embedded in our cultural practices, values & beliefs.



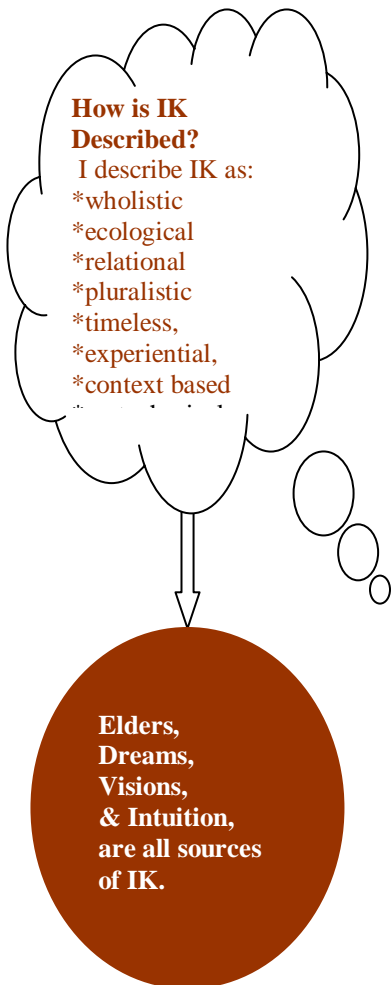
IK connects us with all living things, expresses Aboriginal peoples connection to the land, our wisdom, our technology, our culture & our spirituality



A Diagram of Wholism



Archibald, Pidgeon & Hawkey, 2009



Indigenous Knowledge is Wholistic

The element of wholism was a common strand that wove throughout my conversations with each of the youth. Together, they affirmed that wholism is a fundamental element of IK that creates balance between the spiritual, mental physical and emotional elements of an individual and their community.

“I feel like everybody has a role to fulfill in the community and even us youth. If we are not taking care of the four main aspects of our life in a wholistic way then we are not giving back to our community the way that we should be” ----Dimicia

Indigenous Knowledge is a Process

The youth demonstrated a keen interest in continuing to learn about IK and their culture(s). They viewed IK as being part of a life long learning process that included practical education, observing, listening and experimenting under the caring mentorship of Elders, family members, youth workers and the Aboriginal community.

On my mom’s side of the family a lot of them know their native language. I just kind of caught on. I listened to them talk. Like I just heard them laughing all the time. Oh, what were you guys talking about earlier ‘Oh nothing,’ something dirty.” After awhile I just kind of caught on. Then I would say the word and they would be like “hey, where did you learn that from.” I would be like “hey, I was listening to you guys, trying to find out what it means.”

----Tyrone

Indigenous Knowledge is Expressed In Multiple Ways

While doing this research I witnessed the multiples ways that the youth express and emulate the principles of IK. I felt that many of the youth expressed IK unconsciously through their actions, behaviors and words. They also displayed an intense interest to continue learning about IK so they could express and share their knowledge for the benefit of others in the urban Aboriginal community. The opportunity that IK gave the youth to discover and express their unique individual gifts was a common theme that was woven through our conversations. Courtenay reveals her surprise and delight in discovering her ability to dance in the traditional Plains style in the quote below.

“For me, when I started dancing, it just came naturally to me. I started dancing two years ago. I always didn’t even think that I could do it but then it just came real easy.” ----Courtenay



THE IMPORTANT ROLE THAT ABORIGINAL YOUTH ORGANIZATION HAVE IN EDUCATION

“I Keep Coming Back”

The youth affirm that Aboriginal youth organizations are meeting their needs for a wholistic education. This is evident in the statement ‘I keep coming back’, which was made by several of the youth. *Keep them coming back for more* reinforces the value and necessity in remaining active in Aboriginal youth organizations which allow youth to maintain reciprocal teaching and learning relationships with staff, Elders and their peers. This phrase can also be understood to be part of an incremental Aboriginal educational approach where the teacher (often times an Elder) shares only a certain amount of information with learners in order to pique their curiosity and motivate them to return and learn more (Archibald, 2008).

This one day, I had nothing to do and I asked a friend of mine “what is a good place to go and hang out?” He told me to go down to UNYA. Ever since then, they can’t get rid of me!”

---Cloudy Days

Helps Connect with Aboriginal Cultures

The youth spoke about number of cultural activities and ceremonies that helped them to learn more about IK and connect them with Aboriginal culture(s) through their participation in Aboriginal organizations which included: hoop dancing, West Coast traditional singing, pow wow singing, drum-making, traditional games, First Nations art work, dream-catcher workshops, camping, smudge, Elders, sweat lodges, West Coast Night, regalia making, jingle dancing, butterfly dancing, canoe journeys, bone games, paddle songs, community gatherings and feasts.

