



TEACHING AND LEARNING
RESEARCH EXCHANGE

OCHAPAN:
Perspectives of Elders
and Students on the
Elders in Residence
Program

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Table of Contents

Research Team	iii
Elders in Residence Participants	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Introduction to the Research Project.....	1
Research Findings	3
The Work of the Elders.....	3
Elder Perspectives	3
Elders foster intergenerational connection.....	3
Elders foster independence.....	3
Elders support Indigenous ways of knowing and being in the schools	4
Elders work to develop student identity	4
Elders provide emotional support to students.....	5
Elders contribute to safe, comfortable and welcoming atmosphere	5
Elders support teachers in Indigenizing education.....	6
Student Perspectives	6
Personal Learning and Well-Being	7
Elders contribute to a sense of belonging and understanding of self which leads to greater self-respect among students	7
Elders strengthen home-school connection by generating interest among parents and being familiar with families	7
Elders model unconditional acceptance.....	7
Elders provide one-on-one counselling and educational support.....	8
Elders model and teach life skills and traditional roles of men and women.	8
Educational Well-Being.....	9
Elders support provincial curriculum by teaching language, identity, culture and First Nations and Métis history	9
Elders have a different way of being	10
Elders support the building of positive school relationships.....	10
Elders model and emphasize the importance of spiritual wellness in one's education.....	11
Elders motivate student learning.....	12
Strengthening the Elders in Residence Program: Building on Success	13
Elder Recommendations	13
Support the “training” of cultural carriers	13
Continue to respect and allow space for Indigenous ways of knowing and being	13
Recognize Elder strengths, needs, limitations and expertise in regards to work assignments	14
Supporting the instructional needs of Elders	14
Support Elder professional development	14
Student Recommendations	15
Increased Elder-student interaction.....	15
Researcher Recommendations.....	15

Negotiation 16
School preparation 16
Creating space for Indigenous ways of knowing..... 16
Formalization of EIRP 17
Conclusions 18
References 19

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Introduction to the Research Project

Sweetgrass has long been employed by many North American Indigenous groups as one of four sacred plants that are used for purification and for healing. For anyone who has taken part in a smudge ceremony, it is difficult to deny the feeling of calm which descends on the participant as he or she gently washes the soothing smoke over their eyes, ears, mouth and heart. It is a feeling and an experience which opens the mind and heart to discovery and positions one in a place of readiness to receive wisdom or prayers. A smudging ceremony resembles many other traditional Indigenous ceremonies in the sense that it serves to facilitate reflection, connection, balance and strength.

The braid of sweetgrass is composed of three interconnected strands of grass which are further divided up into many individual blades. Together the three strands make up the braid which is strong, slow-burning and serves its purpose perfectly. We see the braid of sweetgrass as a metaphor for the Elders in Residence Program with each individual being a blade of grass. Teachers and students make up two strands, while the Elders are the third strand, making it possible for the braid to form. In the Elders in Residence Program (EIRP), we saw the Elders, teachers and students working together to enhance student engagement and learning. Elders create strong bonds with students and with teachers, while simultaneously challenging Eurocentric pedagogy and revitalizing a belief in the richness and strength of Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Their way of being brings a calm reflectiveness to the lives of students and teachers and strengthens the educational process.

This research project, entitled *Ochapan*, is an examination of the impact Elders have on students in an Elder in Residence Program. The word ochapan comes from the Cree language and is often used to refer to both a great-grandparent and/or a great-grandchild. Its origins lie in the word **aniskotapan** which is a combination of two words; **anis** meaning that which is connected and **otapan** which refers to that which is being pulled. Therefore, the word ochapan implies a connecting lineage that exists between the person who is pulling and the one being carried along in the journey of life (K. Goulet, personal communication, 2010). It was often the Elders of a community who were charged with the physical, mental and spiritual education of children. It was the Elders who “pulled” children along into an understanding of their world. As parents busied themselves with the essential work of survival, Elders often acted to draw out the gifts of the children and youth, imbuing a sense of interconnectedness and respect. The Elders taught the skills that helped the young to become successful adults and prepared them for the journey of life ahead. This they did from a strength-based approach, and it is a philosophy that was observed during this project in the work that Elders conducted with students and teachers.

The *Ochapan* research project is an extension of an earlier examination of the work Elders do with teachers entitled *Asokan*. *Asokan* focused exclusively on the relationship Elders build with teachers during the EIRP and how that working partnership can be strengthened and improved. The *Ochapan* project switches focus from the Elder-teacher dynamic to examine the Elder-student dynamic. Researchers consulted with the Elders who were involved in the Elders in Residence Program. Through the use of focused conversations (Nelson, 2001) and informal talking circles, Elders were asked questions regarding their work and relationships with both high school and elementary students. Similarly, researchers assembled two groups of students (one high school group and one

elementary group) and, using the same methods of inquiry, asked students to reflect on their perceptions of working with Elders and the EIRP in general. The following report will summarize the findings of these conversations and offer recommendations for strengthening the current EIRP based on the articulated needs and concerns of the research participants.

