

The Role of the Non-Native Teacher in Remote First Nations Communities in Northern Ontario

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This article describes seven experienced First Nations and non-Native educators' ideas about how to prepare non-Native teachers for culturally responsive teaching in remote First Nations communities in northern Ontario. Addressing the concerns for teacher improvement and student success in the Indian Control of Indian Education (ICIE) (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972) policy paper, I describe how non-Native teachers can be successful by focusing on the non-Native teacher as a person, including the crucial question of who the teacher is, the importance of building reciprocal relationships, and the need to understand the role of 'visitor' in a community. I conclude with a discussion of how all three are connected to student success.

Introduction

We want the behaviour of our children to be shaped by those values which are most esteemed in our culture.... School programs which are influenced by these values respect cultural priority and are an extension of the education which parents give children from their first years. (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972, p. 2)

In the past few decades there have been many improvements in schooling for First Nations students, including the increase of First Nations community-controlled schools, the increase of qualified First Nations educators, the development of "alternative teaching and administrative strategies" (Harper, 2000, p. 144), and the sincere efforts to encourage holistic improvements for First Nations students living on reserve (Bell, 2004). Still, graduation rates are low and many challenges persist, such as lack of funding, difficulties in obtaining culturally appropriate resources, and a high teacher turnover rate (Bell, 2004; Mendelson, 2008). While there are increasing numbers of First Nations school teachers in northern remote communities, there continue to be many non-Native teachers who teach in these communities as well (Anderson, Horton, & Orwick, 2004; Harper, 2000). Forty years ago the National Indian Brotherhood (1972) identified preparation for non-Native teachers as a crucial factor in student success amongst First Nations students:

The role which teachers play in determining the success or failure of many young Indians is a force to be reckoned with. In most cases, the teacher is simply not prepared to understand or cope with cultural differences. Both the child and the teacher are forced into intolerable positions. (p. 19)

Unfortunately, all too often this remains true, to this day.

As First Nations communities assert ownership over curriculum and implement their own visions of education, the roles non-Native teachers play need to be discussed in order to be in sync with First Nations educators and communities. Teacher education programs are an important part of preparing non-Native teachers to be culturally responsive and to be willing to become partners with First Nations schools; they are only one part of the process.

As a non-Native teacher originally from southern Ontario, I had the opportunity to teach in a remote First Nations community in northern Ontario after graduating from the Faculty of Education at Lakehead University in 2005. As a first-year teacher, I immediately realized that everything I knew about education was not enough, as both the students and I struggled to get through the Ontario curriculum. I am not the first to struggle with curriculum and pedagogy in a cross-cultural setting (Berger & Epp, 2007; Harper, 2000; McGregor, 2013), but I was fortunate to be surrounded by co-workers who guided me, supported me, and helped me to connect the content of my lessons with culturally relevant material, and to connect the events of the community with the day-to-day instruction and expectations. I was lucky to be surrounded by Native and non-Native educators with extensive knowledge and experience in First Nations education. These educators did not have to help me, but those who were open to it took it upon themselves to be of service to me and others. This inspired me to conduct research that can help non-Native teachers to become culturally responsive, by highlighting the expertise of experienced educators who provide outstanding work in the field of First Nations education. Forty years after the *Indian Control of Indian Education* (ICIE) policy paper, this is still very much needed.

Literature Review

Aboriginal schooling has had a long and painful history, with education being a main method of oppression, assimilation, and even genocide through the creation of residential schools (Thorner & Frohn-Neilson, 2010; White & Peters, 2009). Residential schools, where attendance became mandatory in 1920, arose from a partnership between the church and government, with the church and missionaries placed in charge of educational practices until the 1970s (Frideres & Gadacz, 2008, p. 112). Sadly, personnel focused on training Aboriginal children to be “civilized”, eradicating the education system already in place within Aboriginal communities, “an informal process that provided the young people with specific skills, attitudes, and knowledge they needed to function in everyday life in the context of a spiritual world view” (Kirkness, 1998, p. 10). This was an education where the community and land were used as the classroom and adults from the community were the teachers. Community members

believed in raising children to be moral and to live a good life (Kirkness, 1998). It was not until the early 1970s that residential schools began to close and the idea of Aboriginal people having control of their education came to prominence.

