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Indigenous Elders' Role in Fostering Intergenerational Relationships with Youth

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Abstract

The purpose of this student driven commentary is to explore the importance of intergenerational relationships between Indigenous Elders and youth. Indigenous Elders play an important role in fostering intergenerational relationships and passing on cultural and traditional knowledge. They transfer traditional teachings and lessons learned from a lifetime of experiences to the next generation through a variety of means (such as sharing circles and storytelling) to help future generations understand and honour the teachings and understandings of the generations before. Elders play a central role in the transfer of traditional beliefs, language, and cultural practices, which empower Indigenous youth to connect with family and community, promoting ties to the land. Elders are role models supporting a positive cultural identity and establishing ties to Indigenous traditions, values, and practices.

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Opening Disclaimer and Land Acknowledgement

The University of British Columbia Vancouver Campus is located on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the Musqueam people. The land is situated on and has always been a place of learning and teaching for the Musqueam people, who have passed on their culture, history, and traditions from one generation to the next on this site.

Introduction

The purpose of this student driven commentary is to explore the role of Elders in nurturing intergenerational relationships with youth. It is important to highlight that the definition of an Elder may vary depending on the Indigenous culture and community (Indigenous Corporate Training Inc., 2012). Elders are respected members of their community recognized for the wisdom, teachings, and balance of actions that they have accumulated throughout the years within their community (Indigenous Corporate Training Inc., 2012; Saba, 2017). Elders are often the key community leaders responsible for sharing of traditional knowledge, values, and practices to others (Stiegelbauer, 1996). Elders can share a lifetime of experiences and wisdoms to the next generation (Saba, 2017).

It is very important to highlight that the title Elder is distinct from the term "senior" often used within the general population reflecting an important and recognized status within the Indigenous community.

The important role of Elders within Indigenous communities cannot be overlooked. Elders play a crucial role in fostering intergenerational relationships with youth, helping address the negative effects of colonization and the Indigenous Residential School system (Kral et al., 2014). Elders have a deep respect for the

natural world and are dedicated to sharing their knowledge and providing guidance to others (Indigenous Corporate Training Inc., 2012).

Elders are the gatekeepers and knowledge holders for Indigenous language, teachings, values, and traditions, serving as important role models for future generations (First Nations Pedagogy Online, 2009). Within Indigenous communities, Elders can support and promote healthy behaviours founded in traditional Indigenous knowledge and practices that inspire youth to become strong and resilient people.

Recent studies have identified a growing disconnect between Elders and youth within Indigenous communities (Goodkind et al., 2012; Wexler, 2011). The line of communication between Elders and youth has been fractured owing to the lasting effects of colonization and other governmental policies (such as the Residential School system and the Sixties Scoop) on Indigenous language, culture, traditions, and governance (Saba, 2017).

Improving the connections between Indigenous Elders and youth has been widely promoted (Saba, 2017), owing to the important role Elders play in the transfer of traditional knowledge, addressing the effects of colonization and the intergenerational trauma resulting from the Residential School system. Youth are able to learn from Elders, reconnect with their culture, and strengthen the bond with their community (Saba, 2017).

Interconnectedness is a central tenant of Indigenous worldviews and ways of understanding (First Nations Pedagogy Online, 2009). Indigenous culture is centred on community relationships, with strong connections to ancestors and future generations and the land (and all of

the plants and animals that live upon it), (First Nations Pedagogy Online, 2009). Many Indigenous peoples will use the phrase “All My Relations” to acknowledge the belief that everything within the universe is connected (First Nations Pedagogy Online, 2009). “All My Relations” is a cornerstone to Indigenous teaching and learning (First Nations Pedagogy Online, 2009) reflecting the belief that harmony with everything in the universe is required for good health and wellbeing.

Traditional Knowledge

Elders are valued by community members as the source of traditional knowledge on health and wellness. The Northern Ontario School of Medicine (2018) outlined the role that Elders may play in the passing on of life-long experiences and knowledge related to traditional teachings and life skills including:

- The Creation Story;
- A traditional Indigenous worldview and other perspectives;
- A clan system and its function in traditional and contemporary society;
- Indigenous languages, their effect on culture, and what the language says about cultural and social norms;
- Sewing and leatherwork;
- Food harvesting, preservation, and preparation;
- Teachings about, and staying connected to, land-based activities;
- Seasonal cycles and the changing of the seasons;
- Storytelling;
- Humility and humour and their role in health and healing;
- Wholistic health; and,
- Traditional knowledge, healing medicines, and ceremony.

Wholistic Health and Wellbeing

The Indigenous perspective on health and wellness is much more wholistic than colonial approaches to medicine. The Indigenous wholistic view of health and wellness encompasses four dimensions (as reflected in the Medicine Wheel) involving a balance of physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual wellbeing (Kant et al., 2013; Auger et al., 2016).

Through oral history and role modelling, Elders can share traditional knowledge and life experiences to help enhance the health and wellness of future generations (First Nations Pedagogy Online, 2009).

