

The Role of Elders in Child and Youth Care Education

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The development of postsecondary education programs for First Nations students in British Columbia has been accompanied by an ongoing discussion about the approaches and components that are most effective. The authors add to this discussion through a description of the value ascribed to Elders in their traditional roles and as guest teachers in Child and Youth Care First Nations classes offered by Malaspina University-College. Particular emphasis is placed on issues concerning the location of courses and programs in relation to the communities where students will become practitioners in the future.

Introduction: The Issues

There has been a good deal of discussion about *rural* and *urban* as terms or concepts that are applied to the history and development of First Nations people and communities. The discussion has proceeded through a variety of views. Paralleling this ongoing discussion, the understanding of what constitutes urban versus rural, and what is the meaning and significance of the differences between the two, has seen its own alterations and discipline-specific evolution. Briefly, and without judging the values attached to the terms, in this article we recognize the emergence of a number of conflicting themes that might apply to educational programs specifically tailored to meet the needs of First Nations:

1. There is "an oft-cited externally imposed dichotomy between urban and rural, based on the lingering stereotype that 'Indian' is synonymous with rural and that urban is somehow not genuinely Indian" (Lobo, 1998, p. 93).
2. Urban adaptation is posited as the logical outcome for all people, and particularly for "Natives," in adjusting to the demands of modern technological society (Grantham-Campbell, 1998).
3. The urban-rural continuum approach does not adequately represent today's world in which "telephones, television and the internet expose every reservation to the problems and perks of urban life" (Strauss & Valentino, 1998, p. 105).
4. The intertribal or "pan-Indian" identity assumed by many urban-based Aboriginal people does not imply discontinuity in relation to home areas, tribes or bands (Straus & Valentino, 1998, p. 105).

The critical issue in response to these themes is our contention that many of the educational needs of First Nations communities cannot be met through educational programs that take place far away from the home area, whether the home area is rural, urban, or some combination. Needs for human services practitioners, in this case in the Child and Youth Care (CYC) field, require trained graduates who know and understand about the people, issues, and dynamics of the local area, as well as larger issues and beliefs concerning world view and identity. The core component in fulfilling this requirement is access to those people who represent First Nations knowledge and traditions: the Elders. Education that provides meaningful contact between students and Elders can produce graduates who have the requisite local understanding as well as the generic skills and information relevant to the discipline. In other words, relevant education for First Nations CYC students can only take place where there is access to Elders from their own communities, and in our experience, this means in or close to their home areas regardless of whether those are urban, rural, or otherwise.

CYC practitioners work with children, youth, and family members across multiple generations. They practice in a variety of services where needs can range from preventive to crisis-response. In the same vein as the common sense of an ecological perspective that views children in relation to their surrounding systems (Ferguson, Pence, & Denholm, 1993), it has been clear to us over many years that First Nations practitioners have more success when they demonstrate ties to and knowledge about their own communities, both in order to be accepted by the broad range of community members and to be considered for employment by local First Nations employers.

The attractiveness of education in the home area derives from many factors, two primary factors being (a) a reduced monetary cost for education close to home in relation to being away from home, and (b) a social cost involved in the tendency to lose close contact, both short- and long-term (for those who go away to school some choose never to return on a full-time basis). These costs are borne in various ways both by the student and by the band or community.

There are arguments to the effect that the First Nations urban phenomenon goes beyond those issues that concern loss of tribal identity and culture. The ongoing adaptations of First Nations people in response to the conditions in their immediate environments and the evolution (and resurgence) of First Nations culture in urban settings are two relevant examples of observable social phenomena (Straus & Valentino, 1998; Grantham-Campbell, 1998). Nonetheless, the issues of loss are alive and well in the voices and minds of those who continue to live in home areas that are far removed from education sites. In addition to fears about both the financial costs and the social connectedness of those who leave for educational purposes, there is the psychological residue left from the residential school system. A strong memory remains from the era when First Nations customs and societal practices were attacked and repressed, a memory of children being taken forcibly from their home environments and sent away to school where they became estranged from their homes, families, and culture. In subsequent generations up to the present day, this negative experience affected the attitudes of many people, collectively and individually, in First Nations communities, including

students and potential students. Education was, and in many cases continues to be, perceived as an instrument of ongoing colonialism that imposes a "Eurocentric," "superior," world view over an Aboriginal "inferior" one.

