

Are You Providing an Education that Is Worth Caring About? Advice to Non-Native Teachers in Northern First Nations Communities

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Abstract

This article explores the development of culturally relevant teaching practices of non-Native teachers in First Nations communities. The findings were gathered from a qualitative study that asked First Nations and non-Native educators what they believed non-Native teachers needed to know about cultivating student success for First Nations students. Based on participants' personal stories, suggestions, and advice, this article encourages non-Native teachers to enrich their teaching practices through self-reflection, communication and community engagement, and the right kind of attitude. Participants suggest that these activities can help non-Native teachers create a learning environment that is meaningful to the students they teach.

Keywords: culturally relevant teaching, First Nations education, teacher development

Résumé

Cet article explore les méthodes pédagogiques adaptées aux différences culturelles que développent des enseignants non autochtones au sein de communautés des Premières

Nations. Les résultats présentés proviennent d'une étude qualitative dans le cadre de laquelle des enseignants autochtones et non autochtones se sont vu demander ce que, à leur avis, des enseignants non autochtones ont besoin de savoir afin de promouvoir la réussite scolaire de leurs élèves autochtones. Basé sur les témoignages, les suggestions et les conseils des participants, cet article encourage les enseignants non autochtones à enrichir leurs méthodes pédagogiques par la réflexion personnelle, la communication et l'engagement communautaire, et l'adoption d'une bonne attitude. Les participants croient que cela peut aider les enseignants non autochtones à créer un milieu d'apprentissage qui est pertinent pour leurs élèves.

Mots-clés : enseignement adapté aux réalités culturelles, éducation des autochtones, perfectionnement des enseignants

Introduction

The education of First Nations students in remote communities in northern Ontario remains an ongoing concern (Agbo, 2011; Oskineegish & Berger, 2013; Watt-Cloutier, 2000). According to the 2012 education report published by the Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN),¹ students in remote communities in northern Ontario face greater challenges than students in urban settings due to insufficient funding, a high turnover rate of teachers, and frequent school closures. A large number of teachers who are hired to teach in First Nations schools are non-Native with varying experiences of living and teaching in remote First Nations communities (Anderson, Horton, & Orwick, 2004; Taylor, 1995). Research on non-Native teachers in remote First Nations and Inuit communities suggest that many of the difficulties that teachers experience stem from a lack of training and preparation in culturally appropriate practices, a disconnection from community, and feelings of isolation (Agbo, 2006; 2007; Berger & Epp, 2007; Harper, 2000). Compounded by the poor socio-economic conditions within some of the communities, the challenges of living and teaching in the North can feel overwhelming to many non-Native teachers. And yet, when these challenges monopolize conversations about teaching in First Nations communities, it can conceal the growing strength and expertise that also exists in remote schools and communities. Local First Nations teachers, education assistants, principals, and school board members are a tremendous resource for pedagogical mentorship for non-Native teachers new to a community. Their knowledge and experience of students, their families, and the community can assist non-Native teachers to adopt a place-conscious lens in which non-Native teachers bring local knowledge and activities into their everyday teaching practices (Chartrand, 2012). A place-conscious knowledge base provides teachers the foundation to develop pedagogical practices that align with the pedagogy of the local community and culture. Non-Native teachers who arrive in a First Nations community willing to learn from within the community will be more able to develop lessons and instructional strategies that are culturally relevant and meaningful to the students they are teaching.

1 NAN is a political territorial organization representing 49 First Nations communities within northern Ontario (www.nan.on.ca).

This article discusses the ways in which non-Native teachers can learn to implement culturally relevant teaching practices specific to the community that they are teaching in. The findings are drawn from a qualitative study that asked experienced educators, both First Nations and non-Native who have taught in remote First Nations communities, what they believed non-Native teachers should know about planning lessons and teaching First Nations students in remote communities in northern Ontario. This article focuses on one aspect of their response that connects successful teaching practices with self-reflection, communication, community engagement, and the importance of having the right kind of attitude. It concludes with a discussion of how all three elements are connected to culturally relevant teaching.

