MINDFUL LISTENING: INDIGENOUS ADULT BASIC EDUCATION LEARNERS

SPEAK ABOUT RETURNING TO SCHOOL

by

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Abstract

Returning to school to complete secondary studies is a pivotal event in the life of an Indigenous adult learner, yet there is a gap in the academic literature about student voices describing their experiences. This qualitative case study from the unceded traditional territories of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations focused on students at the Native Education College urban Indigenous adult learning centre. The study sought to make space for student storywork that expressed important elements of adult basic education (ABE) learner experiences. A conceptual framework based on oral traditional teachings of *maskikimiskanow* (the medicine journey), and of *mino pimatisiwin* (a good life), as well as the Seven Teachings of respect, honesty, courage, love, humility, wisdom and truth, informed an Indigenous methodology that incorporated culturally relevant research methods and an overall approach that sought to demonstrate respect and relationality. Thirteen students were interviewed and shared some of their stories of returning to school. School instructors, administrators, Elders – in residence, and one student supporter were also interviewed about ABE and lifelong learning. Cree Elders from Saskatchewan and from my home area of Ochekwi Sipi, Manitoba were consulted, as well as two additional instructor / administrators.

Thematic analyses revealed factors of the greatest importance to the students' experiences of returning to school were motivation and readiness to return to school, participation in the intake assessment, and the finding of community within the school. The greatest impact was the finding of supportive, culturally connected community within the school. This occurred as a result of peer, Elder, and staff support, and the everyday "place" of the school that offered culturally relevant supports with its

Longhouse structure and tangible connections to a physical place on the land where people gathered to be and to learn. This research contributes valuable information for other prospective adult learners, Tribal education authorities, ABE instructors, administrators, and policy and programming personnel. It adds to the academic literature for Indigenous ABE subject matter and Indigenous research methodology. In bringing a strong student perspective from these adult learners, this research values, acknowledges, and empowers their voices and story contributions.

Lay Summary

Returning to school to complete grade 12 as an adult learner marks a major shift in a person's life. Not much is written about this experience from the student's view. This study aimed to have urban Indigenous adult learning centre students share their stories of what was important to them as adult basic education (ABE) learners, and to add these stories to the academic literature. A framework of traditional Cree teachings helped to guide the research and ensure the study was carried out with respect and reciprocity. Students indicated that central to their overall experiences were motivation and readiness to return to school, participation in the intake assessments, and especially, the finding of a supportive school community. The findings provide information of high value to prospective students, and to those who teach and develop ABE policy and programming. Sharing these student stories acknowledges and empowers these voices within our community.

Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, F. Emmonds. The University of British Columbia Behavioural Research Ethics Board certificate number for fieldwork carried out in this study is H16-01339.

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List of Abbreviations

ABE – adult basic education

NEC – Native Education College

Interview participants (Students, Elders, Instructors and Administrators) are identified anonymously by alphabetical lettering, beginning with A and ending with BB. There is no participant X.

Glossary

I am a beginning learner of my Cree language, and I acknowledge that any errors in Roman orthographical representations or explained meanings as they pertain to this paper are my own. Cree is not necessarily given to literal translations; words meanings must be considered in context, and in understandings of shifting contexts. I am grateful for the guidance of my Elders in what I have learned so far about these words. *Ekosani*.

Anishinaabe – the Ojibwe people

mino bimaadiziwin – in the Ojibwe language – a good life

ekosani – thank you

ekosi – that's the way (affirmation)

mahskikimiskanow – medicine path / journey

mino pimatisiwin – a good life; understanding of leading a good life

mooshum - grandfather

tapwewin – truth

tapwe – acknowledges a truth

Acknowledgements

their words. You have all shown me great kindness and care, and I am honoured and

very grateful to be a part of this student – centred research.

Dedication

This research is made possible because of my faith in Creator and my love for my children. Each day they inspire me to practice *mino pimatisiwin* and to carry the teachings, and I dedicate this work to my son Quinn and my daughter Sarah. Follow your dreams, *mes chers enfants*.

Chapter 1: Introduction

"He did it all with a grade four education" (J. Crate, personal communication, July 2015).

This research is about stories and oral histories gathered from adult basic education (ABE) students and staff at an urban Indigenous adult learning centre, and about the teachings that remind us of who we are and *how* we are going. That being the case, it seems like a good idea to start off with a small story. My Auntie, now passed on, was a key story keeper of our family. She often liked to tell how my *mooshum,* my grandfather, had completed grade four before leaving school to work at fishing, trapping, and woodcutting. Growing up, she had marvelled at the way her dad always knew how much fish he needed to catch and how much alfalfa he had to harvest, calculating to the dollar how much income was required to support his family and see to their needs, and what might be left over for contingencies. She said he was always able to figure out the math, all on a grade four education. My granny had completed the highest grade attainable to her at the reserve school - grade eight. My Auntie said her mom was always proud of that. Long ago many of our people did not have the chance to reach that goal of high school graduation; now it is imperative for Indigenous learners to complete at least grade 12 in order to have better opportunities to find work and earn a living wage (Bougie, Kelly-Scott, and Arriagada, 2013). Some students go through and directly finish high school but many, for various reasons such as a lack of ample cultural curriculum, do not (Cherubini, 2014).

Today many of the Indigenous youth and adults who are without their grade 12 standing often find themselves returning to school in some form in order to complete their secondary school education. For example, they are enrolling in online modes of

distance high school education, or attending secondary school coursework in person at an adult learning centre. These forms of adult education provide an important function in how Indigenous students navigate their paths to further learning, and for many adult learners, adult basic education (ABE) courses are a bridge for completion of grade 12. What is it like for these people to return to school as adult learners? What are their stories? What does it mean to be "ready" to return to school, and what do ABE places of education need to know about the adult learners who come through the door? How is intake assessment received, and what influence does school community have upon the well being of the student, and on retention rates and academic potential? This study focuses on Indigenous ABE and addresses these concerns within the context of an Indigenous worldview. Specifically, it centres on using a case study approach framed by a qualitative Indigenous methodology that is based on traditional teachings about *mino pimatisiwin* – a good life, and *maskikimiskanow* – a medicine journey around the circle of life and lifelong learning.