Postsecondary education in British Columbia has tended to be an urban phenomenon, an outgrowth of demographic shifts, economic and population growth, based in regional and provincial centers. In recent decades at both the University of BC and Simon Fraser University, postsecondary programs, most notably in the K-12 education field, have been directed at First Nations students and communities. Typically these programs have been organized around two aspects of delivery: nonresident coursework delivered at or near home areas and residency at main campuses. Further, in recent years a developing trend in First Nations communities has been to look for ways to create specific, new, educational opportunities for their members closer to home and for educational institutions to begin to respond to these needs, and many have done so. In Vancouver Island, Malaspina University-College has delivered Child and Youth Care First Nations two-year diploma programs since 1993. In 1999-2001 two duplicate programs are being delivered, one at Malaspina's Cowichan campus in Duncan, and another at the Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw Education Centre in Port Hardy. The former was developed from a partnership between Cowichan tribes, Malaspina, and the University of Victoria's School of Child and Youth Care, which developed the concept for the program (Kuehne & Pence, 1993). The latter was developed through a partnership between Malaspina and the Tri-Bands group comprised of the Kwakiutl, the Quatsino, and the Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw Bands.

A central feature of these programs is that students meet with local Elders weekly throughout the two years in seminars that are credited, university-transferable courses. The themes and topics covered in the Elder teachings seminars are subsequently woven into the assignments and evaluation for all other courses in the curriculum (Cooke-Dallin & Underwood, 1998). This core aspect of the programs is a foundation that contributes strong relevance and responsiveness, each in its locale. Elders as local sources for research assignments and local practicum placements where student development can be rehearsed in real-life settings provide additional opportunities to develop skills and knowledge in a community context.

Definitions

What do we mean when we refer to Elders, and what is their role in First Nations culture? We begin with some definitions.

Elders are those persons in a First Nations community who are recognized for their wisdom, knowledge, and experience as it relates to the community. They are people who are expected to share their teachings. Older persons are respected in First Nations cultures generally; traditionally they represent an accumulation of experience, a valuable attribute in cultures that carried their libraries in the memories of the people, using oral communication and live demonstration to transmit information. The process that identifies the Elders who are called on is subtle: to a large degree it is a manifestation of the custom that requires every person to pass along what he or she has learned. Also, it is customary for older people to act like Elders and to be treated as such, and the effective modeling of one generation

inspires the future conduct of the next. These practices are consistent with the First Nations consensus-based approach in that

social consensus is based upon a shared agreement of individuals to exercise a variety of responsibilities. Social status is enhanced through the exercise of those responsibilities and therefore continuously reinforced ... unless people have the opportunity to accept responsibility, decision-making based on consensus is not possible. (Aboriginal Committee, Community Panel, Family and Children's Services Legislation Review in British Columbia, 1992, p. 7)

It has been pointed out to Child and Youth care students (M. Williams, personal communication, March 14, 2000) that the losses and devastation effected on First Nations communities by the residential schools were most painfully felt by the Elders and adults, who were dispossessed of their responsibilities as teachers and left to cope in whatever way they could in communities and families from which their children, the inheritors of their way of life, were removed. Consequently, the rationale for accumulating and maintaining knowledge over a lifetime became severely strained. Subsequently, many of the Elders have shown that they could deal with their own struggles, setting successful examples for others. Those Elders who continue to struggle with their challenges are shown respect, but their effectiveness as models is probably diminished.

Teachings are messages about how to act, how to perform, how to understand—in the context of the correct attitude to hold. In Child and Youth Care education, concerned primarily with the psychosocial aspects of human development, the emphasis is on those teachings that are directed at children learning the skills and developing the attributes required in everyday life. In the Coast Salish and Kwakiutl cultures evidenced in the programs highlighted here, the teachings for everyday life often consist of comprehensive sets of lessons—demonstrations and information about how to do any job correctly—directed toward children from an early age (mothers are told to communicate with their babies while they are still in the womb). The responsibilities and sequences appropriate to each child's learning process have traditionally fallen to those most capable of enacting them; active adults would teach the physical skills as children became capable of learning. And later, with the approach of adolescence, the teaching of cultural values was undertaken by those people who had lived a major portion of their lives: the Elders (Aboriginal Committee, Community Panel, Family and Children's Services Legislation Review in British Columbia, 1992).