Recent evidence has highlighted how contemporary (non-Indigenous) society is affecting the health and wellness of Indigenous peoples, in particular Indigenous youth. For instance, Indigenous peoples in Canada are influenced by the colonial biomedical model, which focuses on the physical aspect of health and emphasizes diagnosis and treatment of diseases (Engel, 2012). Elders serve as great learning resources for youth by disseminating knowledge on physical health, emotional wellbeing, cultural knowledge and traditions, and spiritual wellness. Interactions with Elders instil values of wholistic health and wellbeing in youth, which extends beyond an individual's physical health, and expands to connections with the environment and culture (Auger et al., 2016).

Physical wellness is demonstrated when Elders pass down knowledge on traditional healthy lifestyle behaviours and introduce contemporary activities to promote physical health and fitness in youth in urban settings. For example, some Elders advocate youth to be involved in recreational sports or

community service (Kahn et al., 2016). This improves physical health and builds a sense of responsibility. Furthermore, Elders lead culturally-appropriate programs to strengthen cultural identity and improve emotional wellness in youth (Stiegelbauer, 1996). For instance, cultural activities, such as planting and making baskets, and traditional ceremonies, such as cedar brushing and smudging, can improve spiritual wellness. Through cultural activities, Elders help youth understand their roles in life and the sacred connection between people and the natural environment (Kahn et al., 2016).

Some Elders suggest providing mental health programs and workshops to educate youth on topics such as depression, money management, and gun safety (Kahn et al., 2016). Through these intergenerational interactions, Elders narrow the disparity between traditional and non-traditional perspectives to health and well-being. In the process, intergenerational relationship between Elders and youth is strengthened.

Storytelling of Past Experiences

Elders transfer traditional knowledge through oral forms (such as sharing circles and storytelling), which fosters the development of intergenerational relationships with youth. Sharing circles offer a safe and non-judgemental environment for participants to express their thoughts and feelings comfortably. Talking about deeply personal stories with others allows participants to form a bond of real trust. Through sharing circles and storytelling, Elders are able to share childhood experiences and lessons that they learned from Elders from previous generations. This includes being able to openly discuss how colonial and

governmental practices (such as the Residential School system and the Sixties Scoop) have adversely affected Indigenous peoples. Many Elders have experienced various traumatic events that shaped their health and wellness and that of their community (Grandbois and Sanders, 2009; Grandbois and Sanders, 2012). As youth listen to personal experiences related to the Residential School system addiction, family separation and mental health, they learn about the trauma that has contributed to the loss of Indigenous languages, practices, and traditions.

Elders are also able to pass on the strengths of their community and the resiliency that exists within all Indigenous peoples. Elders are often survivors of past hardships and continue to experience contemporary adversities and historical trauma as the result of colonization (Reinschmidt et al., 2016; Wexler, 2014). Historical trauma refers to emotional and psychological distress that has been accumulated across generations (Brave Heart, 2003). Historical trauma has been associated with contemporary issues affecting Indigenous peoples, such as substance abuse and an increased risk for chronic medical conditions (Durie et al., 2009; Reinschmidt et al., 2016). Through sharing stories, youth are able to learn about important characteristics of resiliency that have allowed for Elders to overcome adverse experiences associated with colonialism (Stiegelbauer, 1996; Struthers et al., 2003) and develop a resurgence of Indigenous ways of understanding and doing.

Through sharing circles and storytelling, Elders pass down intergenerational life lessons supporting resiliency and strength within the community (Goodkind et al., 2012;

Wexler, 2011). Youth learn to turn to their culture for understanding and support, and facilitating healing and wellness (Stiegelbauer, 1996).

Communication between Elders and youth also fosters the transmission of cultural knowledge, such as traditional medicine and spiritual ceremonies (Wexler, 2011; Wexler 2014). This is important because it allows future generations to carry on Indigenous cultures and traditions. In the process, they build deep connections and form meaningful relationships with Elders.

Modelling Healthy Behaviour

Elders foster intergenerational relationships through role modelling and mentoring. As such, they play an important role in modelling healthy behaviours. Elders remain grounded by drawing strength from traditional resources and cultural values and practices. Many believe that cultural roots provide them fortitude and a sense of identity (Kahn et al., 2016; Wexler, 2014). When Elders demonstrate behaviours that display physical, mental, and spiritual strength, they act as important role models for youth. The Elders' involvement in the community teaches and encourages youth to draw upon the strengths of Indigenous ways of understanding and doing.

Conclusion

Indigenous Elders play a crucial role in nurturing and maintaining intergenerational relationships and the promotion of the strengths associated with traditional Indigenous languages, cultures, values, and practices. They are able to pass on Indigenous knowledge and practices that help youth achieve and maintain physical, emotional, mental, and

spiritual wellness. Sharing circles and storytelling are powerful Indigenous practices that promote intergenerational knowledge translation. Traditional knowledge is further reinforced when Elders serve as key role models in the community. They transmit knowledge and practices across generations and nurture the development of Indigenous youth that understand the importance of wholistic health and wellbeing. Youth develop positive Indigenous cultural identities and understanding of traditions.

Authors' Qualifications

The authors' qualifications are as follows: Tommy Yang, BKin; Darren Warburton, MSc, PhD, HFFC-CEP.

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