1.1 Background to the research

Who am I? I am a member of the Ochekwi Sipi Cree Nation. My maternal grandparents are the late Frances and Wilfred Crate, and my paternal grandparents are the late Yohasia and Metro Holowachuk. As a person of Indigenous and European ancestry, I have roots in the Cree and Ukrainian communities of Canada. I have identified myself and have been identified by others with terms such as Aboriginal, First Nations, Status, Native, Treaty, and Indigenous. When I make reference to Indigenous people, I want to be respectful of the different ways that other Indigenous people

choose to self identify, and so I have also chosen to use the terms "Aboriginal", "Native", "First Nations" or "Indigenous" interchangeably within my writing, to respect how they are voiced by different participants, and employed by peoples within academic literature. Furthermore, unless it directly relates to the content of my research, I make no distinction between titles of status, non-status, Métis, and on or off reserve as they pertain to Indigenous peoples. It is not within the scope of this research to examine the often – changing categories that are part of Indigenous history in this country, and what Palmater (2013) refers to as the "externally-imposed, legislative identity of "Indian" "(p. 148).

In addition, and most importantly, when I speak about Indigenous peoples, my words, unless referenced otherwise, come from my personal observations, opinions, and experiences, as I can only speak to my own teachings that I have received and to my own point of view, and I cannot speak for other Indigenous peoples in any way. I do however use the terms "our" and "our people" when referring to Indigenous peoples in a respectful, non- stereotyping manner, such as in "the oral histories of our people are rich and varied." As an added note, many of the Elders I listened to employed the terms "our" and "our people" when referring to Indigenous people. It is also important to say that my descriptions of research language within this paper, including such words as worldviews, epistemologies, ontologies, methodologies and conceptual frameworks, are unless noted otherwise, based on my personal experiences, learning, and interpretations of what I have read and seen and listened to. I endeavour to be respectfully aware of the different ways these words are used and interpreted by other Indigenous and non- Indigenous peoples. My writings, with my thoughts and views, are

my way of interpreting and communicating a bit of what I have come to know so far on this part of my learning journey. In placing myself within this research with an introduction to who I am with regards to family and geography, I am cognizant of how Absolon and Willett (2005) regard this inclusion as "one of the most fundamental principles of Aboriginal research", where identifying who a person is and what perspective they speak or write from contributes to the relationality and validity of the approach (p. 97).

Why am I writing about adult basic education? ABE is a crucial step along the path to grade 12 completion, and we need to know more about it. What are the stories of Indigenous people who return to school as adult learners? What experiences do they encounter when they gather courage enough to walk back through the school doors? In order to understand a bit about students in adult basic education, it is important to comprehend the enrolment processes that they follow.

In order to register for ABE courses, adult learners are often obliged to complete pre-enrolment, diagnostic academic placement assessments to determine their level of proficiency in the subject areas of English and/or mathematics. When students take these placement or intake assessments and then go on to successfully complete subsequent coursework, they add to a learning agency's retention of learners. In the course of my 15 years of work as an academic tutor, I have worked extensively with Indigenous and non-Indigenous adult learners in a wide variety of ABE, university transfer, trades, and diploma programs. During this time I noticed that ABE was undoubtedly a major event in the lives of many of these Indigenous students, and that it had strong effects on their everyday way of being. Students often came in from outlying

areas to attend upgrading, and everything, from walking in the door for the first time, to sitting the placement assessment, to participating in weekly classes, to becoming part of a cohort of learners, had huge influence on how they framed and reframed what mattered in their lives. I was impressed by the strength of character that I witnessed in these adult learners and I was curious about how they might describe their experiences of returning to school.

In the past, I too had returned to school to pursue ABE math upgrading as an Indigenous adult learner who was many years out of high school. My memories of that part of my education journey have stayed with me: my uncertainty at walking back into a school, the nervousness I felt before taking the intake assessment, and my remembering of how high school teachers had criticized my schoolwork and had told me I would never succeed at higher education. Going back to school was a huge shift in my life path as I reached for new goals. Now as a graduate scholar I had many questions about what I had observed over the years with the students I had met and worked with, and choosing this topic for my research study offered a way to learn more about the Indigenous ABE learner experience.

What were the stories of these returning students? In the beginning I was focused on hearing their views about what their intake assessment experiences were like, and about how the assessments affected their education paths. In the course of my initial investigations into this issue, I spoke with ABE instructors, students, career counsellors, administration personnel, and other people concerned with and connected to different places of adult education learning. My inquiries then led me to explore current assessment strategies, and to have conversations with educators who

expressed similar concerns. What are the assessment procedures and tools? What are the experiences of Indigenous adult learners, and what do they tell us about how intake assessment is delivered and received, and how it impacts the learning potential of ABE students? Based on my work with many Indigenous adult students and from my own previous ABE assessment as an Indigenous adult learner, I found myself wanting to emphasize the human side of the story. From this, my research focus broadened to include questions concerning how Indigenous students go through not only ABE placement assessment, but also the whole experience of returning to school as adult learners.

This is an important subject area. We need to know the stories of these returning students. What they have to share with us can help us to create more effective, culturally relevant places of meaningful adult learning. This is a pertinent research topic for adult and higher learning, framed by an Indigenous qualitative methodology, and drawn from a conceptual framework based on traditional oral teachings about lifelong education.

1.2   Purpose of the Study

My primary purpose in this research was to gain an understanding of how Indigenous adult basic education students experience returning to school. I wished to examine what students have to say about their "readiness" to return to school, as well as to inquire about how they might view the process of intake assessment and its affects on their learning potential and overall education experience as Indigenous adult learners. In addition, I sought to know how they would describe what they find at school

in terms of culture, environment and community. What are the ABE experiences of these students and how do these contribute meaningfully to their journey as learners? The best way to gather material to inform my research about how ABE is experienced by Indigenous adult learners was to practice mindful listening: hearing the stories from the learners themselves. In searching for this understanding, I listened and learned from the adult learners, while respectfully examining what their ABE experiences looked like. This is academic research and as such, although I acknowledge that I am writing for a higher learning audience, in order to address the goals of the research I am also writing for the students, to make room for their voices. Additionally, I know from my own schooling that the support of people influences how students experience education, and so I have also listened and endeavoured to learn from those who have lent their personal assistance, instruction, guidance, and encouragement to Indigenous ABE learners: I am also writing for those who support the students in many ways.

My preliminary research showed me that although this is an issue that would clearly benefit from ongoing discussion, there is limited literature on this specific topic, especially from the adult learner or Indigenous adult learner perspective. In order to move the dialogue forward on the topic of Indigenous students' ABE experiences, we must create a respected space in the conversation for the participation of these adult learners. In my opinion, this calls for the increased presence of Indigenous ABE voices within academic literature, and so an additional purpose of this study is to make room in academia for a fuller scope of the voices of Indigenous adult basic education students. It is my belief that what matters most about this topic comes from the voices of the people who are most directly affected by it, namely the students and their supporters. I

also believe that the best approach to this line of inquiry is an Indigenous methodology based on a framework of oral teachings that acknowledges and supports a holistic, culturally relevant Indigenous worldview of education. This is elaborated upon in chapters three and four.

