

Incorporating Indigenous Knowledge within Student Supports: Elder-in-Residence Position

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Abstract

Student supports are most effective when they are tailored to meet the needs of the student body. Aboriginal students comprise a particularly vulnerable Canadian student body, given the gap that remains between non-Aboriginal students and Aboriginal students in regards to completion rates. Aboriginal student retention remains problematic despite mandates to be culturally inclusive in the classroom, and the inclusion of language credit options, Aboriginally focused curricula, and culturally appropriate resources. As educators, part of our complex role includes finding creative ways to engage and support our students. One way to assist educators in engaging Aboriginal students within the school community is to have an Elder in residence who could work with both staff and students.

Given the inter-generational trauma of the Residential School system, locations of First Nations communities, poverty, mobility, and socio-economic factors, it is not surprising that, at present, Aboriginal peoples are struggling to complete high school or post-secondary education. The addition of an Elder-in-Residence position would assist education centres in dealing with many of the challenges that Aboriginal learners face through addressing students' spiritual needs, mentoring and promoting cultural awareness, and enhancing the incorporation of Aboriginal perspectives.

Within First Nations communities, Elders are respected, older members of the community who are often active members of council, advisors, healers, and teachers. For Aboriginal peoples, the term *Elder* can have many meanings, and an Elder can have many roles. Stiegelbauer (1996) explained how a person is given the title as follows: "Elders are not born, they are not appointed, they emerge as the sum total of the experiences of life, they are a state of being" (p. 50). In most cases, an older person in the community is considered an Elder based upon his/her life experiences and how he/she has reconnected with traditions, culture, and the community. It is through life experiences, what the person has learned, and how he/she has returned to traditional ways to continue on the journey and share knowledge through a commitment of helping others that qualifies a person as an Elder (Stiegelbauer). Each Elder has his/her own area of expertise and may be sought out for specific roles. Currently in education, western-based practices are dominating modes used for teaching and supporting learners. However, this system is failing Aboriginal learners, and new methods and supports must be explored to assist Aboriginal learners to complete their educational goals.

At the Aboriginal Community Campus¹ in Winnipeg, Manitoba, administration and staff are aware of the complex issues that many Aboriginal peoples face, and provide additional services to assist adult students. Currently, the campus provides support through housing, day-care, advocacy, literacy, mature diploma programming, student support liaisons, employment, and post-secondary education counselling. As well, students can be referred to, and access additional supports on site including two Elders. Despite the many supports education centres provide, there remains a holistic aspect in education centres, which continues to be unaddressed. The addition of an Elder-in-Residence position would provide education centres

¹ The author of this article is the Assistant Director of Education at the Aboriginal Community Campus in Winnipeg. The information that she discloses about this Adult Education Centre derives from her first-hand knowledge of this Aboriginal campus.

with a wealth of Indigenous knowledge and help to reach the goal of providing a holistic education to students.

There are a variety of reasons for adult education centres to include an Elder-in-Residence position in their facility. First, Aboriginal peoples make up 4.3% of the Canadian population, which amounts to over one million Aboriginal peoples in Canada (Government of Canada, 2011, Discussion section, para. 1). The rising population of Aboriginal peoples suggests that services such as educational institutions must prepare for an influx of Aboriginal students in the near future. Second, since the signing of the Constitution Act and the numbered Treaties, the Federal Government of Canada has claimed responsibility for Aboriginal peoples, including their education. Education is also a provincial, territorial, and First Nations responsibility. The Federal government is responsible for First Nations elementary and secondary education on reserves, managed by the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (Simeone, 2011). Although the provinces and territories are responsible for Aboriginal education through educational programs, departments and schools, for delivery of education to those off reserve, First Nations authorities will gain more control over First Nations education through the proposed First Nations Control over First Nations Education Act, Bill-C-33 (Government of Canada, 2014). Because education is a joint responsibility, there are many issues that all parties cannot agree upon, which hinder the progress, development, maintenance, and success of educational programs. Third, the majority of people who do not complete high school enter the work force instead of continuing some form of adult education. This lack of education has created problems because not enough skilled Aboriginal tradespeople or professionals are entering and contributing to the workforce (Sharpe, Arsenault, & Lapointe, 2007). Education is by far the most important determinant of labour market outcomes, and also plays a preeminent role improving social outcomes.