In 1972, the National Indian Brotherhood (now the Assembly of First Nations) presented a policy paper entitled *Indian Control of Indian Education* (ICIE) to the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development. In it, the authors stated:

If progress is going to be made in improving educational opportunity for native children, it is basic that teacher and counsellor training programs be redesigned to meet the needs. The need for native teachers and counsellors is critical and urgent; the need for specially trained non-Indian teachers and counsellors is also very great. (p. 18)

Research on the experiences of non-Native educators in isolated northern First Nations and Inuit communities describes some of the ongoing challenges that stem from lack of training, lack of appropriate resources, and isolation (Agbo, 2006; Berger & Epp, 2007; Harper, 2000). Harper (2000) interviewed 10 early career teachers (nine non-Native and one First Nations) who were teaching in remote First Nations communities in northern Ontario. The teachers expressed the need for more training in Aboriginal culture, English as a second language (ESL), and special education before they had arrived in the community. Agbo (2006) conducted a year-long participatory research project in a remote First Nations community in northern Ontario that explored the ongoing relationship between community and school. He, too, found educators stating their need for more training prior to and after their arrival. One non-Native teacher expressed her desire for direct training from local community members in order to learn more about the local culture and lifestyle. Berger and Epp (2007) discovered a similar call for help during interviews with 20 non-Inuit educators in five communities across Nunavut. These studies focused on the need for help rather than on viable solutions.

In 10 schools characterized as “successful” in Aboriginal schools across western Canada, Bell (2004) points to teacher training as a critical aspect of non-Aboriginal teacher preparedness. He writes that, despite improvements in teacher education programs that “provide increased recognition of Aboriginal languages ... and student teacher placements in Aboriginal communities” (p. 318), there remains a feeling that beginning teachers were unprepared for teaching in the north or did not possess enough knowledge to understand the “cultural aspects of teaching Aboriginal children” (p. 318). He recommended that mentor teachers work with non-Aboriginal teachers when they begin teaching in Aboriginal contexts.

Strong-Wilson (2007) explained that it is a teacher’s duty to “transmit, critique and interpret” society’s important knowledge (p. 115). However, when educators do not feel confident in their understanding of Indigenous

knowledge it creates obstacles for transmitting accurate knowledge, values, and norms. This was part of the ICIE paper's concern (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972). It is impossible for a university to adequately prepare teachers with Indigenous knowledge and for the many different situations that could occur in First Nations schools (Goulet, 2001; Harper, 2000). This study, then, explores ways for non-Native teachers new to the north to approach further learning and describes the importance of finding "mentors" or "experts".

A paper document cannot replace personal contact, but the voices of experts presented here can guide non-Native teachers in their development of culturally responsive programming by encouraging them to make strong local connections in order to ensure quality education for their students. Non-Native teachers can, and should, learn about colonialism², culture, and the history of Aboriginal peoples in Canada by reading works such as Dickason (2006), Dion (2009), and Frideres and Gadacz (2008). These works add to literature on the preparation of non-Native teachers, by giving specific guidance on teaching in northern Ontario from experienced educators, and contributing to the goal articulated by the National Indian Brotherhood (1972) for teacher training programs and curriculum to be redesigned to meet the needs of the students.

Methodology

The findings in this article are drawn from master's degree research (Oskineegish, 2013) that aimed to help increase success and well-being among First Nations students in northern communities. This research was influenced by Indigenous methodology, a "body of indigenous and theoretical approaches and methods, rules and postulates employed by indigenous research in the study of indigenous peoples" (Porsanger, 2004, p. 107). My aim was to reflect carefully on the voices I heard and to attempt to minimize the influence of Eurocentric bias on the process and outcomes of the research. Porsanger (2004) explains that Indigenous Methodology requires researchers to situate Indigenous knowledge, interests, and experiences at the centre of the research.