Research Findings

THE WORK OF THE ELDERS

ELDER PERSPECTIVES

Elders commented on how much they enjoyed working in the schools. Their love of children was evident. They found fulfillment in being asked to share their knowledge and life experiences. The Elders felt that they got as much from the children as they gave them.

Working in the program has created a lot of happiness. It has brightened up my life. It is something to look forward to. Last year I was supposed to go in for a new knee cap, but with all this working and moving, I don't need a new cap.

Elders are often humble about the ways they continually make a difference in the school environment. Researchers used a talking circle and general questions to attempt to illuminate and articulate the impact Elders are having on students in schools. Elders described their teaching/engagement processes which the researchers later grouped into the following themes.

ELDERS FOSTER INTERGENERATIONAL CONNECTION

Colonization disrupted community and social relationships in Indigenous societies. The Elders recognize the importance of positive human relationships. They actively work to rebuild those relationships in a contemporary school setting.

I know I have helped students to overcome fear and to trust and to respect. When they ask me how I was taught to respect people, I told them that right from the time I was able to talk I was taught respect. And we were taught not to call anybody by their name, we had to use relationship. It didn't matter where you went, these old people, they greet one another [in relational terms]. We never used any names. That is what I tell the students. I want to be called Kohkum, not Florence, and they always call me Kohkum, no matter where it is.

Elders bring with them the interactive reciprocal view of teaching common to many Indigenous approaches to education.

Children give you such unconditional love ... they teach us many things ... they are our teachers, too.

ELDERS FOSTER INDEPENDENCE

Indigenous pedagogical principles differ greatly from those that originate from a Western paradigm. Similar to constructivist themes, traditional Aboriginal education is very much learner-centred and community-guided. It involves risk taking, learning by watching, then doing, and requires the learner to take responsibility for his or her own learning (Ermine, 1995). Sometimes in schools, students can be passive recipients in learning. In small and incremental ways, the Elders encourage students to be more independent and to see themselves as agents of their own education and lives. While teaching about the history, philosophy and construction of a tipi, one Elder noted, "We didn't help them. They did it on their own."

Another little girl said, "I want to play basketball but I'm not good enough." I told her, "You have to take that risk. You could be one of the best basketball players." You know, building up that self-esteem. These are things that the teachers and parents don't have enough time to talk to them about.

ELDERS SUPPORT INDIGENOUS WAYS OF KNOWING AND BEING IN THE SCHOOLS

Elders are role models and provide unique expertise on Indigenous history, language, values and perspectives. In the last two decades, many Canadian schools have begun to understand that the learning of Indigenous history, values and languages is not only a human right, but it also has many benefits for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students (Saskatchewan Education, 1989). In particular it can have positive effects in the areas of retention, the development of critical and creative thinkers, and in the reduction of incidences of racism and prejudice (Sparks, 2000). Elders have the expertise and first-hand knowledge of events and experiences in the Indigenous narrative. They act as role models for Indigenous students and teach accurate and lived history to all students.

Sometimes I talk to them about the gangs and about long ago and our warriors and how different things were. These warriors, they always looked after the safety of the camp.

I do have a variety of schools I go to. In a suburban school [I might talk about] treaties, Louis Riel day, veterans, [and] they seem to be paying attention. [When] they pay attention they will retain....

When Aboriginal teachers are present, they can help students navigate the waters of contemporary education. However, there remains a shortfall in the number of Aboriginal teachers proportionate to the growing population of Aboriginal students (St. Denis, Bouvier, & Battiste, 1998). Elders can connect students to the curriculum and act as cultural brokers between the students and the school. They affirm and instil traditional beliefs and customs, while at the same time explain the meaning and processes behind those beliefs and customs to non-Indigenous students.

Sometimes they ask about ceremonies because they are scared. They don't know about those kinds of things. I answer as best I can. I tell them everyone is different ... they think about spirituality as religion. I tell them it's about living life.

I said, "Tansi." I asked the young people, "What did I say to you?" Everyone shrugged except that one boy who said, "You said hello." His demeanour changed.

One day students asked me, "Kohkum, where do you pray?" I said, "I'm a Cree Indian and I go to sweat lodges."

I do my best to share with the students something maybe the teachers are not very familiar with.

ELDERS WORK TO DEVELOP STUDENT IDENTITY

The lack of Indigenous content and perspectives in past schooling has alienated many Indigenous students from the education system. Many Aboriginal students struggle to reconcile who they are with what, where and how they are learning. Elders' cultural teachings dispel commonly held myths and stereotypes of Indigenous peoples.

If I can help them to understand that we are all unique and special in our own way, we can identify with who we are so we don't get lost.

Elders model positive Indigenous values in their interactions in the school. Elders are knowledgeable about past hardships and work to help students find their place in today's education system.