Finally, this research is intended to add to theorizing about Indigenous students' pathways in adult education. In addition, the use of an Indigenous methodology brings attention to aspects of these ABE learners' experiences that help reframe our understanding of how we perceive adult education, while also adding to the existing literature and practice on these topics. In bringing these student stories forward to find an acknowledged place within academic literature, I am also writing for the Elders, teachers, administrators, and researchers who study and work with adult learning.

1.3   Research Questions

1.   What does ABE look like from Indigenous students' points of view; what are their stories about returning to school? What is of greatest importance to them in their journey as ABE students?

2.   With respect to Indigenous adult learners, what have been their experiences of assessment tools and practices currently in use for ABE placement? Have they encountered culturally relevant assessment practices?

3.   How do people who have encouraged the learners describe their experience as supporters? How do instructors and administrators understand the path of learning for an ABE student?

1.4 Methodology

Indigenous approaches to academic research that note characteristics of culturally relevant holistic theory and relationality are well documented (Absolon, 2010, 2011; Archibald, 2008; Chilisa, 2012; Debassige, 2010; Hanohano, 1999; Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2013; Wilson, 2008). In this study, my Indigenous methodological approach is informed by the traditional oral teachings that I have been fortunate to receive. They lend structure to a conceptual framework of a Cree *maskikimiskanow* – a medicine journey around the circle of life, which is upheld and informed by cultural teachings of *mino pimatisiwin* – a good life, as well as by the Seven Teachings of respect, honesty, courage, love, humility, wisdom and truth. In this way, the intent has been laid out to also live a good life as a student, and to approach and carry out all parts of this research with a high degree of respect for the participants and for the teachings.

1.5 Conclusion

In this introductory section, a brief examination of the background to the research has been provided, including how I situate myself in terms of the research, how I came to focus on this topic, and my research questions. Reference to relevant literature was briefly presented. Chapter two is a literature review of pertinent academic material, followed by a third chapter that outlines in greater detail the approach to the study, including the conceptual framework and methodology. Chapter four explains the research methods employed and the data collection process, and introduces the case study location and the research participants. In chapter five, the data results are shown

and discussed, and the strengths and limitations of the research are also offered. Conclusions are presented and future directions for research are examined in chapter six.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

"… so I went to the library, and I couldn't find much of anything written by the students. There were very few student voices talking about ABE or intake assessment" (Emmonds, personal communication, March 29, 2017).

2.1   Clarifying the Goal of the Research

In compiling this literature review, I ask myself what matters most about the creative processes of reading and thinking about academic literature. What are my priorities here, and what messages am I trying to impart to my readers? Reading Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2002, p. 73), I am drawn to their description of the creative flow in divergent and convergent phases of planning research. As I consider how I have come through the divergent phase of brainstorming ideas and visions of subjects, questions, frameworks and methodologies, I wonder how well I have laid out the finer distinctions of the convergent phase of planning, where my ideas for study and my collection of reference materials have manifested into an applied version of my research design. I am heedful of their view that in specifying where and how to situate research within a workable plan, one is really figuring out the subtleties of transforming dreams and visions into concrete ideas that will carry meaning from the written text to the reader. To that end, I intend that this literature review will bring a deeper focus on not just *what* I have researched, but also equally about *how* I have researched. I believe that one informs the other.

This literature review of related material is intended to offer a representative cross-section of what is available and relevant on the subject of Indigenous ABE, and to note any gaps present in the research that have influenced how my project was carried

out and assessed. I acknowledge that in view of the limited amount of literature that speaks directly to Indigenous ABE students' experiences of placement assessment and returning to school, some of the literature presented addresses the more general areas of Indigenous education, adult education, and placement assessment, on individual, non-comprehensive terms. As well, there may be spaces in my literature research where I have unintentionally overlooked or not found existing pertinent references that speak to the focus of this study.

2.2   Indigenous Research

At its best, Indigenous research involves a kind of exploration such that the tenets of conducting research in a "good way," as per Debassige (2010), and the "ceremony" of research, as per Wilson (2008), are observed. For me, it is important that the process of my academic research and writing considers my own narrative, where my daily life is grounded in the purpose of keeping and communicating Indigenous traditional teachings as I strive to practice *mino pimatisiwin* – a good life. Debassige (2010) speaks to the intent of "research that is grounded in Anishinaabe spirituality", where the tenets of Anishinaabe *mino bimaadiziwin* – in Ojibwe language "the good life" - flow into doing research in a good way (p. 16). In this respect, the words of the ancestors and Elders are seen to guide Indigenous academic scholars who work within a framework that honours and acknowledges the spiritual intent present in the *how* of doing. Debassige (2010) comments further:

> I believe Anshinaabe mino-bimaadiziwin in research situates our ways of knowing at the center of the research process, and anything that we choose to do in life because it is largely participatory. … In other words, Anishinaabe mino-bimaadiziwin is a unifying and transcendent concept

that, when activated, contains the past, present, and future of Good and respectful approaches in daily life, which includes Indigenous research. … Anishinaabe mino-bimaadiziwin is a wholistic way of daily living and should not be reduced to only an intellectualizing project. (pp. 16-17)

What this means to me is that this concept is not an action-less metaphor, nor is it a dispassionate exercise in fitting a passive methodology to a given research situation. Indigenous research is not a spectator sport: it requires participation *with intent*. In the best sense, it is a conscious participatory effort to comprehend how intent and reason, faith and spirit, spill out from our life's purpose and encircle our work as scholars who strive to be of benefit to others in our communities: *mino pimatisiwin* - good life, good research. In this way, the oral teachings that reflect the ontology and epistemology of my Indigenous cultural experience also actively inform my methodological approach to research, so that what I believe as a person and how I have come to understand these beliefs guides my way as an Indigenous scholar. It is therefore key that the literature that links this study with the use of Indigenous methodology follows in the same line and reflects a respect for Indigenous worldviews. I use the term "Indigenous worldview" to express my understanding of a way of looking at how we are in relation to all of creation, and I respectfully acknowledge the use of this term as it is understood and expressed by other peoples.