The state of Aboriginal education affects not just Aboriginal peoples, but everyone, and is an issue that cannot be easily remedied. For current educators, it is difficult to understand the possible underlying issues that may be affecting their Aboriginal students. Issues such as academic success, lack of preparation, time, commitment by schools, students or families, or perhaps a lack of cross-cultural training, curriculum, and student supports may be affecting Aboriginal students' completion of high school and post-secondary education. There remains much racism in the current education system within institutions, curriculum, training, languages, accessibility, and assessment processes, as well as scepticism and avoidance on the part of educators to be culturally inclusive to Aboriginal students (Neeganagwedgin, 2013). Many in the field of education believe that incorporating Aboriginal perspectives into the curriculum is a way of catering to one cultural group while ignoring the multicultural environment of the classroom (St. Denis, 2011). Nevertheless, including Aboriginal perspectives into the curriculum is necessary to address a variety of issues.

The addition of an Elder-in-Residence position complements many of the recommendations that have been outlined in reports and in provincial legislation. In 1972, administrative powers were given to First Nations authorities after the National Indian Brotherhood (Assembly of Aboriginal peoples) published a report entitled, *Indian Control over Indian Education*, and the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development accepted the report and took steps to initiate an Aboriginal education action plan (Antone, 2010). Following the release of the *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (RCAP) report in 1990, it became apparent that Aboriginal people's issues, including education, were in dire need of solutions, as little was being accomplished despite various programs and initiatives.

The key issues as initially stated in the RCAP report were repeated in the 2002 report, *Our Children: Keepers of Sacred Knowledge*, released by the Minister's National Working Group on Education. The report stated a need to grant more authority to Aboriginal peoples and assist in the development of programs and organizations, with adequate funding and resources for these programs. There were recommendations to acknowledge, protect, and incorporate Indigenous knowledge in education by all levels of government.

In the 2002 report, there was a strong recommendation for more Elder, family, and community involvement in decision making, planning, and implementing education. As well, the report acknowledged the need to create more early childhood development programs and special needs programs, resources and services, and an increased need for more gifted education research, programs, and funding within Aboriginal education. Teacher recruitment, training, and retention must include more cultural training to incorporate Aboriginal perspectives into curricula and planning. Lastly, this report noted that post-secondary education needs to be more accessible to Aboriginal students and the issue of racism in educational institutions needs to be addressed (Minister's National Working Group on Education, 2002). Many of these recommendations parallel the role of an Elder-in-Residence position in education centres.

The Aboriginal Community Campus, for example, has designed its supports and programs with many of the above recommendations in mind. The majority of the student population on campus is of Aboriginal descent, and have reported struggled as youth academically and with various other complex issues such as poverty, violence, addictions, mental illness, learning disabilities, health issues, single parenting, inadequate affordable housing, lack of transportation, legal issues, and language barriers. Just as incorporating Aboriginal perspectives into the curriculum is crucial, incorporating Indigenous knowledge in student support services, preferably by means of an Elder in Residence, is also necessary for education centres.

Support services currently in place, such as the Student Support Liaison position or Student Counsellor as currently available in many schools, are invaluable in assisting with advocacy, counselling, guidance, resources, post-secondary guidance, employment counselling, referrals, and attendance reporting. Because many of these duties are part of a more Western, contemporary approach to student support, there remains a major component of adopting a holistic approach to education that remains unaddressed, which is spirituality. An Elder has the prerequisite experience to address this neglected area in a holistic approach to education.

Elders are carriers and teachers of Indigenous knowledge, which has been defined in a variety of ways throughout history. Through the lens of a Eurocentric, imperialist view, Indigenous knowledge was considered folklore, devalued, and considered inferior to Western knowledge and methods (Neeganagwedgin, 2013). As more Aboriginal scholars have emerged and more fields of study have become interested in Indigenous knowledge, there is now a resurgence of validation of Indigenous knowledge and traditional learning structures (Battiste, 2005). Some of the challenges facing Aboriginal education in Canada are the incorporation of Aboriginal perspectives into the curriculum, proper supports, and engaging Aboriginal students.

In a study conducted by Friedel (2011), Aboriginal youth took part in a place-based study that connected Aboriginal youth with ancestral lands. An Elder was used to transmit traditional knowledge about land and uses, which engaged the students who, in turn, developed a sense of community with their peers. Attempts to incorporate Aboriginal perspectives into the curriculum without Elder participation are destined to fail, as there is no cultural understanding of the complexity of Aboriginal history or cultures.

Indigenous knowledge, or traditional knowledge that Elders possess, is information passed on from generation to generation. Therefore, Indigenous knowledge is community based in the sense that everything is connected and learning is gained through the experiences of interactions amongst family, friends, community, spirits, the land, animals, or plant life (Little Bear, 2009). In education there is room for Indigenous knowledge because it complements educational practices in the sense of building classroom communities in which students learn collectively.

