

DR. STIRLING MCDOWELL  
*Foundation*  
FOR  
RESEARCH INTO TEACHING



# TEACHING AND LEARNING RESEARCH EXCHANGE

## Asokan (The Bridge): Teachers' Work with Elders

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Project #188  
2009

This research was partially funded through a grant from the McDowell Foundation. However, the points of view and opinions expressed in project documents are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foundation.

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# Acknowledgements

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We would like to express our gratitude for the generosity of the teachers who participated in the study and for their willingness to engage in a meaningful dialogue about their experiences with the Elders in Residence Program.

We would also like to thank the Regina Public School Board for supporting the project and for giving us opportunities to engage teachers in a dialogue about their experiences in working with the Elders in Residence Program.

The Stirling McDowell Foundation was instrumental in enabling this research to take place through their funding to support improvement of teacher practice.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge and to thank Elder Ken Goodwill for his insight and guidance throughout this research project.

# Introduction to Research Project

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System-wide programs involving Aboriginal Elders in provincial schools are a new area of endeavour in Saskatchewan. Consequently, there is limited research regarding teaching practice with Elders that pertains directly to the Saskatchewan experience. This study, *Asokan (The Bridge): Teachers' Work with Elders*, represents an initial exploration into the experience of teachers who work with Elders in the Regina Public Schools Elders in Residence Program (EIRP). This report will provide a context, a description of the study, and a summary of findings, as well as recommendations for future directions in the area of Elders' work in provincial schools.

# Background Information

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## DEMOGRAPHICS AND CONTEXT

On the recommendation of their Elders Advisory Committee, the Regina Public School Division implemented the Elders in Residence Program in the 2006-2007 school year. The Elders in Residence Program is an innovative system-wide response to the many challenges First Nations and Métis students experience in provincial school systems. The cumulative effects of colonization and assimilationist policies and practices are reflected in the disparity between the achievement rates of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students at all levels. Coupled with the lower achievement rates are current demographic trends that indicate a rising birthrate for Aboriginal peoples, a population that has a greater number of young people, and Saskatchewan as a province that has one of the highest Aboriginal proportional populations in Canada. All of these complex factors necessitate an immediate and effective response that results in a more successful educational experience for Aboriginal students.

The Elders in Residence Program is a school division program that aligns with the current policies of the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education. The Ministry, through the Continuous Improvement Framework, supports school divisions to set goals in three areas of priority: higher literacy and achievement, equitable opportunities and outcomes for all, and smooth transitions. The Elders in Residence Program supports teachers' work with Elders to find ways to integrate their expertise into the normal functioning of the school classroom, thereby supporting the Ministry priority of supporting equitable opportunities and outcomes for Aboriginal students (Regina Public Schools, 2008).

## ESTABLISHING THE PROGRAM

In response to the changing demographics and context identified above, the Regina Public School Division established the Elders Advisory Council in the 2004-2005 school year to serve as an advisory board to the Regina Public School Trustees. The Elders expressed a desire to have Elders from the community work with students and school personnel to build relations and to create ethical spaces where learning and sharing can occur. The Elders in Residence Program was a result of this recommendation from the Elders Council and the Trustees.

Based on discussions with teachers from three community high schools (Cochrane, Scott and Thom) who had previously worked with Elders in their classrooms, and the publication of the Saskatchewan Education document, *Aboriginal Elders and Community Workers in Schools: A Guide for School Divisions and Their Partners* (Saskatchewan Education, 2001), the Elders in Residence Program was established. Schools were first approached to determine if they wanted to participate in the program and were then required to have Aboriginal education goals in place, including an outline of their plans on how they hoped to achieve those goals.

During this first year, there were eight participating schools, and the program was co-funded by the school division's Aboriginal education budget and the participating schools. The following year, the school program increased to 21 schools and the program received additional financial support from the Ministry of Education. The program expanded to 31 schools in 2008-09, when further

additional funding was secured from the Federal Government through the Urban Aboriginal Strategy. Of the 31 schools currently involved, 17 are community schools and 14 are non-community schools.

School division staff selected Elders who had substantial lived experience in the Aboriginal community. The Elders were approached, offered tobacco, and asked if they would be willing to participate in the program. Remuneration for Elders was set at an amount equivalent to a substitute teacher salary and each entered into personal services contracts with the school division.

In addition to this study of initiatives in Aboriginal education, student success data is currently being collected that will be included in the Continuous Improvement Framework plan.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of Elders working with teachers and students in the school setting has been gaining ground in recent years. The positive outcomes range from a greater understanding of Aboriginal cultures to a more critical review of the school system and the values inherent in that system. When Elders bring authentic cultural experiences to the classroom, they build bridges of understanding between various stakeholders (Sparks, 2000b). Marker (1998) suggests that Elders have the ability to act as “cultural brokers” within the school. They help to give Aboriginal teachers and students confidence to express their culture, while providing understanding to non-Aboriginal staff regarding protocols, history, and cultural teachings. Morelli and Fong (2000) suggest that if an authentic relationship exists, teachers will begin to naturally examine some of their own teaching practices and broader structural inequities that may exist in schools and in education in general. Other research suggests that in order for Elder involvement in schools to be successful, a solid and productive relationship between teacher and Elder is necessary (Cooke-Dallin, Underwood, & Underwood, 2000; Freedman & Jaffe, 1993; Lipka, Mohatt, & the Ciulistet Group, 1998).

# The Research Project

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This research project examined the implementation of the Elders in Residence Program from the teachers' perspective in both high schools and elementary schools. The question that guided the research was:

*How can teachers work effectively with Elders in school programming to improve learning for Aboriginal and other students?*

The aim of the research was to gain a deeper understanding of how teachers in Regina Public Schools work with Elders to improve learning for students.

## PARTICIPANTS

The project brought together 15 teachers, including one administrator/teacher, from elementary and high schools. The diversity of participants accurately reflected the diversity of teachers working with Elders. All participants were employees of the Regina Public School Board.

## METHODOLOGY

Using qualitative research, the experiences of teachers involved with the Elders in Residence Program were examined. The research team conducted four data collection sessions with the teachers and one final supper meeting to share and to validate a summary of the findings. Prior to each session, the research team, including Elder Ken Goodwill, met to plan sessions and, after each subsequent session, met to discuss previously gathered data and to plan succeeding sessions.

Over the course of the year, there were four focus group meetings with all participants. Initially, each meeting began with the whole group to introduce teachers to the research project. In subsequent meetings, the whole group was presented with the initial data analysis of the last session and was provided with an opportunity for discussion and feedback. For the latter part of each session, participants were divided into three smaller discussion groups, each with a research leader and data recorder. The groupings allowed for detailed, yet focused, questioning to occur and for all members of the group to participate in a meaningful way. The groups consisted of the same members for each of the four data collection sessions, helping to create an atmosphere of comfort and familiarity for the participants and contributing to responses reflective of the teachers' authentic experiences with Elders.