2.2.1   Traditional Teachings and Indigenous Knowledge

Thinking about how ways of knowing connect to ways of learning, I am aware that I must be mindful of how I use the term "traditional teachings" within the context of my research process. I acknowledge and respect that different people understand terms such as "Indigenous knowledge", "traditional knowledge", and "traditional teachings" in

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many ways. My life experience so far provides a frame for my understanding and application of these terms. I have seen something of how traditional teachings are comprised of oral histories and Indigenous knowledges that form part of our living histories and explain our understanding of how we are in this world, and are transmitted through the spoken lessons and storywork that form part of the circle of life. Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) critically observe that traditional knowledge is defined in a large part by how its "meaning, value and use are bound to the cultural context in which it is situated" (p. 5), and how it both derives from and exists as an integral part of real life experience. Indigenous forms of research acknowledge that our knowledge is lived knowledge, informed by oral teachings that are carried from generation to generation in a meaningful, purposeful, and demonstrative way. I understand that Indigenous knowledge is traditional knowledge, and I accept that it is further described and delineated by the people who share and receive the teachings.

Looking at the literature, I see it is important to further address how the terms "Indigenous methodology" and "traditional knowledge" are used in academic writings, and how the scope of their meaning and application is interpreted. Ray (2012) speaks to this concern when she makes the point that Indigenous methodology is not necessarily a form of communicating traditional knowledge. She states that one cannot substitute "traditional knowledge" for "Indigenous" in the term "Indigenous methodologies" (p. 86), and that confusing one term with the other is a pitfall of modern research. I can appreciate her perspective and she raises a relevant point of discussion about how the meaning, connotation, and use of words exist and are constructed within understandings of sacred and secular contexts: *traditional knowledges* often come from

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oral teachings that are passed down generationally within family, community, and cultural groups, honoured and held up for the ways they continue to sustain and ground us, connecting past to present and future. Sometimes traditional knowledge teachings are given in ceremony and are not widely shared, as commented on by Kunkel and Schorcht (2014) and also by Simpson and Manitowabi (2013). I have been honoured to witness some of these family, community, and ceremonial teachings, and I have learned a bit of how these lessons of traditional knowledge are respectfully carried and shared with the people.

Indigenous methodologies are ways of thinking and doing that respect and acknowledge the role of Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies. They are necessary to create space in mainstream academia for the manifestation of Indigenous knowledge systems and the life stories of Aboriginal peoples (Ray, 2012). This is similar to how Smith (2013) and Weber-Pillwax (2001) discuss Indigenous methodologies as being culturally and epistemologically relevant, necessary educational tools of and for Indigenous peoples. As we walk, talk, and write with these worldviews and paradigms we perpetuate acknowledgement of their spiritual origins and understanding of their theoretical underpinnings. This critical approach is something I have endeavoured to incorporate into my research. My inquiry aims to make more room for voices of Indigenous adult learners within an academic setting: how do I do this in a way that acknowledges and honours the teachings and the people? As I proceed, the students will lead with their stories.

2.2.2 The Place of Stories is Also in Literature

Stories figure prominently within Indigenous frameworks and worldviews, across many languages and cultures. Storywork can take different shapes, including oral or written forms of personal narratives that describe shared or individual occurrences woven together to reflect thought and vision. My Elders have taught me the importance of hearing storywork. Listening to stories is how we learn about who we are and where we are in relation to all creation, and telling stories through voice in oral or written words is how we transmit this learning to others in our family and community, as exemplified in writings by Archibald (2008), and Keitlah (1995). Stories have taught me history from my family, my community, and from our collective community as Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples of these many lands. As my late Auntie used to tell me, I need to remember these stories because then I will know what to tell my children (J. Crate, personal communication, July 2015).

It is well acknowledged within academic literature that stories function not only to connect us to our homeland, our family history, and our culture, but they also serve to ground us within our Indigenous worldviews in a way that gives us a sense of familiarity and belonging (Absolon, 2011; Kenny, Faries, Fiske, and Voyageur, 2004; and Kovach, 2009). McLeod (2007) succinctly places it all into a relational perspective when he writes, " … collective narrative memory is what puts our singular lives into a larger context" (p.11). The idea of individual and collective storywork relates directly to my case study of student stories and is elaborated upon later when the conceptual framework is examined.

2.3 Adult Basic Education

There is a limited amount of academic literature that speaks specifically about Indigenous ABE students' education stories or placement assessments of Indigenous ABE learners. There is a bit more material that speaks non- specifically to general ABE experiences, as for example in the studies by King and Wright (2003), and Reynolds and Johnson (2014), where ABE students provide qualitative data by sharing accounts of their school experiences as adult learners. Other authors present works in which Indigenous voices may not necessarily represent ABE students, but the findings are still of interest and relevance in how they centre on Indigenous voice and story. Such is the case in Blodgett, Schinke, Smith, Peltier and Pheasant (2011), where Indigenous voices speak via vignettes as part of a community study on Aboriginal research. In addition, although Donovan's (2015) study centres on the inclusion of Australian Aboriginal high school student voices within educational research, the author raises salient points about voice and education practices that do apply to ABE, stating that "Accessing students' opinions and stories about what they believe works in their schooling has the potential to shed light on how better outcomes for Aboriginal students might be achieved" (p. 615). Gallop and Bastien (2016) also draw on Indigenous students' voices and stories in their study of Aboriginal student success in higher education, where post-secondary students shared their education experiences.

In summary, there is valuable research material that touches on ABE, or Indigenous education, or Indigenous voice and story. However, I have found only a few words here and there written by Indigenous ABE students themselves about returning to school or placement assessment (Haig-Brown, 1995; Jothen, Cavaliere, Cormode,

Hanson Arnold, McKay, and William, 2011; Little, 2013). What this means to me as a researcher is that the most valuable material I gather is from the students telling their stories about how they have experienced adult basic education as part of their learning path.

Adult education has its own set of variables that students experience in different forms and to varying degrees. Adult learners are in a unique situation of entering a school environment at a time in their lives when many of their age cohorts may be settled into family and work environments, or even looking ahead to plan retirements. Lifelong learning opportunities often happen while adults are busy parenting children, caregiving for Elders, working, managing household finances, or attending to various other adult tasks and activities, so these learning participants often take on a student role in addition to everything else that makes up part of a full and active life. It is important for instructors and administrators to see that adult learners bring much more than just a transcript or *curriculum vitae* with them: along with a variety of life experiences, they may also bring family and work responsibilities, as well as life and learning challenges. They bring their whole person. These points emphasize that ABE students are especially unique individuals with varied backgrounds, and no single description of life history or previous learning experience can define or express what comprises an adult learner in general, or an Indigenous adult learner in particular.

