



## Shelley Mandakwe

Shelley Mandakwe Charles is an Elder who has taught culture and medicines, plant restoration, knowledge and Anishinaabe language in various educational settings throughout Turtle Island for over 30 years. She is an Elder Advisor with the York Region District School Board and the Native Women's Association of Canada. She is also an instructor at First Nations Technical Institute (FNTI) Aviation School in Tyendinaga. Here she shares her knowledge about the vital role Elders can play in the classroom, as role models and in supporting traditional learning.

# Elders Support Classroom Learning

By Shelley Mandakwe Charles

Elders are highly esteemed traditional knowledge holders who carry extensive learning and life experience in Indigenous history, culture and teaching. Elders are generally recognized in their home communities.

Elders in the classroom are essential to sharing *Aadizookanug* (traditional stories), creating a safe environment to return to *Biskaabiiyung* (the teachings) and bringing them forward from the past into the present day. While grandparents play a significant role in upholding the teachings, the Elder in the classroom has the added responsibility to reflect the Indigenous notion of thinking, sharing and listening from a place of respect, knowledge and kindness in a group setting.

Elders take the time to acknowledge *Ishkode* (the sacred fire) through a smudge and to honour all of creation within the circle by the offering of *mashkikiwan* (sacred medicines). The Elder also acknowledges *Mishomisinaneg menwa Gookomisinaneg* (the grandmothers and grandfathers), an expression of being grateful for life, the sacred teachings of *GizheManido* (the Kind Spirit). In aspiring to work this way in the classroom, an environment is created whereby students can focus on learning and sharing, and feel included and valued from the moment the fire is lit.

The inclusion of language and medicine into the circle facilitates culture-based knowledge transmission; it is engaging, informative, and sets a standard for developing respect, self-esteem and leadership skills. It is more than just a ritual; it incorporates intergenerational learning, reclamation of traditional teachings, cul-

tural practice and celebration. Everyone is equal in the circle.

An Elder is not only a person who opens and closes meetings but also listens to the topics being discussed so they can share Indigenous knowledge concepts that highlight *Inokonigewin* (natural laws), honouring the connection to the Spirit and the interconnectedness to the rest of creation. It has the potential to create positive learning outcomes for both the student and the Elder who is listening to individual sharing and teaching. The Elder lifts up and values the educational exchange and relationship through the closing words, acknowledging the participants' contributions.

In the spirit of education as reconciliation, the inclusion of Elders in the classroom is a great place to start. It has the capacity to inform Indigenous knowledge, create a cultural foundation and promote *Mino bimaadiziwin* (the good life). Elders in the classroom also support the Indigenous philosophies of *Gageegay kwumoo Gikayndawsowin* (the road to knowledge is eternal) and *Niigauninaube* (leading and looking into the future)—seven generations into the future. ✖

Shelley Mandakwe Charles is Ojibwe Anishinaabe and a member of the Muskellunge fish clan from the Chippewas of Georgina Island on Lake Simcoe (Ontario). She was raised by her grandmother on Cape Croker, Chippewas of Nawash territory. Mandakwe has been an Elder educator in communities, high schools, colleges (FNTI/Georgian/Humber) universities (Lakehead/Yale/SUNY) and at the Waabgon Gamig First Nation school on Georgina Island.