

# The need for Elders in education: **Five Indigenous perspectives from around the world**

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## Abstract

Elders are the knowledge keepers and knowledge teachers of Indigenous societies. The perspectives, skills, knowledge, stories, and teachings of Elders must have its place in western academy and higher education. The article provides five passages of Indigenous perspectives, stories, examples of including Elders, their wisdom, knowledge, and expertise, in the educational institution.

## Introduction

Diversity continues to impact the educational system and the academy profoundly. Garcia (1995) states, that by the year 2026, 70 percent of all American students will be nonwhite. "As the proportion of minorities rises within an institution, institutional success depends increasingly on minority success" (Garcia 1990, p. 73). Educational institutions must address the needs of students of color, ethnic minorities, and indigenous populations that some day will be the majority in

academia (Iokepa-Guerrero, 1998).

Recognizing, honoring, and incorporating the culture, values, and traditions of students of color is a step towards addressing the needs of these students in education. Particularly, for the Indigenous population, the respect, recognition, and inclusion of the Elder as a source of knowledge and expertise in the educational institution is of utmost importance. Elders are the knowledge keepers and knowledge teachers of Indigenous societies. The perspectives, skills, knowledge, stories, and teachings of Elders must have its place in western academy and higher education.

Indigenous peoples have much to share with the world. The following passages are five perspectives, stories, examples of including Elders, their wisdom, knowledge, and expertise, in the educational institution.

### **Ka Hulu Kupuna: The Elder, a choice and precious feather**

*A Hawai'i perspective*

*Contributed by B. Noelani Iokepa-Guerrero, Faculty at Ka Haka 'Ula*

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Nui nā mea a nā kūpuna e a'o ai. Nui ka 'ike o nā kūpuna i ka wā ma mua a inā 'a'ole a'o e pau ana. Hiki ke hā'awi aku a ho'omau i ia 'ike o nalowale, a pehea lā? 'O ia ko'u kuleana e ho'ōla i kēlā mau mea. (Nicholas, 2011)

**Translation:** There are many things the Elders have to teach. The knowledge of the Elders is extremely immense and important. Elders know a lot from before, and if it is not taught it will be lost. Transfer, give and perpetuate this knowledge or else it will disappear, and then what? This is my responsibility to revitalize these things.

In old Hawai'i, feathers from the native birds of the forest were gathered to create adornments for the chiefly class. Because of the skill and technique necessary to obtain the feathers without harming the birds, these feathers were highly valued. The title of this passage, Ka Hulu Kupuna, is an 'ōlelo no'eau, wise Hawaiian saying and proverb,



that likens the Kupuna, Elder, to a most precious feather. The metaphor illustrates the understanding Hawaiians have of the educational, cultural, and spiritual importance of and their reverence for kupuna.

The term kupuna means elder, ancestor, grandparent, starting point, source. The word itself proves the knowledge holding role of the Elder in the Hawaiian society. The Kupuna is usually one of the first teachers of the child from infancy and is a constant mentor and guide for the child, family, and community. The genealogical place of the Kupuna in the family and his/her experience makes the Kupuna by practicality a natural teacher and knower of many things. The Kupuna is the source of the family, the source of knowledge and information from which new things grow and sprout.

Stated by Kupuna Lolena Nicholas, the opening quote holds many pearls of wisdom. The first lesson and example of the importance of Elders, illustrated in the quote, is the power and knowledge of language. Many of the

cultural secrets, wisdoms, traditions, and teachings of the past are locked in the traditional language of the people. To unlock this treasure, one must know the language. About 30 years ago, the Native Hawaiian language was on the verge of extinction. There were less than 50 Native Hawaiian language speakers under age eighteen. Lolena Nicholas was one of the handful of Native Hawaiian speakers at that time who, through the language revitalization movement of the 'Aha Pūnana Leo and the Pūnana Leo schools, helped to nurse the state of the Hawaiian language back to health. Today there are thousands of young Hawaiian language speakers (Iokepa-Guerrero, 2010). This success is largely attributed to Kupuna like Lolena who continued to hold this knowledge of the 'ōlelo makuahine, mother tongue, and shared and taught the knowledge of the Hawaiian language to the next generation(s).

The second lesson from the quote is the importance of looking to the past. Generations who have gone before have mastered many skills, crafts,

arts, and sciences. The repository of the Elder is great. Why try to reinvent something that has already been done or proven? Learn from the lessons of the past. Look to the traditions and teachings in history.

