Meaningful Engagement of Indigenous Youth in PAR: The Role of Community Partnerships

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Abstract
This article presents the process used in a Participatory Research Project with Canadian Indigenous youth aimed at understanding their civic and cultural engagement. Specifically, we reflect on the approach taken, together with the core role of community partners in facilitating youth participation in this project. The process we used had three key aspects which facilitated effective youth engagement. First was flexibility and adaptability of the original study design, allowing the young people to adjust the project design, increasing their comfort levels and in doing so, assume as much or as little ownership of the process as they wanted. Second was building on preexisting relationships between mental health service provider staff and the community, which accelerated the establishment of trust. Through this trust, new relationships within the research team were able to develop. Third was the support of the youth engagement by the service provider staff, which provided support as required. This process improved the quality of the data collected, related findings, and for effective dissemination. Importantly, this staff–youth interaction has also increased longevity of the dissemination process. Our intent in reflecting on this process here is to further the dialogue on how to meaningfully engage ordinarily silenced and/or marginalized youth in research and evaluation as well as the sharing of findings.

Keywords
youth engagement, participatory action research, knowledge mobilization, community service provider, research partnerships

What is already known?
We know that meaningful engagement of youth in research will significantly improve relevance and applicability of research findings. We know that such engagement is well within the capacity of young people. We know that researchers need to improve knowledge mobilization and knowledge uptake of research findings. Much research with youth remains tokenistic, largely in the absence of knowledge regarding how exactly to achieve meaningful engagement, especially when working in marginalised and silenced communities.

What this paper adds?
There is a well-established call for increased youth engagement in research (Alderson, 2000; Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008) as well as policy-making and program design (Alparone & Rissotto, 2001; Combe, 2002; Gaunle & Adhikari, 2010; Hallett & Prout, 2003). Simultaneously, the field of knowledge mobilization (KM)—developing ways of moving highly theorized academic research to applied policy and practice—is growing. The intent is for research to be relevant and for

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findings to be integrated into the knowledge-to-action process through meaningful translation and effective dissemination, impacting policy, and service structuring and delivery (Bammer, Michaux, & Sanson, 2010; Leadbeater, Banister, & Marshall, 2011). Better understanding of how to integrate these various spheres of work—youth engagement and KM—seems critical in a time of increasingly strained and limited resources, fractured communities, and youth-related need (as reflected, e.g., in increased rates of mental health concerns); better understanding of how to “do” research, dissemination, and implementation in more integrated ways, and importantly, in ways that center youth, is crucial.

In this article, we explore the question of how communities and service providers can capitalize on an improved understanding of young people’s experiences, using research findings in ways that have greater impact on policy, service, and resource provision. To do this, we reflect on our experiences from the Spaces & Places (S&P) project as well as our related reflections from the Meaningfully engaging youth in research and evaluation workshop, attended by Mi’kmaw youth and staff from one of the three S&P project sites. The goal of the workshop was to bring together youth, community-research partners, and researchers to develop knowledge on how to meaningfully engage ordinarily silenced youth in research, evaluation, and the sharing of findings (see also Reich et al., 2017). Specifically, we review the ways in which the community partners of the project were critical to the process of doing a Participatory Research Project (PAR) with Indigenous youth; the ways in which meaningful partnerships between Indigenous service providers and non-Indigenous academics created the foundation for meaningful engagement of youth. We also look at the ways in which these meaningful partnerships impacted knowledge production, dissemination, and uptake of findings from this youth-centered project. While the scope of the article is limited to Indigenous youth, we believe there are important lessons learned that are of relevance to other communities of youth and/or research contexts.

**Youth, Research, and KM**

For several decades, there has been a growing call for the engagement of children in research: moving from including young populations of interest as research subjects to youth driven and youth led studies (Bagnoli & Clark, 2010; Grover, 2004; Holland, Renold, Ross, & Hillman, 2010). A core motivation for this move is the need to respect youth as people in their own right, with their own unique needs, experiences, and insights that need to be fully understood in order to effectively cater for and respond to young populations (James & Prout, 1997; United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009). Within this argument, are those who draw attention to the ways in which researchers should consider critically how children and youth are engaged in research and what is meant by “giving youth voice” (James, 2007; Komulainen, 2007; Spyrou, 2011). The intent of these critics is to ensure that due respect is afforded to the expertise of young people, ensuring that findings are credible and can effectively impact our knowledge base and the ways in which knowledge is used (Fox, 2013; Malone & Hartung, 2010).

