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## Your Still Not Listening To Us: What First Nations Youth are Saying

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## Introduction

Indigenous peoples around the world are challenged with a leadership void, due in part by a shift in demographics. The population of Indigenous youth is growing, and it is estimated that about 48% of the Canadian Indigenous population are below the age of 26.

Indigenous youth leadership development has assumed an increasingly complex and challenging evolution over the past three decades. Although some Canadians may have perceptions that Indigenous youth are in crisis, and represent a threat to established social order, these perceptions have been more pronounced over the past few years. Moreover, government policy (Child Welfare family policies, Social Services youth policies), seems to reflect that Indigenous youth leadership programs are a strain on public funds and not capable of resolving the myriad of issues and challenges that now confront Indigenous people.

Indigenous youth endure some development challenges (identity, sense of belonging and purpose), which have resulted in social, economic, and political exclusion occasioned by high rates of unemployment, poverty, victimization, and disempowerment. Others suggest a pervasive hopelessness and despair among the youth cohort. However, a shift away from justifications for “fixing” youth for prosperity has occurred in discussions about youth inclusion as a fundamental matter of equity (Hopkins 2013). As such, youth leadership studies need to acknowledge the heterogeneous experiences of youth, without ignoring the structural forces and context that, in effect, homogenize and exclude youth as an important class of citizens.

Young Indigenous people seem to be disproportionately impacted by social exclusion, economic marginalization, and an increasing virulent and dysfunctional political culture (Alfred, 2015). Yet, amidst these concerns, most young Indigenous people are coping with many challenges and have contributed, and continue to do so, to the development of their communities, even in the face of a governance culture that needs to be addressed (von der Porten, 2012).

Indigenous leaders in Canada are continuing to witness the challenges that people face who are struggling to live in two worlds; a delicate dance between Indigenous and Western worldviews that have clashed over time. Indigenous youth face similar challenges, including those of disappearing languages and the erosion of cultural identity and values. Indigenous youth may, in the future, work within corporations, government, or their Nations. Thus, giving Indigenous youth a solid foundation that includes teachings of their own Indigenous ways of knowing will enhance their capability to be inspirational leaders in any environment.

Very little has been documented on the process of traditional Indigenous youth training: how they develop leadership qualities, learning processes, and how they learn about responsibility. In this paper, I explore the question “How is traditional Indigenous leadership knowledge transmitted to Indigenous youth in leadership roles?”

If Indigenous leaders are to share their own ways of knowing, they must first recognize and comprehend their histories. The importance of understanding one’s history is crucial to effective and strong leadership: “Indigenous identity, language, and culture contribute to an exceptionally important awareness for youth as they initiate their journey to comprehend

leadership” (J. Ottmann, personal communication, January 19, 2013). R. Hill (personal communication, January 23, 2013) agreed: “People are born with innate qualities that became obvious to the clan, the leaders. One’s keen, respectful observation allowed one to absorb the values needed to be a good leader, along with the mentoring influence of older leaders”.