The third lesson from the quote is the importance of perpetuating the knowledge of the Elders forward. This lesson embodies the responsibility to care, uphold, and continue the teachings. Teach the skills, knowledge, stories, and traditions of the Kupuna to the next generation(s).

The last lesson from the quote is the importance of mo'olelo (history, legends, stories, and talk story). Many lessons are found in the stories told and the talk story nature of everyday conversation. The quote opening this passage was taken from a mere 5-minute conversation with Lolena while she was caring for my youngest child at the Pūnana Leo preschool. Listen well to learn the wisdom. The knowledge of the Kupuna does not necessarily come in lecture form or written word but most often in





mo'olelo and through interaction.

Kupuna Lolena Nicholas is a mentor in the University of Hawai'i system. A mānaleo, Native speaker, she is faculty in the Ke'ena Mānaleo of Kawaihuelani Center for Hawaiian Language at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. While she does not teach in a typical college classroom, she shares her stories, expertise, and skills in the Hawaiian language, mele (music, song and poetry), hana no'eau (cultural arts and craft), and mo'olelo. She succeeds other Kūpuna, such as Eddie Ka'anā'anā, Lydia Hale, Kainoa Wright, 'Iokepa Maka'ai, and Josephine Lindsey who once worked at the University in the same capacity. These Kūpuna serve as cultural guides, mentors, and experts in Hawaiian language and traditions. The Mānaleo program has been at the Mānoa campus since the 1980's. University students and staff of the Hawaiian Language program of Mānoa are able to meet, converse, and learn from the Kupuna on campus. As a class requirement, Hawaiian Language students meet weekly with Lolena

(Kawaihuelani Center for Hawaiian Language, 2007). Students have the opportunity and venue to converse with a Native speaker and apply book knowledge to real life experience. Students learn cultural practices hands-on from an expert practitioner. Students grow academically, socially, and culturally from the teachings of the Kupuna—a holistic and culturally responsive approach to education honoring the knowledge of the Elder.

Larry Kimura is another example of a Hawaiian Elder working in the University of Hawai'i system. Larry is an assistant professor at the University of Hawai'i at Hilo's Ka Haka 'Ula o Ke'elikōlani College. Growing up listening to the stories of his Kupuna (Tsai, 2006, WorldNewsSite.com, 2002), Larry is skilled in the Hawaiian language, mo'olelo, mele, wahi pana o Hawai'i (famous places of Hawai'i), and hana no'eau. Unlike Lolena, Larry teaches in the typical University classroom. He weaves his expertise and knowledge in the Hawaiian language and culture curriculum he teaches in his college

courses. In 2002, Larry earned his Master of Arts in Hawaiian Language and Literature (Starbulletin.com, 2002). He is currently working towards his doctorate in Hawaiian and Indigenous Language and Culture Revitalization. While Hilo's campus does not have a Native speaker position and mānaleo program, Larry's contribution to the academy is testament to the versatility and ability of Kupuna who straddle both worlds of tradition and modern times perpetuating the cultural wisdom and excellence of Elders.

Kupuna Lolena Nicholas (2011), who spends her days teaching both young students in the Pūnana Leo preschool and adult students at the University, sums up the role of the Kupuna, "Hana me nā keiki, hana ma ke kulanui...like ka pahuhopu, e ola mau a ho'omau i ka 'ike o nā kūpuna." Whether you work with children or work at the University, the objective is the same, perpetuate and continue the knowledge of the kūpuna.



## Elders in education *A Northern Manitoba perspective*

*Contributed by Barbara Carlson, Faculty at University College of the North, Manitoba*

Note: Most of the information in this passage is taken from the University College of the North website (University College of the North, 2011). Information in this passage is credited to the University College of the North Kenanow Bachelor of Education Program and the following who have helped in the creation of the Kenanow Model---Elder Stella Neff, Elder Mabel Bignell, David Lathlin, Pat Lathlin, Esther Sanderson, and Doris Young.

Elders are respected and honored by their communities for their spirituality, wisdom, high intelligence, knowledge. Elders are recognized for their gifts for their love and knowledge of the land. Within University College of the North (UCN) Elders are role models, resources and advisors providing guidance and support to students, staff and administration community (University College of the North, 2011).

University College of the North has a council of Elders. The council works in partnership and provides guidance within UCN by sharing Elders' traditional knowledge of wisdom beliefs and values. The following is an example of how Elders are partners in education. This model demonstrates the importance of Elders in education and the wealth of knowledge they bring.

