“Try to Understand Us”: Aboriginal Elders’ Views on Exceptionality

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Abstract

This article provides an analysis of the views of four Elders at the “A Window to Seeing the World Differently, National Symposium on Aboriginal Special Education” that was held in October 2005 at First Nations University of Canada in Regina. The symposium was an opportunity to provide educators, students, parents, and community members with information on Aboriginal views on special education. Concern had been expressed over the high numbers of Aboriginal students being identified as “special needs” attending schools on reserves throughout Canada. There was also concern over difficulties with the current special education system, e.g., funding, assessment, and service issues. It was believed that the Aboriginal worldview of students with special needs as having special gifts from the Creator was not integrated into the curriculum or into teaching practices. The article concludes with suggestions for educators on how to address exceptionalities in Aboriginal communities.

Keywords: Aboriginal education, Elders, exceptionality, special education, Aboriginal special education.

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Introduction

First Nations education throughout Canada is in a “mess”. This is particularly true of the current state of special education in First Nations schools. Part of the problem may be that educators, academics, and bureaucrats have taken the view that their professional training and academic knowledge gives them the best solutions to solve the many problems within the current system of First Nations education. By any measurement their “best solutions” have not been successful, yet these experts continue because they believe they know best. The result is that the current educational system for First Nations students does not reflect, consider or incorporate an Aboriginal approach to education. Rather, the “Western” world’s education system was simply imposed on First Nations communities because this is all that the educators, academics, and bureaucrats know. The result is that First Nations/Aboriginal traditional thoughts and/or beliefs are not included in the curriculum or in teaching. Not surprisingly, First Nations students and schools continue to fail.

It is time to consider a different approach, one guided by Aboriginal understandings of education. As Aboriginal Elders are viewed as the repository of traditional knowledge and spirituality, a change to an Aboriginal approach to education should be guided the thoughts of Elders.

This article presents and discusses Aboriginal Elders views on exceptionality with respect to the strategies for educators to consider when working with Aboriginal students with special needs. Four Aboriginal Elders from across Saskatchewan were invited to discuss their thoughts on exceptionality as well as possible pedagogical and interaction patterns for educators of Aboriginal children with special needs. It is hoped that the identification of these patterns will help educators develop effective teaching strategies, improve relationship interactions, and increase understanding of how exceptionality is viewed in traditional Aboriginal belief systems.

Background

The high numbers of Aboriginal students being identified as “special needs”, as well as system difficulties (e.g., funding, assessment, and services issues) raised many concerns about the current special education system for First Nation students attending schools throughout Canada. These concerns led a number of educators in Saskatchewan from the First Nations University of Canada (FNUC, 2005), University of Regina, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, Saskatchewan Region, and File Hills Qu’Appelle Tribal Council to question the current system of special education for Aboriginal children.

The group of concerned educators made a decision to organize a national symposium on Aboriginal special education. The symposium “A Window to Seeing the World Differently” was held in Regina, SK., Oct. 6-7, 2005 (FNUC, 2005, p.1). The theme of the symposium was “to provide an opportunity to review and discuss best practices and identify Indigenous knowledge that can contribute to the field of Aboriginal special education” (FNUC, 2005, p. 1). Simply put, the current system of providing special education—“based on the Western views of diagnosis and treatment” (FNUC, 2005, p.1)—was not working in First Nations schools. The symposium’s organizers thought that the current special education system was failing Aboriginal students because the Aboriginal worldview of all children, including those with special needs, as being “gifts” from the Creator was not integrated into the education of Aboriginal children with special

needs. An Elder from the FNUC attended each meeting to provide guidance to the organizers as they sought to incorporate Aboriginal knowledge and perspectives into the design of programs.

The symposium was organized to provide attendees with both theoretical and practical information. Dr. Lorna Williams, who holds a Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Knowledge and Learning, emphasized the inclusive nature of Aboriginal worldview concerning exceptionalities in her keynote address “Each Child, an Honour and a Blessing to the Community” (FNUC, 2005, p.3). Over two days there was a mixture of panel discussions--on topics such as Aboriginal Elders’ views of exceptionality and voices from the field of special education--papers on specific issues—for example, students with middle ear problems and community-based Aboriginal curriculum initiatives--and workshops—for example, how to meet the needs of students and defining a place for all in the learning community.

