

Intergenerational Teaching and Learning in First Nations Early Childhood Care and Development Training Partnerships

BY JESSICA BALL

Intergenerational teaching is a core feature of the First Nations Partnership Programs — a unique childhood education and child and youth care training program delivered through partnerships between the University of Victoria's School of Child and Youth Care and First Nations communities. This article is the second part of an ongoing series in the Journal on this program that is helping to meet the needs of First Nations communities in BC and bring more First Nations colleagues into our profession.

Practice in the field of early childhood care and development is inherently intergenerational — adults are caring for children ... children and adults are learning from one another. There is a growing interest in our field on how to stretch the age range of intergenerational interactions in our programs to include grandparents and Elders who carry cultural knowledge and the wisdom of the communities we serve.

"Remember always to listen to what your parents and grandparents are saying. It is their gift to you. It is our way, the teachings I pass along to you, teachings which have always been in our families, your family. It is something that you will leave with your children when we are gone."

—Traditional Coast Salish advice, offered by William White, Aboriginal liaison officer, University of Victoria

Recognizing the importance of intergenerational relationships and respecting the wisdom that comes

with experience over a long life are values held in many Aboriginal and European-heritage families alike. Practitioners who serve children and families through services such as infant development home-visiting programs, centre-based child care programs, speech language therapy programs, and parent education all recognize the importance of building upon intergenerational ties. Through these relationships children and adults can share affection, support, teaching, and learning. Meaningful intergenerational relationships can occur within nuclear and extended families, neighbourhood groupings, formal programs for children and families, and more dispersed communities of care.

Many of us have learned, perhaps through trial and error, that meaningful involvement of elderly people in infant and early childhood programs does not always come naturally. For many adults and young children, the age-old tradition in most cultures of learning at the feet of our grandparents and other elderly community members

is being lost as nuclear family life is becoming the norm, even in collectivist societies. Elderly people are increasingly segregated from young children and parents, and the interest and capacity of many young people to learn from their elders is diminished. For example, in Aboriginal Head Start programs, Elder involvement is a highly valued goal for program development. Yet, many practitioners have found that although it may be possible to arrange for an Elder to be present in the program on a regular basis, it is much more challenging to involve Elders in meaningful, mutually rewarding interactions with the children.

Involving Elders in programs is something that requires careful forethought (what are the goals?), planning (how can we make it happen?), and active facilitation (who will do it?). Successful programs have one individual to set up and facilitate the Elders' involvement. The facilitator needs to ensure that both older people and young children are comfortable with one another, to help older people and

young children develop skills for relating to each other, and work to increase the probability that older people and children will have some of their needs met through their time together.

Elder Participation In Communities of Learners

First Nations that have partnered in the First Nations Partnership Programs emphasize the importance of strengthening bonds across generations. One of their motives for choosing this particular training program is their desire to incorporate the wisdom of Elders and their ways of teaching into learning processes that will prepare community members to become early childhood care and development practitioners with children and families in their communities.

The program uses a Generative Curriculum Model that was first articulated by University of Victoria professor Alan Pence during his pioneering work with the Meadow Lake Tribal Council in Saskatchewan. In this model, Aboriginal understandings of child care, which are provided by the participation of Elders and other knowledgeable community members, are taught in conjunction with Western research, theory, and practices. This approach is used in every one of the 20 courses that students take.

Each community partner identifies a number of Elders and other respected members of the community and invites the Elders to join the cohort of students and their instructors, who live in or near the community, as part of a community of teachers and learners. Elders are older members of a First Nations community who are revered as holders of the cultural knowledge

of the community, passed down from one generation to another. Elders are asked to participate in classes according to their interest and ability to speak to the students about the traditional understandings and ways of the communities with regards to the various topics being covered in the courses.

In most of the partnership programs to date, one afternoon is set aside each week for the Elders to come into the classroom. Topics include infant and child development, child rearing, child life in the context of family and community, special needs, nutrition, and spirituality. Elders contribute portions of the content of each course, and they model ways of storytelling, listening, and learning that are themselves expressions of First Nations culture. Instructors stay alert in every course for opportunities to involve Elders in teaching activities, to integrate teachings gleaned from Elders into the course work, and to encourage students to reflect on Elders' words throughout their discussions, assignments, and practicum activities. Intergenerational teaching and learning acknowledges the value of diverse cultural understandings of child development and care, and the importance of community involvement in generating knowledge.

Involving Elders in teaching and generating curriculum is seen as essential and core to the quality of the training experience and to the outcomes in terms of graduates' readiness to serve their cultural communities. First Nations knowledge is generally not available in written form, and is at risk of being lost as older community members pass on, making Elders' contribu-

"The Elders ... hold the fabric of community life together. They have increased awareness of the need to work together, to have self-respect and respect for others. They know that traditional values and practices have a rightful place in the modern world."