The Kenanow Learning Model is an education system that served Aboriginal people well for generations throughout time and history. It is about identity, a place of belonging, community history roles and responsibilities for generations of families and the process of handing down knowledge in larger context, the community that supports and nourishes the heart, mind body and spirit (University College of the North, 2011).

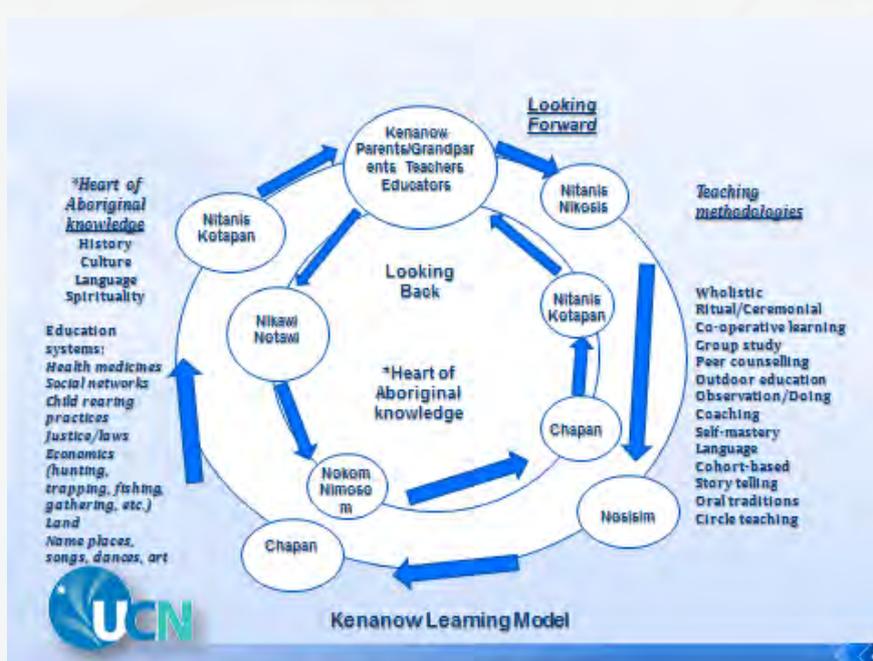
Kenanow is intended to generate constructive solutions to systemic issues within the education system in the areas of literacy, language and culture, identity, teacher supply, training

and retention and community support for learning. Researchers and educators will continue to explore the model's value as a tool for positive change in teacher education for Aboriginal and northern students (University College of the North, 2011).

The model is circular, containing 3 circles---an inner circle and an outer circle which are joined by a circle at the top.

### **(1) Inner Circle – Looking Back**

The inner circle represents the past generations and is the heart of the Aboriginal knowledge base protected and sustained by our Elders, ancestors, and memory. It is comprised of cultural histories that have been carried on from generation to generation via oral traditions of storytelling, ceremony, songs and teachings, as well as rituals and sharing. These histories reflect in the names of places, people and elements of creation, a spirit that is alive in the land. They were then and remain today etched in the memories of the people and the land (Absolon



& Willett). All families learned their political, spiritual and social teachings and laws in their respective education and cultural institutions within their community.

### (2) Outer Circle – Looking Forward

The outer circle are the children, the youth and future generations represented by our children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and great-great-grand children – the children/youth of today and also those yet unborn.

### (3) Top Circle – Kenanow/Us

We, all of us, Kenanow, parents and educators, are represented by the top circle where the two circles meet. It is us/we Kenanow who are responsible for transmitting knowledge we received from past generations (from Circle 1), down to our children and youth....that in education, our children must have a way of learning that is based on Our Story, and our original ways of knowing and teachings (University College of the North, 2011).

### Terms in this passage:

- Aboriginal – Include all Original Peoples of the land and their descendants including Cree, Metis, Saulteaux/Ojibwe, and Inuit. It is a more common term in Canada rather than Indigenous.