Situating Myself

As a Euro-Canadian woman originally from southern Ontario, I began my teaching career in a remote First Nations community in northern Ontario. When I first arrived, I was told immediately by other educators to prepare my lessons for students in a combined Grade 7/8 class who worked below the provincial grade level. I accepted this statement to be true and began creating lessons accordingly. In the first few weeks of teaching I started to realize that much of what I knew about education was not working for the students. They were struggling to follow the lessons that I was teaching and I had the sinking feeling that I was failing as a teacher. Fortunately, I was also working alongside highly skilled and committed First Nations and non-Native teachers and education assistants who were willing to mentor me in developing lessons and pedagogical practices that were supportive of the students' well-being and academic growth. As I learned from students and colleagues, and as I engaged myself in community life, I became more capable of developing lessons that built on the knowledge and capabilities of the students in my class. This experience inspired me to develop a study to further explore successful teaching practices in First Nations communities in northern Ontario.

Terminology

The term “Aboriginal” refers to the collective groups of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people of Canada and is used in this article when referring to all of Canada’s First Peoples or when used by participants from the study. In my experience of living and teaching in a First Nations community in northern Ontario, people were referred to as First Nations, Native, or non-Native when speaking English. Eber Hampton (1995) has said:

No name encompasses a people, and none is truly accurate. Correctness is not nearly so important to me as accuracy in feeling as well as in fact. But many of my words and thoughts were first spoken by my many teachers, and I cannot disentangle those words that I now hear in my own voice. (p. 6)

This article is a piece of my ongoing journey in learning about successful teaching in First Nations communities in northern Ontario. I primarily use the words First Nations and non-Native out of familiarity and respect to those who taught me in my early teaching career.

Another term used in this article is “successful teaching practices.” From the guidance of the participants in the study, successful teaching refers to positive teacher and student interactions; active engagement and partnership with local educators, parents, and community members; and a willingness to adapt and respond to the flow of the community.

Literature Review

Research within Aboriginal education advocates for an education system that honours the teachings of the Elders, empowers student growth, and builds on the knowledge and skills that exist within Aboriginal communities (Battiste, 2013; Kanu, 2011; Kirkness, 1998; Madjidi & Restoule, 2008; St. Denis, 2011). Parents and community members in First Nations communities in northern Ontario want teachers who will respect their children’s cultural identity, encourage academic success, and support their personal well-being (Agbo, 2011; NAN, 2012). These goals are a conscientious effort to eliminate and reverse the negative impact that previous education systems, such as the Canadian Indian Residential Schools system, has had on First Nations people and communities. Despite many

initiatives to educate the general public about Residential Schools, many non-Native people continue to have little to no awareness of Residential Schools and its resulting oppression, assimilation, and even genocide amongst Aboriginal people across Canada (Reagan, 2010). Non-Native teachers can gain a greater understanding of the goals of First Nations communities, and the necessity of working towards culturally relevant teaching practices when they learn about the impact Residential Schools have had on many Aboriginal people across Canada.

The Canadian Indian Residential Schools System

The Canadian Indian Residential Schools system officially began in 1831 and remained in operation until 1996 (Miller, 2003; Milloy, 1999). After numerous assimilation initiatives with Aboriginal adults had failed, the Department of Indian Affairs and Catholic Church leaders directed their attention toward Aboriginal children by creating schools across Canada with the primary objective to assimilate children into the dominant society (Miller, 2003; Stonechild, 2006). Residential Schools were designed to disrupt the parenting and teaching of Aboriginal parents and communities by removing children from their homes for most of the year (Milloy, 1999). What occurred as a result of these initiatives were horrors and devastations that were comparable to death camps, since one-half of all Aboriginal children in Canada died or disappeared in the government-enforced schools (Thorner & Frohn-Nielson, 2010). The children who did survive suffered greatly, with current Aboriginal social conditions being described by United Nations human rights groups as “that of a colonized people barely on the edge of survival, with all the trappings of a third-world society” (Thorner & Frohn-Nielson, 2010, p. 382). The history of assimilation, racism, colonization, and even genocide are “routinely ignored, minimized, and erased” (St. Denis, 2011, p. 310). Non-Native teachers risk perpetuating harmful attitudes and practices in their classroom when they are unwilling to learn about past and present assimilation attitudes and beliefs that continue to permeate education and society.