2.3.1   Indigenous ABE Learners and Cultural Content

One thing that does set Indigenous adult learners apart is that they may be faced with a lack of relevant cultural content in the curriculum and in the learning institution

itself, as noted by many including Coleman (2012), Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991), and

Verwoord, Mitchell, and Machado (2011). Coleman's conversations with Battiste,

Henderson, Findlay and Findlay add to this discourse, as they consider the manner in

which Indigenous ways of knowing and learning exist within and along margins of

acceptance in Eurocentric academic settings. When talking about culturally respectful

education, the distinctions of the separate classroom curriculum and the general

learning environment of the institute are blurred into a common element, where what

happens inside the class is affected by and in turn affects the overall atmosphere of the

learning site, including the physical building, and the students, instructors, and other

staff.

The degree to which an educational institute itself is sensitive to student needs

and provides a culturally relevant environment may directly affect student success as

experienced by Indigenous adult learners. This is noted by many, including Coleman

(2012), Gallop and Bastien (2016), Isbister (1998), Jothen et al. (2011), Kanu (2011),

and Kirkness (1999). How adult education is delivered and received by Indigenous

learners matters, and recognizing the importance of culturally relevant content matters a

great deal. Little (2013) discusses "Things that get in the way of success" for adult

learners, and notes, "… academic, institutional, and pedagogical systems and practices

continue to create barriers. They still often fail to recognize Aboriginal identity or

meaningfully embrace Aboriginal concepts, values, and knowledge" (p. 18). Anuik,

Battiste, and George (2010) examine First Nations education and learners from a

traditional cultural, spiritual, and epistemic perspective, and they too note the challenges

for students that exist because of how "curriculum, teacher training, and administrative

practices continue to operate from Eurocentric foundations" within our Canadian education systems (p. 63). They call for the inclusion of Indigenous ways of knowing and learning within our places of education so that students and communities of learners can benefit from a sharing of traditional teachings.

Many authors, including Cherubini (2014), Kanu (2011), Kirkness (1999), Little (2013), and Silver (2013) acknowledge the positive impact that cultural support can have on Indigenous student success when it is implemented into an academic teaching environment. MacKinnon and Silver (2015) also note that incorporating Indigenous teachings within an adult education curriculum positively influences student learning outcomes, while "the continued use of Eurocentric content and teaching styles" is a factor that contributes to Aboriginal students leaving high school before grade 12 completion (p.3).

In a similar line of thought, Amprako's (2017) work identifies that a pedagogy and curriculum based on "culturally responsive teaching" that recognizes, values, and includes local cultural content is of great benefit for primary and secondary Indigenous students in the Northwest Territories (NWT) of Canada. His study underlines the important issue of students being able to meaningfully connect to and interact with a style and content of learning that respects their Indigenous ways of knowing and learning. Wilson (2004) critiques adult learner curriculum content, questioning how educational policies are developed and implemented regarding what constitutes culturally relevant, culturally pertinent curricula within ABE. She advocates for new programming content that recognizes and supports Aboriginal ABE students in a meaningful, decolonizing way. She reminds us that policy "plays a significant role in

influencing, shaping, and producing structures of society " and how it figures "in the production, reproduction, and maintenance of social constructions of power and inequality" (p. 20).

Whose words and meanings do adult learners connect with when they return to the classroom? It matters to our students that they see themselves and their cultures reflected in meaningful ways of delivering educational programming within the classroom and within the institute. A good illustration of this that is also inclusive of Indigenous ABE voices is Little's (2013) work, which is most effective in its use of student dialogue to illustrate important points with real life Indigenous ABE student experiences. For example, one student comments on the cultural content of the ABE program, noting that "If this program was just reading, writing, and math I don't think it would have been as good. Slavey [language] was a really important part of the program for me" (p.32). Culture matters in the lives of students.

Similar to Anuik, Battiste, and George (2010), Tisdell (2006) broadens the conversation and links culturally responsive adult education to an understanding of epistemological knowledge and of how spirituality informs culture. Battiste (2013), Debassige (2010), Hanohano (1999), and McGuire (2003), also discuss the essential role of spirituality in Indigenous academic research and education. This relates directly to how oral teachings function to connect epistemology and methodology to an overall approach to Indigenous research, and is examined further when conceptual framework is discussed.

2.3.2   Intake Assessment

Academic placement or intake assessments are often among the first steps that adult learners take when they decide to upgrade their secondary school level education. In addition to a potential lack of culturally sensitive student supports within the learning environment, the challenges of returning to school for Indigenous adults may also include the stress of placement assessments, which can likewise affect how they may or may not fulfill their academic potential (Jothen et al., 2011). The authors comment on sensitive issues around adult student self-esteem and anxiety about entering and completing upgrading, noting that these may connect with the context of school intake assessments. It is important to know that just walking through the doors of a school the second time around as an adult learner takes courage and can be a stressful experience all on its own, even before a would-be student sits for an assessment. I speak here from my own experience as an Indigenous adult learner who has attended upgrading programs, and from my observations of other students I have worked with.

According to Jothen et al. (2011), adult learner assessments are often deficit based and may lack cultural relevance. Coupled with what Askov, Van Horn, and Carman (1997), Campbell (2007), and Verwoord et al. (2011) note about student assessment being a potential source of stress, it is not unexpected that placement assessment can be a worrisome experience. Adult educator J. Green comments further on this subject, and she states how important it is to understand that whether potential ABE students undergo positive or negative experiences during their placement assessments can greatly influence the degree to which their learning potential is realized through subsequent enrolment in and completion of upgrading coursework

(personal communication, October 19, 2012). Lange, Chovanec, Cardinal, Kajner, and Smith Acuna (2015) also mention how effects of previous school encounters may influence the kind of experience a student has when re-entering a school environment. They consider the concept of the "wounded learner", referring to a person who is in a marginalized situation and who has been negatively affected by a previous education experience, which in turn affects how a present or a future learning endeavour is experienced (p. 96.)

In the lesser amounts of academic literature that address Indigenous adult education assessment, or link intake assessment with culturally sensitive ABE, there is considerably less research that focuses specifically on Indigenous student experiences with ABE diagnostic placement assessments, culturally relevant or otherwise. For example, Indigenous ABE intake assessment is mentioned briefly by Anuik, Battiste, and George (2010), Haig-Brown (1995), and by Jothen et al. (2011). Jothen et al. (2011) comment that the majority of adult learner assessments used are of a generic nature and may not be culturally sensitive in design for Indigenous adult learners. They too note the relative absence of research about this, and regard it as a serious lack of information about an issue that affects both the success of adult learners and the degree of student retention experienced by the learning agency. Haig-Brown comments briefly on the practice of intake assessment within an Indigenous adult learning centre, noting that it is a step in the process of ABE enrolment.

