

What it's like being an Indigenous Youth in Canada Right Now

Feedback from the Indigenous Youth Round Table hosted by MP Maryam Monsef Peterborough—Kawartha

This summer, youth from the [Katimavik](#) program representing First Nations communities from Northern Quebec joined members of the youth committee from [Curve Lake First Nation](#) here in Peterborough—Kawartha to talk about what it's like being an Indigenous youth in Canada right now. The discussions were enlightening and mainly focused on the issues of education and mental health.

The Round Table was convened by [Maryam Monsef, MP for Peterborough—Kawartha](#), Minister of Status of Women, and held at the Canoe Museum in Peterborough.

Katimavik is a national youth development program that offers young adults an opportunity to gain valuable life skills, to develop professional experience, and to serve communities through volunteerism. As part of its commitment to active reconciliation and Indigenous youth development, Katimavik has brought these eight participants from **Eeyoo-Istchee, Cree Territory** along the east side of James Bay and Hudson's Bay, to Peterborough. During their five months stay in Peterborough, the participants will volunteer with local organizations and take a course at Trent University.

The Curve Lake Youth Committee also volunteers their time to help their community and act as positive role models within the Curve Lake First Nation.

We were honoured to have these young people share their stories with us. We talked about what they got out of the Round Table discussion, and what else they'd like to see happen in Canada for Indigenous Youth, especially regarding education. Their feedback on the round table and a summary of the discussions that occurred is below.

Feedback on the Indigenous Youth Round Table in Peterborough

Damian (Mistissini, inland from James Bay and Waskaganish, James Bay Coast) - I was surprised I learned something with the Curve Lake youth there: I didn't think our issues would be so similar. I like that we were able to share our stories and speak for others who can't speak for themselves back home. I think that, overall, it was a success.

I really didn't expect that people at that level would be coming to listen to us. It was really unexpected. It was an amazing opportunity. Being in the canoe museum made it more traditionally connected.

Ruben (Whapmagoostui, Hudson Bay Coast) - Talking to other people like Maryam was really cool. I never thought I'd share my thoughts in front of people like her.

We talked about education and mental health issues - important issues – but there are other things we didn't talk about like the land and all the mining and forestry and damning up of rivers and things like that. I want to be able to talk about that too.

I've been living off the land since I was a little boy and hunting since I was 6 years old and that is part of who I am as a person. If I ever saw part of my hunting grounds being damned or used for forestry I'd be really sad. I'm lucky I got to live off the land before anything else happens. Hopefully I get to teach my daughter these things. She's 10 months old. I want her to have a better future than me, than my past.

I hope that through this program I will be able to turn my future around. This [Katimavik] program should help.

Phoenix (Waswanipi, inland from James Bay) - It's the first time I've participated in a round table like that and a lot of deep personal issues with the youth, across the different communities, were coming out all at once and there is a lot of stuff to talk about and a lot of stuff to unpack. Even though it was only a small round table and it was only 4 or 5 hours, it felt like a lifetime of stuff came out.

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And it felt like there was more to be said... on everyone's part.

We are talking about nine different communities here - each have their own problems, with different severity of problems.

A lot of people cried at that event.

We had government officials and other important local representatives from youth groups like YES, to immigration people, to psychologists to the police chief... paying respect to, us but also trying to understand our problems at the same time.

I cried.

I think the whole atmosphere of the room started changing when Lucas started crying. Because, it was not just a humanising moment for everyone in the room but everyone felt it was a real... like everyone could feel the tension – which always happens in these kinds of conversations, these highly intense meetings – but people could understand then.

Moments like that, not only touch the heart but the mind is able to hold onto it better. A lot of people cried at that event. I cried.

Lucas (Chisasibi, James Bay Coast) - I would say the round table was pretty good. It was actually my first time participating in that kind of discussion - sharing my thoughts about education and mental health.

It is really rare to be in a discussion like that. My emotions were building up, speaking about personal experiences... around the end I opened up and started sharing what we go through in our communities and talking about people in our community passing away because of suicide. Several people came up and hugged me and said, it's okay.