In spite of the brutal impact of residential Schools, there are a growing number of communities, educators, and organizations that are building their strength and capacity. Research is beginning to describe the successful endeavours of numerous Aboriginal schools and communities across Canada that can act as models for others (Anuik, 2008; Anuik, Battiste, & George, 2010; Bell, 2004; Fulford, 2007; Toulouse, 2013). Common

amongst the success stories is the foundation of respect for land, culture, language, and knowledge; the integration of holistic teaching practices; and the advancement of Aboriginal identity through the use of resources, literature, and images within the schools. Teachers who engage in culturally relevant teaching are committing themselves to engage in acts of ongoing learning to determine what appropriate and meaningful teaching practices are for the students they are teaching.

Culturally Relevant Teaching

Culturally relevant teaching in this article derives from literature on culturally responsive schooling for Indigenous youth (Brayboy & Castagno, 2009; Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Demmert & Towner, 2003; Kahontawkas, 2012; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Developing a culturally relevant teaching practice is the same as culturally responsive schooling, as it requires educators to be willing to actively engage and learn from both the students they are teaching, and the community that they are teaching in (Alaska Native Knowledge Network [ANKN], 1999; Gay, 2010; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). As teachers get to know their students, they can begin a process of developing lessons and instructional strategies that build on what the students already know (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Studies have shown that student engagement, motivation, and academic achievement are positively affected when teachers are willing to learn to develop culturally relevant teaching practices (Demmert & Towner, 2003; Faircloth & Tippeconnic, 2010; Kahontawkas, 2012; Tompkins, 1998). This type of learning moves beyond the superficial treatments of culture to become conscious of the distinct way of life of local First Nations communities (Chartrand, 2012). Culturally relevant education builds from the values, beliefs, languages, protocols, and land-based activities that occur within a community throughout the year. Learning the pedagogy of a local First Nations' community can take time and is often built from relationships (Oskineegish & Berger, 2013). And yet, this learning may not occur at all if educators are not open to changing their understanding of teaching and learning in schools. In the study that I conducted, all of the participants highly recommended that non-Native teachers arrive with an open-mind and a willingness to learn. This article contributes to literature on successful educational practices in First Nations communities and culturally relevant teaching by exploring how non-Native teachers can

improve their teaching through self-reflection, communication, community engagement, and having the right kind of attitude.

Method and Methodology

The findings in this article are from a qualitative study informed by Indigenous methodology (Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2012). The dominant methodologies within Western academia prescribe a certain set of methods; Indigenous methodologies also refer to a specific set of methods. Wilson (2001) explains that the research methods chosen allow for the formation of relationships between researcher and the research topic with all participants fully involved. Wilson (2001) refers to the methods of “storytelling and personal narrative” (p. 178) as commonly used methods in Indigenous methodology, whereas Steinhauer (2002) provides a longer list of methods, such as “interviews, talking circles, sharing through music, dance, art and drama, dream works, and revelations through connections to nature” (pp. 78–79). The method must be relevant to the type of data being collected as well because it needs to be comfortable and respectful for both the researcher and the participants. Though I had pre-set questions given to participants, I did not focus on the questions; rather, I used them as prompts to conversation. This form of semi-structured interview follows the advice of Kovach (2009) who explains that the 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). Grande (2008) describes research methods in Indigenous research as tools for researchers to engage with their participants and to build relationships, trust, and reciprocity. Relationships of trust and reciprocity were at the heart of the study as I began by asking those who know me and with whom I have an established relationship. I asked four First Nations and three non-Native educators who had extensive experience living and teaching in remote First Nations communities. The interviews (conversations) took place in Thunder Bay, Ontario; however, many participants were primarily located in northern Ontario, and two were working in northern Manitoba. I contacted five participants by telephone and met two participants on-site, with each interview lasting approximately 60 minutes. I provided each participant with the interview questions ahead of the interview to give them time for personal reflection before responding. The questions