Simultaneously, there is the move to include youth in policy-making and service provision planning (Morrow, 1999; O’Donoghue, Kirshner, & McLaughlin, 2002; Vromen & Collin, 2010; Zeldin, & Macneil, 2006). Again, the motivation is one of relevance. Proponents argue that for policy, services, and resources to have relevance to young people, the intended recipients should have a central say in what these policies, services, and resources are, and the ways in which they are delivered (Evans, 2007; Lansdown, 2001).

Developing alongside arguments for youth engagement is the field of KM and efforts to close the so-called “know–do” gap (Bammer et al., 2010) through effective translation of research, increasing the use of findings by policy makers, practitioners, and communities. A key component of the knowledge-to-action cycle is the relevance of research findings to the population or community of interest. This component of KM resonates with the call for youth engagement. For research to be of value to services and practitioners, findings need to more accurately reflect the lived experience and needs of youth (thus the need for greater youth engagement). Simultaneously, for research to more effectively shape policy and practice, how findings are presented, and to whom, needs to be considered. These dissemination aspects of the research process again raise the questions of how to better facilitate youth engagement in research activities and KM of youth-focused findings (Head, 2010).

To this end, many researchers are calling for more pluralistic approaches to research and evaluation in an effort to increase knowledge uptake by decision makers and ensure that knowledge being used is of relevance (Head, 2010; Smylie, 2011). Here, the misalignment between academic research, policy development, frontline service delivery, and service users has been noted. This misalignment pertains to end goals, time lines, language, and focus, among others. Landry, Lamari, and Amara (2003), for example, highlight the lack of effective communication between academics and nonacademic audiences; while Sason and Stanley (2010) mention the ways in which cumbersome academic writing prohibits uptake by policy makers and practitioners. Remedying this situation involves strengthening both formal and informal relationships between policy makers, practitioners, and researchers (Landry, Lamari, & Amara, 2003). When working with services in marginalized contexts, strong institutional partnerships and meaningful involvement of frontline staff are emphasized (Jansson, Benoit, Casey, Phillips, & Burns, 2010). And, where the focus is on youth-related issues, these populations should also be included (Cashmore, 2003).

Echoing suggestions around active partnerships, KM activities that integrate PAR approaches have been identified as effective in facilitating uptake of research findings to improve the mental, social, and material well-being of community members (Tapp & Dulin, 2010; Wallerstein & Duran, 2006). Furthermore, PAR approaches characterized by meaningful
collaborations and relational accountability (Prout & Tisdall, 2006; Wilson, 2008) are well positioned to center community voices in knowledge-to-action cycles. The Canadian Institutes of Health Research (2012) has termed such approaches to KM and integrated knowledge translation (iKT) in a specific context to a Canadian context, Smylie (2011) argues that a combination of iKT together with community-based PAR can effectively address the know–do gap, especially with regard to Indigenous (i.e., First Nations, Inuit, and Metis) communities and the positioning of Indigenous knowledge.

However, implementing effective PAR iKT remains challenging in knowledge-to-action cycles, especially with marginalized populations (Coad & Evans, 2008; Renold, Holland, Ross, & Hillman, 2008) and in non-medical settings (Grenhalgh, Robert, Macfarlane, Bate, & Kyriakidou, 2004; Lyons, 2010). We lack examples that can respond to our questions of how to achieve integrated research processes, where academics, knowledge users, and youth effectively collaborate on knowledge production, what this looks like, and how this actually contributes to knowledge translation and uptake. In an effort to address this gap, we share our experiences on the S&P project as an exemplar of such collaborative processes.

Spaces & Places

Briefly, S&P is a PAR project exploring how Indigenous communities and community-based service providers can better support the cultural engagement of youth. The project has a specific focus on how communities can facilitate this engagement, and in doing so support improved mental health outcomes for youth. As such, the project sought not only to improve our understanding of youth cultural engagement but also to facilitate necessary change. The study is located in three communities: two remote coastal communities of Labrador (one predominantly Inuit and one predominantly Southern Inuit) and one rural Mi’kmaq community in Nova Scotia, Canada. The study integrates participant produced photographs and day-in-the-life videos into individual interviews with youth (Liebenberg, Ungar, & Theron, 2014). Data are analyzed by the entire research team (youth, community partners, and academics; Liebenberg, Jamal, & Ikeda, 2015) after which, youth actively drive and participate in dissemination of findings (www.youthspacesandplaces.org).