The Elders’ panel on Aboriginal views of exceptionality began the symposium. It was thought that the thoughts from this panel would provide guidance for the remaining two days of the symposium. The Elders were selected as a result of consultations with Aboriginal organizations and individuals throughout Saskatchewan. They were well respected Elders within their communities. Each Elder had experience providing guidance to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups throughout the province. The organizers believed that the Elders had to be representative of the province. For this reason, the Elders were from the four directions: east, west, north, and south. The Elders represented different Aboriginal language and cultural groups. They were two women and two men.

Literature Review

Special education is an issue in First Nations communities and schools. First Nations students with special needs attending First Nations schools encounter many difficulties. These difficulties include: inadequate funding (Fulford, 2007; Kavanagh, 2006; Mamow Sha-way-gi-kay-win, 2007a; Martin, 2009) and lack of services (Brant 2000; Mamow Sha-way-gi-kay-win, 2007b). Such difficulties have resulted in many First Nations students with special needs being forced to leave their home communities to attend provincial schools to have their needs met (Assembly of First Nations [AFN], 2005).

The percentage of First Nations students requiring special education programs and services in First Nations schools appears higher than those attending provincial schools. For example, Edmunds & Edmunds (2008) reported “In Canada, it is generally agreed that the percentage of students who are considered to be exceptional ranges from 12 to 16 percent of all school aged children” (p. 22). These figures were supported by Bennett, Dworet, and Weber (2008) which stated that the percentage of students reserving special education services in provincial schools Ontario was 13.72%. These figures are much lower than those reported for students attending schools on First Nations across Canada. For example, the percentages vary in British Columbia from 29.8% (Auerbach, 2007) and 30.13% (First Nations Education Steering Committee/First Nations School Association, 2009), 35% in Nova Scotia (den Heyer & Wein, 2001), 52% in Quebec (First Nations Education Council, 1992). The Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada’s (INAC, 2002) National Working Group on Education also expressed concern about the “over-representation of First Nations students in special education programs in provincial and territorial schools” (p. 23).

Recently, the Edmonton Journal ran several stories on the realities faced by teachers and students in First Nations schools throughout Alberta. One story focused on the poor academic

achievement levels found in the schools as only 4% of Grade 9 students passed provincial achievement tests in math during 1999 to 2001 (Stolte, 2010a). The same story emphasized that only 14% of the students achieved 50% in science. In social studies the figure was 19%. A second story found that “many parents still don’t trust the school” (Stolte, 2010b, p. 2). A later story noted that First Nations schools lack second level support services (Stolte, 2010b).

However, all is not bleak from these stories. Guy Morin, a teacher who is excited about teaching in his own community gave his thoughts on what would be successful. He believes that “Aboriginal students need to know who they are, need to understand recent history and feel a connection to their people. That’s what inspires them to learn, ...” (Stolte, 2010b, p. 3).

Mr. Morin speaks of what he knows. He overcame being a high school dropout by returning to his traditional beliefs (e.g., learning to smudge, sweats, dreams and meditations). He also uses guided imagery to go on a spiritual journey with his students every week. Such traditional and spiritual beliefs come from the Elders who hold this collective wisdom.

Elders and Education

Who are the Elders? One does not become an Elder simply through age (Alberta Education, 2005; Owljoot, 2008; National Aboriginal Health Organization, undated). Elders are people who “have significant wisdom in areas of traditional Aboriginal knowledge; are recognized as having that wisdom by their community, their Nation; and, have the capacity to transmit this knowledge to others (Steckley, undated). Cordoba (2005) noted “Elders show us our responsibilities” (p.4). They “impart knowledge, values and traditions... The Elders are the most knowledgeable people in Aboriginal societies” (Burns, 1998, p. 5). Battiste (2002) has viewed Elders as “... living educational treasures” (p. 21) and recommended that Elders be designated “as masters of traditional knowledge” (p. 37).

Community recognition and respect are important in the process of becoming an Elder. Saskatchewan Learning (2001) reported “a person becomes an Elder in the eyes of his or her community by developing knowledge of life and traditional ways” (p. 5). The National Aboriginal Health Organization (undated) in a guideline for interviewing Elders reported that “Individuals recognized as Elders have earned the respect of their community” (p. 2).