We say a lot of stuff, but we don't always put emotions to it. I've never really shared stuff like that. I'm comfortable talking in front of a group of people but opening up and showing your vulnerable side to people, showing that emotion, it's harder.

Nathalie (Curve Lake) - The round table was great. Everything that was said...it's something that needs to be heard.

We got to learn so much from the other youth. It's nice to know that they face a lot of the same stuff that we do. It's nice to know we have that in common. We can learn from them.

We face a lot of the same thing in our communities. Language barriers in the school system is a big one that we definitely have in common [with other First Nations youth]. Mental health and addictions on reserve was another big thing we have in common with the Katimavik youth

Reconciliation

Phoenix (Waswanipi, inland from James Bay) -

Reconciliation is a long, hard and arduous task – people need to learn how to accept blame and then move forward. We live in a fast-paced society, but we can't just barrel through it. There is an emotional side. It takes years. It's not just a single round table. It will take a while for Canada to be able to say, oh yeah we did that. It doesn't mean we don't need the discussion, of course.

In some ways the government is doing enough but in other ways...I don't know. For example when the Cree leased the land, people perceive that as us just giving away our rights, just because we got money. Money, politics, and personal issues: There is a very emotional response to all of that.

I'm not sure how the round tables are supposed to address those issues all at once. **It is like 1 step out of a thousand.** No one is going to figure it out in the next 100 years.

Everyone deserves to be part of it. Everyone deserves that closure. Round tables are a way of participating in changing history. These are small steps forward.

Ruben - I don't even know what reconciliation is. I have no idea what it means. I've heard that a lot since I got here, but I wonder what it is.

Phoenix – It is essentially saying I'm sorry. Like when you break up with a girlfriend and she says I want to be friends.

Ruben – I would say, "No I don't want to be friends."

Education Gaps

Lucas (Chisasibi, James Bay Coast) - I was the smartest kid in class because I'd been from Grade 4 to 6 in Ottawa and that put me on top of the class. When I came back to Secondary 1, I realized that people in my class couldn't do maths or read like I could. I was really surprised about that gap between Indigenous education and non-Indigenous education.

I always have that feeling too: that I'm not at the same level as people who went to school here in Peterborough. I am always feeling like I can't compete with someone who went to school in Ottawa their whole life. I always feel that gap. I feel lesser than others.

There's always that discrimination ...in the education system and the government is not putting more money into the Indigenous side of education.

I'm probably not the only one who feels that way. I'm sure that other kids from other reservations probably feel that way.

*I always feel that gap [in my education].
I feel lesser than others.*

Damian (Mistissini, inland from James Bay and Waskaganish, James Bay Coast) - Just like Lucas said; you are caught between both worlds. I went back and forth from Ottawa to my reserve and I noticed every time that I went home I was on top, and so I asked to be moved up. It was too easy. I went from Grade 4 to Grade 6 but because of my age they couldn't put me any higher. It slowed me down, going back to the reserve, and the way that they teach.

I wanted to do mechanics at Algonquin College, for example, but there was a requirement – Secondary 5 and I'd graduated Secondary 4 but not enough people had passed 4 to make a class for Secondary 5. I even requested it. But they removed that class due to not enough enrollment. I felt like it was a missed opportunity. Back home I was trying to learn cultural things, [I was] missing identity - and it was really frustrating because you are in between both worlds.

You aren't up to par with those who have gone to school down south [off reserve] their whole life – like Lucas said, you are caught in the middle.

The other side is that Cree language is removed after Grade 5 and then it's different inland. This is one of the things that needs to be addressed. Depends on where you go to school. One of the things that could change is that it should be the same across the board.

Nathalie (Curve Lake) - Traditional learning is absolutely so important. Our system is great because it has the Ojibwe language, but it's hard to continue to learn more when they are teaching you the same things year after year. We learned animals and colours and then the next year you would learn the same thing. New teachers every year would just teach the same thing. So you aren't learning anything new. It might be better if our Elders were involved in these teachings.