Adding to the literature on Indigenous ABE assessment, Anuik, Battiste, and George (2010) describe a culturally relevant method of intake assessment in use for an Aboriginal adult literacy program, and go into some detail about the spiritual

epistemology that informs the process, and how it is of much benefit to the students. They note that during a calm and "informal" initial meeting, the learner is set at ease, and thus "shares a wealth of information that sheds light on life experiences in the learner's past", therefore helping the facilitator and the learner to make meaningful connections with the "learning spirit" within the student (p. 74). This example demonstrates a workable method of ABE intake assessment for Aboriginal learners that importantly acknowledges the spiritual path that each learner takes, and that comes from an overall approach to adult education that affirms Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies. Although the authors do comment on the student benefits of such an overall cultural approach to adult literacy programming, such as how "the cultural learning throughout such activities results in a positive cultural identity for the learner", what is lacking in this study are the student voices that describe their experiences of ABE and ABE intake assessment from their perspectives.

While this source does directly refer to Indigenous ABE intake assessment, the overall amount of literature on this subject remains limited, especially any that includes student voices. This gap in the literature is an opportunity for this study to add to the available research by sharing Indigenous students' stories of placement assessment. Walking through the school door is the first part in upgrading; sitting the assessment is usually the next step. What are the students faced with when they take that next step?

2.3.3   Diagnostic Tools for Assessment: Culture Optional

Academic placement assessments use a variety of methods for ascertaining reading and mathematic levels of the ABE student applicants. Most diagnostic tools in

use today for intake assessments are not new, and outside of those that have been adapted for "cultural" use by individual agencies, they are not specifically designed for Indigenous adult learner use. Millar (2007) discusses current tools in use that include the Canadian Adult Reading Assessment (CARA), the Canadian Adult Achievement Test (CAAT), and the Tests of Adult Basic Education (TABE), noting that CARA is used as a diagnostic test, while CAAT and TABE are used as standardized tests. Millar notes that standardized tests inform an instructor about *what* a student knows, and diagnostic tests give more information about *how* a student experiences learning or lack of learning, and he also acknowledges that many standardized tests are not "culturally sensitive" for certain groups of people, including Aboriginal adult learners (p. 71). Millar's overview is relevant mainly for its outline of assessment tools currently in use for adult education.

This material is added to by Jackson and Schaetti (2013), and Saskatchewan Learning (2003), and there is some discussion by Millar (2007) and also by Saskatchewan Learning (2003) as to the importance of acknowledging that assessment tests may not necessarily be seen as being culturally appropriate, without a great amount of information given on what makes individual tests more or less usable for cultures outside of mainstream [Western] academia. Jothen et al. (2011) also mention the need for culturally relevant assessment in adult literacy programs: "The standardized assessment tools available today are for the most part, culturally inappropriate and new tools need to be developed which more accurately measure the literacy skills of Aboriginal adult learner" (p. 63).

While not directly focused on Indigenous ABE intake, Golbeck, Ahlers-Schmidt, and Pashal (2005) do address the cultural importance of having ABE assessment available in Spanish to Hispanic adult learners in the USA, in view of the more widely existing English version. Here in Canada, Campbell (2006) comments that delivering "user-friendly, culturally relevant *diagnostic* tools" for Indigenous adult learners (p. 63) and "creating a non-threatening assessment environment" (p. 65) for students sitting to write assessments are important recommendations for policy development and implementation in adult basic education. Importantly, she also includes mention of "culturally appropriate tools that reflect the assumed knowledge that one would have if one were born and raised in northern Canada" (2006), something that is akin to the findings of Amprako's study on the importance of culturally relevant curriculum content for K to 12 in the Northwest Territories (2017).

Some agencies use a combination of recognized tools, and also add in their own assessment methods that may be more holistic in nature, for the benefit of the students, such as Aboriginal - themed essay questions and reading paragraphs (J. Green, personal communication, March 3, 2015), and also mentioned in Jothen et al. (2011). In addition to the aforementioned work by Anuik, Battiste, and George (2010), Verwoord et al. (2011) also comment on the importance of having student assessment methods that respect Indigenous worldview and culture, as do Campbell (2007), Little (2013), and Mercer, Bellegarde, and Charland (2012). Here again it is difficult to find student voices addressing the specific topic of Indigenous ABE intake assessment.

Campbell (2007) underscores the need for culture as an element of assessment, and she makes good use of compelling statistics, especially when she notes that only a

small minority of adult assessment tools have been developed within the past decade of her article's publication, pointing to an urgent need for up to date, new forms of assessment that show creative approaches to today's many different adult learner populations. The literature review by Mercer, Bellegarde, and Charland (2012) provides another request for more research into assessment, and it is worthwhile to note that critical examination of the role assessment plays in student success is also touched upon by Grieve (2007).

The overall consensus is that it matters how Indigenous adult learners feel they are treated, especially when they are assessed by methods that may not respect their ways of knowing and learning. As Kenny (2002) states, students notice these errors and omissions. She goes on to cite a comment about the lack of cultural acknowledgement an Indigenous student experienced in higher education evaluation: "The way that they assess White students' abilities doesn't work for us" (p. 27). Although this particular student was enrolled in university, I feel the same principle about culturally inadequate assessment methods could and does apply to ABE learners. Indigenous adult learners, in ABE as well as in places of higher learning, all require and are deserving of assessment methods that respectfully acknowledge worldviews and epistemologies that model culturally relevant forms of teaching and learning.

Traditionally, Indigenous education is grounded in spiritually based teachings and culturally appropriate, positive approaches to learning that model desired behaviour and encourage students to consider the interconnectedness of *all our relations* (Hanohano, 1999). It is challenging to find related, relevant sources of positive -based intake assessment information in academic literature. Education models such as "assessment

for learning" (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall and Wiliam, 2007), and "appreciative inquiry" (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005) address a more positive attitude to assessment, teaching, and learning in adult education, and although they do not specifically look at Indigenous ways of knowing, or ABE intake assessment, they do offer complimentary attitudes to education evaluation that can be related to Indigenous approaches to learning.