A focused conversation approach was used to structure the dialogue amongst the teachers for the first two meetings. Focused conversation is a method designed to develop the capacity of participants to "observe events . . . , to connect new information with previous experiences, to interpret the impact and the meaning of those experiences, and to act on insights" (Nelson, 2001, p. 29). Based on the main question guiding the research, further questions were developed to take participants through the four phases of a focused conversation: the objective level where facts and experiences are recalled, the reflective level where the internal impact or response to the experience is explored, the interpretative level where meaning and significance are identified, and the decisional level that enables groups or individuals to make decisions about the future. Focused conversations have been used by Regina Public Schools in other work with

teachers, so teachers were familiar with this technique for structured sharing of information and for planning future action.

A series of questions was prepared to guide the small group discussion. Session one focused on teachers' experience in working with the Elders in Residence Program. Session two focused on teachers' perception of students' experiences with the Elders in Residence Program

The responses of the participants were collected and sorted into themes, which were then analyzed by the researchers to gain deeper insight into the teachers' experience with the Elders in Residence Program. Following the initial two meetings, researchers reviewed the analysis and a discussion guideline was developed based on themes arising from initial data.

This project brought together teachers who were involved in this innovative school programming to build a knowledge base of their effective practices. Relationships amongst participants were developed that created a network of professionals with knowledge and experience working with Elders. This network can provide teachers with support and can educate other teachers who are interested in incorporating Elders into learning and teaching.

# Research Findings

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In examining the implementation of the Elders in Residence Program, teachers described the multifaceted nature of the EIRP. The examples of Elder involvement provided by the teacher participants were as diverse as the Elders themselves. The themes of the teachers' rich stories included the impact that Elders had on the school, on the learning environment, on themselves, and on their students. Teachers described the evolving nature of both the program and their personal and professional relationships with the Elders. They shared the challenges of the program implementation and also identified the emerging effective practice.

In this section, teacher quotations are used extensively to capture the voices of the teachers. Sometimes direct quotes were edited for readability and confidentiality. In some cases, teacher quotes are taken from researcher notes and represent a summary of teachers' conversations.

## THE IMPACT OF THE ELDERS IN RESIDENCE PROGRAM

“Are the Elders changing the schools, or are the schools changing the Elders?”

Ken Goodwill, 2009

The overall goal of the EIRP is to improve the success of Indigenous students. The role of the Elders is to: enact Indigenous worldviews and imbed Indigenous philosophies and cultural values in the schools, connect with students and build community relationships, assist teachers in implementing Indigenous content, and provide instructional support in Indigenous education to school staffs (Favel & Racette, 2009).

As Elders became immersed in school and classroom programming, the effect they had on the school, on the students, and on the teachers was profound. They supported the school programming through their interactions with students, teachers and community members. Their involvement differed depending on the school communities they served and also reflected the diversity of the Elders themselves.

## THE ELDERS' PRESENCE IN THE SCHOOL AND CLASS

In our conversations with teachers as part of the examination of Elder roles and responsibilities, teacher participants were asked to identify, in a broader sense, how Elders contribute to student learning. Participants responded by stating that Elders had a certain magic—that they conducted their interactions with students in such a way as to have positive impacts on student behaviour, attendance, and participation. In doing so, they had a positive impact on relationships within the classroom and the school that improves the school climate for all students.

The philosophy of the medicine wheel guides the Elders' actions and interactions. It is a holistic view of development that includes socio-emotional, intellectual, physical, and spiritual aspects of a person. Elders focus on students'

development as people, not just on learning academics. This approach conveys a personal interest in students and a caring for them as individuals. The teachers indicated that this stance by Elders engendered a deep respect from the students that seemed to come more easily than with other school staff.

*The Elders have a quiet confidence and take a genuine interest in the students that demonstrates respect and the students give that right back.*

In addition to the student-Elder relationship, Elders affect student-student relationships. As they teach values, Elders clarify how students can enact those values in their lives and remind the students to think about their respect for themselves and for others in their daily lives.

*With young children, the Elder asks students to “Make sure whatever comes out of your mouth is clean, to say kind things about others.”*

As Elders share their Indigenous worldviews and cultures, they teach students that there are different ways of being in the world. Learning to see things from a First Nations or Métis perspective helps students accept, appreciate, and value differences.

*The Elders model another point of view and students begin to notice differences, that accepting others' ideas is the norm. That reaffirms the acceptance of differences.*

Valuing difference is one important aspect of reducing discrimination. Through their teachings, the Elders engender respect within the school for Aboriginal people in general. Their very presence challenges students'—and sometimes teachers'—misconceptions of Aboriginal peoples. Challenging misconceptions and stereotyping is an important change to make school a place of belonging for all students, especially Indigenous students.

*There seems to be less dismissive talk about issues in the headlines and more trying to understand these issues [facing Indigenous peoples]. I'm not sure if this is a spin off, but I want to believe that there is a connection with the Elder being in the school and a sober second thought to current events.*

Beyond the respectful, caring atmosphere that Elders brought to the schools, in some schools, Elders provided essential services in helping schools and students deal with tragedy and grief. The selection process used to identify Elders to work in the school meant that many of them have community experience in supporting people in times of crisis. They knew the appropriate action to take when people experience the loss of a loved one and were skilled at reaching out to people.

*We've had a few tragedies in our school. The first time we had Elders in the school, they really helped pull the students and the staff through the tragedy. We set up a room where the students could go and be with the Elders. The students had a chance to express their grief, sorrow or confusion. The Elders have gone out to homes and visited with families as well.*

The Elders were an integral part of the collective expression of loss, helping students to find ways to express their feelings around the disappearance of their

fellow student and friend. Together with staff, Elders were able to bring the students, staff, and community together to express the strong emotions that arise in times of tragedy.

*Community building is happening. We had a big assembly for our missing student. The grade elevens put together a PowerPoint on the issue of missing women and the missing girl. The mother and the family came to the assembly. The students were so respectful. The Elder did an amazing prayer for the family and talked to the girls about staying safe in the community with Easter holidays coming up.*

Collective rituals, even in times of grief, help build connections—a feeling that others care about, and are willing to acknowledge, the feelings of anger and sorrow that accompany acts of violence or loss. The above quote also illustrates how Elders are able to speak to those feelings while using the gathering to educate others, to prevent another girl from going missing, reminding the Indigenous students that our community is not always a safe place for them.

The Elders serve a different role than teachers in schools. They view the students differently than the teachers do and their presence in the schools is having an impact on the students, staff, school climate, and community. Their different approach is also having an impact on the learning environment.

## ELDERS' IMPACT ON THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The Elders in Residence Program supports the Saskatchewan policy implementation of the integration of Indigenous content in all curriculum areas (Saskatchewan Education, Training and Employment, 1989). The goal of this policy is to improve education for Aboriginal students and to increase cultural understanding for non-Aboriginal students. Provincially, although teachers have been mandated to integrate Indigenous content throughout the curriculum since 1989, the “change envisioned by [this policy and others] has been slow and sometimes meets with resistance” (St. Denis, Bouvier, & Battiste, 1998, p. 75). Even in schools with high proportions of Aboriginal students, Longman (2003) found that integration of Aboriginal content in the curriculum falls short of mandated expectations. In their discussions, teachers indicated that Elders are providing the link that has often been missing in the implementation of this policy.