After approval from the Lakehead University Research Ethics Board, I conducted semi-structured interviews with the intention of listening to each participant's story or personal narrative. Pre-set questions were given to participants beforehand, with the idea of using them as prompts to conversation and story. Kovach (2009) writes that a semi-structured interview "gives research participants an opportunity to share their story on a specific topic without the periodic disruptions involved in adhering to a structured approach" (p. 124). Participants responded in a formal question and answer format with informal conversations arising with six of the seven participants. The sixth participant shared with me later that she felt nervous during the interview.

Interviews took place between January and March 2012. They lasted approximately one hour and were carried out in person (two interviews) or by telephone (five interviews). I began by asking questions of four participants who knew me and with whom I have an established relationship. I continued the recruitment of three more participants by snowball sampling (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006; Knapik, 2006). I asked participants if I could audio record the conversations, transcribe each conversation, and provide the transcript to each participant to confirm that the interview accurately represented their ideas. Four of the participants responded with additional comments and thoughts. I entered all of the transcripts and notes into *ATLAS.ti*, a qualitative coding software, and reviewed each conversation to identify emerging themes. Bogdan and Biklen (2006) explain that during the process of reading data “certain words, phrases, patterns of behaviour, subjects’ ways of thinking, and events repeat and stand out” (p. 173). I identified 53 emerging themes, words and phrases including “be yourself”, “authenticity”, “role of the visitor”, “self-reflection”, and “establish relationships”. This process guided me into developing four main coding categories: (1) *the non-Native teacher*; (2) *cultural inclusion*; (3) *learning*; and (4) *culturally responsive education*, with sub-sections in each category based on words and phrases that I recognized as themes from the literature or that were new and seemed relevant. In this article, I discuss the findings related to *the non-Native teacher* category, including three themes: (1) *it is the ‘who you are’ that counts*; (2) *building relationships*; and (3) *you are the visitor*.

The knowledge at the centre of the study came from four First Nations participants and from three non-Native participants whose knowledge, experience, and attitude place them in the position of ally. Three of the participants preferred to remain anonymous; therefore, I created first name only pseudonyms for the purposes of this article and share only general background information for them. The first participant that I spoke with was Adam, a non-Native teacher who spent almost 10 years teaching in a Cree community. While working in the community, he immersed himself in the history and language of the community and quickly became a mentor to other non-Native teachers who came to the community. The second participant I spoke with was Sarah, a First Nations educator who has worked in the field of First Nations education for many years and taught in her own community less than five years. Her knowledge and experience came from her dual position as teacher and community member. The third participant that I spoke with was Mary Oskineegish³, a First Nations educator who has taught for 25 years in her community in northern Ontario and for 3 years in another community. Her experience in education includes Kindergarten teacher, classroom teacher, principal, and Native language teacher. The fourth participant that I spoke with was Brenda Firman, a non-Native educator who has worked in remote First Nations schools

for more than 15 years as a teacher, special education teacher, and principal. She currently teaches in a teacher education program in northern Manitoba. The fifth participant that I spoke with was A. Jane Tuesday, a First Nations educator who has worked in Aboriginal education for 35 years. She taught at the high school level for 20 years and has been a principal or school director for 15 years. The sixth participant that I spoke with was Gina, a First Nations educator who has worked for over five years in her community in northern Ontario. She began as a teacher's aide and then taught in the early grades. She shares her knowledge and experience as an educator, community member, and parent. The last participant that I spoke with was Audrey Smith, a non-Native teacher who has 30 years' experience teaching in Newfoundland and just over five years' experience teaching in First Nations communities in northern Manitoba and northern Ontario.

The ideas shared by the participants in this research are a small representation of the knowledge and resources available in education from First Nations educators and non-Native allies. Though each participant discussed ideas based on their own experience, I am confident that the advice provided in this research is relevant to successful teaching practices in First Nations communities beyond the experiences of the seven participants interviewed. I found their contribution and ongoing dedication to improve education for First Nations students to be invaluable; I am confident that the advice to listen and learn from educators, parents, and students within each community is beneficial to educators in a variety of educational contexts.