We learned more (Ojibwe language) in Kindergarten. It was every day, every morning. We even knew how to sing Oh Canada in Ojibwe. Now we know how to say all our colours and animals but what's that going to do for you if we can't put it into a sentence.

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Dainna (Curve Lake) – We need stuff that would actually help people too. For example, if someone is having trouble with debt, teach us accounting skills so we can figure out how to manage that. I may not be able to go back to high school for these services as I was told I wasn't allowed to go back to the school since I already graduated. Having more education around things like this (to develop life skills) would be great.

Nathalie (Curve Lake) – A lot of people don't go off to college. It's too expensive. I did everything backwards kind of. I had my house, then I had my baby, then I went to school and now I'm going off to college. It's kind of backwards. You should go to school first. So many people don't go to college. They are just like "I'm finished school now let's party." Now they are at McDonalds and Walmart. That would actually be really helpful; if we had a program to explore the options we have for jobs.

I think you have to have 60 in all your classes for the whole year to be able to continue on and get funding for further education. There are a lot of restrictions to get the money we need to go to school.

Make it available. They should be able to give us funding for trying to go on to school.

Arnold (Curve Lake Elder) – That is why we need the AES. (Anishabek Education System: <http://sayyestoaes.ca/>.) We need our own education system.

Deborah (Curve Lake Councillor) – There are people who think we get our education for free that is untrue, we've paid for our education by our land, resources, culture, lives lost, residential schools , Sixties scoop , pretty much all of the trauma we've gone throughout history. It's time that we take back our lives and use all the resources we can to make our lives better for the children now and future generations. The money we receive now for education is not nearly enough and a lot of it gets used up on administration fees.

Nathalie (Curve Lake) – When we went to high school it was hard. The teachers picked favourites. In Grade 7 my teacher told me that I looked at her weird and so she yelled at me in front of everyone. She told me to get out and I went to the office.

Dainna (Curve Lake) – The same teacher made me run the track after I had sprained my ankle and tore my knee ligaments. She's still there.

Nathalie (Curve Lake) – It was mostly discrimination on the Curve Lake kids. If I wanted a pencil she would make me leave my shoes with her until I gave the pencil back.

We adapted to it because we knew we would be treated differently.

One of the teacher's helpers, an older lady, was really bad. My friend was walking down the hallway with one shoe on and as we were walking away she said put your shoe on and then we all heard her say "Oh those Native kids they can't even afford shoes." It was Grade 7 or 8.

Nathalie (Curve Lake) – We are never going to forget all of those things that happened to us.

Damian (Mistissini, inland from James Bay and Waskaganish, James Bay Coast) – My grandma said to me, quietly, not to everyone that my school looked the same as when she went to residential school. At that point I was just wondering, how does she feel? Is it re-opening a scar. That is the environment we are in now.

Ruben (Whapmagoostui, Hudson Bay Coast) - I was raised in the community my whole life. Never got a chance to go down south to school.

There's nothing basically to interest you in education. There's nothing that made me want to stay in class. I wanted to drink, I wanted to smoke, I wanted to do drugs. I wanted to do anything else except look at the book. I want programs I could enjoy.

My grandma said to me, quietly... that my school looked the same as when she went to residential school.

I really enjoyed Cree culture (class). We were taught to make a paddle and a sled but then all of the sudden it changed because we had a lack of teachers. There was a lack of resources. They said there was a lack of money.

I got to the point that I was failing classes because I was out on the land all the time. I wanted to get away because there was a lot of alcoholism. So when I got back... I wanted to be back out on the land again.

There's no class to learn how to hunt. I want to teach my nephew, niece, and my daughter even.

In a way I failed myself. I was relying on drugs and alcohol, because I had problems. I didn't know how to deal with those issues so I started drinking just like any other kid on their reserve.

When I was 16 I started not going to school because I was going through a rough time. I was losing friends. I started drinking. I started going down the wrong road.