focused on sharing personal successful teaching practices, advice, and suggestions for non-Native teachers interested in remote First Nations communities, and concluded with open-ended questions about important aspects of teaching in remote communities that had not been mentioned in the interview. Follow-up questions asked participants to expand on their answers, as needed. My goal in the semi-structured interviews was to be an active listener, and to learn from the participants about what they valued on this topic. I provided time for participants to review and approve transcripts of their interviews. Four of the participants responded with additional comments or changes to the original transcripts. I entered all of the transcripts into Atlas.ti and looked for themes and key words or phrases that I recognized from the literature or that appeared to be new and relevant. In this article I have drawn upon the findings that explored how a teacher can change his or her attitude and practice to be able to develop a culturally relevant and meaningful learning environment for students.

Participant Profiles

Three of the participants wanted to remain anonymous and, out of respect for their anonymity, I have provided pseudonyms and share only general background information on their experiences. The first participant was Adam, a non-Native teacher who spent close to 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. The second participant was Sarah, a First Nations teacher who taught in her own community for close to five years. Her knowledge and experience came from her dual position of teacher and community member. The third participant was Mary Oskineegish,² a First Nations educator who has taught for 25 years in her community in northern Ontario along with teaching three years in another community. Her experience in education includes being a kindergarten teacher, a classroom teacher, a principal, and a Native language teacher. The fourth participant was Brenda Firman, a non-Native educator who has worked in remote First Nations schools for more than 15 years. She has been a teacher, a special education teacher, and a principal. She currently teaches in a teacher

² Mary Oskineegish is the author's mother-in-law.

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 high school for 20 years and has 15 years in administration as a principal and school director. The sixth participant was Gina, a First Nations teacher who has worked in her community for just over five years. She began as a teacher's assistant and then taught kindergarten and Grade 3/4. She shares her knowledge and experience as an educator, a community member, and a parent. The seventh participant was Audrey Smith, a non-Native teacher who has 30 years of teaching experience in Newfoundland, and just over five years' experience teaching in First Nations communities in northern Manitoba and northern Ontario.

Many of the participants continue to work in First Nations education in northern Ontario and across Canada. I am grateful that each participant was willing to share their ideas and their experiences with successful teaching practices. This study is a small representation of the knowledge and resources available in First Nations communities; however, I am confident that the advice to listen to and learn from First Nations educators, parents, and community members is beneficial to non-Native teachers in a variety of educational contexts.

Findings

All of the participants that I spoke with recommended that non-Native teachers engage in continuous acts of professional development through self-reflection, communication, and community engagement. Participants linked these acts of learning to a teacher's ability to develop and implement lessons that are culturally relevant and meaningful and that meet their students' needs. It became evident that a teacher's ability to develop culturally relevant practices was deeply entwined with their willingness to examine their own pedagogical practices through acts of self-reflection.

Self-reflection

Self-reflection in this study refers to the active examination of teaching practices and lesson content to determine how to improve or build upon student successes in the

classroom. The first participant, Adam, shared his experience with self-reflection while developing classroom lessons, explaining:

For me it was a lot of late nights and a lot of preparing for these lessons and whether or not they worked. I just had to do trial and error—things would work one day and other things wouldn't.

He also discussed the challenge of failed lessons:

I would sit and be like, this lesson plan is brilliant, this is awesome and this is brilliant, I'm so happy I got a good night's sleep. I'm ready to go in the morning. I get there and it didn't work.