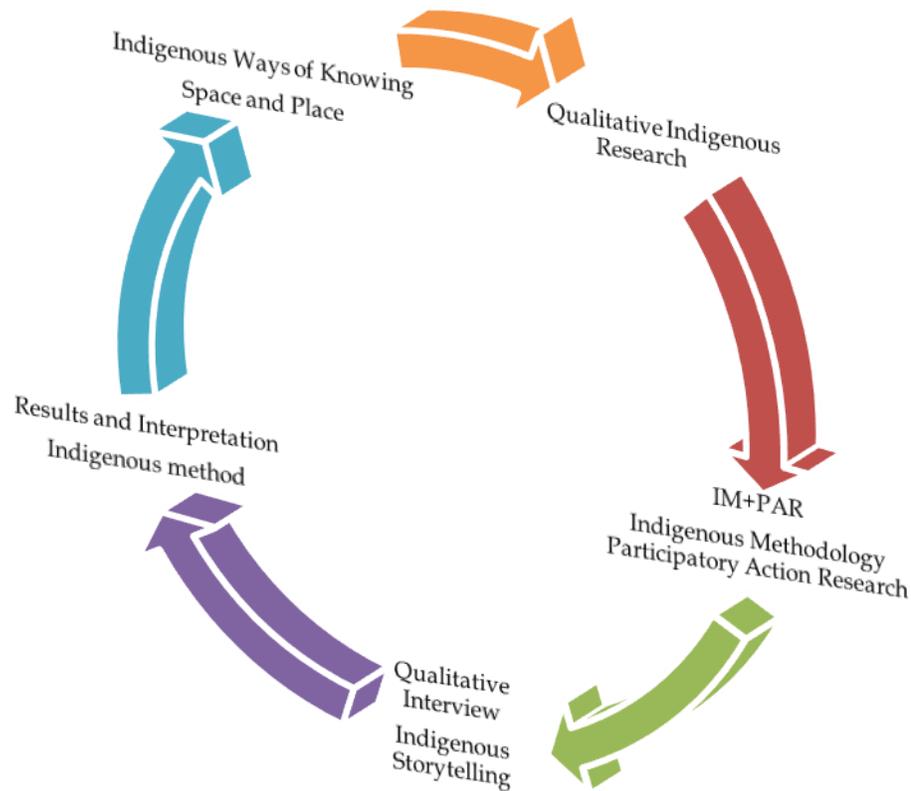
C. Eagle Speaker (personal communication, February 15, 2015) suggested that the epistemology of Indigenous leadership is not a process that can be transferred through lesson plans; rather, it is an experiential process that involves sharing lessons through stories and individually experiencing life. Experiential education occurs when participants are encouraged to decide at what level they want to initiate their journey of self-exploration and discovery or rediscovery of cultural identity.

I engaged in a blend of Indigenous methodology and Participatory Action Research, to carry out my research. My Indigenous methodology focused on the method of storytelling that is consistent with Indigenous value systems and well-suited to working with Indigenous youth in the context of this research (see Figure 1.). Stories create, define, and maintain the people’s relationships with each other and the world around them, and when the storytellers share stories, listeners reflect and learn as part of a community and a people. Storytelling is a method central in Indigenous methodology and stories reflect the experiences, thoughts, and knowledge that are important to Indigenous people and collectively map their creative and critical relationships, their philosophies, and their own history.

Indigenous methodologies are not solely represented in the collection of data or the research design but include the interpretation of the material once the researcher has collected it. It should be noted that my use of the term stories is not focused only on traditional oral renditions of events such as the Elder Brother stories Wisahkecahk and Nanubush, but on the Indigenous youths’ narratives that, I as the researcher, heard in response to the research question.

Indigenous methodology is about centering Indigenous concerns and worldviews, being committed to knowing and understanding Western theory and research, and coming to know and understand theory and research from an Indigenous perspective and for an Indigenous purpose.

Following the afore mentioned Indigenous methodology, thirty one-on-one storytelling interviews (Kovach, 2009, 2010) were held with First Nations youth aged 18 to 30. Participants were selected designed to ensure equal representation of First Nations youth from, for example, rural and urban areas, males and females, and different ages. Initial interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes to an hour, and I allowed an additional 20-minute follow-up period for the participants who needed it. Once the interviews were transcribed, I sent them back to the participants, asked them to review and/or revise details they thought were missing from the initial interviews.