### Aboriginal post secondary institutions gathering space

*A British Columbia Perspective*

*Contributed by Larry Railton, Administrator at Langara College, Vancouver, British Columbia*

Canadian success of Aboriginal learners in post secondary education greatly depends on supports and Aboriginal services available within their learning environment. This said, there is a massive amount of research in Canada to back up this statement, much of this found in government surveys and academic research. A quick reference supporting this assertion can be attributed to the 2007 Aboriginal education plan the Provincial Government of British Columbia Canada implemented. The plan released a 65 million dollar policy framework supporting Aboriginal students in post secondary institutions



(PSI). Aboriginal services plans and Aboriginal Special Project Funding were launched in an effort to recruit and retain Aboriginal students (Ministry of Advanced Education and Labour Market Development, 2008).

One of the strategies, now outcomes, was to build Aboriginal Gathering Spaces in PSI's. Funding and operating capital is the responsibility of the institutions as this infusion of money would be understood as a one time opportunity to build and create a space for Aboriginal students to gather, connect with like minded colleagues, as well as creating a cultural learning environment holistic to individuals' needs. At the same time PSI's that have gathering spaces use the spaces to increase Aboriginal awareness on campus. The greater expectation of these spaces would be to support and create a safe place for Aboriginal students to gather, building an environment of supports and collegiality leading to greater retention of Aboriginal students in post secondary.

Gathering spaces, created by this

funding, supports Aboriginal student including services such as Aboriginal counselors, traditional healers, and Elders. Technology within gathering spaces also supports Aboriginal learners making available computer systems, printers, and faxes. Many gathering spaces offer a place for students to prepare foods and on special occasions potlucks to celebrate successes.

It is important to note that many Aboriginal students attending PSI's need support, not just academically but spiritually, in part through Elder guidance. Rural students coming into urban settings often experience culture shock leaving their rural home community. Thus it is important to welcome the role of the Elder into the gathering space as an Elder in residence. This important factor confirms the commitment to the Aboriginal learners while creating a culturally safe environment.

Elders, the keepers of knowledge, carry a responsibility as healers of our people. An example of this is an Elder in resident program that guide students through difficult times while in post

secondary. Ardent listeners, Elders carry the knowledge passed down by the grandmothers and grandfathers and carry their experience into the gathering space. Recently on a visit to a local PSI an Elder reported, "Student's seek me out when I come on campus, I help to calm them when their work is too much" (B. Gladue, personal communication, January, 2011). In this case, the Elder's responsibility was to calm the student, helping them focus on the issue at hand. In another conversation with an Elder, the elder reported "...is a good student, she is sad that she is so far from home, it's good she has lunch with me when she is at school, we talk a lot about home her family. I know her family through my cousin" (R. Point, personal communication, November, 2009). This is an example of student support that connects the student back to family at the same time remind the student that the work must be done even though at times it might be too much.

Recently, at a PSI in Vancouver an Aboriginal student became ill with kidney disease. During the student's





time attending the PSI, students heard about the illness. In western medicine the system is built to solicit potential donors. Matching donors is an onerous process and often takes time, at the same time, putting the patient at risk. In the case of this student, the gathering space created a sense of family that developed relationships, with that, the student's newfound family (cohort) stepped up. Seven Aboriginal students stepped up and offered to give a kidney to the student. All seven of the students applied and went through the screening process of being a potential donor. One of the seven students during the writing of this is now tissue matching to ensure a match. With a little luck and overseeing of the creator, the student will have a new kidney prior to the fall session. Along with Elder support, the connections that students make are often lifelong relationships strengthening and rekindling lost family connections. "I was scared when I came to college, I was afraid that I wouldn't fit in. The best thing about the college is the gathering space for me it's the place that found friends that have become my family" (A.

Derrick, personal communication, April 2011).

The focus of the Federal government of Canada and the Provincial government is to increase the numbers of Aboriginal Post Secondary Students. It is early to quantitatively report the successes of increased numbers as a result of gathering spaces. That said, the qualitative report appears to be leaning towards increased numbers of Aboriginal students entering PSI's as well as, increased numbers of graduates as a result of cultural support and services that have been encouraged. It appears with the few outcomes demonstrated in this short essay, the 2007 Aboriginal Education Policy was accurate in understanding the need for a place for Aboriginal students to gather, connect with each other supported by Elders.

**Terms in this passage:**

- Aboriginal - Include Indian, Inuit and Métis peoples of Canada.

Involving Elders in higher education  
*A Cherokee Nation perspective*

*Contributed by Dallas Pettigrew and Eloise Locust of the Cherokee Nation, Oklahoma*

The Cherokee Nation seeks to involve our Elders in education at all levels, from early childhood programs, through elementary and high school, and into college. It's not hard to imagine how an extra grandparent can fit into the day of a young child in an educational or child development setting, as we think of grandparents as caretakers already. However, we do not often think of grandparents as supports on college campuses for young adults who are "becoming mature" there. The Cherokee Nation is currently developing a plan to encourage students' success in completing college (Cherokee Nation, 2011).