Two aspects of this project warrant mention at this point. First, the study was a PAR project based on a community service provider–youth–academic partnership. As such, various groups within the partnership assumed greater responsibility for various aspects of the project (as detailed below), all while working within an Indigenous research model of relational accountability (Wilson, 2008). Second, the original project was designed with only the Indigenous partners from Labrador. The third rural site joined the project about a year after the start of the original project. The ways in which these various components of the project came together across time and sites are discussed below. All quotes presented here are taken from the transcripts of discussions at the Meaningfully engaging youth workshop. The workshop brought together experts in research with youth (including Mi’kmaq youth participants and Mi’kmaq community partners from the rural S&P site), to draw on their experiences of meaningfully and successfully engaging silenced youth in research, with a larger view of amplifying innovative practices and knowledge systems.

The Team

The S&P team comprised three components: non-Indigenous academics, Indigenous community partners, and Indigenous youth. The academic component included the principal investigator (PI, Liebenberg) and two successive project managers. The PI (non-Indigenous) has extensive experience in doing image-based research with youth and conducting research with the participating communities. The two project managers (non-Indigenous master’s students) also have extensive experience doing research with youth in participating communities. The community partner component comprised local Indigenous government departments responsible for mental health service provision in each of the three communities (i.e., the Nunatsiavut Government, NunatuKavut, and the Eskasoni Band Council). Senior representatives (two Indigenous and one non-Indigenous) from each of these three departments actively participated on the team and were the coinvestigators (Co-Is) on the project. Each community was represented by at least one Indigenous frontline staff person (Sylliboy, Davis-Ward, and Vincent) who have grown up in the community and who have extensive experience working with youth. All community staff members assisting with the research in the third site and who attended the meaningfully engaging youth workshop were Indigenous. These individuals themselves were young adults. Finally, the youth component comprised 8–9 Indigenous youth “participants” or coresearchers, between the ages of 12 and 18, from each of the three communities (for a total of 25 youth).

The Origins of S&P

S&P exists within a larger continuum of studies and has been undertaken by long-standing research partnerships. S&P emerged from a series of other studies. First, the PI was engaged in a multisite qualitative project that highlighted how communities internationally are structured in ways that physically marginalize youth (Liebenberg et al., 2014). Observing this youth-space tension raised questions about the ways in which such physical disconnects impacted connections with community (such as civic engagement) for youth. Simultaneously, the PI and the three Co-Is of S&P were engaged in a mixed-methods project, exploring the ways in which youth navigated through formal and informal resources to achieve the best possible outcomes (Ungar, Liebenberg, Dudding, Armstrong, & Van der Vijver, 2013). Analysis of local site data from the three S&P communities raised questions about higher than average youth resilience scores in relation to limited resources within communities (Ikeda & Liebenberg, 2011; Liebenberg & Ikeda, 2011). Given the findings of these two
studies, we began asking questions about how Indigenous communities could facilitate the civic and cultural engagement of their youth, where this engagement is considered a resource for mental health outcomes. These questions are important, given significantly higher mental health needs within Indigenous communities (Loppie Reading & Wien, 2009; Reading, Kmetic, & Gideon, 2007) together with evidence highlighting the critical role of cultural engagement in supporting improved mental health outcomes for Indigenous youth (Lalonde, 2005; Ledogar & Fleming, 2008; McGuire, 2010). So, while youth themselves were not included in establishing the study’s focus, the research question does have direct relevance to all three communities and is of critical importance to youth, communities, service providers, and policy makers.

**Designing the Study**

In order to ensure integration of methods with cultural and contextual relevance for youth, and that are well positioned to answer the research questions, community partners (from the two sites in Labrador), and academics met for two days to design the study. Three core reasons precluded youth involvement at the planning stage. First, the participating university is approximately 2,000 km from the central offices of both Indigenous government service providers in Labrador. The communities themselves are 400 km (using a very poor road) and approximately a 1.5-hour flight (highly dependent on weather), respectively, from this central government location. Second, we were unsure as to the institutional ethical constraints in accessing potential participants prior to the study’s approval. Third, despite interest in the study, without a research plan, we did not have community permission to work with youth. The costs associated with travel required from sites to a central meeting point combined with limited understanding of which youth to invite and ethical concerns regarding access to youth made this situation unrealistic. As a compromise, youth were represented at this meeting by younger team members (i.e., the initial project manager and staff from the two communities).