As difficult as those moments are for teachers, they can also be meaningful experiences for growth. He explained that “you have to re-evaluate and assess—okay, why didn't this work? And maybe this was a little too tough for them to comprehend, so whatever the reason you have to figure it out.” This type of self-reflection comes from trial and error, or in some cases trial and success. Another participant, Audrey Smith, also encouraged reflection and re-evaluation, especially when struggling with difficult student behaviour in the classroom. She said:

I taught a little boy in northern Ontario, and he misbehaved every day. He wouldn't work, he wouldn't listen, he wouldn't do this, he wouldn't do that. So for about three weeks every day I had to remove him from my classroom and had to bring him to the principal's office. I couldn't have him in my classroom when he is disrupting, he's not listening, he's not doing what he is asked to do, so he had to be removed for a period of time. One day I said to myself, this is nonsense; there is nothing wrong with him—he is as smart as anyone that I've had in my classroom, he's just looking for attention, and when you are looking for attention, negative attention is just as good as good attention because all he wants is attention. So I started not acknowledging his bad behaviour but acknowledging his good behaviour; every time he behaved good, I would praise him up... Every day he got better, he did more work, he listened more, and even the principal said, “I see some difference in this little boy, what did you do?” and I said, “I gave him attention, but I didn't give him bad attention, I gave him attention when he

was good,” and he just blossomed. So look for your positives, there is positive in every child.

Audrey showed that by changing her own discipline method and working to build a positive relationship with her students she was able to turn a difficult situation into a positive one. Reflecting on teaching practices that are hurtful to students can help teachers to replace their practices and lessons that are respectful of the students. Brenda Firman suggested that non-Native teachers modify lessons and ideas based on the needs of the students:

Don't just bring something in straight away, you have lots of lesson plans, lots of samples, lots of ideas, lots of things to do, and then you check in to your local environment to see how you need to modify it.

The act of checking in with your local environment can be as simple as speaking to colleagues who know what works best for the students. Brenda provided questions to assist non-Native teachers in their reflection, asking: “Are you providing an educational experience that is worth caring about? In what ways are you? And in what ways aren't you? What do you have impact on?” These questions encourage non-Native teachers to reflect on the effectiveness of their teaching from the students' perspective. Developing lessons that are meaningful to students can sometimes take time as it requires a shifting understanding of what is working and what is harmful to student learning. In my teaching experience, I began to shift my own understanding of student capabilities while participating in a school-wide game of capture the flag that we played in the forest across from the school. A couple of students asked me if I knew the name of the plant that was in front of us. I didn't. They proceeded to teach me the name of the plant as well as the names and uses of many of the plants in the forests surrounding the community. After the game, I reflected on what the students had taught me and realized that I was not drawing on their knowledge or capacity in my lessons and evaluation practices. I also realized that if I were ever in the position of being evaluated on the knowledge and skills of the land in the community I would probably be labelled as working below grade level.

When teachers do not take the time to reflect and learn about their students it is the students that suffer. Mary Oskineegish explained that “when teachers teach too low, the students get bored, but when they teach too difficult, the students become frustrated

and don't come to school. No matter how hard we try to get them to come, they don't come." Academic improvement will never happen if students aren't even willing to come to class. Mary pointed out that creating school work that is too difficult can cause students to not come to school, and on the other hand, creating school work that is too simple does not help students either. Sarah said:

I did observe on a number of occasions where the teacher was more or less babysitting, having students colour pictures or watch a movie. Killing time, babysitting more or less; students are being supervised sure, but what are they doing? There's too much of that going on.

Teachers are encouraged to plan a variety of learning opportunities for students, designed with a great deal of thought about content and goals that are relevant to the students and their environment. According to some of the participants in this study, self-reflection can work toward a greater understanding of how their own ideas of teaching can affect student learning. Non-Native teachers who reflect and adjust their lessons will be able to see what is working by the students' reactions and ability to complete the work, and through on-going communication with students and their parents.

Communication and Community Engagement

The participants pointed to active communication and engagement in the community as an essential method of learning relevant and appropriate pedagogical practices. Mary encouraged non-Native teachers to continuously communicate with community members. She said:

I would say communication is a big thing when you want to work in an Aboriginal community, because you have to know what is happening in the community and you have to find out from [local] people what's going to work when you are here in this community.