Elders are an important resource for teachers who are sometimes unsure of what the Aboriginal perspective is. Many teachers feel that they don't have enough accurate knowledge to teach about Indigenous cultures in their classroom. They are reluctant to include information that they think may be inaccurate or misrepresent the reality of Indigenous peoples. Elders support and provide the impetus for teachers to bring cultural knowledge of Métis and First Nations people into their teaching.

*I felt a sense of relief when I heard I would be working with an Elder. The Elder would be another resource and a bona fide resource in an area I don't have a whole lot of knowledge in.*

Teaching and curriculum implementation are complex acts. Working with Elders made integration of Indigenous content easier for teachers as teachers were able

to observe how the Elder integrates Indigenous knowledge into the various curricula. Teachers reported that Elders seemed to provide a natural segue to the introduction and sequencing of Aboriginal content in the curriculum. Elders often had localized knowledge that was not available from other sources.

*I had the Elder come in and talk about the Saulteaux seven stone philosophy. She's so well spoken and knowledgeable, how she goes about saying it. That's beyond anything I can repeat with a textbook.*

As indicated in the above quote, teachers reported that it wasn't just what the Elders taught, but how they taught, that impacted the learning environment. Often Elders would use an approach that personalized learning for students—to make it meaningful in their lives outside of school. This approach engaged not just Aboriginal students, but all students in learning.

*I teach visual arts. The Elder came up with the idea for a project. In class the Elder led discussions around colours and symbolism and then the students did a painting where they created their own symbolism. It was really good for the students because they all started to give opinions, even quiet students. The students were really excited about and engaged in the project.*

Elders contribute to student learning by ensuring that the representation of Indigenous knowledge in the curriculum is authentic and accurate. In one classroom, the Elder took the Teaching Treaties kit home to study it in preparation for his presentation on the First Nations' perspectives of treaties.

The authentic representation is important to counteract the misconceptions many people have regarding Aboriginal people. The teachers were of the opinion that the Elders were making significant contributions to cultural understanding in their schools and classrooms. The negative perceptions of Indigenous peoples continue to be all too prevalent in our society and in our schools (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003) and these views are reflected in the student population.

*The Elder talked to the students about stereotyping Aboriginal people. Even some Aboriginal students have misperceptions of how they should act, what they should look like, and how they talk.*

Racial attitudes, with their accompanying discriminatory behaviour, begin to develop at a young age in children (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). Although negative images of Indigenous peoples continue to be a part of the lives of children, Elders, with their positive messages, authentic representation and respectful demeanour, serve to counteract that message.

*My daughter has been working with the Elder at her school. She wanted a First Nations doll because she finds them beautiful. She views them as being desirable.*

In addition to teaching positive views of First Nations and Métis peoples through their personal stories, the Elders are able to convey the past struggles and hardships endured by Indigenous peoples. Too often, our schools have not accurately represented the reality of Canadian history and its impact on Indigenous peoples. Indigenous educators Gillespie and Murdock (2001) state that knowledge of past colonial practices aids in understanding how the history of Canada impacts social realities today. "If schools do not recognize, and use to

their advantage, the educational history of Aboriginal people, they cannot assist Aboriginal people in the process of reclaiming their past and thereby securing their future” (p. 83). It is also important for non-Aboriginal students to be aware of the reality of our history.

*My own child is in a grade four class where the Elder was speaking about the residential school experience. He was able to empathize with the experience and told me, “I can’t believe that happened to children my age.”*

Along with teaching children some of the hard realities of our shared past, Elders model a sense of humour when it comes to dealing with cultural differences.

*In a kindergarten class, the Elder was sharing what he does. He asked the children what a powwow was. One of the young students replied “It’s a party for Indians” which made us laugh. We need to be able to step back and laugh at ourselves and not take ourselves too seriously. Laughter can build bridges between people, between cultures.*

Through their presence in schools, the Elders support teachers in the implementation of Indigenous content in the curriculum. Their accurate representation and personal stories bring meaning to student learning, assist in the development of positive racial attitudes in children, and foster cultural understanding.

## IMPACT ON TEACHERS

The teachers who were at schools with effective EIRP programs were enthusiastic about their work with Elders. Some even said that their work with Elders and the opportunity to participate in this research project were some of the best professional development opportunities that they had. All agreed that the Elders had as much to offer teachers as they did to the students in the school.

## PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

Teachers who worked with Elders on a regular basis said that Elders support them both personally and professionally. The Elders’ ways of being helped teachers to slow down, to become centred, to refocus on the important things—that teaching is about life as much as it is about the curriculum.

*I can’t separate the professional and personal impact of the Elder. Every time I talk to the Elder, it’s like a magic moment. She pulls me back down to reality and keeps me grounded. As teachers, we always tend to think in terms of the curriculum and the framework of curriculum. It’s like we have the burden of conquering the curriculum, but she reminds me of reality. In doing so, she changes my actions because everything she does is values-based. I have so much to learn from her.*

Because teaching is a human endeavour, situations arise that cause teachers to question themselves. In these situations, the Elder acted as someone who would listen to the teacher without judgment, giving personal support to the teacher. They paid attention to teachers’ concerns for students and reinforced their professional judgment.

*I was in a difficult situation with a student and was being told that I wasn't seeing the whole picture. In my conversation with the Elder, I was crying. I had self doubt and questioned myself because others were seeing the situation from a different perspective. But I questioned whether that perspective was really helping or was it enabling the student? The Elder asked me about the student's behaviour in class. As I shared, it was like a load being lifted off—I had a sense of relief. The Elder gave me validation of myself and of my professional view of the student.*

## **PEDAGOGICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL IMPACT**

In addition to the support from Elders, many participants recounted that they were surprised to realize they learned as much from the Elders as the students. Teachers explained that these influences were of both a practical and of a philosophical nature. Practically speaking, Elders became a real and accessible cultural resource for teachers.

*I have given the Elder some topics that are part of curriculum and he comes in and does follow up from a traditional knowledge perspective.*

Teachers spoke of an increased sense of confidence in the area of content integration. They explained that, for the most part, Elders never reprimanded them, but, rather, continually modeled and encouraged them to take risks with Aboriginal content integration. Not only did Elders give advice to teachers in regards to ceremonial protocol and teaching accurate history, they modeled ways in which First Nations and Métis content can be integrated holistically, authentically, and respectfully.

*All the Elders I have worked with are great storytellers. All the teaching is taking place within their stories. It's not like, "I'm supposed to be teaching about plants today." They will have a story that tells you about the plants. And the students always love to hear stories.*

The methods of teaching used by the Elders often remind teachers to use strategies that they don't tend to incorporate into their teaching, even when they know they are methods that will engage students in learning.