Understanding that the best source of information relating to this question would be youth themselves, it was decided that youth needed to be central to the data collection. We drew on the academic expertise in methods, to explore which methods would be best suited to answering the research question. The expertise of the community partners was then used to inform the final selection of these methods supporting contextual and cultural relevance. For example, community partners noted the links between using images to facilitate narratives on lived experience and cultural traditions of storytelling. These methods also align with the decolonization of research (Smith, 1999) and a move to embrace transformative and indigenous ways of knowing (Castleden, Garvin, & Huu-ay-aht First Nation, 2008), centering youth voices in a broader discussion of social ecologies. Furthermore, community partners felt that the visual components of the methods selected would contribute to local efforts aimed at preserving cultural heritage and that the perspectives of culture captured in this project would be accomplished through “the eyes” of youth. Finally, the research itself would assist community elders in understanding the ways in which youth identified with their culture, and the ways in which they are making culture “their own” within a more contemporary context. We drew on community-partner expertise to establish criteria to identify youth participants and how best to invite them.

Through this process, two things were achieved. First, a basic blue print for the project was established that while being aligned with the research questions, had cultural and contextual relevance to youth. Importantly, the plan also had enough flexibility to be adapted once youth were integrated into the study. Second, the collaboration moved from an administrative one where a partnership existed on paper, to a living and active partnership where all parties had invested in the project and now owned it. This has important implications for concerns raised in the literature regarding “gatekeepers” and the biases they can introduce into studies (Leonard, 2007; Powell & Smith, 2009) and academic responsibility toward the communities (Kovach, 2009). As a partnership, all involved had a vested interest in finding the most relevant answers to the study’s questions and advocating for change or allocation of necessary resources. It was essential for all of us that we partner with those youth who could best help us understand cultural engagement in the community, especially where youth are facing higher than normal challenges, and equally important, to engage youth in the knowledge-to-action cycle.

When the senior representative of the rural third site heard of the study, its focus and design resonated with community concerns. She therefore proposed we replicate the project in their community (380 km from the host university). While the study had already been designed, a staff meeting was held where the PI presented on the design and shared experiences from Labrador. Staff were able to ask questions during this process. As Sylliboy explains:

> …when you [i.e. Liebenberg] first came into our community and …you sat down and talked with us… I had my own walls set up… and I started asking you what is the research going to be used for? Right? I wanted clarification, …And I asked about the quality of your research? And I asked …all these sorts of questions, and when I started to get a better idea… I said oh okay. And that’s when that sort of connection came in, that’s where the trust came in, not the sort of trust you have with researchers …if you came and …said I’m going to do research for a while, I don’t think I would have been so involved… But when you build that relationship, and explained “this is your guys’ research happening” I’m like okay now I’m on board 100%. So that’s the difference right there!

Providing space for staff to wrestle with the project, pick it apart, interrogate the motivation for the study, and find the ways in which they would contribute to the fieldwork established the opportunity for staff in the community to establish ownership of the project.
Applying for Funding

Building on existing relationships, funding was sought where senior community partner representatives were listed as active Co-Is on the application, and services themselves were listed as formal partners. In all three instances, local Indigenous community governance provided formal support. While the initial application listed only the partners from Labrador, the same model was used to expand the study into the rural site. Accounting for demands on community partner time, much of the grant writing was conducted by the PI. As far as possible, the academic team members completed application segments for community partners (such as entering curriculum vitae (CV) information into the funding portal). In this way, partners had only to finalize and approve documents. This approach minimized possible partner “research fatigue” and supported the continued involvement where partner expertise was critical.

The Fieldwork

In each community, the fieldwork was conducted by a combination of academic and community partners in collaboration with youth. Once ethics approval had been secured from both the host university and the various ethics boards representing the communities (Liebenberg, Wood, & Wall, in press), community partners identified potential youth partners. Here, frontline staff were crucial to inviting “the right” youth to join the team:

What we did as an agency, we looked for youth that were in different… either they were really having a hard time or maybe they were really social or all different kind of aspects in their life and what they can bring forward into the group. So we got everyone in our agency to pick a couple youth that they felt would benefit the research, and then we narrowed it down. . . . (Indigenous staff member, MD)

Of note here is the fact that the community development models underlying service provision across all three sites, means that staff involved in the identification of youth partners, had an in-depth knowledge and understanding of youth in their respective communities (see, e.g., Liebenberg & Hutt-MacLeod, 2017). They could identify youth who were not necessarily involved with their services but who have important perspectives on S&P in the community that contribute to either youth alienation from cultural engagement or contribute to a sense of belonging, facilitating cultural engagement. In this way, we were able to engage a cross section of youth other service providers (such as schools) may not have had access to or insight of.

All youth who were interested in participating, together with their caregivers, were met by community service provider staff and an academic research team member, who explained the project in more detail. For those youths who decided to participate, consent was obtained from both youth and their caregivers. Importantly, once parents/guardians had consented, youth had the final say over how they participated in the research. This allowed for a highly flexible approach to the fieldwork within which youth held a sense of control over their participation and could reconsider earlier decisions regarding their engagement (for a more detailed discussion of this process, see Liebenberg et al., in press).