Us treaty Indians had to go through this assimilation process of integration into town schools and city schools. For me, not one Indian person ever came to our class to talk about who I was. It was always about [non-Indigenous] understanding of how Canada came to be. Right from the Plains of Abraham. No mention of our heroes, our place names. That left a feeling of alienation, thinking that this is not my place, although I'm supposed to be here. Ironically, this is Indian land that the school is on.... In this new millennium, there must have been strong prayers by our people in the past to [now] talk openly about identity and even bring our pipes into institutions. Those are the hardships of our people being answered. They prayed for the next generation and now I sit here with the next generation of Elders.

ELDERS PROVIDE EMOTIONAL SUPPORT TO STUDENTS

The Elders told the researchers that in addition to teaching, conducting ceremonies and giving guidance to teachers, they also do a lot of one-on-one and group counselling with students. Sometimes this occurs in a common room such as the staff room or library. Other times, Elders have access to and exclusive use of specific rooms during their time at a school. Elders expressed a desire to nurture the emotional and spiritual aspects of students as much as the intellectual. Indeed, in their view all aspects of students' lives must be attended to simultaneously.

If they have a lot of hurt, they can't learn.

Although many schools have on-site counsellors, Elders are often more aware of community issues and sometimes have insiders' information as to the obstacles particular families might face. This familiarity with student issues seemingly helps to facilitate an open and meaningful dialogue between Elders and students.

I do a lot of individual work with students. I do a lot of talking circle remediation. We have a lot of gang-related issues in our community. Those students are able to come and talk in those circles. If there's any kind of violence in the homes, they feel secure to come and talk to us.

ELDERS CONTRIBUTE TO A SAFE, COMFORTABLE AND WELCOMING ATMOSPHERE

In our sharing circles, Elders revealed the personal, warm and reciprocal relationships they had worked hard to build with students. They talked about seeing all of the students as members of their family and encouraged students to use the kinship terms Kohkum or Moshum (grandfather). They discussed the importance of students feeling a sense of security and belonging while at school. They demonstrated a keen understanding of the challenges students face both in and out of school and expressed the importance of creating an environment which supports students' learning and openness.

You [the Elder] don't even have to say anything; you just have to be there. An older Indian in the school makes them feel better.... All it is, it's just a presence so they don't feel alone in the majority of mostly non-Indian students.

I provide to the students, I believe, unconditional acceptance. And that places them in a place of wanting to share, wanting to do something different.

ELDERS SUPPORT TEACHERS IN INDIGENIZING EDUCATION

Elders model effective integration of Indigenous perspectives. In our previous research (Goulet et al., 2009), teachers indicated that watching Elders integrate Indigenous content and perspectives gave them the confidence to take risks in doing so in their own teaching.

Elders help to foster teacher awareness of student issues. The role of the Elders, who they are and how they are seen by students, sets them apart from the teacher so Elders can often do things with students that teachers may not feel comfortable doing. They have the time and they know how to give comfort and support to students who are facing hardships.

This boy, he lived with his Grandma and he [was acting out at school]. I'm related to this boy. The Grandma died and they are still grieving. The grandchildren miss her so much.... Grieving is very hard to handle and you have to help them get over it.... I told him I was going to pray for him and I put my hand on his head and said have a good day, respect other people. Then he got up and he went. That little prayer helped him.

Elders help teachers understand the diverse cultures, perspectives and practices of Indigenous people. Elders also differentiate between behaviour brought about by colonization and behaviour that reflects cultural norms.

How I help teachers is try to make them understand our way of life.

Our children are afraid to speak.... I tell the teachers that. To take your time. They are not slow. We were brought up in residential school not to say anything. Today the children see that in us, not saying too much all the time.

The Elders assist teachers by reinforcing appropriate student behaviour. They talk about and model respect for other people. Because they are older people, respected in the community, Elders engender different responses from students as well.

When I go to these schools there [is often] somebody that is bullying and I have to stop them.... I told them that bullies belong in the pastures and they were not bulls, they were children. We don't teach bullies, we teach children. You come here to listen to the teachers and do your school work. Sometimes in the hallways, girls were pushing each other and they almost pushed me over. They apologized and later one of the girls came up and told me she was sorry.... Sometimes the excitement overwhelms them and they don't know what to do. I hugged her and told her I forgave her and that she would have a good day.

STUDENT PERSPECTIVES

Using a similar method of focused conversation and talking circles, researchers brought together students who have had experience working with Elders and asked them to reflect on how they view the work Elders conduct in their schools. We talked to the elementary students and the high school students separately. We then brought them together as a group to hear what each other had to say about the Elders. Because the students are the main recipients of Elder contributions, they were able to articulate in great detail all of the ways that Elders make a

difference in their lives. Although there is overlap, their answers were grouped into two areas of impact: Personal Learning and Well-Being, and Educational Learning and Well-Being.

PERSONAL LEARNING AND WELL-BEING

ELDERS CONTRIBUTE TO A SENSE OF BELONGING AND UNDERSTANDING OF SELF WHICH LEADS TO GREATER SELF-RESPECT AMONG STUDENTS

Many of the Aboriginal students involved in this research project are students who are urbanized and far removed from the access to Elders and community knowledge that a reserve or traditional community often provides. Urbanized students who are Indigenous language speakers, culturally grounded and practitioners of spirituality are the exception (Favel & Racette, 2009). Yet, students told researchers that having access to an Elder in school helped to revitalize a desire to learn more about their cultures and communities.