Teachings are emphasized through repetition: "You have to constantly talk to children, let them know what is right, and wrong" (Native Infant Education and Care Program, 1982, p. 30). These teachings correspond to the developmental needs and characteristics of the recipients, for example, the teachings about the responsibilities and tasks of adulthood are triggered by the age of puberty. Similarly, the teachings about the bighouse and the cultural protocols and events there were traditionally introduced as future participants became old enough to understand and take part. These teachings can be extremely detailed, requiring literally a lifetime of learning for some, starting at a young age and progressing in detail and complexity as the aptitude and memory capacity of the learner grew and matured.

In many First Nations traditions, teachings are practiced and passed along in families; they may vary from family to family, although through marriage and social ties they often become known in an extended family and beyond. In earlier days they were based on real-life examples, descriptions, live modeling, or on the content of stories or legends. In recent times the concept of teachings has come to mean more than family traditions by including suggestions of how to be successful in response to the demands of western culture and about how to maintain First Nations culture in an effective coexistence with western culture.

The Relationship Between Elders and the Teachings

As teachers, Elders carry the responsibility of maintaining the core message of the knowledge they hold. Some individuals have been heard to contend that they are not empowered to change the words, thus an Elder may preface a teaching by saying, "These are not my words." Such occurrences seem to attempt to maintain the teachings unaltered; it has been heard from Elders at the Child and Youth Care First Nations program that they are unhappy about the number of revisions that are being introduced. At other times, and more often, the teachings are clearly subject to editorial control; they can certainly be adapted to the particular circumstances at hand, and it is the wisdom of the Elder that brings forth appropriate teachings when they are needed.

In the home area and the local community, teachings are transmitted at a number of venues. Among these are: (a) in the home informally as an aspect of everyday life; once this was how children learned most of the knowledge and skills required for daily living; (b) in the home more formally at family gatherings when, for example, Elders will share and discuss teachings during and after a family meal; (c) at a community cultural event or ceremony such as a naming, a memorial, a traditional wedding or adoption, a funeral, or a school event, Elders will share teachings as part of the ceremonies in community buildings and churches; and (d) at the bighouse as a main feature of traditional bighouse proceedings. Beyond these occurrences, the Elders and teachings may be central to treaty and land claims, court proceedings such as the Delgamuukw decision (Delgamuukw v. the Queen, 1985-1991), medical and scientific meetings, and conferences concerning any number of themes. (In fact this article was first iterated as a presentation at a conference: Rural Communities and Identities in the Global Millennium, held at Malaspina University-College, Nanaimo, BC, May 1-5, 2000).

Elders who are role models demonstrate a willingness to be approached and to share; they prepare through practice, and through practice they become recognized and trusted. Their behavior as Elders is consistent with the teachings about conduct and attitude (about how to be "right" in the world). They show humility, candor, and honest self-disclosure; an unaffected manner; integrity in their dealings; sensitivity to others; politeness, and success in coping with community and personal circumstances. Elders model consistency in their respect for, and adherence to, cultural traditions. A large part of the role involves reinforcing the goals and efforts of younger people: for example, education is often promoted as a means to succeed as a person as and a community member in the larger context of life, and "life is an education."

All the teachings have a long-range focus in a way that western teachings may not. They are concerned with the people and the culture as ongoing and permanent phenomena, existing inseparable from, and connected holistically to, all of the seen and unseen world. This viewpoint reflects a legacy of oral history through which events and family members can be recalled and revisited through scores of generations and hundreds of years.

The ongoing impact of oral tradition contains both educational and social dimensions. Its most essential characteristic is that it requires either a speaker (or presenter) and a listener (or participant) in order to occur. As described above, the transmission of teachings takes place most often in groups. There the links between the generations are strengthened through a common regard for the teachings and for the comforting presence of the Elders (Stiegelbauer, 1996). The sharing contributes to a number of interactive and interconnected factors:

1. Group affiliation is increased through shared experiences;
2. Respect and attention to the speaker are modeled;
3. Memory and processing skills are practiced;
4. The presence of the Elder has a positive impact on the participants;
5. The Elder "reads" and responds to the characteristics of the audience.

Thus the continual process of education that is accomplished through sharing the teachings orally relies to a large extent on the interpersonal human dimensions involved.