A welcome event was then hosted to initiate the fieldwork. Community partners were central to making arrangements and shaping what the events would look like. In the third site, staff were instrumental to the evening’s success. As one of the non-Indigenous RAs recounted:

So [there was] supposed to be a barbecue, but . . . then nobody (i.e. youth) showed up. . . . And I remember very clearly—this is what amazed me—you guys (i.e. staff) like scattered, and like in less than an hour, probably half an hour, you guys and everyone was there! So I was like I’ve never seen this happen ever in my life! So it just, to me, it shows the level of engagement. Like they’re (i.e. staff) just so connected in the community, they knew exactly where to go where to find [the youth].

Across all three sites, youth, community partner staff, and academic staff actively participated in the data collection. Youth were central to producing the visual data (making photos and participating in the video production) and narrative data (through individual elicitation interviews). Youth also selected visual (photographs and video) footage for inclusion in a focus group. Community staff were integral to arranging times for data gathering with youth and their families. They then worked with academic staff to gather the video footage (sharing the work of filming and making observation notes). In all sites, staff vehicles were often used for transportation. During winter filming in Labrador, for example, staff snowmobiles were integral to being able to follow youth. Additionally, much of the video footage was watched independently by senior representatives of service providers, frontline staff, the PI, and the project managers, and in the third site, the research assistants (RAs). Within each site, teams then compared notes on the observed footage, collectively identifying segments to include in 30-min compilations of each youth’s day, to be used in elicitation interviews. The diversity among the “viewers” is intended to account for the “complexity, partial truths, and multiple subjectivities” (Lather, 2007, p. 136) of the research focus, by establishing diversity of viewpoints across contexts, culture, gender, age, and discipline. Given existing demands on staff time, it was however not feasible for them to watch all the footage. By watching several of the youth’s days however, we were able to establish patterns of observation across community partners and academic team members. Once everyone was content with how academic partners were identifying segments, academic team members continued creating compilations with the remaining footage. Youth were not involved in the process, as it seemed unreasonable to ask them to contribute an additional eight hours to the process, watching footage of the day that they had actively participated in. Rather, during the interviews themselves, youth were asked for their perspectives of the selected clips: If there were any segments they felt...
should have been included and if any of the included segments surprised them. In this way, youth could add segments that they considered important to the compilations. However, none of them highlighted any additional footage. All youth, staff, and academic team members participated in the data analysis and dissemination processes.

Discussion

Owning and Growing the Project

An engaged partnership where we could treat the project as a living process created space for our team to reshape the project as we felt necessary. For example, the project was originally designed as a cross-sectional study, where data gathering, analysis, and dissemination would occur once. Due to questions emerging from the fieldwork experiences in Labrador, combined with community partner awareness of how seasonal change impacts mental health, we decided to repeat the photoelicitation component about 14 months later. This would provide insight into the ways youth engage with their community spaces across various seasons. Additionally, many of youth were at transition points: Older youth were about to graduate from high school, and younger youth were about to graduate into high school. Adding a longitudinal component would add to our understanding of engagement across these transitions. Because of the resources required to conduct the day-in-the-life video component of the project, especially in terms of time demands, we decided as a team not to repeat this.

The flexibility of the project, supported by the continuous consent process (see Liebenberg et al., in press), also created a space within which youth could become comfortable with the research process, develop an understanding of the intent of the project, and gain confidence to adapt the project as they chose. Consequently, youth were able to assume as much or as little ownership of the process as they wanted. This pertained to individual youth as well as the larger group within each of the three sites. In one site, for example, where youth had limited time resources, their involvement remained aligned with the original design. However, where some youth wanted to participate in the project but were uncomfortable with the video component, processes were adapted. In one instance, the site researcher, PM, and youth decided to spend a day together filming and talking as they moved through the community, rather than focusing the camera on the youth. By contrast in the rural site, youth had far greater resources to draw on and increased capacity to engage with the process. This is apparent in the ways youth started to adapt the process right from the start of the data gathering. One of the youth, for example, decided rather than ignoring the researchers following him, he was going to give them a “guided tour” of his community. The entire day’s footage is filled with action and a running commentary; it is extremely informative! Additionally, in this same site, the youth decided that they wanted to repeat the video process together with the photographs in the second round of data gathering. Given the community’s rural rather than remote proximity to the host university and access to greater resources that this allowed, we were able to repeat the video component.