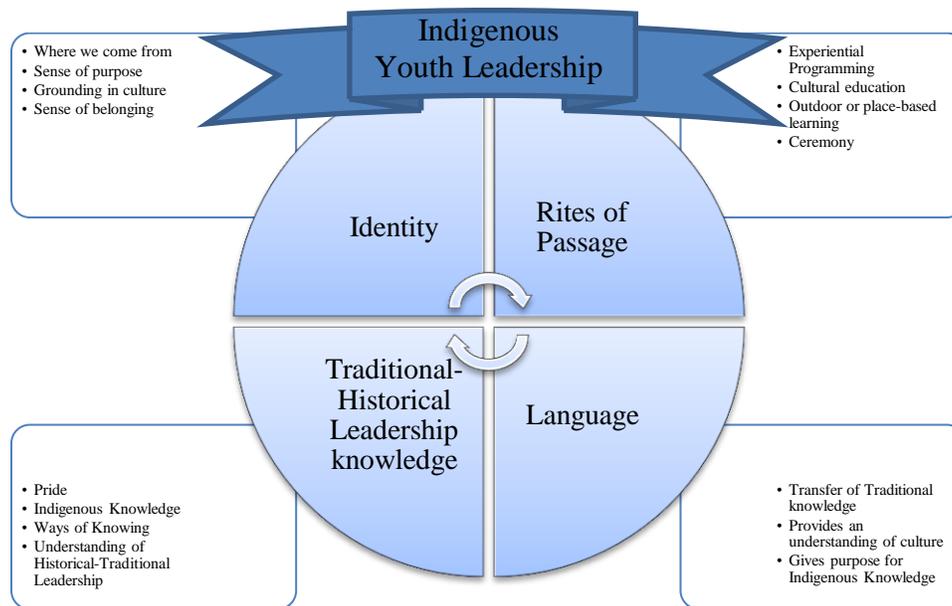


*Figure 1. Indigenous Research Process (Lickers 2016).*

### **Data Analysis**

After reviewing the interviews, I identified four key themes and e-mailed the coded data and emergent themes to the youth leaders to review. The material included the transcripts of their interviews, my reflections and coding on the key themes. I asked them to amend their own data if necessary by adding or deleting comments from their interviews and, finally, to agree or disagree on the key theme areas that I had coded. Overall, the process of gathering the participants' responses with regard to their interviews and gaining their approval on the key theme areas took well over three months.

Analysis of the data involved techniques to extract themes from the data. This included data from my field notes and interviews. It was necessary to re-engage the participants to ensure that I had accurately heard and interpreted their stories before I would present the information, visual model, or theory. The participants were part of every step of development, analysis, and summary of data. Four themes emerged and we collectively agreed upon the key theme areas (Figure 2).



**Figure 2. Four key themes (Lickers, 2016).**

We now turn to address the research question posed at the beginning of the research project. How is traditional Indigenous leadership knowledge transmitted to Indigenous youth in leadership roles? When I asked the question “Has any one specific person guided your leadership journey?” I received diverse responses that ranged from immediate family, to extended family, to teachers, and to current leaders such as chiefs or council members. Nevertheless, according to youth, the transfer of Indigenous leadership knowledge to them is limited.

Some youth revealed that Indigenous leadership knowledge was a transfer of family history, and if the family had leaders, they received the information. However, in several cases, there was no transfer of historical or contemporary Indigenous leadership knowledge. In the end, many Indigenous youth were unaware of how a person could become a leader or the methods involved:

*I was raised by a single mother who brought me up traditionally, and with my journey, I kind of think about Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse and try to picture what they would be doing now—warrior, healer—just in a different way nowadays. I can picture myself being a modern warrior with a good sense of who I am. (Aten'a:ti)*

Nevertheless, the participants were clear that family, regardless of the generation, was an important factor in transferring traditional leadership skills. Over half of the participants focused on family as their source of knowledge and understanding of Indigenous leadership. It is interesting to note that most of the participants cited females (i.e., mothers, aunts, and grandmothers) as prominent in sharing their knowledge. Secondarily, others had some influence on the leadership potential of the youth, e.g., guidance counsellors and teachers. Although counsellors and teachers are important supporters, their interactions were limited to offering support and encouragement rather than transferring Indigenous leadership knowledge.

Finally, the results also show some Elders and community members played a role in giving the youth leaders knowledge to take on leadership roles: While Elders had passed on their knowledge earlier, youth are no longer connected to them as in the past. They felt Elders are saying that we, as young people, don't want to learn our traditional leadership ways. A pattern in the data reflects a disturbing trend in the transmission of Indigenous leadership knowledge. The youth feel a lack of access to Elders' traditional leadership knowledge and most of the youth lamented the lack of traditional leadership knowledge:

*I didn't have any formal Indigenous leadership training not really knowing my culture. I hate to see that it [education of Indigenous leadership] is not alive, and it's discouraging to see that a lot of youth have not had any formal or informal leadership from our own culture. (Ohkwe':sen)*

Several youth leaders shared that there was a lack of knowledge regarding traditional leadership values and ways of knowing, *"I don't know anything about traditional leadership, not really. No, I don't"* (A'hsire). Another stated, *"I've actually got to be honest: I've never actually had any traditional leadership training"* (Aonkwe'ta:kon). Yet there is a strong desire to learn about the methodologies that guided leaders of the past.