It was of the utmost importance that the knowledge at the centre of this research came from individuals who defined student success as holistic learning and growth, including the spiritual, mental, intellectual, and physical development of the child. The discussion of "successful teaching practices" herein refers to the promotion of culturally inclusive learning environments for First Nations students and does not include practices that contribute to assimilation into a western worldview.

Findings

Participants shared their ideas on how non-Native teachers can become successful educators in remote First Nations communities. From the interviews I found common themes that led me to conclude that a teacher's willingness to learn from colleagues, parents, and community members is the foundation for creating successful learning environments and is connected to three themes: (1) *who* the teacher is; (2) building relationships; and (3) the role of the visitor.

'Who' the Teacher Is

Five of the participants referred to sincerity, authenticity, and *who* the teacher is as important to successful education practices. Sarah, a First

Nations educator and community member, has seen non-Native teachers use their job only for a paycheque:

If you want to go and teach in a First Nations community, then be honest about why you are going there. I know there are a lot of people who go there because they know it's good money, and that's the only reason, or they're going there just to gain experience. (personal communication, 2012)

Adam, a non-Native teacher who taught in a remote Cree community for many years, described how educators cannot fake their intentions. He said:

They're going to know if you are there for good intentions or not; if you're faking it they're going to know and the kids are going to know. The kids are going to know if you have good intentions or not, if you are there just collecting a cheque. (personal communication, 2012)

A. Jane Tuesday, a First Nations educator who has taught for 35 years, shared a similar point:

People will pick up exactly who you are, within a month of being here. They all know you, what kind of person you are. You can't fool people, especially kids. You can't fool kids—they are a lot smarter than we are; they can read us so much more quickly. (personal communication, 2012)

Mary Oskineegish, a First Nations educator who has worked in her own community for over 25 years, said that when students “know you are interested in their lifestyle they become interested in you as a teacher” (personal communication, 2012). Brenda Firman, a non-Native teacher who has worked in First Nations education for 15 years, explained this further: “Remember it's the ‘who you are.’ Trust will happen, and if who you are is a kind, honest, caring person in that classroom, then you can make mistakes and learn from them” (personal communication, 2012). She continued to explain that educators “need to become open and work towards cultural competency, which is about who you are as a person, not what other people are” (personal communication, 2012).

Sarah discussed another critical point in the discussion of *who you are*, and that is to avoid assuming the identity of First Nations people. She explained that “the best way for a non-Aboriginal teacher to be respectful is to not take on the wannabe status Be who you are. You don't have to assume an identity as an Aboriginal person”; nor, she said, are educators expected to “know it all” or take on the role of a saviour: “they're not expected to help a community” (personal communication, 2012).

The participants described *who you are* as being aware of your own cultural background and the privileges connected to it. Working towards cultural competency does not require educators to mimic a First Nations person; it requires genuine respect and sharing of everybody's knowledge and skills. Following the advice of the participants, non-Native teachers who are honest and open can begin working towards cultural competency. The desire to become culturally competent is connected to building relationships, and that is the next essential step to successful teaching in a First Nations community.

Building Relationships

All of the participants expressed the importance of building relationships with students, parents, co-workers, and community members. Brenda Firman stated that building relationships comes before best teaching practices and is tied into the *awareness of who you are* and she strongly advised that relationship building goes beyond the classroom: "If you are going to establish relationships, first of all you can't just establish with the students, you have to establish with the parents; the parents are the kids' first teachers" (personal communication, 2012). Mary Oskineegish highly recommended continuous communication, advising teachers to "communicate with parents and Elders in the community," especially when "planning a cultural activity", and she added that "it's very good to talk to those in the school who work with you, to help you in any way" (personal communication, 2012). Audrey Smith said that relationship building is a "two way street," and that teachers must be willing to share their knowledge with colleagues; she went on to say that if "you have knowledge that would be helpful to others then you help them" (personal communication, 2012).

