

WALKING TOGETHER

First Nations, Métis and Inuit Perspectives in Curriculum

Elders Elder Wisdom in the Classroom

by Ramona Big Head

Government of Alberta ■





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*Ramona Big Head is a PhD student at University of British Columbia
and an instructor at the University of Lethbridge.*

Who Is an Elder?

Elders have always held prominent roles in FNMI communities. Yet, who is an Elder and how does one qualify for this prestigious role in FNMI contexts? Here are several answers to that question.

According to the National Aboriginal Health Organization,

Aboriginal Peoples have great respect for the wisdom gained, over the course of individual lives, but age is not necessarily the defining characteristic of an Elder.

Individuals recognized as Elders have earned the respect of their community. Elders are people whose actions and words convey consistency, balance, harmony, and wisdom in their teachings. Elders hold invaluable knowledge and skills.

According to the Métis National Council of Women,

Elders today endure many hardships; however, through their spiritual and personal strength, their commitment to their language, culture, and people, they have sustained their important role in the community. However, for this role to thrive they must continue to have a prominent role in the survival of the Métis.

Most Elders are deeply spiritual in nature and everything in their life has spiritual significance, the day-to-day activities, their thoughts and actions, their relationships. They are the models by which their people see spirituality being lived.

According to *Aboriginal Perspectives Teacher Resource* (Aboriginal Studies 10),

Elders are the spiritual librarians of their communities and the keepers and teachers of oral tradition and traditional cultural knowledge. They keep and share knowledge of traditional ceremonies, stories, and teachings from centuries past. Elders can be men or women of any age, but often they are older members of the community, individuals who are recognized as having spiritual and cultural wisdom. Elders are considered vital to the survival of Aboriginal cultures.

(p. 426)





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The Role of an Elder

Keep in mind, the various FNMI Elders throughout Alberta provide knowledge that cannot be accessed anywhere else. Therefore, these Elders are considered experts in their respective fields.

According to the *Aboriginal Perspectives Teacher Resource* (Aboriginal Studies 10), the role of the Elders consists of the following:

- saying prayers before meetings
- describing or performing traditional ceremonies
- sharing traditional knowledge
- giving spiritual advice to individuals
- demonstrating traditional crafts and practices
- teaching the community's protocol (p. 426)

According to the Canada Council on Learning, *Naturalizing Indigenous Knowledge, Synthesis Paper*, the role of Elders can best be summarized as teachers:

It seems like you not only had one main teacher but you had a lot of other teachers. Each teacher brought in a different perspective to the whole. . . the teachers taught in both group and individual situations. Although the learner had one principal instructor, other teachers assisted in the learning process. . . the multiplicity of teachers added to a more rounded out understanding.

According to the Métis National Council of Women,

Elders play a prominent, vital and respected role. The Elders shared wise counsel, advice, and guidance about maintaining harmony and balance in the community. They provide wisdom to daily life and bring order to chaos and are considered the 'teachers of heritage and survival and strength.'

Through the Elder's depth of understanding concerning the association of all earthly beings, they further teach us of the importance of kinship within our extended families.

Guidelines for Inviting an Elder into Your Classroom

Many strongly recommend that teachers reach out to their respective communities and invite Elders into their classrooms for the benefit of all learners. However, before doing so, there are some important and practical issues that teachers need to keep in mind when going through the process of inviting Elders into their classrooms.

When it comes to **protocol** issues, the *Aboriginal Perspectives Teacher Resource* (Aboriginal Studies 10) states:

Many Aboriginal people believe that in order for the balance of all living things to continue, proper protocols must be followed. Protocol is a traditional set of rules or etiquette that helps maintain harmony and respect between individuals. Protocols ensure that ceremonies will be remembered from generation to generation and that the values of the culture will be upheld through time.





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Before making any requests or attempting to communicate with Elders, familiarize yourself with proper and respectful protocol. Protocol always ensures that the Elder and his or her knowledge is shown respect. While similarities exist among First Nations, Metis, and Inuit groups, traditions vary from community to community. (p. 426)

Start from where you are. Take a look at your own students in your classroom. Are there any students from an FNMI background? If so, then those students' heritage can be honoured by following the protocols from that particular group. If you do not have any FNMI students in your classroom, then focus on the traditional territory on which your school is situated.

With respect to **tobacco and offerings**, the National Aboriginal Health Organization states, First Nations Elders and Métis Elders often have helpers who work with them and receive training. You may ask the helper how to approach a particular Elder since each Nation has its own tradition. The helper will tell you if a gift of tobacco should be offered when approaching the Elder before an interview.

Tobacco is one of the four sacred plants. The other three are sweetgrass, sage, and cedar. A gift of tobacco is sometimes offered in recognition of the wisdom the Elder will share. Tobacco can be given as cigarettes, pouch tobacco, or tobacco ties (loose tobacco wrapped in a small square cloth). Offering tobacco to an Elder establishes a relationship between you and the Elder.

Inuit Elders do not expect a tobacco offering. Tobacco is not used ceremonially in Inuit culture. A small gift may be offered in appreciation for the Elder's time and assistance.

In any case, a small gift or offering is usually well received in recognition of the knowledge being shared and the time being taken by the Elder in providing guidance.