She also advised teachers to "communicate with parents and Elders in the community," especially when interested in "planning a cultural activity." Sarah described community interaction as vital to a teacher's ongoing learning:

Get to know the community and then while you are doing that you are learning, so if you think you're done you can think again, because your learning is just starting over again, and it's always like that. Today you are still learning. It doesn't end.

She continued:

It's also important to understand where the children are coming from. 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.

Audrey shared an example of communicating with local community members in order to be respectful of community protocol:

When I was in a community and they closed the school for three days for bereavement...one of the things I wanted to know was, is it appropriate for me to go to school and work or is it more appropriate for me to stay home? I didn't want to go to school and do work but be looked upon as this is not respectful. So this is one of those things I had to find out.

She added that non-Native teachers need "to be willing to ask for help when needed. Don't think that you know everything, don't assume your way is the right way. If you don't know then ask somebody, never be afraid to ask somebody." Similarly, as a principal, A. Jane Tuesday encouraged all of the educators to learn from one another. She would tell teachers to "go sit in on other teachers' [classrooms] when it's your prep time instead of sitting in the coffee room." She continued to explain that: "Everybody has knowledge, has skills that they can share with everybody else." Adam also spoke of the importance of learning from colleagues by speaking about the assistance he got from the education assistant in his classroom, saying: "We became really good friends...if it wasn't for him, I wouldn't have got a lot of things. He took me under his wings so to speak." As many of the participants pointed out, communicating with colleagues, parents, Elders, and community members can provide a teacher with a wealth of knowledge and understanding of teaching practices that work best for students in the school.

Learning from a community is not a passive practice in which an individual simply observes from a distance. A successful learning experience involves active participation in community events as described further by Sarah:

With regard to the community, it's important to participate in community events, not to just isolate yourself. Get to know the entire community and participate in their events. That is how you learn about the community and the people in it.

An example of participating in a community event is provided by Adam, who said:

Anytime there were community events I'd try to go to them to participate—for example, moose calling and goose calling. I was awful at it but it made them chuckle and laugh but they'd enjoy it that I'd actually do something. The jigging contest, I don't know how to jig, I still don't, but I mean to show that I am willing to do that.

Mary shared examples of community engagement, explaining:

Be ready to help in any situation and be a part of the community, be visible... When you are visible you talk to parents, leaders, and other teachers in here, your co-workers. That's the best thing that can happen when you become a teacher over here.

There are numerous opportunities for non-Native teachers to communicate with community members and to participate in community events throughout the year. Community feasts, festivals, cultural activities, sports, dances, and flea markets are some examples of what non-Native teachers can engage in. One year I had decided to return to the community early from my holidays and was able to participate in the New Year's celebration. I was able to see a side of people that was filled with dancing, laughter, and family fun. It was wonderful to be with colleagues, students, and parents outside of the day-to-day activity of work and to participate in the joyful spirit of the community. The difficulty of isolation can be overcome when teachers become active community members as best they can. In my experience, and based on the advice of the participants in the study, the engagement in community can help to build positive relationships between teacher and community which then supports a trust between student and teacher. Being visible in a

community and being supportive and willing to learn is aided through the right kind of attitude.

The Right Kind of Attitude

There are many teachers who arrive in remote First Nations communities with numerous skills and resources that are of great value in the school and classroom. And yet, if they are accompanied by the wrong attitude, they can become counterproductive to collaboration and student learning. For example, pushing personal agendas does not help build a collegial spirit, nor does it help students succeed. It comes down to being part of the team, working with your colleagues, students, and parents. Brenda said: “You can’t come in and start pushing things around. It’s just not following the values of respect.” Teachers new to the North need to take time to learn from the community or they risk making uninformed suggestions. Sarah recommended that teachers be open minded and flexible:

Flexibility is for sure number one. You have to make sure that if you are planning a lesson and using the computer or internet, well, it might be down, okay, because of the weather, so you have to be aware of that and you have to plan alternative lessons and stuff like that.