I did something I really regret. I ended up in a cell.

I did something I really regret and I wanted to kill myself.

They are forcing an education system that is fake on us. What I like is that we get to go to college for free, but in a way that doesn't really help us because most of the things you need for college are not being taught. They are not enforced in our education system. It's a failed education system. I didn't know it was failed until I got here. I thought it was high-end. But I started realizing that after like Grade 6 because anyone who went down south came back and

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Nathalie (Curve Lake) – It would be great to have more teachers from the reserve, more teachers that know traditional learnings, teachers that we can relate to and that would totally understand us: That’s what we want.

Ruben (Whapmagoostui, Hudson Bay Coast) – When Lucas said I can speak Cree really fluently, it really hurt because I felt like I needed to teach them. Seeing [the system] fail is hard.

I feel great that I have that connection to the language, but also it’s eye opening... seeing people who come back to the reservation from school... and seeing them succeeding while we are stuck.

I felt it in my heart when Lucas said that. I didn’t want to show my emotions until right now.

I really love being out on the land. We are losing the land and we are losing interest and we are losing our language and our education system is failing us.

They want us to go to school down south but it’s not helping us as Cree people, as nomadic people who live off the land. Now we are expected to live off of groceries – expensive ones too.

We need an education system that has every Cree language but also had the push of the formal education. It should not be impossible but it feels a long way away.

Damian and Ruben – Basically, the residential schools succeeded.

Damian (Mistissini, inland from James Bay and Waskaganish, James Bay Coast) - The Cree school board has a very, very high percentage of drop-outs coming out of college. Why is that? It’s because they are coming from our failed education system to a very successful education system.

For example, fractions: I learned fractions down south in elementary and then back on the reservation we weren’t learning those until high school.

It’s a system that is designed for us to fail.

What does that do to a person mentally when they fail?

Personally, I went to Ottawa and then came back home and then I went to college and dropped out because I couldn’t do it. I realized that the failed education system worked on me too. Yet, I had been brought up in Ottawa.

I had graduated with the Governor’s Award, and to me a great accomplishment, yet for me my first semester in college I failed. It did something mentally to me. I was depressed for a full year. I was depressed and I started drinking, smoking weed, doing other stuff, far worse things... where did that start from? Because I felt like a failure. I had never failed in my life. I always passed. I was ahead. To go right in and be a failure right off the bat - that did something to me mentally.

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is designed for us to fail.*

Ruben (Whapmagoostui, Hudson Bay Coast) - Once I turned 18, that is when I dropped out. One year away from finishing high school. I was drinking with a friend and went to the bar almost every day and didn't want to go to school because I was really hungover. It stuck, and eventually I was binge drinking.

I didn't have interest in school. They didn't give me anything to be interested in except for a diploma, and there's nothing culturally for us.

Mental health

Nathalie (Curve Lake) - When you are on the reserve there isn't much to do and everybody knows your business. People talk about you behind your back because they know you, and have nothing better to do, and then you get brought down. They see you and they pick on you and you become a target. That can lead to addictions and suicide and all these mental health problems.

The education system could help if there were more programs – we have programs but not a lot of people attend them anymore because people don't know what they are about and it can be time consuming.

There is more the government could do to help with mental health and addictions issues.

Social media can help too. We have all these resources, but if you don't know that they are available to you, how are you supposed to be able to use them?

It would be great to have someone or something that was available at all hours. Someone who can work through issues with you, here, on the reserve, and someone who knows what it's like living here.

There is more the government could do to help with mental health and addictions issues.

I feel like people in the community could relate more. Bringing resources on the reserve would be good. Getting people, even youth, involved in providing help for future youth. Youth now could be counsellors later on. If we come up with things NOW that we need in the community, we might be able to help out youth on the reserve in the future.

We need more youth in Curve Lake to speak out like we are.

The Youth Committee goes to events, and speaks out, and we would like more youth in our community to speak out. We want to speak with people who are involved in government who can provide us with help.