The special regard accorded to Elders has a number of sources. One important reason for this respect is their link to the teachings, which are the basis both for survival and for an understanding of the universe: "the Creator, the connection with nature, the order of things and the values that enhance the identity of the people" (Kirkness, 1998, p. 11). Although it is not necessary to be an Elder in order to understand and discuss teachings, it is specifically the role of Elders to transmit them. Because the accumulation of teachings is considered a lifelong undertaking, increased age equates to increased knowledge; hence an Elder is a source of many teachings. The practice of relying on Elders for these purposes is consistent both with the tradition of oral history that has always existed as a feature of First Nations culture and with contemporary practices in First Nations communities that endorse the special teaching role of Elders (Cooke-Dallin & Underwood, 1998). And in a society that values extended family relationships, Elders are the symbol as well as the repository of Indigenous culture, that is, cumulatively they are the physical representation of the continuity of accumulated knowledge between generations as well as being individually the carriers and communicators of practical knowledge about what to do and how to do it.

It is the Elders who can be relied on to discuss and decide on all issues that affect the welfare of the community. Because First Nations cultures integrate social, cultural, and political functions, all these are aspects of the Elder role. In these generally overlapping areas of First Nations community systems, Elders are acknowledged as the source of authority (understood through the leadership of Elders in collective, family, and community group decisions). This 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 systematicity" (Kawagley & Barnhardt, 1998).

Educational Programs

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. As a result, only recently has the importance of the teachings tradition and the Elders been acknowledged in the education delivered by BC's postsecondary institutions, and when such acknowledgment does occur it tends to be delivered only in particular circumstances: predominantly in special programs that target First Nations students. In human services programs with stated core values of cross-cultural perspectives and cultural competence, tensions are attached to the concepts of individual orientation versus collective orientation and the concepts of social and cultural progress versus social and cultural sustainability. In this case sustainability means continuous assertion; it does not imply stasis. Kawagley and Barnhardt (1998) make a point that may have relevance beyond their examples of First Nations approaches to maintaining a productive natural environment in Alaska, by asserting that

Indigenous people ... as a matter of cultural survival, have been quick to adapt new technologies and to grasp the "new world order." While retaining a keen sense of place and rootedness in the land they occupy, they have not hesitated to take advantage of new opportunities ... This is done, however, within their own framework of values, priorities and worldview, so that the developmental trajectory they choose is not always the same as what outsiders might choose for them.

Elder teachings are culturally relevant and can become meaningful to the identities of First Nations students, practitioners, and communities. Valuing traditional knowledge by making it central to the educational program is valuing the students' life experiences. Meaningful education must provide students with learning that fits the context of their lives. Through Elder teachings students in the CYC First Nations program are given the opportunity to learn skills and theory and develop as practitioners by placing their knowledge in the context of their own culture.

At the meeting point between postsecondary human services education and traditional First Nations teachings, there may be an opportunity for a coalescence of values around an emphasis on family and community. Mainstream western approaches in CYC have in the past decade witnessed an emphasis on cultural diversity. Future practitioners may gain from the First Nations understanding of the interdependence that exists between individuals, the families, and communities—through which individuals are nurtured in their growth by their family and community, and the family and community are strengthened through the growth of individuals. First Nations CYC students hear from their community representatives that these themes in the teachings are invariably considered as the source of solutions for those who address many of the issues and concerns in

contemporary First Nations organizations. It is an example of an area where competence for First Nations CYC practitioners can apply to their interactions in service sectors beyond their First Nations communities. There are opportunities to promote a more wide-ranging and inclusive viewpoint on community health as well as to inform non-First Nations people about how effective services are understood from a local First Nations perspective.

At the same time, because CYC education in BC is coordinated through a provincial articulation process, CYC students in all postsecondary institutions are taught according to shared learning objectives. Consequently, although students in Port Hardy or Duncan will have particular knowledge about their own communities, they will also have the same or equivalent skills and knowledge as students in other institutions and programs in all the recognized core areas of CYC. In other words, they will be equally prepared for all aspects of practice that do not demand specific local knowledge in any location in the province. In addition, graduates report that this form of education develops generic skills that are valuable in First Nations contexts beyond the home site because the respect shown for Elders, the role of Elders generally, and the concepts of shared world view and First Nations identity apply in other areas in BC and beyond. In other words, students who have become practitioners away from their home communities have found that their abilities adapt to new practice environments. The relevant point here is in the students' contention that the confidence they acquire from learning in their own cultural milieu lends itself to transportability more than learning undertaken in a "different" milieu and subsequently taken "home."