In a partnership with Northeastern State University, the Cherokee Nation is establishing designated residence halls that are exclusive to Cherokee students. We hope to establish a sense of community among the students. We hope to create a "home away



from home” to encourage students to complete college. Historically many, even most, Cherokee students drop out of college before completion often because they lack the family support they enjoyed at home. Being away from parents, siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles, and grandparents, is sometimes too overwhelming for students and they return home before finishing college. Hopefully our Cherokee Residence Halls will provide students the supports they miss by not being home.

Cherokee Elder and philosopher, Benny Smith (2010), has taught us that we should not have to give up one aspect of our lives (the traditional realm) in order to accept and thrive in another aspect (the modern realm). In order for us to maintain tradition while mastering the modern we must not leave one for the other. Involving our Elders in our higher education experience is one way to maintain our traditional life in the modern world. Our Elders will transmit cultural wisdom to our students during all the times the students are not involved in class work. They may help

plan and prepare meals, offer advice and encouragement, and provide that sense of home that may help stave off the homesickness that draws students away from college.

During times that the school is closed for breaks or long weekends, these Elders may be willing to offer their homes and families to students who can't travel to their own homes. This surrogate family could become an additional system of support for the student and the relationship could carry on for a lifetime. Systems of support, sense of connectedness to the college community as well as the feeling of family are protective factors that will encourage our students to remain in college and earn their degrees.

Elders on campus will help us maintain balance, harmony and respect, the ways of keeping our inner spirit strong, and the means to incorporate our “keetoowah” nature alive. We hope we can find the proper balance of home and university.

#### **Terms in this passage:**

- Cherokee Nation - the governing body of approximately 250,000 + Cherokee members with its headquarters located in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. The Cherokee Nation boundary covers 14 counties in northeast Oklahoma.
- Becoming mature - the nearest English translation of how Cherokees explain going off to school.
- Keetoowah - the traditional Cherokee word explaining the spirit (essence) of our people.

Looking to our Elders for direction: The **importance of cultural inclusion** immersion within mainstream education  
*An Australian perspective*

*Contributed by Tjalminu Mia, Managing Director of Sister Kates Home Kids Healing and Remembrance Center, and Healing and Cultural Grounding Programs, Perth.*

The education curriculum in Australia has changed shape at primary and secondary levels over a number of years, and though a major benchmark nationally was to give Aboriginal

peoples access to education – 1967 Referendum (National Archives of Australia, 2011), the majority teaching/ learning curriculum is still greatly imbedded in western culture and history. As well, also inclusive now is a high degree focus in the areas of economic industry, mining, off-shore multinational economic development collaborations and business management, primarily aimed at the high level of international students attending university across the country (University of Western Australia, 2011).

There is however, from an Aboriginal perspective, still failure to recognize that the curriculum falls short of adequately catering to the cultural, emotional, social and educational needs of Aboriginal students. This is across the board, particularly at the pre-primary and primary levels. These years (in educational learning terms) are the important primary learning years of a child's learning experience and development, and alternately determining a child's thinking and outlook of the world around them. This

has always been a major concern for our Elders, particularly in reference to the increasing population in Australia with a high in-flux of many migrant cultures now making Australia their home.

Though there is Aboriginal cultural themes introduced into mainstream learning modules with some success, this mostly falls to Aboriginal teachers who are both limited in numbers and what they can teach, and who are also pushed to extremes to cater to the needs of all students in their class, especially children with learning difficulties (special needs) and children from multicultural backgrounds, with the language barrier being a major factor in their progress. This puts our Aboriginal teachers under enormous pressure, coupled with the knowledge that they are limited as teaching practitioners in enabling spiritual and emotional wellbeing and cultural learning opportunities for Aboriginal children.

Though the development and implementation of the Follow the Dream Program (The Government of Western

Australia Department of Education, 2011) for Aboriginal students has also had some success and is offered to Aboriginal students in High Schools, it is not compulsory for Aboriginal students to attend. Our Elders feel this as with the non-inclusion of appropriate cultural learning programs in early childhood mainstream curriculum is an issue and needs to be addressed at the community grassroots and federal/state government levels.