—Debbie Jette, Cree leader

tions to teaching future child care and development practitioners for the community especially urgent. Indeed, many of the community members themselves are long estranged from this knowledge, largely due to the disruption of intergenerational cultural transmission that was the mission of the Canadian government's Indian Residential School movement (the last school closed in 1996). As one graduate reflected: "I learned from the Elders how to raise my daughter and how to forgive. We never got any teachings when we were young because we were in residential school. The Elders gave us their teaching and their words and helped us to become better parents. Learning communication skills also brought me closer to my daughter."

From Outcome-driven Programming to Indeterminacy

Our experience with intergenerational teaching and learning in training programs for practitioners may be useful in reconceptualizing the "curriculum" — or the objectives and planned activities — in infant and early childhood programs, whether these are enacted in centres, homes, or at various indoor and outdoor sites in a community. This approach to an "opening up" curriculum to invite and meaning-

fully incorporate Elder involvement welcomes not only the content that Elders offer (such as teachings, stories, showing how to make things) but also creates time and space in a program for Elders and younger people (both adult caregivers and young children) to be in the presence of one another and to give and receive affection. It creates opportunities for young people to learn more about the knowledge and know-how that Elders offer. As one student remarked: "Patience, that's what I learned from the Elders who came to our program. I learned how to listen, how to wait, and how to hold my questions and my need to know until later, when the meanings of what they were saying would come to me when I needed to know it. The patience I learned from being taught by the Elders has helped me to be patient with my own little ones, and with the people I work with."

Often Elders speak in their heritage language (mother tongue), which many students do not understand. The sessions with Elders are translated and written down by an instructor, student, or community member. In most partner communities, cultural knowledge that is reconstructed and elaborated through the participatory curriculum process has been preserved in the partner communities through journals, books, audio- and videotapes for purposes internal to each community. Marie Leo, a revered Elder of Lil'wat Nation who participated in the program, said: "I really enjoy it, going over there and answering questions that the students give us. It's really needed for the young people to remember our ways, how we raised our children and how we discipline them. And

we talk about it in our language so that we can get it right."

Like the renewal of our early childhood care and development programs each year, each new partnership program delivery brings together different participants, purposes, and ideas. The outcomes of open-ended processes for children, parents, practitioners, and Elders can never be known in advance, and will be different for each person and each community partners who participates. This openness of the program to what will come has made it challenging to find course developers and instructors. In mainstream programs of practitioner training and services to children and families, there is a presumed value in predictability, in defining pre-established objectives and outcomes to guide program decisions and against which to measure the value and efficacy of a program. In the First Nations Partnership Programs, it is difficult to find course developers and instructors who truly understand or appreciate the power of indeterminacy — of not knowing. So too, in all our programs for children and families, when we make space and time and devote efforts to inviting community members to participate in meaningful ways, we need to be prepared to "not know" what will transpire between children and invited community members.

Elder Involvement and Cultural Healing

For many program participants, the training program is part of a journey of healing, enabling them to reclaim their voice and reconnect to their culture. The Elders, their stories, and the storytelling practices play a major role in this restorative

process. Louise Underwood, who served as the intergenerational facilitator in the Cowichan program, explained: "The Elders have the soul for what we do. They give us their wisdom and their hope. In turn, they feel welcomed and respected, some of them for the first time. There is just so much love that goes around in this process. It's like a big circle."

Martina Pierre, an instructor at Lil'wat Nation, said that the training program responded to the community's goal of reclaiming their heritage, cultural traditions, rituals, and ceremonies." She explained that students "wanted this experience, so that as caregivers they will be more balanced in their lives, in their own self-concept and identity. Taking the information from the Elders gives them a sense of pride and identity." Reclaiming a cultural heritage was especially significant for the generation of Lil'wat Nation members who had been taken away from their communities and confined at residential schools, where their own languages and cultural practices were banned, even punished. Martina Pierre explained: "When we began as new instructors, we began to rediscover ourselves. We looked at the things that were missing in our lives and said, 'This is what we want for our children.' So this program was very important."

Because of the opportunities provided in the training program for intergenerational connections, many students develop a personal relationship with an Elder, often for the first time. They receive emotional support and practical guidance from Elders, and acquire knowledge from Elders about their culture of origin, traditional language, socio-historical roots, and

ways of being on the land. A student in the program summarized her experience as follows: "This program is unique in giving me the chance to learn from my Elders what I need to know about who I am and my culture's ways of being with children. I couldn't learn this from any textbook, and I couldn't reach out to the children in my community...without knowing what the Elders can teach me." The dialogue that begins in the classroom between the Elders and program participants renews respect in the community for the cultural knowledge and heritage preserved in the teachings of Elders, and reinforces pride in First Nations identity throughout the community.