*I see the Elder use things that I already know are good teaching strategies, such as storytelling. I have seen what a huge impact this can have on children—how it engages them in learning. My own daughter has come home from school excited about the stories from the Elder they had in her class. This is both a reminder and an affirmation of what I know about the importance of narrative in learning.*

With their focus on student perspective and respect for all students, Elders' teaching also leads to more equitable patterns of interaction in the classroom. They will often use talking circles with students that encourage student-student participation rather than teacher-centred communication.

*The Elders introduce different ideas for teaching, such as the talking circle. The talking circle approach ensures that children who might not normally speak in the class have a chance to share.*

As teachers, it can sometimes be difficult to accept professional development from those who do not have formal teaching backgrounds. However, the participants in this study identified several ways in which Elders continue to provoke thought and to influence their teaching practices. The ways in which Elders instructed and the content they focused on seem to disrupt teacher comfort and to encourage a rethinking of the teacher's role. The constructivist nature of Elder-student interaction reminded teachers that it is sometimes necessary to let go of control of the classroom in order to nurture student independence and responsibility.

*The Elder got me thinking about my own teaching. I thought I was doing student-centred learning before, but it was really teacher-directed. I forced myself to listen, not to talk, and to let it come from the students. My working with the Elder has changed the way I approach projects and lessons. I allow for more student input. I am being more open to collaboration with students on the direction of their learning.*

The holistic focus of the medicine wheel guides the Elders' interactions with students. As teachers observe the effect the holistic approach has on learning, it stimulates them to rethink the emphasis of their own teaching.

*For me as a teacher, the academics are always there, but now [after working with the Elder], I focus more on the social. I want my students to be happy. I want them to have a good day when they are in my class.*

Holistic teaching, with its focus on relationships and all aspects of the child, also reminds teachers that learning is a combination of external and internal processes. In the teacher discussions, they often talked about the Elder being able to pull the learning out of the students. Children learn through interactions with others in a culturally based manner because inherent in every person and every action is the social history of that person and his or her culture. Most of our thinking is assisted and is shaped by the tools, language, and people around us who influence how we interpret our experiences (Cole, 1996). At the same time, Cree scholar Ermine (1995) critiques the Western view of knowledge creation and identifies the importance of introspection in Aboriginal epistemology. For students to learn in a meaningful way, they need to be able to interpret learning from their perspective.

*I find we as teachers teach in such a compartmentalized way. As a teacher, I have to work to translate that to the world of students. The Elders' teaching is holistic and so has meaning already. My students learned from the Elder that everything we do has a purpose. For example, in beading, you're not just beading, she's teaching them history, colours of beads, what the different colours represent. They have to choose the colours to suit themselves. The kids are drawn to her; they flock around her, talk to her. Everything the Elder does is value-driven as opposed to being focused on curriculum. That affects the students and me, too.*

Elders contribute to teaching through their reconciliation of First Nations and Western worldviews and personal concepts of teaching and learning. When Elders and teachers have formed productive and friendly relationships, the teachers reported that the relationship itself provokes more transformative thought and reflection than a workshop or professional development session. Teachers talked about how their interactions with Elders made them reconsider

the purpose and the importance of culture in the classroom, particularly after observing positive student responses. They observed how the Elders were able to pique curiosity and to foster important conversations about race, community and identity. Teachers described how learning about students' cultures grounded their understanding in the students' lived experiences. They felt this focus helped to make their relationships with students more personal and more holistic.

*My relationship with certain students has changed because of Elders—we joke more and have a different respect for one another.*

As the relationship between the teacher and Elder is nurtured, teachers often find they learn as much from working with Elders as the students do. As Morelli and Fong (2000) suggest, if an authentic relationship exists, teachers will begin to naturally examine some of their own teaching practices and broader structural inequities that may exist in schools and in education in general.

## IMPACT ON STUDENTS

As described earlier, Elders enhanced the learning environment for students. For the most part, students were given a preintroduction to the visit of the Elder and were told that the Elders are people with specialized knowledge who should be given the utmost respect. When Elders were present, students became more attentive. The Elders inspired curiosity among the students. They encouraged the students to ask questions and for all to participate in discussions. When they were asked questions, they often posed them back to students, emphasizing personal responsibility and decision-making. They challenged student perspectives and encouraged them to be critical of their own learning.

## ELDER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP

The respect engendered by the Elders from the students impacts how students respond to learning in the classroom. Teachers talked about the level of calm in a classroom when Elders are present. Time and time again, teacher participants noted that there is a marked difference in the classroom atmosphere from the minute the Elders step through the doors.

*[As a teacher] I get to know my students on a personal level and although I get respect from them, it's not the same level as when they are with the Elders . . . it almost has a spiritual aura when the Elders are working with the students. Without anyone saying anything to the students, the Elders demand that kind of respect even though they don't ask for it directly. The students just do it.*

The Elders' holistic philosophy impacts student engagement in learning. When Elders have input into instruction, they tend to base teaching topics on observed student need. The connection of the topic to the students is apparent in the students' positive reaction to the learning.

*It's now more a team teaching approach [between the teacher and the Elder]. Often subjects [that the Elder will address in their teaching] come out of incidents that have happened at school. Students get into the flow of the class. It opens up dialogue between students. It's difficult to bring good interaction to a close when the class is over. Students look forward to the next visit. Students ask "When is the Elder coming to the room again?"*

## COUNSELLING

When Elders are not lecturing or providing instruction in the classroom, they are often counselling small groups or individual students. Sometimes Elders are asked to do this, and sometimes they initiate contact either because they know the student's family, or because they see need. Elders often meet with at-risk students. Teachers noted that after meeting with the Elders, many of the counselled students volunteer to take care of the Elder at the school and projected increased responsibility and confidence. Teachers also noted that during Elder counselling sessions, Elders often learned a great deal of information regarding student circumstances of which teachers remained unaware. For students who are at risk of leaving school, talking with Elders can help to keep them in school and reengage them in learning.

*We had a student who was on the verge of dropping out of school. We got him in to have a visit with the Elder. I'm not sure what she said to him. His teacher described it as "He went in with a sense of despair, his shoulders hunched down. He had a talk with her. One visit and he walked out of that session like a different person. His face was lit up, his shoulders high. He was excited to start coming to school." His attitude changed and he is back in school. He's attending regularly. The impact she had in one session with one boy is amazing. If she was here on a regular basis, what a huge impact it would have on our school. There's huge potential for that.*

As mentioned previously, Elders perform counselling both in and outside of the school. Participants noted that as Elders became more familiar in the schools, students themselves began to request to be able to have time to visit with the Elder. Participants agree that counselling contributes to student learning, because it helps to create a warm and caring atmosphere in the school. Home visits and wellness groups also help to forge new connections between the community and the school, making parents more aware of what is happening in and around the school.

## IDENTITY

For Elders, it is imperative to have discussions regarding identity with the Aboriginal youth of today, some of whom are separated from their home communities, but mostly because youth are incessantly bombarded with conflicting images regarding who they are supposed to be. Elders find direct and serendipitous ways to engage students in conversations about community, culture, roles of men and women, and why we should accept people's differences. Indeed, teachers explained that often before Elders tell a story or give a teaching, they point out that their way of doing things is just one of many. When Elders are given opportunities to co-construct curriculum, they infuse identity into the curriculum from an Indigenous perspective, making students feel good about identifying as an Indigenous person.