She added that teachers need “patience, understanding, and compassion.” She provided advice to new teachers:

When you go into that classroom you have to go in with an open mind, you have to be able to be flexible, to be dynamic, to be able to adjust to the rhythm of the classroom, to the students, not to go in and teach that linear progression that we like to keep track of. To be flexible, to be open to student suggestions too! To be able to step outside of the box.

Audrey also referred to flexibility, saying: “A teacher has to be flexible, understand that your day may not go as you have planned, and be able to change your plans in a moment’s notice, because anything can happen.” She also encouraged humour: “You have to have a sense of humour, bring humour into your classroom, make jokes with the children and try to get them to see the positive of some things instead of the negative.” It is important to note that humour does not always mean that the teacher must be an

entertainer or good at telling jokes, it simply refers to the ability to laugh, to smile, to hold back anger when things do not go as planned, and to see the humour in life's ups and downs. The participants linked a teacher's attitude with their ability to connect with and teach students. A. Jane spoke about the importance of teacher credibility:

I had one teacher who used to smoke like a chimney. Come National Addiction Awareness Week and she's talking about the dangers of smoking and all this. Kids just laugh and look at each other; you got to be credible. If you're going to teach something you've got to be credible...you have to be credible if kids are going to connect with you...and you have to be honest and they have to trust you.

Creating a positive relationship with students through humour, honesty, and credibility is as important as being flexible and open-minded to the unexpected changes that can occur during the day. A teacher new to a community will not know the rhythm of the community and will need to be able to adjust to the changes and flow of the community. In the school where I taught, the students were encouraged to leave school in the fall and winter to participate in family hunting activities outside of the community. Students would be gone for up to two weeks and would return with many stories that they wanted to share with me. I had not expected the absences to occur, but once I adapted to it, I created a variety of literacy activities that included oral and written storytelling, interviewing and article writing, and even comic writing based on their learning experiences. It became one of my favourite times of the year to hear the stories that students wanted to share about their experiences on the land and with their families.

Another recommended attitude came from Gina who described "patience and a lot of listening" as important traits to help teachers connect to students. She said that "when you are in the school here you are here for the kids not for yourself." She encouraged educators to do what is best for the students and to be positive when speaking to them. She explained that she does not use the word "no" or "don't" when talking to the students in her primary grades, instead she would explain to them why certain behaviours are not safe; for example:

When you see a kid running in the hallway, I wouldn't say "Don't be running in the hallways." I won't say that, I would say, "When you run in the hallways,

I'm afraid that you'll get hurt, and I don't like seeing kids get hurt." That's how I would do it.

This example demonstrates how words can reflect care and respect to students. It also demonstrates a difference in communication styles, with the teacher preferring to use a non-confrontational approach. A non-Native teacher who uses an authoritarian approach risks creating a fearful environment, which brings back the importance of self-reflection and community communication to come to understand what teaching practices are the most conducive to the students well-being. For some teachers, it may be difficult to let go of the idea of teachers as experts, but as a non-Native teacher new to a First Nations community, it is essential to carry the right kind of attitude that can help foster positive relationships and practices.

Discussion

Many First Nations communities and local First Nations educators are working hard to transform their schools into more relevant and meaningful environments for the children within their communities (NAN, 2012). These efforts are made more difficult when non-Native teachers arrive with absolutely no understanding of culturally relevant teaching or no willingness to connect their teaching practices with the knowledge and way of life of the community. It is evident from the experience and advice of the participants that successful teaching manifests from a teachers willingness to reflect and adjust their own understanding of teaching and learning; to make connections with community members through communication and community participation; and to nurture an attitude that encourages positive interactions. Participants shared their experience of engaging in acts of self-reflection to shift their instructional strategies and classroom lessons. Developing culturally relevant teaching practices in a First Nations community is not simply a matter of applying new techniques, it involves an ongoing personal reflection of how one's own beliefs and attitudes of their students affect teaching (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Self-reflection, in a cross-cultural context, provides teachers with an opportunity to examine personal biases, reactions, and assumptions that carry forward into student and teacher interactions in the classroom (McAllister & Irvine, 2002). At no point does self-reflection

end; it is ongoing as teachers continually engage in a process of learning, teaching, and reflecting.