As an Indigenous researcher and oral historian, I have had numerous discussions with our Elders concerning a wide range of issues that affect our peoples collectively (Mia, 2000), including the need for appropriate cultural grounding programs for our younger generations. Their shared thoughts and views are constantly aligned in regard to the importance of cultural inclusion within mainstream education curriculums. They feel it is not enough to offer our children cultural programs that are piece meal, as this only causes further confusion because of the lack of continuity. Though many of our Elders have participated in cultural

programs within both primary and secondary schools, including hands on application in cultural learning activities, they still feel this is not enough to both sustain cultural learning for our young ones as well as for them to retain the cultural knowledge they share with them. This is why they feel a set of compulsory cultural programs need to be developed by Aboriginal staff working in Departments of Education, and where they work along side our Elder's who would guidance them in developing a cultural curriculum that would be culturally sound and would greatly help our children to re-connect with their Aboriginal heritage, which in turn, would aide them to identify as Aboriginal people.

As Nyungar Elder Beryl Dixon voiced at an Elder's meeting to discuss various issues affecting Aboriginal children,

*"I'm 85 years old, a grandmother and great-grandmother, and I have seen the face of Australia change many times over, but the worse thing I have witnessed is the destruction of our children's identity. I see the confusion in the eyes of many of our kids because a lot of them don't really know who they are or what it means to be Aboriginal.*

*If you ask some of our kids what it means to be a Nyungar, they couldn't really answer you and this is because they identify with every other culture around the world other than their own. It makes me sad to say this but it's true in many ways, and we need to get more cultural things happening for our younger generations before it is too late. I think the Australia government and the education department have a lot to answer for..."* (HACC Elders program – People Who Care, Western Australia, 2009).

Building cultural pathways within mainstream education to enable our children to access cultural knowledge must be considered, and this could happen by providing opportunities via a special cultural unit made up of Aboriginal cultural teachers, who would be taught by our Elders, who then would in turn, teach our children the cultural knowledge they need to understand themselves better. Feeling strong in your identity makes for a stronger future (Mia, 2011)

Our Elders feel the current education curriculum needs to change and be more embracing of Aboriginal children's needs, and should include an

alternative learning strategy paradigm that is culturally sound and reflects our true cultural heritage and identity, which would also include Australia's contact history of Aboriginal peoples and their lands (Colbong, 1999).

As stated by Nyungar poet, writer and human rights activist talking at a Black Deaths in Custody rally.

*"The loss of identity and Karnagh – (shame) that many of our peoples, especially our children suffer today is a sad thing to witness, and we all know that this stems from the continuous oppression we all still experience. Couple this with the high rate of imprisonment of our men, women and children incarcerated in prisons and detention centres, it's any wonder we feel the way we do. But we all need to keep strong and fight for our human rights and that of our children if we want to see them take their rightful place as First Peoples of Country and our future Leaders. We need to work together to make this happen. We need to stand strong together and help our kids heal from past injustices and heal the hurt they and we still feel from the intergenerational trauma of oppression, assimilation, and the Stolen Generations. Talking our Truth, and Walking our Truth can only bring with it a positive way forward for us all especially for our kids, and the best*

*gift we can give them is their identity – because with it comes freedom – to be who they truly are – Black, Strong and Proud.” ... (Dixon G. D., 2005)*

### Terms in this passage

- Aboriginal – Indigenous person to the lands of Australia
- Nyungar – a generic term to identify an Aboriginal person from the south-west, Great Southern region of Western Australia, who are also part of the 14 family groups that make up the Nyungar Nation
- First Peoples of Country – term to identify people’s cultural, spiritual and bloodline links (through family & community connections) to the land
- Stolen Generations – Aboriginal children who were taken away (without the consent/or permission from Aboriginal mothers & fathers) by the Chief Protector of Aborigines, and placed in various children’s orphanages and homes throughout Australia over a span of 8 decades.

### Summary

“Today, more and more are looking to the diverse cultures of the world. It

is a rebirth and freedom to share our knowledge. It is not only the vogue thing to do... it is the right thing” (L. Railton, personal communication, May 2011). Indigenous peoples look to Elders as the knowledge keepers and knowledge teachers of their cultures. Elders hold a high place in their Indigenous communities. Elders’ position of value must also be accepted and acknowledged in the western educational institution. Elders, their wisdom, knowledge, stories, and teachings must be included and recognized in academia and the academy.

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