*Elders talk about the diversity within their own cultural groups that is often connected to place, language, and time. They speak about the blending of cultures, the multifaceted aspects of identity. They help young people understand that identities are not static, that there is no one way to encapsulate what being an Indian is.*

Elders have a quiet pride and refusal to compromise their own Indigenous identity that sends the strong message to students that it is okay to be who they are.

## EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The focus by the Elders on development of the whole person is reflected in their interactions with students. Elders are as concerned with how students feel as they are about what they know. They ask students about their families, their friends, their goals and their struggles. In class discussions, they emphasize kindness to others and individual responsibility as markers of success and remind students to attend to their spiritual selves.

The holistic philosophy of the Elders has a holistic impact on students. As students struggle through life transitions, the Elders provide guidance that influences the relationship the students have with school. Teachers observed behaviour change and improved academic performance when students connected with the Elder. Teachers shared that Elders help students in their emotional development—in how to process and deal with the strong emotions of youth. The calming effect of Elders is evident in this regard.

*There was a group of boys sitting in the office. They were in trouble and were supposed to see the administrator. They were fuming. I suggested they may want to talk to the Elder to problem-solve before talking to the vice-principal. They said they wanted to see the Elder. The Elder helped diffuse the situation. They were so upset. The Elder calmed them down before seeing the vice-principal. The students respond differently to the Elder than they do to the administration.*

*The Elder is a non-biased person who will not judge the students. Often in school, the students, especially Indigenous students, are not sure if their side will be listened to and understood. The Elder can help them calm down and figure out what would be the positive things to say in meeting with the administration. You can end up with restitution for students instead of suspension.*

## SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

*Spirituality is different than religion. It is a way of life, a way of being in relationship to others, to all life around you, where you consider what your duty is to that life. (Ken Goodwill, 2009)*

Teachers reported that the Elders facilitate student exploration of who they are and what their place is in this world. For Elders, living and learning cannot be separated. Harmony is not an outcome of success, but success is often a product of achieving balance in one's life. They recognize the importance for young people to feel good about who they are, to know that they are unique human beings. For example, one Elder talked to the young female students about their role as women, how special they were as people, how they were connected to the earth. For female students who were already young mothers, the Elder's message helped to make the students feel good about themselves and to recognize the important role they play in our society.

In addition to building self-esteem, as indicated previously, values were infused in all the actions of the Elders. They often taught values directly such as the Saulteaux Seven Stone Philosophy or the Plains Tipi Values to provide students with frameworks to guide their choices in life. They also talked to students about making decisions regarding their behaviour and the choices they make.

In follow up to a ceremony the Elder did with the students, she talked to them. “How we want people to see us is how we need to behave. You need to be true to yourself. You can make mistakes and fall down but you need to pick yourself up.”

In keeping with the Indigenous concept of spirituality, at times, the Elders saw the necessity for carrying out ceremony in the school. Although Indigenous ceremonies are seen as a controversial issue in public schools, the Elders viewed ceremony as a ritual that brought community together in a time of need.

*Some colleagues were unsure about having a pipe ceremony in the school but some of the students had asked for it. The Elder thought we needed a ceremony to acknowledge the deaths, the missing persons, the issues that are real in the students' lives. It gives the students a sense that they are being looked after in a spiritual way.*

In another school, a ceremony or ritual that teachers said had a powerful and lasting impact on the students was the Tawow (Welcoming) ceremony that one of the Elders did for the grade nine students who were new to the school. All the grade nine students gathered in the gym for an assembly. The Elder used the metaphor of a river to talk about life and that as teenagers, the grade nine students were entering the rapids—a time of change and turbulence in their lives. Reminding them that they were each special and unique, she gave each of the students a stone, and asked them to use it as a reminder of the special person they were when they experienced a difficult time in the rapids in their high school years ahead.

*I know the benefits of students working with an Elder. My daughter was in the stone ceremony the Elder did. She was so proud that she had a stone that was blessed by the Elder. She talked about how the stone chose her. She was beaming with pride that she had this little stone. She collects stones, so I know she will have it forever. She talks highly of the Elder. There was a total change in her, having that experience at school carried over to the home, which was wonderful.*

The ceremony made each student feel unique and special, but also created a climate of caring and a sense of belonging in the school that the teachers in our study recognized as having benefits for all students. Generally, “Western education, which emphasizes formal learning structures and discrete areas of specialization, has been slow to recognize the intrinsic value of an oral, cumulative approach to knowledge” (Cooke-Dallin et al., 2000, p. 87). When Elders are welcomed and given high levels of responsibility for teaching and interacting with students, positive changes occur that are good for all students. Their stories inform history. Their warmth and concern for all students enhance engagement, esteem, and attendance.

## THE DEVELOPING NATURE OF THE TEACHER-ELDER RELATIONSHIP

In our discussions with the teachers, they said that the pedagogical relationship they had with the Elder depended on themselves as teachers and on the Elder. Generally though, with the Elders and teachers, the relationship changed and developed over time as each became familiar with each other’s ways of teaching and their respective strengths and gifts. Teachers made it clear that it took time and effort on their part and on the part of the Elder to come to a point where the

Elder is able to share the depth of their Indigenous knowledge. With the teachers, three tentative stages were identified regarding Elder involvement in teaching.

In the first phase, Elders act as guests to come into the class, usually on an irregular basis, to talk to students. This is the place teachers who have not previously worked with Elders identified as their starting point. In this stage, Elders participate by supporting teacher-led curriculum initiatives and by providing the knowledge for integration of Indigenous content in the curriculum.

*You can't just dive in [to working with Elders]. I don't think that's the way we work as individuals. As someone who feels a little more confident in what I'm learning with each experience that I have, I am now willing to take more risks.*

As teachers became more comfortable with the Elder and more confident in their ability to work with the Elder's teachings, they were able to more fully engage the Elder in their teaching. They then move into the second phase where the Elder becomes a co-teacher. In this phase, the teacher and the Elder plan activities together. As their work together progresses, the teacher is able to draw on the strengths of the Elder and to use his or her strengths more effectively in the classroom instruction. In the third phase, when there is trust and understanding in the relationship, the Elder becomes the model for the teacher of the implementation of Indigenous pedagogy in the class.

*When I started working with the Elder, I asked him to come in and talk about certain subjects. Now I book the time and he sets the agenda but it took me six months to get to that with him.*

It is in this stage that teachers struggle with letting go of control and predictability. Often the Elders' teaching is based upon the Elders' observation of students' needs, so it is not predetermined. But it is also at this stage that teachers begin to see the Elder sharing in-depth Indigenous knowledge and the implementation of authentic evaluation by the Elder.