This continuum of engagement and flexibility was also apparent with regard to the dissemination process. In one site, for example, given some of the challenges youth were managing, combined with demands on their time, their dissemination outputs were heavily facilitated by the team. Having decided to make posters reflecting their core findings, the PM quoted on cards verbal phrases that the youth had used during the data gathering. These phrases reflected core themes. Youth then paired these phrases with photographs they had made for the elicitation interviews, creating images for transfer onto posters. While original interview photos were not intended to be used in dissemination products, the collaborative and flexible framework of the study promoted such “creative license.” The success of this approach is reflected in the actions of one youth who later contacted the PM and shared an additional poster she had made. In another site, youth decided at the start of the project that they would paint a mural of the findings. Community partners were instrumental in assisting youth obtain permission to paint the mural inside the community center, after which youth drove the entire dissemination process, including the production of a related video. In the rural site, the Director of the service provider asked at the start of the project if youth would paint a mural outside of the crisis center. The youth agreed and, at the end of the data analysis weekend, designed an image to reflect eight core themes from the findings. Briefly, the mural conveys to the community, that in order to do well, youth require available and integrated resources. These resources include relationships and physical resources that can support their holistic development of personal capacities. Furthermore, resources need to integrate cultural components such as opportunities to interact with elders and engage in traditional spaces and activities (see www.youthspacesandplaces.org). During the planning, one of the youth approached the team with a poem she had written and asked if it could be included in the mural. The other youth were extremely supportive of the idea and included a section of the poem. The poem has also been turned into posters and postcards.

Solid trusting relationships have been crucial to this flexibility, and community partners have been at the center of establishing these relationships. They have been central to bridging the initial youth-academic divide, often communicating with the academic team on behalf of the youth, or explaining cultural relevance of choices or behaviors. Staff were also crucial to balancing community and cultural routines with the project activities and time lines:

I think it goes back to the relationship [between the youth and the youth workers], because we wouldn’t have been able to figure out when the youth were free if you guys [i.e. the youth workers] weren’t so engaged with them [the youth], like you know as a community, so it’s all connected, so it showcases the strength, again, it goes back to, . . . how engaged you guys are with the youth, because you know them, you know who they are good at, you know what they like and what they don’t like . . . . (non-Indigenous RA)
Relationship Building

The service provider staff–community relationships that existed prior to the research project were central to the establishment of trusting relationships between youth, their families, and academic team members at the start of the project. Until recently, images (often made by non-Indigenous academic and/or government researchers) have played an important role in the stigmatization of Indigenous culture in Canada, contributing to the systematic process of cultural genocide. Not surprisingly, contemporary research conducted by outsiders in Indigenous communities is regularly met with resistance, especially when involving images. As such, from the outset families could have been resistant to their children’s participation in the project. The strong involvement of community partners, who themselves are the members of participating communities, shifted that resistance. Specifically, it was the existing trust community members have of community partners that shaped the ways in which the project was accepted by the community and the new relationships that developed as a result:

Linda came to us and she explained everything, and like I said, we had our own questions...and then once she had...we said oh this is awesome! We had to actually bring that to the youth and their parents, and...so we have to make this okay with them, so they really have to trust us...and we were also there offering supports, so! (Sylliboy, Indigenous)

As the project progressed, community partners continued to play a central role in furthering relationships. In the third site, the use of the service provider’s youth center as a central project location created a “safe” space, where all members of the research team, including youth, could “hang out” around the research activities. This was the venue for the barbeque, where we conducted interviews and made plans. Often youth arrived early for various activities and/or stayed long after these activities had ended. “Hanging out” with each other in this way meant we got to know each other as people outside of our respective research roles. It was often in these lighthearted and informal moments that youth developed ideas that were fed back into the “formal” process. As one of the non-Indigenous RAs reflected on the impact of this process:

I’m thinking about “how can meaningful engagement produce better research,” gaining trust with the researchers before beginning the research; getting to know each other one-on-one in smaller groups, and then getting to know that “I’m not just another participant.” So, that really came through very strongly.

Staff were also able to problem solve in ways that were positive and aligned with the youth and the community. For example, recalling the barbeque in the rural site where staff fetched the youth is a solution that outsiders may not consider in response to that particular situation; or, may consider but would regard as inappropriate (perhaps by not showing up, the youth are telling us they are not really interested in participating); and may consider but may not have the capacity to do (where do youth live and can outsider academic researchers walk into people’s homes and “take their children away” to do research?). However, given the trust between families and service staff, this was possible, acceptable, and effective. In having the resources on the team to problem solve in this way, we have been able to continue growing the study:

...what I found really valuable was learning the process,...I got to hang out with you guys and get to know you guys, and you know it was really fun to learn a different community and understand what the challenges are, and seeing how...this research is meaningful, and it’s like this is baby steps and can get bigger and bigger and eventually more people are going to pay attention, so...that’s really powerful! (non-Indigenous RA)

Impact of the Approach on Findings and Dissemination

The role of community partners in establishing genuine and trusting relationships between youth and academic partners had a profound impact on the quality of the data, findings, and dissemination process. The dissemination process was particularly important, given the action component of the project. Without sharing the findings in meaningful and impactful ways, the platform from which to initiate change would not be established. First, the ways in which frontline staff shaped relationships supported how youth were able to engage in the entire process. Put simply, staff augmented the meaningful engagement of the youth. The more youth gained a sense of buy-in and ownership of the process, the more fully they could participate. As one of the staff (MD, Indigenous) explains:

I think it did make an impact for the youth because I don’t think they felt as confident, I guess in their abilities, they’re “just youth” so, “youth being youth,” but now I feel like a lot of more youth are empowered, not even just the youth in the program, but other youth are more willing to come out and help us. Because they see a difference and...so I think a lot of kids want to jump on board and are saying “hey! I want to be a part of that!”

Working interactively with youth, community partner staff could amplify the dissemination of findings. In the third site, the invitation to paint the mural on the crisis center wall, for example, was a strategic action on the part of the service director to integrate the findings into a larger community development plan currently being implemented. Additionally, by positioning the mural at the center of mental health services, it would speak directly to staff. As their Director says, “anytime staff forget what they should be doing, they can just go outside and look at the mural!” By actively engaging in the entire research process, community partners could immediately draw on the details of the research process and use that to inform their own practice:

...a lot of stuff that comes out of Spaces & Places you know, as soon as they say something, we say okay if this is a space that isn’t
safe, how do you go about changing that? And I can go straight to my team and Daphne, and say okay we have to do something about this. . . . That’s kind of like how we took up the stuff: we take it in, and say how do we adjust? How do we say okay, how can we better help, not just our clients, but the whole community. (Sylliboy, Indigenous)

Indeed, staff have commented on the ways in which being part of the data gathering and analysis has highlighted for them the taken-for-granted of their community, and how important this has been to improving services and programing for youth:

How did Spaces & Places benefit our work as a community organization? . . . after the research, there’s things that were an eye opener to us! There were things that we just didn’t see, just because it’s just normalized within our community. And then taking that, and figuring out why there are specific places that weren’t safe and then you know changing that, or changing that outlook on specific places or specific people, so that was an eye opener for our agency to better help our community as a whole. (Staff member, MD, Indigenous)

It also has a direct impact on others in the community. As another Indigenous staff member (MRG) says about the mural, “I have clients from 5 years old to 19 and that’s an eye catcher! When I drive them to my office they see the big painting that we did and all of the cultural stuff the crew did—even the little kids know the sharing hands and the eagle.”

Beyond immediate service providers, community partners have been instrumental in sharing the findings of the research more broadly. As community government representatives, senior staff have access, for example, to the First Nations and Inuit Health branch of the Federal Government of Canada. They also have access to other service providers in their community with whom they can share the findings (such as schools and police services). Truly owning the project means staff have a vested interested in sharing the project findings and promoting related change. The third site, for example, is part of a pan-Canadian project aimed at improving mental health service provision for youth (ACCESS Open Minds http://accessopen minds.ca/). They have been able to feed findings from S&P into this larger initiative, creating additional dissemination paths and further impacting mental health resources for youth nationally. Through this larger initiative, staff and youth have also been able to present at many more conferences.

Finally, staff have been integral in physically getting youth to events. In 2013, staff traveled with youth from remote communities of Labrador by road and air to an international conference, acting as chaperones but also providing critical encouragement and support for their presentation. Similarly, in 2015, staff from the rural site drove youth from their community to another international conference 400 km away, again providing support and guidance through multiple presentations at the conference.

**Long-Term Impact**

In considering ethical engagement in PAR, the issue of long-term sustainability of research for participants and communities arises (Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008); what remains for participants and their communities once the research is over? Similarly, theorists emphasize how authentic PAR should leave participants and communities empowered to continue to inform change after the research ends (Freire, 2002; Sullivan, Bhuyan, Senturia, Shiut-Thornton, & Ciske, 2005). Meaningful engagement of community partners in PAR provides a continued platform of support to youth, where community partners and youth can continue to be change makers for their community.