Wholistic Education

The youth agreed that Aboriginal youth organizations were providing them with educational opportunities that taught them how to live in harmony with others, their community, nature, and the spirit world. Ben stated that Aboriginal youth organizations gave him a strong emotional foundation by providing a safe space where he could establish and strengthen relationships with other youth and staff. He said “Everybody is heard in a sense. There is a gathering, just being a group together with. Just all the visiting. Even in drum group, we will just sit there and joke. There is a lot of good connection.” Like Ben, Leo was very optimistic about the possibilities of connecting and interacting with peers who helped him to gain a wholistic understanding and appreciation of the diversity of Aboriginal cultures and heritages in Canada. He stated: “We are all different clans and different tribes and we know what we grew up with and what we share between each other.”

I do think these organizations are meeting the youth’s needs wholistically....they have sports and recreation outings. They have Elders. They take the youth to sweat lodges even just to hang out, just to talk. I think as service providers they are offering everything that they possibly can.

---Dimicia



Native Youth Learning Centre-Photo Courtesy of the Urban Native Youth

Improvements

Even though the youth unanimously agreed that Aboriginal youth organizations provided them with a sound wholistic education, they offered suggestions about how their wholistic learning could be improved.

The youth highlighted four areas for consideration:

- ⊕ Communicate Programs in Advance
- ⊕ Add Child Minding Services for Single Parents
- ⊕ Provide Continuous Education and Awareness about Two Spirited Youth
- ⊕ Provide Anti-Racist Education to Help Youth Identify and Challenge Racial Stereotypes

I think it is extremely important for us to have more education around the history of two-spirit people. In our schools, in our organizations you know? With our youth we have the highest rate of suicide. For queer youth it is second. What if you are both?

----name withheld

We need to give youth the knowledge about how multicultural it is and how we can't stereotype others just because we have been stereotyped.

----name withheld



THE YOUTH DESIGN THEIR OWN ABORIGINAL YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS

I ended each of our interviews with the following questions: “If you could run your own organization what kinds of programs or activities would you have in it? Who would you hire? How would you run it?” Here are their answers:

Ask Elders

I would probably just ask the Elders what to do for the youth, or for anyone that wants to participate. For what kinds of activities, I would try to teach the youth (or anybody that wants to learn) how: to make a sweat, or how to do a smudge, pipe ceremonies, or how to skin a moose for their hide...how to make a drum, and archery practice. ----Leo

Offer a Wholistic Range of Activities

I would definitely have a gym for youth to go play floor hockey, basketball. -Probably close to a park so we could go play baseball or have a BBQ. Computer programs because I know a lot of people are getting into computers now. I would probably have an Elder or someone work with storytelling or sweat lodges, different ceremonies. Medicine. Like herbal medicines. Probably, like a small place as big as the gym across the street for drumming and singing. Maybe like a small area like this for child minding because I know there are a lot of Aboriginal ladies out there that are single moms or single parents I guess. What else? A place like this for fooseball or pool, ping pong or whatever. ----Tyrone

Connect with the Land

We'd 'Go into the wild' where we could learn more about the natural resources that we have and how useful it is to us. Also, getting away from the city and learning leadership and how to problem solve and all those kinds of things because those are things I see a lot of youth struggling to obtain.

----Dimicia

Leadership

I'd keep everything the same as UNYA except I would add a few more sports and rec activities, as well as take youth on outings to the movies. I would also host more youth advisory committee meetings since the idea is to keep us coming back.

----Cloudy Days

Hire Older Youth

I would hire older Aboriginal youth to work for my organization. I think they would do a lot of good because maybe when they were younger they were going through some troubles. Or problems or family issues or whatever it is. Now that they are older and may be aged out, they would find lots of fulfillment as people who are in the same situation.

----Courtenay

A Mix of Traditional & Modern Activities & Programs

I'd have all the culture teachings like smudge, sweats, canoe journeys, canoe racing, wool weaving, cedar weaving, basket weaving. I'd have parenting programs, as well as youth groups, talking circles (co-ed and male/female ones). Individualized attention, one on one... I think I would have trips to, probably like an annual trip to somewhere like Haida Gwaii to go and see the long houses. You have to make it modern as well. You have to have modern programs. I guess hip hop classes and all sorts of sports. I definitely have guest speakers and workshops, mostly Elders.

----Ben



NEXT STEPS & FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The youth suggested four future directions for Aboriginal Youth Organizations:

- ⊕ Teach Aboriginal languages in programs
- ⊕ Continue bringing youth out on the land (in and out of the city)
- ⊕ Social justice education
- ⊕ Involve more Elders in cultural programming



Canoe Journey-Photo Courtesy of the Urban Native Youth Association

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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MORE INFORMATION

If you would like more information about this study please contact me at amyparent@yahoo.com