The participants demonstrate that the initial stage of teaching in First Nations communities can be a steep learning curve and require teachers to plan a variety of lessons to determine what will work best for students. This advice is supported in the literature, as Anderson (Waabginojii) (2002) explains, teachers must “plan a variety of learning opportunities for students. This requires a great deal of thought about materials and goals for the activities. It requires cooperation with colleagues in a rich community of educators in the Anishinaabe ways” (p. 303). When teachers take time to communicate and engage with the community it can help shape the caring environment that they are trying to create in the classroom. Through community engagement, students and teachers begin to have shared experiences with which to build positive interactions in the classroom. Communication and community engagement also aid non-Native teachers to create opportunities for learning that can occur outside the classroom. Taking classroom learning out onto the land with the assistance of local community members can provide learning opportunities that build upon the knowledge and skills that students bring from home. Land-based learning shapes students’ cultural identity, their relationship to themselves and to their community (Corbiere, 2000). In the NAN (2012) education report, land-based education is viewed as essential to student learning, it states:

Land-based learning is essential to cultural revival and maintenance; our ancestors were intricately connected to their natural environment, to take care of Mother Earth, and to live in harmony with the earth. Our traditional knowledge must be incorporated into our education programs; it is what makes us who we are, it is our identity. If we deprive our children of learning about their ancestors, then we are destroying the identity of our children and future generations. (pp. 63–64)

The benefits of land-based education in First Nations communities include the improvement of students’ well-being, sense of pride, and motivation to learn (Greenwood & de Leeuw, 2007; Neganegijig & Breunig, 2007). It is important to note that non-Native teachers are not asked to be experts in land-based learning; instead, they are to communicate with local educators and community members to learn what is appropriate to include in school lessons as well as who would be best to guide or instruct the specific lessons.

The third point discussed in this article is the link between a teacher's attitude and successful teaching. Some of the attitude traits that the participants mentioned included flexibility, humour, open-mindedness, credibility, and patience. Having an open-mind and a positive attitude, while remaining flexible, were repeatedly recommended to non-Native teachers as a way to cope with the many new and changing experiences they would have while teaching. Patience and humour were mentioned as ways to better connect with students. The idea of humour is mentioned in Goulet's (2001) study of the effective teaching practices of two teachers in a First Nations community. She observed that the teachers "used humour and often laughed at themselves and with the students" (pp. 73–74). For some teachers, having the right kind of attitude will naturally develop as they learn and grow as teachers. In my own experience, I did not realize the importance of patience in my teaching practice until a visiting artist who came to my class mentioned that he thought that I was a very patient teacher and that he'd noticed other teachers in remote communities were patient teachers as well. The examples of the right kind of attitude identified in this article are not exhaustive and are worth exploring in more depth in future research studies as there is no singular method to learning to develop culturally relevant teaching practices. Each teacher who arrives in a community can find a path that works best for him or her and for the students he or she is teaching.

Conclusion

The examples and advice discussed within this article do not cover all of the possibilities for successful teaching practices; they merely provide examples of what has worked for the participating educators. Every community is unique with its own culture, ideals, and ways of living; though not all examples provided in this article are applicable, the willingness to learn through self-reflection, communication, and community engagement can be applied anywhere. Approaching teaching with open-mindedness, flexibility, and positivity will help shape a teacher's attitude and approach to being both the teacher and the learner. The idea of arriving to teach in a remote First Nations community with a willingness to learn and to get to know the students, parents, colleagues, and community members is applicable to any community; the specifics of culturally relevant teaching will have to be adjusted and decided within each community.

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