I think we lose a lot of our knowledge of the major part of our society and I think it is really important for us to learn.

She really helps me with the enthusiasm and the wanting to learn about Aboriginal things we learn about in social class. It helps you get more excited and enthusiastic about learning those things.

ELDERS STRENGTHEN HOME-SCHOOL CONNECTION BY GENERATING INTEREST AMONG PARENTS AND BEING FAMILIAR WITH FAMILIES

As students engage in Elder teachings, they share those experiences at home. For parents who grew up not being able to see their values or themselves reflected in school staff or curriculum, it is exciting to be able to hear students discuss having ceremonies or learning Cree words. The increased Indigeneity, which Elders bring to the school environment, helps Aboriginal parents to see relevancy in their children's education and motivates many to become more involved in the schools their children attend. Additionally, because most of the Elders are from the same community, often they have familial or community ties to parents. Elders who are in this position sometimes make home visits to touch base with families or to help facilitate family counselling when asked to do so.

If there is trouble in your house or something, then they [the teachers] judge you. The Elders listen to what you have to say and they support you and understand.

The cool thing is that Elders can actually come to your house and talk to your whole family. Teachers would just rather have the parents come to the school, not the whole family.

ELDERS MODEL UNCONDITIONAL ACCEPTANCE

Students echoed what Elders had to say about the importance and impact of being accepted for who they are and how that had positively impacted their learning experience. In discussions regarding the differences between Elders and teachers, students often remarked that Elders had a very different approach to discipline than teachers.

[The Elders] never raised their voice. Never been mean. The whole time I've known them, they've never raised their voice.

Although students recognized that teachers had care and concern for them, they felt that it focused on the educational realm. They said that Elders were concerned about their feelings. Indeed, they felt loved by Elders and this had enormous significance for their personal and educational well-being.

She [the Elder] teaches you how to love somebody. Unconditional love.

ELDERS PROVIDE ONE-ON-ONE COUNSELLING AND EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT

Students emphasized the importance of the support they felt Elders gave them. For them, it was clearly important to have a non-judgmental communicative outlet present in the schools. Students noted that although they know teachers care, they don't always have the time or expertise to engage in counselling with students. Furthermore, students explained their apprehension in approaching teachers or principals who often want to "fix" their issue or inadvertently pass judgment on the student's situation.

We have a sharing circle. We pass the rock around. We share what we did in the last week and talk about self-care and work on ourselves.

Last year I was in elementary school and it was like ... if you tried to talk to a principal they kind of tell you what to do but they wouldn't really help you. Now you have someone [the Elder] there to talk to when you need help or guidance.

In Elders, students find caring, compassionate, non-judgmental listeners who can relate to their lived experience. Elders respect the confidentiality of students sharing with them. Students also noted that the presence of such a force often gives them motivation to come to school. One student explained how he tries hard to be good in class so as not to jeopardize his chances of being allowed time to visit the Elder.

The teachers are busy. I know the Elders are busy people and they've got lots of people to look after, but they do seem to care more and they seem to have more time than teachers do for talking.

If you ask them to keep a secret, they will.

ELDERS MODEL AND TEACH LIFE SKILLS AND TRADITIONAL ROLES OF MEN AND WOMEN

In many traditional Aboriginal societies, specific roles for community members were an important aspect of cohesion and survival. Everyone had a job to do and a role to fulfil (Lipka & Mohatt, 1998). With many urbanized youth removed from their traditional communities, confusion regarding what is one's role in life can often lead to involvement with at-risk activities as youth struggle to find a place and belonging. Elders offer an alternative to these students. They remind them of the strength and honour of community roles. They explain to students that although the modes of survival have changed, the ability to provide for one's self and community has not diminished in importance. They help them acquire the skills and find the resources they need to be successful in their lives. Elders provide, what is for most students, a new outlook resplendent with possibilities. Although the negativity of poverty, gang involvement and substance abuse can sometimes be seen by students to be the only choice in their life, Elders help nurture a state of mind where students come to believe otherwise.

She told me women can put the fire out so that kind of made me stronger as a woman and a mother and a friend.

She taught me to be very content and calm and patient with my children and also to be a good woman for myself, very independent and positive about everything. Don't be grouchy or negative because then negative will surround you. Be positive and positive will surround you. So every morning I try my best to think of all the good things in my life so that way I go to school happy or my day is good. She always reminds me.

She helped me with a parenting program and life skills.

She told me there's lots out there for Aboriginal mothers when I'm done high school. There's more out there.

They tell us not to use drugs because it hurts our bodies, and not to get in the wrong groups because then it will hurt your self-esteem.