Resources in isolated communities may appear more limited compared to urban schools, but A. Jane Tuesday said that "everybody has knowledge, has skills that they can share with everybody else" (personal communication, 2012). Recognizing the gifts of coworkers can assist non-Native teachers in expanding their educational resources. Adam had great help from his education assistant: "We became really good friends. We are still friends today; if it wasn't for him I wouldn't have got a lot of things. He took me under his wings" (personal communication, 2012). Adam's interest in staying in the community during vacations may have aided his friendships as well: "I spent my Christmas there and my vacations there, my spring break there; not always, but not always going home; sometimes I would stay there" (personal communication, 2012).

Sarah advised non-Native teachers to ask Elders to come into the classroom and to "participate in community events, not to just isolate yourself" and to have informal conversations (personal communication, 2012). Gina shared her own experience of going to her colleague, a teacher from the community who has been teaching for much longer than her and who is also from the community, for advice. She demonstrated the value of working with mentors and recognizing the expertise within the school.

The advice to build relationships assists non-Native teachers to understand that school and community are not two isolated places; rather, they are connected, and how educators interact in either place can directly affect their relationships outside of the school as well as their instructional abilities within the classroom.

Being the Visitor

Five of the participants expressed the importance of non-Native teachers, recognizing their *visitor* status out of respect. Two of the participants who did not explicitly discuss the visitor status provided advice to non-Native teachers on being an outsider in the community. Adam explained that “to be respectful, realize that you are in another community, you’re in their town and their community, and they’re doing things their way and they’ve been doing it for many years” (personal communication, 2012). A similar point was made by Audrey Smith, who said: “Remember that you are a visitor in this community, and you need to respect the values and beliefs of the community even if it’s different than yours” (personal communication, 2012). A. Jane Tuesday said:

I always tell teachers, you are a visitor here, we are all visitors here, and as visitors we have to be respectful of what goes on around here. I always say just keep your mouth shut for the first six months and just listen, then you’ll learn what’s going on around you. (personal communication, 2012)

Part of accepting the *visitor* status is to follow community rules. Mary Oskineegish said that “you also have to be aware of negative things happening, like drugs and alcohol here in the community. You have to know the community by-laws (personal communication, 2012). Gina said that when you are considered an *outsider* “you always have to be professional; same with after school and the hours after school; you have to be careful who you let inside your home too, who you become friends with” (personal communication, 2012). Sarah explained that the best thing an outsider can do is:

To be able to know the community that you are going into, to talk to people to try to do some research on the community itself, to be a little bit more knowledgeable about the people you are going to work for and work with. (personal communication, 2012)

Brenda Firman cautioned non-Native teachers to avoid “making judgements on other people, pointing those fingers coming from a position of power”, and added that “simply by the colour of your skin you are in a superior power position, that’s without adding the fact that you are a teacher” (personal communication, 2012).

Taking the steps to connect with colleagues, parents, and students is essential to successful education, and yet understanding the role of the visitor can help teachers from overstepping their place in the community. The visitor status is not to keep non-Native teachers from building relationships or contributing their knowledge and experience; it is an aid to help non-Native teachers understand the distinction between sharing and directing.

Discussion and Conclusion

Listening to the ideas and experiences of the seven participants, it became evident that non-Native teachers might always be in the position of learner and teacher with their capacity for being an ally dependent on their will-

ingness to learn. Two of the participants who did not explicitly connect *who* the teacher is with successful education practices did not make statements that were contrary to this point. For example, Gina preferred speaking about her own experience as a First Nations teacher, and said that she could not place herself in the position of a non-Native teacher. Her shared experience echoed the advice of the other participants in being genuine, caring, and part of the community.