One example from the literature of an Indigenous, culturally based method for assessment is the model discussed by Verwoord et al. (2011), which is designed to help Indigenous learners "focus on their strengths … make their learning more meaningful, and place learning within a context that may be more culturally relevant" (p. 49). It is a well thought out design that incorporates a visual modelling of a medicine wheel, which includes references to how Indigenous spiritual and cultural teachings form the basis of an education system (p. 58). This example has significance as relevant literature that touches on my research framework, as it connects traditional teachings to the study of adult learning, although it does not focus specifically on Indigenous ABE intake assessment, and my study does not incorporate a medicine wheel framework.

2.4   Conclusion

To summarize, there is a large amount of writing available that links Indigenous education and research to Indigenous worldview, epistemology and methodology. Authors including Absolon (2011), Archibald (2008), Chilisa (2012), Coleman et al. (2012), Debassige (2010), Hanohano (1999), Kenny et al. (2004), Kovach (2009), McGuire (2003), McLeod (2007), Ray (2007), Simpson and Manitowabi (2013), Smith

(2013), Weber-Pillwax (2001), and Wilson (2008), identify the basic tenets of Indigenous knowledge such as respect, earth-centred philosophy, and spiritual connectedness of all creation, that ground culturally significant ways of knowing and seeing which have a valid place within academic writing. These authors and others such as Little (2013), emphasize the role of narrative and the importance of acknowledging how Indigenous frames of reference and writing provide a vital and life-giving opportunity for hearing what Smith (1999) terms the "counter" stories of Indigenous voices within academic settings (p. 2). The narratives contained within the educative storywork and writings of Absolon (2011), Archibald (2008), and Keitlah (1995) demonstrate the space for these voices of Indigenous people.

In discussing Indigenous adult education, Absolon (2011), Campbell (2007), Little (2013), Jothen et al. (2011), Kenny (2002), Kirkness (1999), and Verwoord et al. (2011) point out some of the challenges involved with a lack of culturally sensitive learning environment and curriculum, and in addition to authors such as Amprako (2017), Battiste (2013), and Mackinnon and Silver (2015), reiterate the importance of having the adult learner / Indigenous learner education process set within a greater culturally-relevant framework. In addition, authors such as Anuik, Battiste, and George (2010), Campbell (2007), Jothen et al. (2011), Little (2013), and Mercer et al. (2012) make a point of linking key concepts such as *assessments* and *culturally based frames of reference* to the subject of Indigenous adult education, and consider it an issue of importance, although they do not all specifically address intake assessments.

Indigenous ABE learners carry life experience with them that includes individual and collective storywork. It is therefore important to recognize that many writers discuss

what they consider to be the ongoing effects of colonization and oppression experienced by Indigenous peoples, and how these influences impact the educational paths of Indigenous learners (Absolon, 2011; Battiste, 2013); Kovach, 2009; Lanigan, 1998; Silver, 2013; Smith, 2013; and Wilson, 2008.) Although this literature review did consider content about the effects of culturally relevant education, it was not within the scope of this research to bring focus on the causes, effects, and impacts of the aforementioned influences as they correlate with adult education. I respectfully acknowledge that for many Indigenous adult learners, including myself, these influences have touched upon the pages of our "life" *curriculum vitae*.

In conclusion, my research is influenced by the somewhat sparse variety of literature specifically pertaining to Indigenous students' descriptions of their experiences of ABE, and to placement assessments for Indigenous ABE learners. It does however draw upon general studies that speak to Indigenous education, and Indigenous voice and story, as well as non-specific ABE student experiences. This literature review assisted me in visualizing how my conceptual framework and methodology would translate into a workable project. The current discourse in the available literature has helped me to make important connections and refine the flow of concepts within my research. It has reminded me that in researching and writing about the stories I hear, I am the learner, and that as Smith (1999) writes, "Indigenous research is a humble and humbling activity" (p. 5). In the following chapter, the research methodology and conceptual framework are presented.

Chapter 3: Approach to Research

3.1 Ways of Knowing and Ways of Writing

Indigenous academic study incorporates oral teachings full of language and literacies that contribute to a particular kind of holistic paradigm, which informs the methodologies and conceptual frameworks of *how* we approach research. These teachings are our ontologies and epistemologies; they tell of what we believe and of how we come to have these beliefs (Wilson, 2008). They speak of our relationality to all creation. Similarly, Kenny et al. (2004) offer a holistic framework for Aboriginal research that honours "the past, present, and future … the spiritual, physical, emotional and mental aspects of human beings, …[and] the interconnectedness of all things" (p. 9). Again, this is akin to my own traditional oral teachings that I have been fortunate to receive. Such a way of looking at how Indigenous people situate themselves within being and learning is well documented, and is generally similar to how other authors identify Indigenous worldview and epistemology (Absolon, 2011; Archibald, 2008; Chilisa, 2012; Coleman et al., 2012; Kovach, 2009; Ray, 2012; and Smith, 2013).

We write what we know in our hearts about how we are with respect to all of creation. For example, similar to Debassige (2010) and McLeod (2007), Wilson (2008) voices how his Cree cultural framework shapes the concepts and manners of how he conducts his research. For Wilson, employing a method of being critically respectful of the voices of others is a ceremonial exercise in finding new ways to understand how coming from a place of traditional Indigenous knowledge can be placed within a frame of academic writing. He lays out a mode of assessing his chosen academic references that respects both the other writers and himself as independent thinkers, and also as

connected parts of the same universal humanity, and thus he shows that it is not *what* he does, as much as *how* he does it, that demonstrates his deeper understanding of the traditional Indigenous teachings and knowledges that foreground his academic endeavours. He is demonstrating relationality within research. This echoes the Good Life way of researching by Debassige (2010) and McGuire (2003), something that I aspire to with my own approach to this study, as I endeavour to follow a methodology and a conceptual framework that are respectful of Indigenous ways of knowing and writing.

3.2   Methodology

What is Indigenous methodology? I believe that it describes a way of thinking: it explains why we do something in a certain way. It is an academic approach that addresses the *how* of doing of research, such that the conceptual frameworks and research methods it informs are defined by how they demonstrate ways of knowing and learning that honour and acknowledge Indigenous teachings and tenets. Battiste (2013) offers that "Indigenous methodologies are then thought of as alternative ways of thinking about research processes and have their own ethical guidelines", and when she states that "Brant-Castellano (2004) suggests that ethics are the rules of right behaviour and are intimately related to who you are, the deep values you subscribe to, and your understanding of your place in the spiritual order of reality", she touches upon another essential aspect of Indigenous methodologies: they also describe a way *of being* within a greater context than just the immediate research (p. 76).