EDUCATIONAL WELL-BEING

ELDERS SUPPORT PROVINCIAL CURRICULUM BY TEACHING LANGUAGE, IDENTITY, CULTURE AND FIRST NATIONS AND MÉTIS HISTORY

The Elders involved in the EIRP, which is the focus for this study, represent a diverse array of experience, expertise and cultural affiliation. They expertly fill the educational gaps regarding Indigenous perspectives that are left void when teachers do not access the information or resources needed to assist in their instruction of such perspectives. As one student noted, "Elders teach what teachers can't." With Elders, students are provided with first-hand accounts of cultural knowledge, events or experiences. Students have access to volumes of oral history.

When I started Social in second semester, I had a really good teacher and we started out beading and Elder Betty came in a few times during that to help us. She would also tell Aboriginal stories and at the end of the year we went out to the medicine wheels south of Moose Jaw and picked rocks.

She helped me by learning my history.

She taught us a lot about the four directions and their meaning and just a lot about Aboriginal history.

Students appreciate the Elders' cultural knowledge that is not abstract, but comes from the Elders' life experiences, events that are often experienced by the Aboriginal students as well.

Well, it's really nice to have somebody that we can learn from who actually lives it.... We have somebody actually showing it and telling us how they do things.

It sounds weird but I think Elders have more knowledge than teachers about like life and everything. And especially being teenage moms, they don't judge us or anything.

Similarly, non-Aboriginal students appreciate learning about the people who have lived in this place for so long. They want to learn about Aboriginal culture, history and view of life.

I find they really help to give you a different view of the world.

In our previous research (Goulet et al., 2009), we noted that teachers often feel uncomfortable with aspects of teaching spirituality. Some feel ill-equipped to discuss the sensitive topics of residential schools, Indigenous rights or systemic racism. Elders are a direct and tangible connection to those difficult aspects of our collective history that are so often omitted from curriculum.

Sometimes [the Elder] talks about residential schools. Only First Nations people went there and even though they had long hair, they chopped it off.... You couldn't use your Indian name, you had to use a white name ... and you can't speak your language, you had to speak English.... They couldn't wear traditional clothing or anything. They had to wear like shirt and pants.... They said that if they were bad, they would go to hell.

When one seeks to motivate students, Elders can personalize the experience of colonialism and its generational impacts without making students feel ashamed or embarrassed of the experiences of their peoples.

[The Elder] tells us more ideas about [the residential schools]. Like she tells us like who was in the different schools and if we know them or their families.

[Our teacher] can explain it or whatever and say, "Yeah, these people went through this," but Elder Betty can still, after all that, say, "I'm proud of being who I am."

ELDERS HAVE A DIFFERENT WAY OF BEING

Teachers have increasingly difficult jobs: larger classrooms, increasing behavioural issues and perpetual cycles of renewal have left most teachers with little time to attend to individual students' emotional or spiritual needs. And yet, it is so often those needs that determine the success or failure of students in school. Students observed that Elders seemed to have a calm and patience that made them approachable from the moment they entered the school. They explained how Elders emphasized the positive and encouraged those around them to do the same. Students told the researchers how they were more apt to want to discuss personal or school issues with an Elder. The Elders approach is to listen, to encourage and to share applicable life experiences.

They talk about life. I just love her. She talks about life and how she looks at life. Such a spiritual way, you know? I learn from her a lot.

She loves everybody. I love her hugs. She brings and gains respect. She just has it and people realize it. She has serenity about her. Her energy is just so loving and you want to be around her. If you make a mistake she won't get mad. Elder Betty will just try to help you through it.

ELDERS SUPPORT THE BUILDING OF POSITIVE SCHOOL RELATIONSHIPS

From the moment they enter the school, Elders alter the environment through their presence and interactions. They are focused on building relationships and try hard to get to know everyone within a school. They work diligently at being

accessible and sensitive to the needs of all of the students and the students in turn value their time with the Elders to the extent that they modify their behaviour when the Elder is present. Students note how the Elder treats everyone with respect, and they try hard to emulate this value. They endeavour to finish work early and behave in class so that they can visit the Elder. Non-Aboriginal students are equally drawn to the compassionate and giving nature of Elders and through them are given a stronger appreciation and understanding of First Nations and Métis culture and values.

What I learned was to treat everyone like they're your family because that's what she pretty much does. Like if a new kid comes, she'll take him or her as her grandson or daughter right away.

It feels like everyone treats each other nicer when she's there, even if you don't like them. They [everyone] treat people they hate different, like they're a friend. Even if you don't know them. Everyone tries to stay out of trouble so they can see Kohkum.

She helped me understand how to treat people with respect and not like teasing them and hurting them and pushing them around.

I think she's really helpful in bridging the gap between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals because her perspective is really valued in our school.