There is a sense of being involved in an important process of maintaining connections through learning from Elders. Indeed, we hear from many of the Elders that they too are continuing to learn and that they do this not only by going to their own Elders, but also by interacting with the education process at all levels: meeting students and teachers and attending classes. There is an acknowledgment that learning is a lifelong process.

One concern heard from many of the Elders we see is that "children don't listen to their Elders anymore." The breakdown in the traditional system of learning and connecting worries them. In our classrooms we begin to rebuild this way of connecting, first by connecting Elders to adult students, and second,, by connecting students to situations involving children and youth where they can reinitiate these contacts between the generations. In Cowichan at least one prominent Elder has suggested that in view of the erosion of many family-based social and cultural practices, it is now appropriate to consider CYC students—who share the Elder's emphasis on family—as an important link to cultural information, passing on the teachings that they gain in the seminars.

The connecting that happens in the classroom is often a result of existing connections that students have with Elders and leads in turn to further connections, stimulated by the curiosity and new learning acquired through coursework. During Elder teaching classes, students will inquire about teachings they have knowledge about; they want to know more and to have their knowledge confirmed. In addition, the sharing of knowledge between participants in the sessions is reciprocal in that the Elders become involved in discussions that arise from

course content. The expectation of the CYC First Nations program is that students will integrate the learning from the Elder teachings with the content of their coursework and practice. Students tend to go beyond this expectation, adding to their learning from the Elder teachings classes by talking with their own family Elders. They are keen to continue exploring in-class learning. An Elder in class talking about a particular place, person, event, or custom often leads to students going to their family members to ask what they know on the same or similar topics. This type of connecting leads to understanding of self and learning about one's own origins. Following an Elder teachings class where two Elders told spoke about the relocation of their reserve, a student said, "I enjoyed having them in because it helped bring back some of the things I had forgotten about my own childhood. Listening to them made me want to go to others in my community and ask questions so I can learn more of what had happened during the move" (C. Demontier, personal communication, January, 2000).

As well as these family and historical connections, other community connections are enhanced through the inclusion of Elders in the CYC First Nations program. Having Elders in the classroom means that the community is in the program and the program is in the community. Community links are built through the relationships of local Elders with program participants. This helps to keep the program in the awareness of the community, while in turn keeping the students aware of community issues. Elders who work in the classroom are often part of students' personal support systems. While we look to Elders because we value their traditional knowledge, these same Elders are often the greatest encouragers for students in pursuit of their educational goals.

The goal of including Elders in the CYC First Nations program is to bring in traditional knowledge, including that of some who might not yet be considered Elders but who carry traditional knowledge in a particular area, for example, someone skilled in teaching a local First Nations language or songs. These younger teachers have been referred to as Elders in training.

The inclusion of Elders in an educational program requires consciousness of and respect for local customs and protocols. For example, guest Elders in the CYC programs are paid by honoraria in acknowledgment of their learned status as teachers, as well as to recognize them as honored guests. Lertzman (1996) refers to these payments as "the practice of cultural accountability" (p. 51). He points out that it is always necessary to know how to proceed in a bicultural context.

In the traditional First Nations context, there is a strict protocol and procedure for the passing of cultural information. One could regard this as a protocol of respect. The protocol of respect is founded upon: permission, recognition and accountability. How permission is asked and recognition is given may vary from region to region. Yet one will almost always find a procedure in place. In a community where knowledge is transmitted orally, people are held accountable for their actions, their words and the manner in which they conduct themselves according to their protocol. (p. 48)

A local facilitator plays an important role in ensuring that the Elder teachings course is conducted appropriately. It would not be fitting for someone from outside of the community, for example, a visiting instructor, to take the lead in coordinating Elders' visits to class. One need not have all the answers about

protocol, but one must be aware of who and what to ask. Students who have strong connections to family and community are also an important source of knowledge of protocol. This attentive way of coordinating the Elder teachings is a mirror of the lessons we hear from the Elders themselves. Many have related how they too look to others for guidance and permission.

In First Nations communities the respect accorded to the role of Elders can facilitate general self-esteem based on the values of culture and tradition, as well as the security that comes from recognition of consistencies carried on from one generation to the next. For future First Nations CYC practitioners, working often in response to the damaging consequences of cultural disenfranchisement and dislocation, the potential strengths to be found in the traditions of respect, and in the Elders as people, become powerful tools in assisting children, youth, and their families toward positive self-concept and optimism for the future. The importance of education that is linked to these strengths is self-evident.

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