*I feel like I'm laid back, but then realize how much of a controller I am. The Elder was involved in an art project with my students using personal symbols. She emphasized respectful behaviour with the students. She moved around the room. She went around talking to the individual students, and asking students why they chose the symbol they did. At the end of the project, I wasn't sure that my objectives were met. But when I talked with the Elder, she shared how much the students had learned. I couldn't see it myself because I was not part of their conversations. She was aware of the students' artistic process, their thinking, the personal stuff about self that they learned while doing the project. That information was in the one-on-one conversations between the student and the Elder. I realized that I had to let go of control.*

In order to maximize Elder effectiveness, Elders need to be trusted and to be given significant levels of responsibility to co-plan and to deliver school curriculum. Failure to involve Elders in the decision-making processes results in superficial interaction that hinders important re-examination of the goals of education necessary for the nurturing of educational equity. In their work with Elders in schools, Lipka et al. (1998) noted that "the co-construction of curriculum and pedagogy with elders is one critical step in transforming the context of schooling, which slowly alters asymmetrical power relations" (p. 140).

# Program Challenges

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Teachers identified areas of challenge as they endeavoured to welcome Elders into their schools and classrooms and to work with them in meaningful ways. As a new initiative, procedures for involving Elders in school programming needed to be worked out. For example, in some schools, the principal took responsibility for program implementation while in others, the responsibility was delegated to one or more teachers, called teacher liaisons, who promoted the program, scheduled Elder visits, and organized Elder involvement in the school.

## LOGISTICAL

Logistical challenges are those that tend to be administrative in nature, such as timetabling, space, numbers of Elders, communication and workload.

### TIMETABLING AND SCHEDULING

Scheduling quickly emerged as an area of concern among participants. A variety of scheduling scenarios were tried, to varying degrees of success. Examples that proved often ineffective were having teachers sign up on a calendar/whiteboard/book in the staffroom. Teachers indicated these methods didn't work for a variety of reasons, including either overworking or underworking the Elder, limited choice if you were one of the later ones to sign up, and requirement of a staff liaison to coordinate times, topics, and classes.

In instances where Elders became overbooked, teachers felt the Elders were hurriedly moved from classroom to classroom. They also expressed concern about the toll overwork could take on the Elder.

Conversely, some days no one would book the Elder and he/she would arrive at the school with nothing designated for them to do. Elders expressed to members of the school staff the need to be useful.

*The Elder said she wants to know she's doing something all day—she said "If I don't know what I'm doing, I won't come back."*

However, for one teacher, having a posted schedule to ascertain when the Elder is available was useful.

*There was frustration in the change from a posted schedule to now having to contact the Elder individually. I can still e-mail, but need something to look at so I can tell when there is free time . . . We have no Elder liaison in the school.*

Similar to a signup sheet was a request form that teachers were required to complete to schedule a visit with the Elder, which teachers indicated as also being problematic.

*We had a form this year to keep track of Elders' involvement in school, but teachers did not use the form . . . teachers are overburdened with paper, so they are reluctant to use the form.*

## ELDER SPACE

Teachers recognized the lack of a dedicated Elder space as being problematic for a variety of reasons. They indicated a dedicated space would work towards ensuring that Elders were an integral part of the school, would facilitate a wider access to Elders by students, and would provide a space where Elders could hold ceremonies as needed.

Students in need of emotional/spiritual comfort or guidance might be more apt to talk to an Elder if they knew there was an approachable place where they could feel freer to initiate the discussion.

*A space is important because a lot of our at-risk students are hurting. They haven't gotten to a point where they are able to talk to someone—a room might provide the incentive for students to go see Elders on their own, informally.*

Teachers raised the issue of students being able to access Elders directly and saw the lack of a dedicated space as being a barrier for students and their ability to interact.

*We do not have a clear cut way for students to access Elders; they have to go through a teacher. Teachers refer students—students do not go to the Elder. There is no direct line.*

*That's why we need a room so students could access Elders anytime they need to.*

The conflicting worldviews of the school and the Elders were evident in the view of spiritual development for students. Teachers recognized the ongoing need for discussion and negotiation regarding spiritual ceremonies in schools, but at the same time expressed the need for a space where Elders could hold ceremonies as required.

*Elders have indicated a need to talk to one specific group, such as young men. How can this be facilitated in the school—after school? They see a need for specific ceremonial teaching for young men. What are limitations around scheduling this?*

## ELDER NUMBERS AND AVAILABILITY

Limitations around number and availability of Elders were a common concern. Teachers felt as if Elders are stretched thin. They also saw tangible benefits when Elders were able to visit their classrooms on a regular, ongoing basis.

*They would be so much more effective if they were there more.*

*I would like to see her come into the school more often. We only have the one day. I don't know how they choose the Elders for our school. We don't have regular opportunities for her to come. If we had two Elders, the kids could get to know them.*

Teachers mentioned that a lot of their frustrations regarding a lack of understanding could be resolved if they and students were given more opportunities to interact with the Elder.

*It's a can't-win situation—more demand creates less time for some classes because time in school is limited. It's difficult to create and maintain bonds the students need with Elders [when their visits are infrequent].*

## TEACHER WORKLOAD

Teachers recognized the importance of a school-based liaison, but they also were concerned about teacher workload and had mixed feelings about the necessity of a liaison versus teachers taking on more responsibility for interacting and working with Elders—both of which require additional time and create additional responsibility for teachers.

*The role of liaison is over and above my regular teacher duties. Last year I was in special education, so I had more flexibility than this year. . . . The problem was that there was need for constant communication with staff to arrange Elders' time and dates. This year, the program has evolved with passing responsibility to all staff and a binder in the staff room to sign up. To date, only one teacher has signed up, so the role of liaison is up in the air.*

*Part of me wants the Elder to be responsible for the booking. But in terms of evolution of the project, I think you need a team to promote, educate and build the program. Without it, I don't know if the program can survive.*

The above quotes indicate that although teacher workload was a concern, especially for the role of the Elder liaison, often the effective use of the Elder by teachers did appear to be dependent upon an effective teacher or team liaison to organize and to promote Elder-teacher interaction at this stage of the EIRP.

## COMMUNICATION

Issues regarding communication of clarity of purpose and procedure for the Elders in Residence Program were raised. Teachers expressed their own uncertainty and unfamiliarity in this area, as well as that of the larger staff. Generally, they expressed a need for a mechanism to better prepare teachers to work with Elders as well as additional planning time in order to determine how Elders could best work with individual classrooms.

*Elders are always welcome in my classroom, but I sometimes feel they are not utilized equally in all classrooms. Some staff members do not know the role of Elders so they are not fully utilized in the school.*

*We need to set up a co-planning time with the Elder to see what they want to do and what they are capable of and willing to do.*

## STRUCTURAL

Structural challenges are those challenges that tend to be conceptual or systemic in nature, such as funding, accessibility, readiness, worldviews, and resistance.

## FUNDING FOR EIRP

Lack of a long-term funding source was identified as being potentially problematic. Core funding, as opposed to conditional, short-term funding, could ensure continuation and longevity of the program.