There is an extensive research and commentary on First Nations/Aboriginal ways of learning throughout the literature (Bergstrom, Cleary & Peacock, 2003; Hilberg & Tharp, 2002; More, 1987; Pewewardy, 2002). There are many suggestions for teaching in First Nations communities (Bell, 2004; Fulford, 2007; Goulet, 2001; Kavanagh, 2000; Kavanagh, 2006; Swanson, 2003; Toulouse, 2008).

There is also research and information on Elders and education (Ball & Pence, 2001; Cordoba, 2005; Owljoot, 2008; Saskatchewan Learning, 2001). For example, Alberta Education (2005) found that Elders’ “contributions to schools and classrooms can be significant when they are involved in meaningful ways such as bringing traditional ceremonies and teachings into the school or classroom” (p. 71).

However, very little research and information may be found on the topic of Aboriginal Elders’ views of exceptionality. This may be explained by examining Aboriginal peoples’ traditional worldview that does not differentiate between children with or without disabilities/exceptionalities. All children are seen as gifts from the Creator. For example, Alberta Learning (2000) emphasized “including disabled children was always a part of First Nations traditional philosophies” (p. 1). Maggisano (2006) reported “In the Objibwe culture, the belief

that children come into the world with special gifts” and that “it is the duty and responsibility of the adults, parents, grandparents and teachers to create opportunities to bring out and enhance these gifts in children” (p.12). An Inuit elder acknowledged that their role “... is not to show kids their weaknesses but rather to help them find their strength – and then discover how they can use this strength to help the community” (Philpott & Cahill, 2005). Similar thoughts may be found an Elder who stated:

Long ago we did not treat our disabled children differently, they were special, special in a way that they were a gift. There was a reason why disabled children were put on the earth and they were included in all parts of the community. These children are a gift to show an appreciation of life. Disabled children are on loan to us and we must nurture and love them. (Alberta Learning, 2000, p. 1)

Aboriginal worldviews do not differentiate between children with or without special needs. All children are gifts. It becomes the job of educators to find these gifts to enable the children to thrive in the educational system. Aside from the Alberta Learning (2000) document, there remains little direct information on Aboriginal Elders thoughts of exceptionality. Recommending to educators that they should find these gifts is one thing. Discussing Aboriginal worldviews regarding exceptionality is fine. What is absent from the research on “gifts” and worldview thoughts are practical suggestions from Aboriginal Elders for educators to implement in their dealings with Aboriginal children with special needs.

In summary, Elders are not limited to senior citizens or “older” people. Surprisingly, Elders are not determined by age. Elders are well-respected individuals within their communities. They are keepers of traditional knowledge. They play an important role in their communities by providing their wisdom, guidance, and teaching about Aboriginal traditions, culture, history, values, and languages. Due to their important role in their communities, as well as their understanding of traditional knowledge, Aboriginal Elders should be consulted in the education of First Nations students with or with special education needs.

Method

The organizers of the symposium discussed possible candidates to be on the Aboriginal Elders panel on exceptionality. Due to time constraints at the symposium, it was thought that four Elders would be sufficient to provide a representative overview of traditional Aboriginal thoughts on exceptionality. After discussions, four Aboriginal Elders were selected and later contacted by phone to determine their willingness to participate at the symposium. The Elders were asked to consider two general questions in their discussions:

1. What do Aboriginal Elders perceive as special education?
2. What suggestions do Elders have for teachers who work with Aboriginal students with special needs?

Each Elder’s panel presentation was video/audio-taped to ensure the accuracy of the transcriptions of discussions. The first step in answering these two questions was to transcribe the panel discussions of the four Elders. The second step was to make copies of the video/audio recordings and the transcriptions. The next step involved assembling each answer for each Elder. The fourth step involved developing a table for each question from the factors that emerged from analysis. Step five involved identifying and analyzing the common themes or patterns found in

the tables. From the analysis of the panel discussions common themes emerged to better understand the nature of Elders thoughts of special education, as well as suggestions for educators.