Several comments about leadership processes were discussed, *"I don't know if I have had any formal traditional leadership training. . . . I see traditional leadership training as being with the community and people"* (River). Another youth stated, *"Nowadays we may not take the same progression as our ancestors did. We just kind of ask kids to take on roles of leadership; we haven't really guided them"* (Kahrhata'ke'ha). As adults, we often put young people into roles that are unfamiliar, we have not given them the tools to be effective leaders so in a sense setting them up for failure.

My results suggest that most youth, had little or no formal or informal traditional leadership knowledge. It was also evident from the data that only some Elders, parents, or community representatives shared or transferred the knowledge. However, results show that ceremony was a key method of transferring leadership knowledge to youth. By attending programs that focused on the rite of passage and participating in ceremonies, those youth gained vital knowledge on Indigenous leadership.

Nevertheless, information obtained from youth reveals that most consider education vital to leadership, whether formal or informal. This is critical to program, community, and school development because it is evident that youth were seeking information on Indigenous ways of knowing and leadership. While not all youth were involved in spiritual activities, and many were not able to attend or interested in doing so; the information indicates that ceremony can guide the transfer of Indigenous ways of knowing and leadership.

## **Conclusion**

My conclusion is that if individuals and communities took the time to share what they know, youth would be excited to learn. If programs provided learning experiences for youth leaders and offered tangible experiences where they could make mistakes, then talk about it, this could

become an important part of Indigenous leadership practices. Youth leaders are excited about the possibility of learning further by actively being involved in programs that share Indigenous leadership methodologies.

The stories of the youth clearly indicate that knowledge of Indigenous leadership, its methodologies, and sharing of historical traditional Indigenous leadership knowledge is critically lacking in Indigenous communities. The youth leaders whom I interviewed wanted to learn more about their historical leaders and the methods and processes through which they became leaders:

*I think that most of my knowledge of traditional leadership was taught by passing wisdom from Elders, grandparents, fathers, and mothers. My training was mostly from watching my grandfather in the way he dealt with people, and a lot from my father. He showed me you not only have to talk, but lead by example. (Moose Hunter)*

They wanted practical Indigenous education programs to acquire both formal learning of leadership, but also informal learning and experiences. It is critical that First Nations schools, teachers, Elders and community representatives take an active stance in sharing this knowledge. The stories revealed that there is a current deficit in any specific Indigenous leadership knowledge being transferred to youth in leadership roles. One youth leaders stated:

*The Elders knew about the land, they knew how the land worked, and I was able to learn from them. Traditional leadership is hard work. . . . From the Sundance to other ceremonies, we learned about the land and how people used it respectfully. (Iaonhawi':non)*

What are the traditional Indigenous methods that have been and can be shared with Indigenous youth to develop their leadership skills? The youth leaders were unclear about the methods that guided Indigenous leaders in the past and noted that leadership programs they attended had little information on the Indigenous perspectives. They expressed a strong interest in and the desire to find, understand, and incorporate Indigenous leadership principles into their lives:

*As for traditional leadership teachings, both formal and informal, I was able to learn from home: the Sundance where I have watched and learned, to the formal part where you're guided by an Elder. So, yes, in my family there is a process of understanding traditional leadership and incorporating today's technology. (Akohsa':tens)*

It is the responsibility of adults in the community to nurture the momentum and to share their knowledge regarding Indigenous leadership, the development of Indigenous youth leaders, and Indigenous ways of knowing with youth. As community leaders, they will need to support the development of Indigenous Youth Leadership programming, facilitated by their own people whenever possible, and guided by Elders. As educators, they will first need to learn more about Indigenous leadership and share that knowledge with youth (through both formal and informal channels), as well as knowledge of Indigenous and Western knowledge.

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