## ELDER ACCESSIBILITY

Most teachers understood the demands of time and the responsibilities Elders had to their home communities. As well, many Elders reside outside the city, and travel during inclement weather can be a factor. Teachers cited examples of times when an Elder had missed a scheduled appointment with a class due to poor travel conditions or home-community demands on time. This situation had left some teachers and students with feelings of anxiety and disappointment.

*. . . the first month was difficult—in the first five times she was scheduled to be here, there were weather and fog and road issues—this was the beginning of the program—we were very anxious.*

Teachers felt they had a role to play in the interpretation of time conflicts. Teachers working with Elders understood, in addition to the role Elders play in the schools, many also are key resource people/community leaders in their home communities and were concerned that they had to effectively communicate these conflicts to other staff and students.

*What worries me about it is that if an Elder is booked in and doesn't show—does it reinforce stereotypes? Some have misperceptions and this reinforces that perception. Do we have available communication? We're all so busy and I am not sure we do the best job communicating the reality of the Elders' lives to teachers who don't know them well.*

## TEACHER READINESS

Generally, teachers felt unprepared to work with Elders. However, teachers who were graduates of the Aboriginal teacher education programs or who have life experience with Elders do not have the same reluctance and hesitation regarding working with Elders as those who have had little or no experience or training. Teachers who were graduates from the other teacher education programs indicated there was a lack of preservice training in becoming knowledgeable about Aboriginal perspectives in general, as well as a lack of inservice specific to working with Elders in the classroom. They expressed concern about the lack of relationship-building opportunities with the Elders and/or other Elders in Residence programs, and the lack of opportunity for joint planning sessions.

*It's not that they don't want her [the Elder], they just want us [the teacher liaison] to do all the organizing. It's new to them and they're not sure. If they meet during the prep time it makes a world of difference. Expectations are sometimes too specific. Some teachers will ask the Elder "How can we work together?" Some just tell the Elder.*

*As teachers we don't want to make mistakes. We are so structured it's unbelievable. If we make a mistake, we fear judgment. That's how we are daily.*

Teachers, when considering this lack of preparedness, compared the situation to the internship seminar, where cooperating teachers and interns have an opportunity to build a relationship and to set specific goals and timelines for professional development during internship.

*When you get an intern, you get 3-4 days to work with them and get to know them. I see this scenario as being useful when beginning work with Elders, to get that planning set up ahead of time. It is hard, once you are in the middle of the teacher day, to make those connections, to build a relationship, and to plan what the Elder will do. It would make the whole year a lot smoother instead of feeling like we are backtracking all the time.*

## **CONFLICTING WORLDVIEWS**

Teachers recognized and expressed how it was difficult to implement a learner-centred program in a Eurocentric school model. Elders often have a different worldview, such as the school structuring of the day, and a differing sense of priority in their relationships with students, with their focus on identity and the school's focus on academics. As Cooke-Dallin et al. (2000) explain:

This [Indigenous] tradition, along with others that stress social informality in the relationships attached to everyday affairs; the priority accorded to culture; culturally based, flexible notions of time; and an emphasis on the recognition and maintenance of extended family relationships have often placed First Nations in direct conflict with western bureaucratic forms of organization with their inherent features of specialization, standardization, compartmentalization and systemacity. (p. 87)

Issues around the nature of timetabling in a Eurocentric school system conflicting with a holistic, learner-centred model were identified.

*I would like to see Elders move freely in the school, stay for a while, visit with students, and build relationships with students and teachers. They may notice things a teacher does not and can initiate working with a student in need.*

They saw the process of an Elder coming to the school to teach to a prescribed situation could be contrary to traditional practice of a learner seeking knowledge from the Elder.

*Interaction with Elders can become artificial if planned visits are scheduled. This takes away from their ability to respond to real issues as they arise in the classroom and school in a more natural way.*

*Has anyone asked the Elders how they feel about confliction; time and schedule driven schools meeting a more natural timeframe and need basis?*

Despite the difference in the worldviews, teachers reported that Elders seemed to be able to weave the worldview into their instruction. They modeled a reconciliation of worldviews and personal concepts of teaching and learning.

## RESISTANCE TO EIRP

Teachers expressed frustration around staff and community resistance towards the EIRP. Community, staff, and students sometimes could not see the relevance of the program, so they could display resistance to the Elders in Residence Program.

*Sometimes there is a backlash from students about why so much Indigenous content. We need to be prepared for this and to be able to rationalize this to parents and students. When we first started on this journey, we had these kinds of questions from staff as well.*

*Not many people were working with Elders when the program was first introduced in our school. Comments such as “Why are we paying to have this person sitting in that room?” were heard.*

*There needs to be time for open communication with parents. One parent didn’t want their child to go to stone circles. I took phone calls about why other cultures were not being represented in school. I have to be diplomatic about my response and explain the past exclusion of Aboriginal peoples, the changing demographics, etc.*

One participant explained a situation in which a disgruntled parent had approached the school and wanted to know why their children “suddenly had to learn all about Indians all the time”. Participants felt that if the community had been properly informed of the visits, and the rationale behind the EIRP clearly explained, scenarios such as these could be prevented. They also indicated that teachers needed to be adequately prepared and ready to deal with the resistance, so they could respond in a positive manner that would educate others regarding the importance of the EIRP.

# Effective Practice

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In our focus groups, we had teachers from schools where the EIRP was working effectively and a school where the program did not develop successfully. By having both school groups represented, it became clear what practices facilitated meaningful involvement of Elders as well as those that deterred effective engagement of Elders in schools. This section summarizes those issues raised by the teachers regarding what they viewed as important features to effective implementation of an Elders in Residence Program.

## RECOGNITION OF THE COLONIAL HISTORY OF INDIGENOUS EDUCATION

The history of the relationship between Indigenous peoples and schools in this province has not been positive in the past. Indigenous peoples were not only excluded from the education of their children, residential schools forbid parents from even visiting their children in school. In locations where Indigenous peoples were integrated into the provincial system, the schools often did not or were reluctant to adapt the schools to make Indigenous students and their families feel a sense of belonging in the school (Wilson, 1991). Instead, Indigenous students were often made to feel embarrassed and ashamed of their people, their culture, their language, and themselves (Campbell, 1983). Given this history, when wisdom-keepers such as Elders are invited to participate in schooling, the onus is on the school administrators and staff to take steps to ensure that the Elder is welcomed into the school. This welcoming does not only apply to the first visit, but to each and every visit.

## ADMINISTRATIVE LEADERSHIP

Although teachers play the primary role in program implementation, to ensure program success, teachers said that it was crucial to have program support from all layers of the administration. In the case of our study, the Regina Public School Board had identified Aboriginal education as a priority and had ensured that funding was in place. Senior administration at the board office supported the program. Teachers often spoke about the importance of the assistance of the board office staff in program implementation. Board office staff were used by teachers to answer questions about the program, to assist in solving problems as they arose in program implementation, and to be involved in program promotion and in communication with other staff and parents. One of the key administrative supports for effective program implementation identified by the teachers was the school principal. The principal was the point of initial contact between the Elder and the schools. Teachers noted that it is important for the principal to make time to meet with and to listen to the Elder's perspective on program implementation. It is the principal who needs to ensure that procedures for Elder involvement are in place. Teachers reported that often this took the form of recruiting a teacher or teachers to share leadership and responsibility for effective program implementation. When the program was in place, it was the principal who would secure funds from different budgets to facilitate the Elders' and teachers' ideas for improving Elder involvement in the school. The principal also had an important role to play in problem-solving regarding policies that were seen as obstacles to effective Elder involvement.