Elders' Panel – Aboriginal View of Special Education

Elder 1

The first Elder spoke of learning from the oral teachings of the Elders in the community and her own grandparents. She remembered:

She emphasized that the mind must be clear and that “when a child is going to learn, we as parents and caregivers have to prepare them to learn ... by thinking in a positive way”. Being positive with students has many benefits, i.e., brings happiness to the students, increases learning, and develops trust with the teacher. She stressed that teachers should not “burden a child with negative talk”.

The Elder believed that “children are sacred” and that “each child is born with the spirit and we have to understand and nurture that spirit”. She also noted that children’s minds and brains are distracted when they are abused emotionally or verbally.

The Elder spoke of her experiences in a residential school from 1949-1951. While lined up in the mornings she would sometimes smile to the nuns “hoping to get a positive response”. Sadly, the nuns just “stood there sternly”. She would be hit on the head and “told to go forward”. Such actions caused her to spend the rest of the day questioning herself (e.g., “What did I do wrong?”; “What did I say to her for her not to like me like that?”).

When she meets and talks with teachers in her own community she stresses the importance of realizing that the children have “feelings and understand when things are happening there”. She emphasizes that teachers should “always speak to them to try to make it seem or look like a better place”. Such actions will bring “happiness to them and they will learn more intelligently” and the students “will speak their mind because there’s that trust relationship”.

Finally, the Elder began her closing by again emphasizing being positive as she only speaks “words that are going to help young people, children. I never like to talk about anything that’s going to offend anybody”. She ended her talk by speaking of the difficulties of being an Elder. Elders are always listening to people with problems. It is important that the Elders get rid of negative thinking and “to think good of people no matter who they are, what race they are or where they come from”. The Elders are there to “enlighten them with good words and words to make them feel better”. She finally spoke of the need for Elders to be humble as “when we walk in the humble way of life our prayers are heard by the grandfathers and the Creator”.

Elder 2

The second Elder also emphasized the importance of being positive and being away from “anything negative”. This begins before birth as:

A long time ago, when a woman was pregnant; they did not see any violence, blood or anything negative to scare her. They protected that woman. She sang to her baby in the womb. She talked to it. She had good thoughts and when the baby came in this world, it was honoured by all the other relatives.

He related his own story on the effects of violence and fear on learning. Recently, an aunt told him about his early years. She told him that his “dad was always beating up your mother” and that he was born “in a violent way”. He acknowledged that:

As a result, I had a hard time learning. I couldn't ...My brain and my hands couldn't coordinate. I couldn't do a lot of things, as every other child could. Children, when they're of a certain age learn to crawl. I just sat in one place. I was scared. As I grew a little older, I couldn't tie my shoelaces; things like that. My father stood above me threatening to hit me if I couldn't do things. He said I was stupid; I was no good. How I wasn't his son. All the negative things he could think of. For some reason he hated me. As I result, I was scared to take risks because I couldn't learn right.

The Elder remembered that his learning was affected because “everybody looked at me negatively”. He internalized these negative thoughts by believing that “There's something wrong with me. I wasn't accepted. I had to work extra hard to try to learn. So I know there's children out there that need special teachers to understand them”.

He spoke of his early experiences with teachers. His school was in the north where teachers came to get their teaching experience. The Elder spoke of the teachers as being “very strict” and how they “tried to break us but we broke them”. However, he remembered one teacher who was different from the rest. This teacher was described as:

A very loving person and we all excelled that year because she was kind to us. She was very helpful and her body language and her feelings were there. We could tell that she cared for us.

The Elder spoke of growing up angry for many years. He “was not being understood by people”. He was quiet and insecure. He dealt with problems or anything negative by using his fists. It took many years to become a “positive person”.

He then described his experiences as a family youth support worker in the schools. He would greet any sad students as they arrived at school by giving hugs to the little ones and older ones a high five. When students were having behavioural problems in school he would take them into his room to smudge, quiet down and then return them to the classroom.

The Elder also spoke of distractions in classrooms and the need to adjust school rules for students with special needs. One struggling student needed to keep his hoodie on. The student knew it was against school rules but said, “There's too much noise. I can't concentrate. I have to focus”. The Elder said the student,

Couldn't concentrate, he couldn't focus because of all the stimulation in the class. He just got all hypered up too and joined the rest of the children and became unruly. He was finally allowed finally to keep his bunny hug up ...cause that's the way he could keep focus, let all that other stuff out and he could work.