ELDERS MODEL AND EMPHASIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF SPIRITUAL WELLNESS IN ONE'S EDUCATION

During the course of our conversations, many of the students articulated appreciation for experiencing ceremony within the school. One such ceremony discussed in detail was the Tawow or welcoming ceremony. The Elder, who conducts the ceremony, uses it as both a tool of education and engagement. Grade 9 students are gathered together in an auditorium. They are welcomed to the school formally by the Elder and each presented with a rock. The rock is a symbol of their strength, ambition and progress and they are asked by the Elder to take care of their rock for their remaining years of high school. Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students expressed how this ceremony helped to ease some of their apprehensions around attending a new school. They felt that not only had they learned a bit of Indigenous ceremonial protocol, but they also had been initiated by someone who radiated genuine kindness and concern for their well-being. In other ceremonies such as smudging, students learned about Aboriginal values and knowledge and were taught how to apply them to their learning and interactions with others. The Elders embody that spiritual presence in the school that acts as a powerful motivation tool and also provides the opportunity and space for students to connect to one another on a very personal and emotional level.

[The Elders] know how to relate it to you. It feels like they know you more than your teachers. Teachers don't have enough time to look into the spiritual and personal. Elders can take care of that. I think that [in] education, you have to hit that part first, the personal.

They're more spiritual because Elders see everything around them and they learn from that. They look at the beauty of things. They have more insight into the well-being of others. They have techniques. They have their way of learning things that is just easier to understand. They attract you to what they are saying. They make you want to know more. They make you care. They make you feel loved and happy.

ELDERS MOTIVATE STUDENT LEARNING

For Aboriginal students, Elders are an important and available connection to their cultures, their communities and their ways of knowing. For culturally connected Aboriginal students, Elders affirm and present Aboriginal culture in a way which schools have failed to do (Longman, 2003). These students see themselves reflected in the Elders, which gives them specialized knowledge in the school and a feeling of affirmation. For Aboriginal students, who have struggled to maintain cultural ties, Elders reinvigorate a desire to mend the cultural bridge. These students are excited to learn from the Elders and share those teachings with parents at home who often also seek cultural reconnection. For non-Aboriginal students, the Elders are interesting and always caring. They enjoy learning about Indigenous knowledge and customs from the people who have experienced them first-hand. They, too, are excited to learn new words in Cree, Dakota and Anishinaabe. All students have learned a tremendous amount about residential schools, treaties, Indigenous science and knowledge, etc., from the Elders in a short amount of time. Through story telling, sharing experiences, conducting ceremonies or one-on-one counselling, the Elders are clearly a powerful presence. The Elders act as gentle reinforcement of positive behaviour, because as one student mentioned, “Nobody wants Kohkum to be mad at them.”

When she teaches us it's interesting and you can remember it. Every time she comes she brings something new. If everyone tells you, "You can't do it," she'll tell you, "You can do it."

[If she wasn't at our school], I would miss how she taught us a big bunch of stuff. Like if you only read a book halfway through, you don't know what happens. If she leaves you'll just be lost. Not like lost, lost. You'll just not feel good that you won't find out what will happen next time.

I've learned the importance of education. When I first met with the Elder last year I didn't have any ambition to go on and go to school and so she told me the importance of education and it just reflected a lot of what my grandparents said. She really put me back on track to graduate and stay focused on my work.

Well, a lot of the students enjoy the Elder. It's actually quite surprising how positive they are about them. Especially the kids who are usually less enthusiastic about things outside of normal school or even school itself.

She motivates you to go on. She really wants you to do well.

Strengthening the Elders in Residence Program: Building on Success

ELDER RECOMMENDATIONS

SUPPORT THE “TRAINING” OF CULTURAL CARRIERS

The Elders in the EIRP recognize that they have limitations. They have many responsibilities outside of the school in their community and within their families. Many of the Elders involved are in their 60s and 70s, so travel to, from and around schools can be taxing. It is often challenging to reconcile their traditional views of education while working in a western-oriented system. Although they love working with the children, some feel that they are still guests in the schools. They want to continue and see the necessity of the work that they do. They are anxious to pass on their knowledge not just to students, but to the teachers who can continue the Elders’ work to pass on that knowledge to the younger generation.

That’s where I see the teacher coming in. I want to assist her with things she can put in her teacher’s basket and whatever school she goes to she has something that’s been given to her by an Elder that she can teach. I feel that’s our ace in the hole; that young teacher, ready to grasp it and hold onto it. When it’s given to them the way it’s given to us, they are natural at it.

CONTINUE TO RESPECT AND ALLOW SPACE FOR INDIGENOUS WAYS OF KNOWING AND BEING

The initiation, maintenance and nurturing of an EIRP sends a resounding message to all partners in a school community. The message is that Aboriginal education is a valued and integral part of our curriculum and effective educational practice. The EIRP says to Aboriginal community members, your worldviews, your perspectives, your ways of navigating and interpreting the world are welcome and honoured here. It says to non-Aboriginal community members that here is our chance to unveil truth where once stood misunderstandings, cultural subjugation and ignorance. It says to the students that the school cares enough about their well-being to allow them access to a secure, loving, non-judgmental outlet for emotions and frustrations. And it says to teachers that here is someone who simultaneously is available to help you, to guide you, to teach you and to care for you. The Elders feel that it is important to continue to send these important messages and to strengthen them by enhancing programs like the EIRP and continuing to allow space, time and resources for expression of Indigenous knowledge and identity.