Previous research that looked at improving the learning experience of Indigenous students focused on the experience, needs, and concerns of non-Native and non-Inuit teachers in First Nations and Inuit communities (Berger & Epp, 2007; Harper, 2000). In this study, I sought advice from First Nations educators for non-Native teachers to address the concerns outlined in previous research related to this topic. I also spoke to non-Native teachers, who are positioned as allies due to their attitude, extensive length of time teaching, and their experience working with local educators and community members. The knowledge and experience of the participants in this study provide advice to non-Native teachers on how to prepare to teach in a First Nations community and to become an ally within First Nations schools and communities. The participants suggest that non-Native teachers work alongside educators, parents, and community members who collectively strive to provide students a schooling environment that honours their learning potential, meets their needs, and works with, not against, the community itself.

The findings in this research contribute to the literature on non-Native teachers in First Nations communities; for example, Taylor (1995) writes that “the relationship [non-Native teachers] develop with students, other teachers, parents, and the community will greatly influence how they are perceived, and this will alter their effectiveness as teachers” (p. 225). The findings confirm this and suggest ways to approach building these relationships. It is understandable that non-Native teachers might feel overwhelmed by the cultural differences and/or isolation in a community. In reaction to these difficulties, non-Native teachers will sometimes create support systems that can “become a little too insular” (Harper, 2000, p. 147). If non-Native teachers try their best to build relationships with people from the community and to develop reciprocity and cooperation, they may be more able to find their own role within the community. Bell (2004), Harper (2000), and Taylor (1995) wrote of the importance of teachers making meaningful connections in the community in which they reside. What is unique about the findings in this research is the advice to non-Native teachers to fully recognize their status as a visitor. It can be viewed as disrespectful for non-Native educators to assume that they are community members who can state their opinions, beliefs, and recommendations on community matters immediately upon arrival. Non-Native educators can take the role of learner in order to understand what is best for the students.

This does not take away from the ideas and suggestions they may have in the school or classroom; for example, a teacher may have a wonderful idea that would benefit the school or students and should seek advice from local community members on how to proceed. The difference is in attitude, assuming to know what is best or acting as a saviour versus being open to learning and showing respect.

A successful learning environment reinforces the values students bring from their home and strengthens a student's sense of self. First Nations students are not failing and they are not in need of changing; it is the learning environment that is failing students. Anderson (2002) explains:

The education system was not designed to teach us that we are Anishinaabe, but indoctrinate us as to how we should embrace the world of the colonizer, be molded into the image they have defined and accept, without question, their ways and our place as second class citizens. (p. 295)

In the ICIE document, the National Indian Brotherhood (1972) called for a collaborative educational training program. They stated that there is a need for non-Native educators to learn from Native teachers and counsellors, saying that "Native teachers ... have an intimate understanding of Indian traditions, psychology, way of life and language" and that they are "best able to create the learning environment suited to the habits and interests of the Indian child" (p. 18).

This research supports the ICIE policy's ambition to create an educational experience for First Nations students that is "relevant to the philosophy and needs of the Indian people" (National Brotherhood, 1972, p. 3). There is no doubt that problems can arise when the expectations of non-Native teachers new to remote communities differ from their preconceived expectations. This research directs non-Native teachers to the expertise within the community, including colleagues, parents, and community members. Some communities may have "cultural supervisors" or "mentors" available to assist teachers in their transition (Bell, 2004); for those without these established positions, it is up to the teacher to initiate opportunities for learning. In remote communities, the learning and training will depend on personal initiative and a willingness to listen and learn, along with the ability to reflect on previous ideas of teaching and education. Success will depend in part on *who* they are, the relationships they build, and how they fit into the community. Those willing to become a teacher and learner will find numerous resources and opportunities for learning.

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Notes

¹ This article is written in the voice of Melissa, the principal investigator. Paul provided support as Melissa's masters supervisor and in the writing of this article. Paul's current research is on recruiting Inuit teachers for Nunavut schools and on improving schooling for Inuvialuit in the Western Arctic.

² It is important to recognize colonial conditions such as poverty and oppression that impact outcomes in schooling.

³ Mary Oskineegish is my mother-in-law.

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