The Elder stressed the need to allow First Nation students learn in their own way. He spoke of his own experiences at college and the need to adapt. He said that:

I'm a hearing and a feeling person. I go by feelings and what I hear. When I went to college all my colleagues were writing notes from what the professor was saying. I couldn't do that – I'd lose focus. I had to really listen to what the professor was saying. It's hard because you look back and you don't have the notes. I just checked my colleague's notes. But it's just my way of learning – you adapt. You adapt to learn.

Finally, the Elder stressed the need to “find the key” with students with special needs and the “gift” that these students give their teachers. He spoke of the importance of educators in assisting students with special needs to make the connections in learning by being “the part that's missing”. He emphasized that teachers must:

Help them make that transition by different skills, different ways, different methods. Maybe visual, it may be other ways. But to find that key, that child will learn. It needs that help. The more you work with these children; it's going to make you special. They're going to develop you. So, we're all going to be special.

Elder 3

The third Elder emphasized the importance of language and identity as an Aboriginal person. She was raised by her grandparents. Her grandfather stressed that she must “never lose her language, that's your identity as a First Nation”. Her grandfather would say to her “Don't ever forget who you are”. He also stressed humility. He used to tell her “Don't ever think you're better than anybody. Always walk behind”.

She briefly discussed the impact of the residential schools on First Nations parents. The Elder spent eleven years in one. She acknowledged that the residential school was not all negative and that “she learnt a lot. I can't say it was all bad”. However, she noted that many parents have lost parenting skills because in the residential schools: “They weren't taught how to care. It was taken away on us as a First Nation. The way you care for your children”.

She also discussed the learning differences or styles of First Nations/Aboriginal people. She noted that as First Nations/Aboriginals “we learn different. We think different. We are very descriptive”. She also stressed the need to be respectful and encouraging with children with special needs. When students ask her why they are being placed in a separate room she has to be encouraging because the students believe they are there because “I got to be there because I can't do this and why don't they put the other ones in that room”. Her response is to encourage the students because “they get hurt so easily and then they keep that within them”. Many of the problems, i.e., FAS (i.e., Fetal Alcohol Syndrome) are not the fault of the student.

This Elder spoke of the need for teachers to visit the homes of their students. She emphasized that teachers “should make an effort to visit the home to speak with the parents so they can assist you in trying to teach the children you are teaching; their children”. She also spoke of the need for teachers to “find ways to accommodate the students you're working with”, and “include all the students in an equal basis and finally “let's try and do things. You know, try and work together”.

Finally, she closed her talk by telling educators to:

Try to understand us. Try and understand our children. We're going through really hard times. I know sometimes you feel like just giving a shake, "C'mon, wake up..." ... Try to work together. This is the only way we can help to try and solve our problems and also, don't forget, we have our language. That's very important.

Elder 4

The fourth Elder never went to school. He spoke of the importance of the extended family, talking/learning circles and storytelling as ways to teach children. He stressed that today's teachers are "building, you're making people. You're making leaders. You're making all kinds of people here. It means a lot to our people". He began by describing traditional education as:

Long ago, the old people had a way to teach children. That way was the mother and the father and the grandparents, and the aunts and uncles. It all went in circles. They circled around that young person.

Teach them, teach them things. Not tell them directly. They'd tell them a story. That's where they'd get their message from. This is the way they taught young people.

He also mentioned the role of poverty on Aboriginal students who withdraw from school. Young students "are dropping out of school and the one reason is they don't have the clothes to wear to school. They don't have, you know, the right kind of home to come home to". He described teaching at a local high school. He arranged the students in a circle. Students would say "People would laugh at their clothes. That would discourage them. They'd want to drop out and they'd try to hang on as long as they could. But eventually, that child would drop out of school".

This Elder pointed out that Elders can help teachers with students who were experiencing problems in school: "We'd try and help you as much as we could". He acknowledged that the road ahead would be difficult as it would be necessary to "get rid of these people who are supplying all this stuff that puts them on the wrong track".

In summation, the Elders usually begin their stories by talking about how they were raised. This was usually followed by their experiences in elementary school. Finally, they ended their stories by discussing their current experiences in the education system. Their thoughts on exceptionality and teaching strategies are woven throughout their discussions.