In my head are 200 stories from my grandparents, but my own children can’t remember a grocery list of three things. They’re not going to be able to learn the oral way of learning. It’s not going to infuse in their whole body. There’s a lot that comes out of stories about how to relate to plants and animals. They want to know.

The more objects a child has, the poorer that child is. But parents think it is a demonstration of wealth. But to a child, wealth is the time someone takes to listen to what they have to say and share life with them. They need to have real life experiences. How many children know that berries come from a bush and not from the store? How I would love to take these children out. If we don’t take them back to Mother Earth, we are losing out on the greatest gift the Creator gave us: our first mother.

RECOGNIZE ELDER STRENGTHS, NEEDS, LIMITATIONS AND EXPERTISE IN REGARDS TO WORK ASSIGNMENTS

Sometimes the Elders do their work so well that they are requested in several schools. However, the Elders told researchers that they also have their own working preferences. Some of the Elders are historians or treaty experts and so prefer to speak to older students directly. Others are ceremonial experts, or tradesmen, or herbalists and would like to be able to use their expertise in the appropriate context. Additionally, some of the Elders have decreased mobility so placing them in schools without elevators can cause over-exertion on the part of the Elder.

Another thing I'd like to see is a home base. I really like that concept because even in high schools the children get to know you and have a lot of trust.

The school I go into there are stairs. I have to climb three flights of stairs. Otherwise things are okay.

I sometimes think I should have more time. If we are working on problems from home, I don't have enough time. Kids ask me why I can't come back the next day and then try to make deals so I will be there the next day.

SUPPORTING THE INSTRUCTIONAL NEEDS OF ELDERS

Elders are teachers who are often asked to perform the functions of their duties in an alien environment and without the required materials. Just as teachers require space and instructional materials, so do the Elders. Elders are flexible and seldom make demands, but expressed the need for a specific space as well as access to materials which strengthen their teaching such as sweetgrass, treaty maps, cultural artifacts, etc.

In the collegiate I have a room ... then the students can just come, knock on my door and come and talk to me. That's really wonderful because they know you're there and nobody's around.

[It would be useful to have a] budget for artifacts that we could apply for and have materials to take out to the schools.

SUPPORT ELDER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Elders valued the time they spent involved with the research. It gave them all a chance to exchange ideas and share their experiences of working with the EIRP. They expressed a desire for further interchange and opportunities to visit with and learn from other Elders. Additionally, they appreciated and often took advantage of offers to attend professional development sessions offered within the schools.

I think it would improve if Elders could get together to just have a day where we can talk amongst ourselves about what we find helps us in the school so we can learn from one another.

STUDENT RECOMMENDATIONS

INCREASED ELDER-STUDENT INTERACTION

Students valued their time with the Elders and expressed appreciation of their relationship. They spoke of school and life lessons learned. Students told researchers detailed facts regarding residential schools, treaties and cultural protocol that they had learned from the Elders. Some reflected on how the presence of an Elder made them calmer, more receptive to learning and more motivated to attend school. Students expressed the desire to have the Elder in their school more often; for example, on a regular, weekly basis.

We want [Elder Day] right in the middle. The first two days of the week you'll be stressed. But on Wednesday, when the Elders come to talk to you, you won't be stressed. And then in the last two days, you're relieved that you talked to them. And then on Monday, it's back to the same thing.

What I've been going to school for the last three weeks since the last time I saw her was to talk to her.

In student sharing about the Elders, the importance of male Elders for the boys and female Elders for the girls was evident. Most students would prefer to have one or two Elders come to their school on a regular basis so that they get to know them and have a close relationship with them. Others, though, expressed a desire to see a variety of Elders which represents recognition of their varying expertise.

I'd like to meet more [Elders], actually. If we could have a new one every month like switch schools and go to different schools so we get to meet them all.

They agree with the Elders that learning takes place in many shapes and environments and wish to have learning experiences with the Elders that reflect this philosophy. One-on-one time in a private setting is high on their priority list, but so is the continuing ability to engage in ceremony and out-of-class learning with the Elders. Students receive something from the Elders that they do not receive elsewhere in school. For each school and each student, this may be something different. For some, it is the cultural knowledge or Indigenous pedagogy. For others, it is accurate history they have never been taught. For others it is hugs. In the Elders, the students have someone on their side, an advocate, a Kohkum, a Moshum. Their only real recommendation is that teachers, administrators and schools recognize the value that this relationship has for them and continue to work to find ways to allow it to grow. When asked what change they would like to see in the EIRP, one group of students replied, "Nothing, except [the Elder would come] five days a week."

RESEARCHER RECOMMENDATIONS

During the course of our project, researchers had the opportunity to speak in-depth with Elders and students concerning each group's perceptions of the EIRP. Researchers met with each group twice and gained a multi-faceted view of the importance of a systemic approach to Elder involvement in the schools. Space and time were allowed in data collection sessions for storytelling: a time when students and Elders gave specific examples of the richness of this newly formed partnership. As a research team, we were able to draw upon our knowledge as educators, cultural practitioners and community members to develop a list of recommendations stemming from our conversations with participants.