A very clear example are the ways in which community partners have assisted youth in sharing the study’s findings through posters and murals positioned in key spaces within the communities. The positioning of these products speaks loudly against the idea of youth as passive members of their community and as passive recipients of community resources; they work every day to change the dominant narrative around youth. Indeed, one of the murals actively communicates the need to include youth in decision-making, stating “strong voices open windows to a better future.” Additionally, the very public way in which youth engaged with this project means they have become role models to other youth in their communities; and together with community partners, they have become role models to other researchers. Similarly, and as alluded to in the statements by Indigenous program staff in the previous section, the visible interactive nature of the project has impacted the way youth in the community respond to programs, facilitating increased civic engagement by youth in community activities aimed at community development. It is through these partnerships that youth have also been able to continue presenting at conferences. Other youth have been supported to continue publishing poetry, take part in national events celebrating their own culture, and engage in international development efforts (for which one youth has received government recognition). Youth have also found meaningful ways of volunteering in their communities, in ways that align with their own interests, again continuing to drive the needed change identified in the research. As an international academic delegate at the workshop shop said “I’m going to take you . . . with me, . . . I will be thinking of you because I can be saying to others that I work with, that I have seen what can happen.”

It is worth noting that while this process has instilled various skills in the youth participants (for example, arts-based research and dissemination), it has also contributed to the skill set of community partners. Listing partners as Co-Is on grants adds to their own funding application capacity. This is important in Indigenous contexts where service provision is highly dependent on grants and so-called “soft money”. Frontline staff have been able to develop research and dissemination skills. Some have drawn on this to successfully further their own education. Others are integrating some of these research skills gained into community problem-solving, using these skills in town hall style meetings to answer questions around what the community needs. These efforts further the development of the communities in which the youth partners find themselves and run parallel to or even integrate with youth efforts at continuing the impact of the findings on their communities.
Conclusion

This article has reflected on the meaningful collaboration in three Indigenous communities between three groups (academic researchers, community service providers, and youth), giving special attention to the role of community-based service providers as critical partners to successful engagement of youth in research, especially when working in collectivist and/or Indigenous contexts. What has become clear across all sites is that youth don’t necessarily want to own the entire research process; they prefer to rather share the responsibility with others; where we can each do our part, and make sure that rigorous research is conducted, producing meaningful results, that are disseminated in equally meaningful ways to relevant audiences. And, in coming together the way we did, we could all draw deeply on respective knowledge, resources, and expertise to create a research environment where everyone felt comfortable participating and engaging. The process was not without its problems and challenges, but knowing that there were people within our team that had the wherewithal to solve problems, and deal with challenges, meant that as a team we could move the process forward with confidence. One of the Indigenous staff members (JD) captured the effect of this process in her reflections:

the research was more involved with youth. . . we’re talking about “helping hands” . . . these youth [i.e. youth in the community], they need help, and they’re reaching up, but who’s going to grab their hand? And who’s going to help them? And . . . that’s what we want to work on. And it’s even for myself, like I’m not a public speaker, it’s so hard! I can speak but I won’t speak in public, where we have you guys! Even for youth they have us to speak with and they have the group. And they were able to, you guys were able to expand, and collaborate and grab the information. And I like that and I call that a helping hand, that holds us!

Important, knowledge uptake of findings identified by youth is improved due to the sense of community ownership and community partnerships that have brought perspectives necessary for service provision funders, government officials, frontline practitioners, and so forth into the dissemination products. This type of engagement increases both continued community ownership of the knowledge underlying or informing findings as well as the likelihood of content being of relevance to these various knowledge using groups. Additionally, these partnerships foster production of research outputs in ways that are more digestible to these audiences. Despite these experiences, it is prudent to keep Head’s (2010, p. 115) caution in mind:

Patterns of knowledge sharing across the sectors . . . need to be appropriate to the specific contexts of joint work. It is necessary to construct these relationships in ways appropriate for each problem context and to recognise that partnering arrangements can be constructed in diverse ways.

The importance of community partner engagement to the quality of this project, its outputs, and the success of the process cannot be overstated. The experiences of S&P points to the importance of these relationships if we are to meaningfully engage those youth who are most marginalized and silenced in research programs; especially, if we are to engage youth in ways that inform change and are truly empowering.

A lot of times people have come into the community . . . doing research . . . people came in the community and got the research for their own research and we don’t know what happened to that information. [With this study] you know its good information because it’s coming from the youth themselves and its shared, and becomes our own, creates ownership with the youth. But it also helps us within our agency: hearing from the youth themselves, hearing their voices, . . . having a better understanding of them, helps us provide a higher and better quality of care, it helps us as youth workers and social workers. And in leadership! So any way that we can help our community and the surrounding communities, because we can share this information. So it’s good to have that sort of ownership and information. (Sylliboy, Indigenous)

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