The Intergenerational Facilitator

The passing of wisdom from one generation to another — even in a First Nations context, where this is a long-standing tradition — does not happen automatically. Our program evaluation research revealed the pivotal role played by an intergenerational facilitator for enabling the generation of curriculum and promoting the reinstatement of traditional teaching and learning roles in the community of learners. In each partnership, this role has been filled by someone who is well positioned to invite and support the active participation of a wide range of Elders in the program. In two partnership programs, the facilitators were Elders themselves, and were widely respected as knowledgeable about the culture with regards to child care and development. The late Louis Opikokew, the intergenerational facilitator in the original Meadow Lake partnership, describes several aspects of his work with Elders, and its long-term re-

percussions in the community:

"I started by sharing a few words in the classes. Then I started inviting other Elders to come and talk about our culture. Many times we began with a pipe ceremony, but we always opened and closed with a prayer from the Elders. Both Cree and Dene Elders were equally involved in the program. There were times when Elders were hesitant to come. They had not been directly involved in Tribal Council programs before. I used to travel to their homes and explain to them what was expected. I asked them to tell their own story first and to just be themselves. Then I would tell them what topic was to be discussed, and asked them to think about it so they could say a few words about it in the class. Today we have Elders in all our programs at both the Tribal Council and First Nation levels. Whenever there is a conference we have a pipe ceremony at the start of each day...We have finally recognized the wisdom and knowledge of our Cree and Dene Elders as a significant part of our life, and our work."

Intergenerational facilitators also play an important role in helping some students — and in some instances, instructors — to overcome their initial resistance to the unfamiliar practice of putting Indigenous knowledge at the core of curriculum development. Some students are initially receptive and welcoming of Elders in this role. But others express serious doubts about whether the "old ways" can have any value or relevance to themselves, their families, or their future careers in child and family services. Many students and instructors find it helpful to discuss Elders' contributions with the intergenerational facilitator, who is adept at helping

them understand and tolerate the often ambiguous nature of Elders' teaching through storytelling. As noted by Louise Underwood, an intergenerational facilitator in the partnership program with Cowichan Tribes:

"When they first started, some of the students had difficulty staying still and really listening and hearing. But that is something that you develop, and this is part of our teaching. ... The circle has been broken for so long, our ancestral traditions have been put aside for so long, that the students need time, especially in the beginning. Time to recover who they are. Time to see that they are being asked and being given an opportunity to inherit all the accumulated wisdom of all the generations of people in our Nation who have gone before them. Time to grow into being the leaders in our community that they will become."

The intergenerational facilitator also serves as a kind of socio-cultural mentor for instructors who may not be from the community, and helps to introduce instructors and Elders to one another. The table on page 12 summarizes the roles and responsibilities of the intergenerational facilitator that were described to us in the evaluation research.

From Training to Practice

Practitioners who have opportunities to receive some of their training from senior members of their community are likely to gain skills that will prepare and motivate them to introduce intergenerational involvement in programs for children and families. With the help of a skilled intergenerational facilitator, they can overcome some of the communication barriers and learn

some useful protocol that will enhance their capacity to reach out to Elders and bridge the gap between generations. As Amelia Stark, community administrator who oversaw the delivery of the First Nations Partnership Program at Tl'azt'en Nation remarks:

"A major benefit is the program helped our students in the community to find their voice. They were a shy bunch of ladies; today they have the confidence to work with community members and our Elders. They gained skills on how to work with Elders, which is an important component in Tl'azt'en Head Start program. The Child and Youth Care students have the confidence, education, and capacity to deliver a well-thought-out program for the children. They will, one day, become true leaders in our community."

A strong and stable cultural identity and positive self-esteem are important foundations for working effectively with young children and their families. The research evaluating the First Nations Partnership Programs has shown how the involvement of Elders, with the help of an intergenerational facilitator, brought all students, even the most disenchanted, into a circle of belonging to a healing cultural community. This is also what we would want for the infants, young children, and parents who we serve through our practice: self-esteem, positive cultural identity, and belonging. The families we serve are more likely to experience this if practitioners and other community members who interact with them project positive cultural identity and self-esteem and have personally experienced a circle of belonging. Elders' involvement with caregivers and young children can be an effective avenue for helping children learn cultural traditions, experience a multi-age, caring community, and consolidate positive self-concept. The role of intergenerational facilitator can be an effective innovation in other training and service programs that seek to bring the outside community inside, and bridge the worlds of mainstream programming and rich knowledge traditions residing in communities.

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Roles and Responsibilities of the Intergenerational Facilitator

Roles	Responsibilities
Plays a very central role in this type of training program	Seeks the participation of many Elders and other community members
Is a bridge between the students and the Elders in their communities	Helps students with the development of questions for Elders. Usually it works best when the questions ask for personal experiences, like "What was your experience as a child in our community?"
Helps to make a bridge between what the students learn about caring for children, and what their traditional culture tells them	Arranges transportation for the Elders to come to class
Helps to make sure there is good communication and a good feeling between the students, the instructors, and the Elders	Encourages students to go to Elders' homes when invited. In fact, sometimes Elders are more comfortable with home visits than coming to the class. Some Elders like to develop personal relationships with students through home visits. Home visits may solve transportation barriers as well
Creates bridges among the First Nations communities that the students are from; if students come from different communities, Elders from each community should be asked to take part in the program	Helps, when necessary, with the English translation of traditional languages used by Elders
	Is sensitive to feelings that Elders may have about class participation and makes Elders feel welcome and appreciated
	Follows appropriate customs, such as providing gifts to Elders for their participation
	Encourages students to show respect for Elders