Analysis

Considering the current situation that First Nations education throughout Canada is in, it is surprising that the Elders did not speak more about the problems in the current system. The Elders' approach to solving problems is to build up rather than to tear down. There is very little explicit criticism in their discussions. Rather their criticism is implicit in their words. The focus of their thoughts was on what should be done, what has worked, rather than a diatribe against the past or what has not worked.

The thoughts of the four Aboriginal Elders on exceptionalities were different, yet very similar. Taken together they may provide educators with a greater understanding of the issue of

exceptionality in Aboriginal communities. These thoughts may also provide educators with suggestions for working with Aboriginal students with exceptionalities in their classrooms.

Elders 3 and 4 stressed the importance of teachers understanding Aboriginal people by going to the homes of students and working with the parents to get them to help in teaching their children. These thoughts are consistent with a curriculum for preparing culturally responsive teachers (Villegas and Lucas, 2002). Teachers should encourage the use of the Aboriginal language in the class. Teachers should visit homes, speak with Aboriginal parents and involve them in teaching their children. Teachers should ensure that students realize that they have support from all sides. Other people are there to support them. Teachers should incorporate the students' experiences, language, and interests outside of school or the "funds of knowledge" of the community to develop the lessons and unit plans. The 'funds of knowledge' approach utilizes the knowledge that students bring to school as the base of learning in the classroom (Moll & Gonzalez, 1997, Martin-Jones & Saxena, 2003).

All Elders spoke of preparing and teaching Aboriginal students by using traditional learning and teaching methods. Elder 2 described his successes smudging with students having behavioural problems to calm students and to prepare them for learning. Elder 1 also spoke of smudging to prepare youth to learn. Elder 4 spoke of using the circle and story-telling in teaching: prepare students to learn by telling stories; use more talking circles, groups and cooperative learning strategies to facilitate learning in the classroom; and, encourage students to use their first language to communicate with one another when they encounter problems in understanding or comprehending English instruction or directions. Elder 3 noted that Aboriginal learn differently. She spoke of being more descriptive. She spoke of the importance of using Aboriginal language and culture in teaching.

Elders 1 and 2 focused much of their talks on the need to be positive in speech and actions with Aboriginal students. Elder 1 stressed that her grandparents "... taught me to think only in a positive way". She noted that students who are abused emotionally or verbally are distracted in school. Learning would be difficult for these students. Elder 2 also emphasized being positive and being away from "anything negative". He remembered a teacher who was different from others because the students sensed that she cared. The importance of being positive and encouraging towards students to motivate them to try their best must be emphasized. Students need to feel that they can learn and that risk-taking is part of learning. Students must also realize that if they do try and then fail that they will not encounter negative talk, rather they will be encouraged to try again.

Elder 3 remembered the words of her grandfather: "Never lose your language, that's your identity as a First Nation" and "Don't ever forget who you are". Aboriginal issues, topics, and community (i.e., people, history, resources, etc.) should be integrated into the curriculum

Elders 3 spoke of the effects of the Residential schools on Aboriginal people. She spoke of lost parenting skills. Teachers should understand the long-term effects of residential schools on later generations. It has been estimated that over 20% of these students were sexually abused (Naumetz, 2009). Aboriginal/First Nation parents may view schools, teachers, and education in a very negative light. They may be very leery of teachers and even going to a school building. Also, some Aboriginal/First Nation parents may have difficulties in caring for children. This caring of children was taken away from them in the residential schools.

A theme that flows throughout these Elders' thoughts is how important it is for teachers to develop relationships with their Aboriginal/First Nation students and communities. Relationship building is crucial to working with Aboriginal/First Nation people. Agbo (2003) in

an examination of school-community relations in a First Nation found that it was “difficult to communicate with First Nations without getting to know them” (p. 42), and as a parent commented “If my people don’t trust you, they’ll have nothing to do with you” (p.42).

These relationships are not built upon power; rather they are built on mutual trust and respect. The relationships are horizontal rather than vertical. Teachers must demonstrate respect and understanding to Aboriginal students, parents, and communities and culture. This respect must be real. It must be substantive. Students and parents will sense right away if a teacher cares for and respects them.