When it comes to the **traditional ceremonial** aspects of FNMI Peoples, the National Aboriginal Health Organization states,

For traditional spiritual ceremonies, First Nations Elders and Métis Elders prefer that recordings and photographs not be taken. Instead, they ask that everyone participate in the ceremonies. Honour songs are performed to honour a person for different reasons. Everyone stands during an honour song and removes headwear. Smudging is a prayer ceremony in which particular medicines (plants) are burned as an offering to the Creator and the Earth. Ceremonies such as smudging and honour songs are private ceremonies held in a communal setting; they are not public events.

Inuit Elders generally allow photographs to be taken during the lighting of the qulliq, which symbolizes light and the warmth of family and community. A qulliq is a traditional seal oil lamp that was used for heating the igloo or qammaq (sod house) and for cooking.





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In all cases, whether First Nations, Métis, or Inuit, explicit consent must be received from the Elder for photographs, audio, and/or video recordings.

Do not touch sacred objects used by Elders (pipes, qulliq, eagle feathers, medicine pouches, etc.) unless the Elder gives you permission. Photographs of these objects must be cleared by the Elder.

The main point to keep in mind with respect to protocols is that they are there for your protection and “when you don’t know or don’t honour these boundaries, you can do more harm to yourself and to others” (Big Head, p. 3).

Nevertheless, the majority of FNMI Elders will be extremely honoured and grateful to be invited to share their traditional knowledge within a classroom setting and most are very forgiving of unintentional mistakes.

Using the Wisdom of Elders in the Classroom

All teachers throughout the province have tremendous potential in ensuring that FNMI ways of knowing are both acknowledged and honoured in their classrooms.

According to the Canada Council on Learning, *Naturalizing Indigenous Knowledge, Synthesis Paper*,

If schools are going to respond to the needs of aboriginal students, then teachers have to know something about the culture, history, and social situations of Aboriginal students.

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal People found consistent criticism among Aboriginal people in the lack of curricula in schools that was complimentary to Aboriginal peoples. Most public school curricula barely mention Aboriginal peoples, and when they do, it is usually offered in fragmented and partial way often omitting Aboriginal peoples entirely or minimizing their contributions.

A plethora of studies regarding Aboriginal education in Canada exists. These studies, more or less, come up with the same findings. They regularly point out what has now almost become rhetoric: the existing education systems in Canada have largely failed the Aboriginal Peoples. From the Hawthorne Report in the 1960s to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples in the mid 1990s, all point out the same findings: Aboriginal peoples are not succeeding in the present education systems; Aboriginal students have the highest dropout rates; Aboriginal students consistently are at the bottom of performance scales.

These are exciting times! The above criticisms of the educational system no longer need to exist. There are many ways in which teachers can use the wisdom of Elders to combat the previous reality of Aboriginal issues in education.





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To ensure the full potential of using the Wisdom of Elders, teachers can keep the following thoughts in mind:

- Using Elders in the classroom ensures that FNMI People, in particular the Elders, have a voice in the existing curriculum. Each subject area, within the program of studies, is enhanced by providing an Indigenous perspective to the topic of study.
- In the United States, the state of Montana implemented the *Indian Education for All* (IEFA) policy in 1999. “IEFA benefits Indian students in several ways: by reducing anti-Indian bias resulting from a lack of knowledge, by enriching instruction through cultural relevance, and by instilling pride in cultural identity” (Carjuzaa et al, p. 192). By inviting and using the knowledge shared by Elders, the Alberta Education system has tremendous potential to fulfill these same outcomes. Through positive interactions with Elders in the classroom, teachers in the province of Alberta will gain confidence in teaching FNMI perspectives in their classrooms.
- “Collaboration among Indian and non-Indian stake-holders is a process central to IEFA and is also a desired outcome.... IEFA requires and relies upon Indian involvement” (Carjuzaa et al, p. 192). The Elders participation in the Respecting Wisdom section of the *Walking Together* is an example of the collaborative efforts made by the FNMI communities and the province of Alberta to ensure that teachers have an authentic resource.
- As Montana’s Superintendent of Public Instruction asserts, IEFA is for all students: “This constitutional, ethical, and moral obligation, known as Indian Education for All, is not only for Indian students. In fact, **its principal intent is that non-Indian students gain a richer understanding** of our State’s history and contemporary life” (Carjuzaa et al, p. 193). The knowledge shared by Elders is for *all* teachers and students within Alberta, not just FNMI students or communities.
- All students need to feel validated in educational settings. It is important for FNMI students’ cultural background to be reflected in existing curriculum.

A member of the Little Shell Chippewa tribe of Montana captured the hope IEFA offers, I think *Indian Education for All*...will help our children understand who they are, take pride in their identity, and see that they have possibilities and opportunities. When I was in school, we didn’t talk about being Indian. If we could, we kept it secret. That was a way to get along. But with IEFA, our children won’t have to do that. They will see themselves in school. They will know that their classmates are learning important things about them. (Carjuzaa et al, p. 193).

Conclusion

The Elders of our time are the heart of cultural existence. A sad reality is that our Elders will not be with us forever. However, inviting and having Elders share their knowledge is one way of ensuring that their stories, songs, teachings and wisdom are kept alive for many generations to come.



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