NEGOTIATION

The EIRP has been greatly successful and has produced many benefits for all involved. However, as a new program that does not yet receive core funding, it is in an experimental stage and those involved are continually refining their roles. Elders expressed to researchers how important it is for them to build relationships. They want to know teachers on a personal level. They want to work with school staff to determine where they can best use their individual expertise. Elders are as diverse as the students they work with so their work need not be given narrow definitions or limitations of doing only one type of activity. Many individual schools have discussions with Elders concerning their involvement; however, in some schools, because communication is not clarified at the beginning of the Elder involvement, issues can arise that can cause frustrations. The lack of initial and ongoing negotiation of the role of the Elder can sometimes result in misunderstandings of what the work of the Elders is. The important idea is that a process exists for determining the role of the Elder in that particular school in consultation with the Elder. Time needs to be taken to discuss an appropriate role for the Elder, develop a list of agreeable tasks and establish a schedule which is suitable for all. The plan for involvement can evolve once the program is underway if clarification or adaptations are needed to the initial understanding.

SCHOOL PREPARATION

Elders can either quietly transform a school or their involvement may be superficial, often dependent on how the school has prepared to work with the Elder. Have they developed a relationship with the Elder? Has the position of the Elder as a member of the school staff received adequate consideration? Has the school staff learned about cultural protocol and etiquette? Have they considered how Aboriginal perspectives on learning will be integrated into the structure of the school? If these considerations do not take place, the Elder's role can sometimes be restricted to that of a guest speaker. Although there is value in this role, as the students have indicated, the potential of Elders' contributions extends far beyond that of a guest speaker.

School preparation for working with Elders can happen many different ways, depending on the Elder and the school. Professional or cultural development workshops are a good way for teachers and administrators to begin to feel comfortable with Indigenous perspectives and practices. Elders could participate in the planning process so that they are not just add-ons to the curriculum, but co-designers. When requesting an Elder, schools should also be encouraged to think through why they want an Elder and how they will best work with the Elder. Not only does this assist in matching the right Elder to the right school, but it reveals a willingness to create a receptive environment in which the Elder can work.

CREATING SPACE FOR INDIGENOUS WAYS OF KNOWING

Perhaps if we tested the emotional and spiritual well-being of contemporary youth to the degree that we test their math and reading scores, we would get a more holistic view of the needs of our students. No one denies the importance of literate children; however, the resounding message from the student participants in this study is that they are hungry for spirit, heart and connection in their learning. For the Elders, these cannot be separated from the learning process. When we integrate Indigenous ways of knowing and being into the school day, we are meeting the articulated needs of many of the students. The EIRP has proven that, when empowered by the environment, Elders have facilitated concrete and observable benefits to student attendance, learning retention, student behaviour

and self-esteem. What they teach and how they teach is helping to transform negative images of Indigenous peoples from the perspective of non-Indigenous students.

FORMALIZATION OF EIRP

The EIRP receives grant funding, which is on a year-to-year basis. Although its benefits are apparent, there is no guarantee EIRP will exist into the future. Long-term measurable results require long-term commitment that includes adequate sustainable funding. Elders motivate many at-risk students to attend and succeed. This fact alone should necessitate the core funding of the EIRP. The Elders envision the EIRP as a long-term partnership among Elders, teachers and schools to shape the braid of sweetgrass and keep it strong.

Conclusions

All of the researchers involved with this project are either Aboriginal themselves and/or extensively involved in Aboriginal education. This did not stop them from being surprised and often astounded at the impact of the work of the Elders. The breadth and scope of their work is remarkable. They teach: sometimes history, sometimes science, sometimes art. They counsel: conducting both group counselling in the form of talking circles and one-on-one counselling with individual students. During these sessions, students told us Elders often give them motivation, life lessons, guidance and share stories with which they can relate. They provide advocacy. In one case an Elder who works with single mothers at a high school ensures the students know their rights and are aware of services which apply to their situations. They promote independence and critical and creative thinking. They encourage students to listen and observe carefully and attempt tasks on their own. They see the whole child and are constantly tending to the emotional, intellectual and spiritual needs of all the students. They assist students with making lifelong decisions and encourage students to break the cycle of colonization. They conduct crisis management and sometimes visit families with whom they are familiar. Truly, the Elders have many gifts and are more than willing to share them with students and schools.

Perhaps the most memorable aspect of Elders' work is that it is conducted from a strength-based philosophy. Too often, the school system takes a deficit approach to education, particularly when it pertains to Indigenous students. Elders look intently beyond a child's circumstances to find and expand upon the positive. Elders value education and life-long learning. In fact, they value these things to such a degree they assist students in understanding how their current context relates to their future life, so that curriculum can have meaning for students. In doing so, they sharpen critical and creative thinking skills, motivate students to attend school, challenge outdated pedagogical maxims, build community and instil confidence and belief in students.

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