## EFFECTIVE PREPARATION AND TRAINING

Prior to the implementation of the EIRP, the teachers indicated that the school staff and community needed to be adequately informed and prepared for Elder involvement in their school. They saw community preparation as useful in avoiding or in reducing problems that may arise due to misunderstandings. Some of the teachers in our study had worked with Elders in their lives outside of school and others had learned about working with Elders in their Indigenous teacher education program. Others who did not have experience working with Elders said that they needed inservice specific to working with Elders. Without adequate preparation, teachers were hesitant and were reluctant to enter into unknown educational terrain. The teachers had suggestions for how preparation could be carried out. At the same time, the teachers who participated in our study indicated that the best preparation they had was connecting with a school that had an effective EIRP, and to be mentored by the teachers who were already working with the Elder in their school programming.

## SCHOOL-BASED PROGRAM LEADERSHIP

In addition to program leadership by the board, board office staff, and the principal, one of the most effective practices that teachers identified for facilitating program implementation was to designate a contact person or persons who took responsibility for the EIRP. They welcomed the Elder, educated other teachers and staff about the program, modeled incorporation of Elders into school programming, and facilitated communication between the Elder and teachers as well as parents. One practice that facilitated effective communication was to have the EIRP as a regular staff meeting agenda item where teachers could share their experiences with other teachers. It was important that teachers who were not involved in the EIRP be given information regarding the program, including the positive impact the program could have on students and teachers alike. In fact, during the course of this research, some teachers who were leaders in an effective EIRP were invited by other school staffs to come to their schools to share their experiences.

## TEACHER-ELDER RELATIONSHIPS

Once the Elder was in the school, teachers talked about the need to take time to develop both a professional and a personal relationship with the Elder with whom they were to work. Professionally, teachers wanted some time designated by the school for the staff to meet with the Elder. They had many creative suggestions as to how this could happen—one being a regular lunch time for the Elder and the staff to get to know one another and share educational views. Teachers also indicated that the professional relationship was inherently tied to the development of a personal relationship with the Elder. The key practice used in getting to know the Elder was to create the space and time to visit with the Elder. Often in schools, visiting is seen as a frivolous activity, but in Indigenous cultures, visiting is cultural practice used to build and to maintain relationships (Goulet & Aubichon, 1997). Visiting is viewed as showing respect for each other through a mutual giving of time and personal space. In this research, visiting played a major role in building both the personal and professional relationship. Through visiting, a personal bond was formed that enabled the development of mutual trust. It is also through visiting that the Elders' strengths were revealed to the teacher which meant that professionally, the teacher was more knowledgeable about how to make effective use of the Elders' knowledge in his or her learning program.

## PHYSICAL SPACE

In some schools, a special physical space was seen to be important so that the Elder had a place of belonging—a place that was theirs at the school. A physical space meant that teachers and students could drop in on the Elder to visit. This was seen as an important step in facilitating Elder student counselling and other Elder-led initiatives in school programming.

## SCHEDULING AND COMMUNICATION

Communication around scheduling of the Elder's time in the school was also identified as a key practice. Different schools used different approaches for scheduling and communication between the teachers and the Elders. For example, some Elders used e-mail to set up times with teachers; others were at the school on a regular basis so teachers talked to them at that time. The important point made by teachers was that regardless of the approach, it is important to have a system for scheduling that works for the Elder as well as the teachers. Schools are organized around timetables, whereas Indigenous time tends to work within the social and physical environment and to respond to identified needs. This difference needs to be accommodated. Teachers also reported that regardless of the scheduling system that was used, teachers needed to be flexible in timetabling with Elders in recognition of the differing worldview. Teachers needed to understand many of the Elders had community responsibilities, such as performing ceremonies or attending to families who were dealing with death or serious illness in the family, that could take precedence over school commitments.

# Recommendations

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Following are the recommendations that teachers made that were both specific to their situation, yet could be generalized to any EIRP, to maintain and to improve Elders' programming in the school:

1. Stabilize funding to ensure long-term support for continued EIRP implementation. Ensure funding is adequate to support quality EIRP programming.
2. Ensure active administrative support is in place that includes program leadership, initiative, and clear communication within the school and with the community regarding the EIRP.
3. Ensure effective teacher inservice is provided specific to working with Elders.
4. Ensure effective procedures are in place for scheduling and for communication between teachers and Elders.
5. Move towards the development of a home Elder program where one Elder is assigned to one school for dedicated periods of time on a regular basis.
6. Ensure there is representation of all cultural groups as Elders involved in schools.
7. Review policies to identify factors that may impede Elder involvement to ensure schools are Elder-friendly. School policies need to be aligned with those objectives and policy initiatives in Aboriginal education.
8. Initiate partnerships between schools with effective EIRPs and those just beginning in order to facilitate teacher mentorship.
9. Improve preservice for teachers in training so that new teachers have knowledge regarding effective wisdom-keeper involvement in school programming.
10. Continue professional development for teachers in how to incorporate Métis and First Nations perspectives across the curriculum, including working with Elders and wisdom-keepers.
11. Provide preparation for Elders for their work in schools.
12. Recognize the need for ongoing relationship-building by teachers, administrators and board office staff with Elders.
13. Recognize that implementation of an effective EIRP is a process that develops over time. There is a continuum of teacher development in their work with Elders that develops as the relationship develops and moves forward in time.

# Conclusion

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When Elders enter the school, they bring with them their Indigenous values and Indigenous ways of knowing and being. These Indigenous ways of being come in contact with the institutional ways of being in schools. Cree scholar Willie Ermine describes the possibility for change that occurs when two cultures come in contact as “ethical space”. He describes ethical space as being

*. . . formed when two different kinds of space created by different world views intersect with one another. The confluence where the two worlds of Indigenous and Western Peoples meet and where two sets of world views are brought to the encounter can also theoretically represent a space of flux where nothing is yet formed or understood. In abstract terms, the encounter of cultures at a space where no definitive rules exist to guide interaction can appropriately represent an opportunity for understanding and the place of negotiation of cross cultural activity. (W. Ermine, personal communication, 2004)*

The ethical space exists between the teachers and the Elders as they come together to create learning opportunities for students. This ethical space holds the potential for the creation of knowledge and for ways of being that can transform the process of education for Aboriginal students in particular, and for all students generally. At the same time, for most teachers it is uncharted territory, without definitive rules regarding how they should interact with Elders and how to include them in their teaching responsibilities. The teachers in this study, in their relationships and work with Elders, have begun to chart this territory for themselves and for other teachers.

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