Dainna (Curve Lake) – There are a lot of youth who don't want to speak out because they are afraid. If you tell someone something it could be the bully's mom. And suddenly – boom! – you are getting bullied even more. It's too close out here.

Nathalie (Curve Lake) – The government could help with jobs. Providing more opportunities for the youth to get out there and do something, to stop them from doing things they shouldn't be doing.

Bryerson (Curve Lake) – What I think is that we need to be taught better ways to cope with the bullying. Because we aren't going to change the person who is being an asshole next to us: They're not going to change.

You got to learn to deal with it. You got to learn how to tune those people out. You've got to learn to deal with it in healthy ways. You've got to learn to love yourself and be yourself. Those people are in a dark place. It's not okay, but they need to focus on themselves and be the best version of themselves that they can be.

There are people out there that know how to communicate and have learned from experience – but at the end of the day, it's what feels best for you. You have to trust your own instinct and your own gut. You can find someone who can help you, but it's a tool – a guide to help you through.

I've been in the hospital on two separate occasions for mental health and I learned all this from being around people who are trained in helping others – and it really helped me in being in that safe space where you could do arts, crafts, cook, play music, and you could take time to really find yourself. You could really be yourself with the workers and tell them how you were feeling. If you are ready to take the help, it can help you, but you have to be ready to take the help.

Having someone available 24/7 and knowing that someone that genuinely cares and wants to build a relationship with you definitely would help. Someone who is open and friendly and someone who will build a relationship and really cares – that does really help.

Education and mental health both relate to youth directly.

Lucas (Chisasibi, James Bay Coast) - Education and mental health are so intertwined. Education and mental health are just like two and two together.

Bryerson (Curve Lake) – I mean, sometimes kids get in trouble for leaving class when they are choosing flight (over fight.) And kids will get in trouble for taking themselves out of that system even when it's clear that they are upset. At my high school my vice principal clearly had zero mental health training.

Nathalie (Curve Lake) – I agree with Bryerson 110%. You can't just sit in a classroom when you have so much going on in your head and when all you can think about is how shitty you've been treated by the people around you. You aren't thinking about math you are thinking about how you are going to be treated when the class is over. It's hard to focus on what really matters when you are having so many problems with your peers.

Dainna (Curve Lake) – I agree. The school doesn't do anything when you are having issues.

Traditional Ways

Damian (Mistissini, inland from James Bay and Waskaganish, James Bay Coast) – I have guys who have taught me things off of the land and they talk about politics and science and they know these things because they see them, they look, they experience, and it shows you: You don't need to learn from a book, you can learn in different ways.

I'm starting to learn about the history and what happened to us. I recently posted a status (on social media) saying youth back home can get into self-healing. I see people back home posting openly that they are tired and want to end it but no one is going up to them and saying try this – no one is trying to help them.

Back home it's Christian or nothing else. I just said [in my social media post] that it's not the only way.

Being here I've learned this. Smudging helps. I asked if I could do it at Trent where I'm working. I asked my supervisor and then I felt great. Back home they say that smudging brings demons – that is how they look at it now because it is very Christian back home.

You can't just point out one problem, there's one problem then another then another you have to keep them all in mind... so the round table is great, but it's got a lot of parts.

I think the government could get more directly involved.

Why don't they come see themselves what is happening with us? Why don't they see the environment we are in?

It's give and take. It's knowledge, which comes from experience. Have they seen our dirt roads or Ruben's home with no roads; you have to fly there. Do they know that a case of water costs \$60?

For the government to try and help us I think it would be better if they came to see what they are trying to fix.

You can't follow this road blindly. It's a wind-y road – very wind-y.

Ruben (Whapmagoostui, Hudson Bay Coast) - Being out on the land is surviving in nature. You provide for yourself and you try to provide for the people around you by what you kill, fishing and hunting.

Our nomadic lifestyle is fading, but it's there (in part) if you want to... it's pretty fun.

I probably could be a teacher if this was a class in a future education system.

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