Elders have a variety of methods of gaining, transmitting and sharing knowledge, which may include storytelling, ceremonies, medicines, beliefs, traditions, art, dance, music, languages, or skill and personal gift development. This information is considered necessary for an individual, so that he or she may learn to live a balanced life. Traditional knowledge is often based upon some form of the Medicine Wheel, depending on cultural beliefs. The basic concept of the wheel

is that an individual must find balance in four basic areas of the self: spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical. Numerous teachings are contained within the Medicine Wheel, which provides a person, including many Elders, with a holistic framework by which to live one's life.

The difference between a holistic approach that an Elder would use and a Western approach is that traditional Aboriginal peoples look beyond just the physical self, while Western cultures believe in meeting one's own physical needs in order for a person to develop in a healthy manner. There is little recognition of meeting spiritual needs in a scientific framework; instead, there is a focus on meeting physical and psychological needs. In relation to education, adult education centres provide a student with the basic needs; however, little, if anything is done to nurture students' spiritual needs.

An Elder-in-Residence would provide students with culturally appropriate supports, including addressing spirituality, which has been greatly contested in being included in education (Neeganagwedjin, 2013). However, Indigenous knowledge and learning is a spiritual process that cannot be separated from one or the other (Assembly of First Nations, 2012). In education, is not necessarily the inclusion of spirituality into the curriculum that is required, but the approaches educators use in their teaching methods. An Elder would teach staff new holistic methods of instruction in order to engage Aboriginal students. Elder programs validate Aboriginal ways of knowing and put an Aboriginal person front and centre as the knower, thereby privileging an Aboriginal perspective by an Aboriginal person.

Similarly, as in the Medicine Wheel, the four aspects of a person must be in balance with one another for a person to live a healthy, fulfilling life. Education focuses on the mental and physical aspects, while the emotional and spiritual aspects are often neglected. An Elder can provide spiritual guidance and assist Aboriginal students to reconnect emotionally with themselves and their cultural identity. Through ceremony, story-telling, counselling, cultural teachings, feasting, and medicines, an Elder would be able to identify a student's spiritual needs, whereas a student support liaison, or counsellor, may not feel comfortable or knowledgeable enough in Indigenous traditions and practices.

Through mentoring, an Elder would guide a student and act as a positive role model in regards to living a healthy, balanced lifestyle. Many adult Aboriginal learners carry adult problems that hinder the continuation of their education and goals. An Elder would teach staff and students how to balance their lives and strengthen the sense of community on campus. Through classroom teachings, workshops, or ceremonies, an Elder would provide the time and space for staff and students to incorporate spirituality and cultural teachings into their lives as part of their education experience. By building upon the strength of the campus community and incorporating cultural activities, an Elder would strengthen staff and student relations, which would assist in the retention of students and help students to become engaged in the learning process.

Students are more engaged in their learning process when they feel a connection to their teachers as well as a connection to the materials being taught. Despite new resources and materials available that incorporate Aboriginal perspectives into curricula, there remains disengagement, or a lack of cultural awareness, on the part of educators. An Elder-in-Residence would bridge this gap for instructors, by providing staff with a sense of cultural awareness that would be passed onto students in the classroom and at campus events.

In a study conducted by Stewart (2013), Aboriginal counsellors and clients were interviewed about promoting Indigenous mental health and healing when counselling Aboriginal clients. Having a strong sense of cultural identity was considered a crucial means for a person to attain and maintain mental health, and the act of finding and strengthening that identity was part of the healing process. As in counselling, education provides a platform in which students learn new concepts, which alter their concept of self and their identities. Elders can teach instructors to be sensitive and aware of the type of cultural identity that they are building in their classrooms.

An Elder who understands the broad worldview of Aboriginal peoples would be able to work with staff to explore this worldview. In turn, an instructor who understands the complexities of

Aboriginal cultures would have a better understanding of how to adapt course materials to create more culturally appropriate resources and teaching methods. As a result, adult Aboriginal learners would feel more comfortable and experience a sense of belonging, which would help them to engage more in the materials and campus community (Wotherspoon, 1998).

Because many Adult Aboriginal learners have complex issues to deal with on a daily basis, it is necessary to provide culturally appropriate student supports in education centres. Through the addition of an Elder-in-Residence position, provisions for student support would be made by the Elder through the sharing of his or her Indigenous knowledge with staff and students alike, which would build upon students' sense of cultural identity and connectedness to the campus community and community at large.

The inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives into the curriculum is but one step toward the reformation of education for Aboriginal peoples. Providing culturally appropriate student supports, such as an Elder in residence, is also necessary to support, develop, and nurture not just adult Aboriginal learners, but all Aboriginal students.

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