



Stronger Together: Helping each other to strengthen and sustain Indigenous youth identity and cultural knowledge

The Success of Cultural Programming in Pre-Employment Training for Indigenous Youth - The EAGLE Project
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Rationale

Statistics Canada (2013) reports that Aboriginal young adults transitioning into adulthood face lower employment and education rates than non-Aboriginal Canadians. Researchers have identified that existing vocational and educational counselling tools often fail to recognize Indigenous values and beliefs about learning, by focusing on skills of independence, external sources of knowledge, and opportunities outside of community (Turner, et al., 2006). The limited career development literature for this group, suggests these young people are instead more influenced by family, education and culture (Marshall, et al., 2013). “Learning is viewed as a life long responsibility that people assume to understand the world around them and to animate their personal abilities. [Traditional] Knowledge teaches people how to be responsible for their own lives, develops their sense of relationship to others, and helps them model competent and respectful behaviour” (Battiste, 2002, p. 14). The EAGLE project (Exploring and Acknowledging Guidance and Leadership through Employment) focuses on life skills, employment skills, and job readiness learning, using traditional Indigenous teachings and cultural practices. As part of the EAGLE project, youth have the opportunity to study necessary skills for the labour force such as self-discipline, accountability, and teamwork, through the exploration of traditional values, practices and beliefs, cultural activities and community engagement. Together, the EAGLE research team asked “*how do Aboriginal youth understand and engage their cultural identity in learning experiences through the EAGLE project?*”

Methodology

The partnership team collaborated to design research methods that were consistent with the values and principals of the EAGLE Project and of the local urban Aboriginal community. With input from Elders and traditional knowledge keepers, the research team developed narrative interviews to reflect the practice of storytelling and to explore relational factors in cultural identity and learning. A community knowledge-keeper guided the interview analysis process to keep it grounded in Indigenous community values and perspectives.

Community Champion Interviews: Individual interviews to explore observations and experiences of mentoring youth in cultural identity development and engagement, were conducted with 6 community champions, identified as traditional knowledge keepers and youth allies in the Aboriginal community. The community champions were asked:

- (1) The EAGLE project is built upon Indigenous values, practices and beliefs -- how are these practiced, taught, and/or encouraged in the program. How important are these for youth? What are the impacts?
- (2) How do you think the EAGLE youths' Aboriginal identity has been affected through participation in the program? Has there been any effect on their cultural knowledge/practice?
- (3) How does youths' participation in this program prepare them for other areas of their lives?

EAGLE Youth Interviews: Interviews to explore Aboriginal identity development, culturally based pre-employment learning and the supports and challenges in work life, were conducted with 19 EAGLE youth. Fourteen (14) participated in group interviews and 5 were interviewed individually. The youth were asked:

- (1) There are some particular values that the EAGLE program is built on (provide EAGLE Project values graphic)? Which ones stood out for you? How were they practiced, taught and/or encouraged? Which were the most important to you?
- (2) In what ways did the EAGLE project help you to know more about yourself and your culture? Has becoming an EAGLE had any impact on who you are as an Aboriginal person?



- (3) Since graduating from the program, how are you continuing to carry things you learned in the EAGLE project in your everyday life? What life skills did you learn in the program? Did they prepare you for other areas of your life?

Results

“We learned traditional virtues and teachings through practice and story - they made us think about who we are and where we come from, and then how to honour that while still being able to participate in a contemporary society. It was all about mentorship, inspiration, and self reflection to explore myself in terms of where I see myself in the future” ~ EAGLE graduate

Culture is the Classroom: EAGLE youth learned culture through story sharing, cultural experiences, and opportunities to live culture. Traditional teachings of mindfulness, accountability, and respect extended beyond work life to family and community. Cultural programming built a sense of pride and confidence in participants. Opportunities for cultural mastery enhanced self-esteem and hopefulness.

Mentorship: Mentors who encouraged and showed genuine investment in youth were most attractive to youth. Mentors who were non-judgemental, humble, and honest were able to build trusting relationships with youth. Mentors who facilitated growth and fostered independence in youth had the greatest long term impact on life skills

Cultural Identity: Youth reported a shift in perspective and newfound sense of purpose. Team building activities lead to youth feeling a sense of belonging and togetherness. Identity was nurtured and reinforced through ongoing support and connection.

Education & Training: Individualized education plans established a sense of safety and inclusion. Youth demonstrated increased help seeking and improved decision making following their participation. Youth thrived in routine and structure provided by regular daily schedules.

Implications

Implications for Community Practice

Sense of belonging is necessary for program engagement
 Social confidence and sense of community impacts success across life domains
 Traditional teachings transfer to home and work
 Cultural engagement inspires and enhances youth’s identity shifts
 Individualized planning builds pride and self-efficacy
 Ongoing mentorship reinforce rapport with mentors and youth’s autonomy
 Challenging youth to try new things, and leave their comfort zone fosters independence and mastery

Implications for Counselling & Career Support

Engage and enhance the relational network which supports young adults’ transition
 Encourage young people to identify and translate skills learned in community cultural practice and volunteer service into skills for their future
 Offer education and career programming that is grounded in Indigenous values, beliefs & practices
 Increase awareness of Indigenous cultures and peoples in the non-Indigenous community
 Focus on strengths and community relationships

References

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