Another idea that is consistent throughout the Elders’ thoughts is that teachers should not think of themselves as being lone workers. They should work collaboratively with other teachers, parents, community members, and students to understand the backgrounds of Aboriginal students. Such endeavours should allow teachers to become better teachers.

The Elders’ thoughts are in agreement with culture-based education that emphasizes the need to “support all students through affirmation of their culture” (Northwest Territory, 2009, p.1) and the belief that education “should reflect, validate, and promote their culture and language” (Lewthwaite & McMillan, 2010, p. 144). The thoughts are also consistent with the views of an Inuit elder who noted that, “In our language we have no word for problem. We see things as opportunities” (Philpott & Cahill, 2005).

Implications for Educators

It is evident from even a cursory view of the situation that the present education system for First Nations students with or without special education needs across Canada is not simply working. First Nation students are failing. The current system is failing them. To remedy this situation, the Elders provide practical information and suggestions for educators who are working with Aboriginal students with exceptional needs.

Much of the Elders’ thoughts on exceptionality focus on the roles of teachers, the need for them to develop respect, and to increase their knowledge of Aboriginal communities, parents and students are consistent with the research on developing “culturally responsive teachers” (Villegas & Lucas, 2002), using the students and communities as “funds of knowledge” (Moll & Gonzalez, 1997), and responding to the cultural backgrounds of students (Lewthwaite & McMillan, 2010). These studies emphasize the important of teachers getting to know, understand, and respect the backgrounds of their students, families and communities and utilizing this knowledge to develop effective lesson plans, unit plans and teaching strategies.

Educators need to reconsider their teaching strategies, as well as, their relationships with Aboriginal students, parents, and communities. From listening to the Elders, as well as my thirty years experience in Aboriginal education, I know that teaching and relationship strategies must change. Educators must realize that their university training as teachers and administrators provides only the very first steps in an incredible journey. Teachers and administrators must realize that they do not know everything. It is time for them to listen and involve the community in substantive ways. To be successful as teachers and administrators in Aboriginal communities these educators must also listen to and consider the traditional knowledge of the Elders. Ignoring the Elders, ignoring traditional and spiritual knowledge of the Elders, has not been successful. The Aboriginal Elders have the following suggestions for educators who are working with Aboriginal students:

1. Increase their knowledge of the Aboriginal community. Visit homes. Speak with parents and older siblings. Encourage people from local Aboriginal organizations to visit your classroom.
2. Teachers should develop trust, respect, and understanding of Aboriginal students by understanding and respecting the backgrounds of Aboriginal students.
3. Teachers must accept Aboriginal students as they are. Consider using talking circles and story-telling in your classrooms. Encourage the use of Aboriginal languages in the classrooms.
4. Be positive. Students who face negativity and criticism on a constant basis will have difficulty with learning.
5. The importance of self-identity as a First Nations/Aboriginal person is important in teaching these students. Students must know who they are.
6. Be aware of the lasting effects of Residential schools. Many Aboriginal parents have lost parenting skills. They may have difficulty going to a school event because of past trauma.
7. When problems or difficulties arise, consider turning to an Elder for assistance. If not an Elder, approach someone from the community who is well respected and knowledgeable.
8. Teachers must realize that all children are gifts. Exceptional students are also gifts. Their gift to teachers is that by working with them, teachers will develop their skills as educators. This is their gift to teachers.

Conclusion

According to the Elders' views of traditional Aboriginal knowledge and practice, there is little, if any differentiation between identified students with special needs and the rest of the students. Rather than focusing on suggesting teaching strategies and their thoughts on exceptionalities, the Elders focused their attention on the education of all students.

The Elders also shifted their focus from the students with special needs to their teachers. Through the experience of working with Aboriginal students with special needs, the teachers will develop and improve their teaching methods and strategies. This is the students' gift to teachers.

Finally, the present system of providing education, regular and special education, for Aboriginal students across Canada has serious flaws. Rather than implementing new, improved "western" strategies to fix the system, it is time to rethink our approach. Given the "mess" in the current state of special education in First Nations schools, it is time for educators to listen to the traditional knowledge and expertise of Aboriginal Elders and to incorporate their suggestions into classroom teaching.

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