

Report on The National Forum 2000 and National Forum Youth during and after the Conference on War-Affected Children

Gimli, Manitoba

Program

In Gimli, Manitoba, 50 Canadian and 25 International delegates gathered to talk about how war has affected each of them. Through a variety of mediums they told their personal stories and discussed the impact of war on them, their peers and families, and what young people can do. Meetings between the National Forum and The International Youth Delegates Meeting were separate and shared.

The "Canadian" youth came from a wide variety of backgrounds: some had been in Canada a few months, others several years, others born here. The born-in-Canada youth came from a mix of francophone, anglophone and aboriginal backgrounds, rural and urban. Backgrounds of others included Colombian, Mexican, Sudanese, Kosovar, Nigerian, Ethiopian, Kurdish, Salvadoran, Iranian, Iraqi, Somalian, and Trinidadian. The international youth came from 16 different countries, with some overlap with the youth from Canada.

The question of "what is a Canadian" was a charged one, for many of the youth identified more with the international youth and their stories, and when talking used the words "my country" to describe the country they had recently left.

We mention this as significant in terms of Canadian policy, because often in the Winnipeg program, the Canadian "war-affected" delegates expressed to us that both the media and conference organizers seemed to place a higher priority on the "international" delegates and their experiences than the delegates from Canada. There would seem to be a significant area of work to be done in terms of looking at how international events significantly affect foreign-born youth in Canada, because of their emotional, and psychological connections to their countries and cultures of origin. In Canadian schools, youth delegates said it was often a area of conflict. It also could provide a significant "teaching" opportunity for making the study of international events and history more relevant to both Canadian born and foreign born students in this country. This was a sensitive issue for the youth. The aboriginal youth also, although quieter in voicing their issues, were steadily pointing out the effects of "occupation" to their peers who were ready to listen. This point came home in one of the small group discussions, when one youth was suggesting that an aboriginal protest had no business at a war-affected children's conference and someone asked "well, whose land do you think you're sitting on?" That table was silent as the penny dropped. In terms of terms of the program, we would recommend that in a blended event of this nature, some time be spent during the program with all delegates together actively discussing the differences in their situations.

The program encouraged a variety of non-verbal activities to accommodate more than 16 languages and set a tone for communal activity, not always based on language. Youthful facilitators and activity leaders encouraged a casual, relaxed approach, with youth seen to be leading and at the front of the room. Games included impromptu dancing lessons, hand and clapping games, and spoons. The informal activities and youth leadership activities were facilitated and led by The Students Commission.

The formal non-verbal program involving art and movement was created and organized by Linda Dale and shared with the National Forum delegates. Large murals were painted by groups, on canvas to display images of what they have seen, felt, heard, and remembered. The murals were then presented to each other, as a means of opening up discussion and sharing information.