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Shawn Wilson notes that an Indigenous research paradigm encompasses the elements of axiology, ontology, epistemology, and methodology (2008, p.70). He goes on to discuss how such a methodological approach needs to strongly reflect ethical considerations and a relational accountability within all circles of the research. This relates to previous discussion and is similar to Absolon's (2011, p. 22) description of how Indigenous methodologies are "… methods, practices and approaches that are guided by Indigenous worldviews, beliefs, values, principles, processes and contexts … are wholistic, relational, interrelational and interdependent with Indigenous philosophies, beliefs and ways of life." My approach to research methodology is based on a like understanding, and my intent is to reflect the relationality of elements while employing a culturally sensitive way of making an academic inquiry in a good way, such as Debassige (2010) discusses in his description of Indigenous methodology based upon a spiritually centred "good way" of thinking, being, and doing.

My qualitative approach to inquiry asks how Indigenous ABE students experience returning to school via adult upgrading. The purpose of this study is not to put myself forward, but rather to show how these student stories are an important part of what we need to recognize and know about adult education systems. Stories are active parts of our lives that compel us to connect respectfully with each other in speaking and in listening, as noted by Benton-Banai (2010). Archibald (2008) weaves her Stó:lô storywork into a seamless methodology that reflects deep understandings of strong ties to language and lived learning: she shows us how stories are a necessary participatory link to the *how* of doing. In a similar sense, Smylie, Olding and Ziegler

(2014) note how epistemologies connect to the vital sharing of knowledge and histories through storywork:

> Indigenous epistemologies, for example, almost always intrinsically connect knowledge with action. … Knowledge may be considered as pre-existing such that there are no new ''discoveries'' but rather a process of gradual awareness and understanding of complex, inter- connected, and pluralistic systems of existing knowledge. In this way, knowledge development work is actively transformative as it is linked to life-long processes of human development. Stories themselves can be perceived as holding ''medicine'' and the process of sharing stories as acts of healing. (p. 17)

Simpson and Manitowabi (2013) also discuss the vital links we make between our stories, our epistemologies and our daily lives, and how these ways of knowing and learning carry our culture and our teachings.

For the Indigenous adult learners and others who I have interviewed, having a voice means that the personal stories these people carry are acknowledged as belonging to them, and are a central part of this chosen research that shows how their voices inform our understanding of what we call education studies. My methodology, as well as reflecting the above - mentioned elements, also employs ways of making an inquiry that are respectful of this goal and are ethically mindful of what it is like to work with students and Elders. I recall what it was like for me to go back to school and do upgrading, and I remember what it was like to engage with ABE students during my many years of working in adult education. My Elders have shown me how to respectfully address and enter into conversation with those who are knowledge and language and story keepers. I have been reminded that when people tell their personal stories, the stories are to be held in reverence and accorded to the person who shared them – we

do not tell them as our own, or share them in a disrespectful manner, or without receiving permission. They have counselled me on what it means to practice *mino pimatisiwin:* the *how* of the manner in which we go forward with intent to live a good life, and this is how I go forward with the intent to carry out research in a good and right way, with a methodology full of the teachings to guide a 'right way' to my approach to inquiry and to critically inform my conceptual framework.

3.3   Conceptual Framework

What does an Indigenous conceptual framework look like, and how does this influence my approach to research? For me, it is a linking together of ontology, epistemology and methodology in such a way that all three form the basis for a theoretical framework that is composed of traditional teachings that foreground an Indigenous approach to education. Traditional teachings are based on an oral method of teaching, and are timeless in the sense that they form the story work of past, present and future generations of learners (Hanohano, 1999). The epistemologies of Indigenous people tell of spiritual connections, sacred teachings, the way our natural world is the source for our ways of knowing, and how Indigenous knowledge systems are sourced from all parts of creation, including the ceremonies, dreams, stories, and visions that are given to the people (Absolon, 2011; Archibald, 2008; Debassige, 2010; Hanohano, 1999; McLeod, 2007; Simpson and Manitowabi, 2013; Wilson, 2008). This makes them unique and different from mainstream Western theories that are largely Eurocentric in nature. McLeod (2007) gives an eloquent discourse on this subject that respects and

honours the many differences and commonalities within and between Indigenous

cultures, while emphasizing the connection of academic research to storywork:

> … the starting point within Indigenous theoretical frameworks, then, is
> different from that within Western theories: the spiritual world is alive and
> influential, colonialism is contested, and storytelling, or "narrative
> imagination," is a tool to vision other existences outside of the current
> ones by critiquing and analyzing the current state of affairs, but also by
> dreaming and visioning other realities. (p. 98)

Simpson and Manitowabi (2013) draw on epistemological similarities from within

their own Anishinaabe culture as they acknowledge McLeod's point of how the spiritual

origins of our ways of knowing are carried forward in our research via our

epistemologies and methodologies that honour and acknowledge our stories and sacred

traditional teachings. They comment that "Every Nishnaabeg has our own personal

stories or narratives that communicate their personal truths, learning, histories, and

insights" (p. 287). This is how we connect with and make meaning from the sacred oral

teachings that inform our ways of knowing: by experiencing life and constructing our

own stories that we share from the past to the future. Simpson and Manitowabi's

commentary on McLeod's passage is particularly well written, and it elegantly positions

ongoing Indigenous knowledge as a necessary foundational part of our theoretical

frameworks for academic research. I see this when I incorporate the teachings I have

received from the Elders into this writing. I write about their stories and lessons from the

past, connecting with a living history of student stories from the present.

3.3.1   The Seven Teachings Within a Conceptual Framework

I have heard Elders speak of the Seven Teachings of respect, honesty, courage, love, humility, wisdom, and truth, that have been given to the people to help lead them in their daily lives: a system of guidance that speaks to how we endeavour to treat each other and all of creation, gifts given by the Seven Grandfather spirits, as told in Anishinaabe traditional teachings (Benton-Banai, 2010). Many people also refer to these Seven Grandfather teachings as the "Seven Teachings", and that is how I refer to them here in this writing. These sacred teachings were given in order that the people might gain knowledge of a good way to go in their lives (Benton-Banai, 2010), and they represent a conceptual framework in the most literal sense of *applied education*, as they encourage us to aspire to and demonstrate these tenets of wholeness on a daily basis in all that we do, say, and think. As Elder Langford Ogemah shares in Wilson and Restoule (2010), "The seven grandfathers are lived every day of your life, all day long" (p.40). I have been fortunate to hear something of these lessons from my Elders.

On a summer day, standing in the sunshine and dust of a prairie side road, Elder Y accepted my tobacco and gift and reminded me that these Seven Teachings were given by Creator to the people, and so have been passed down through ceremony and shared knowledge. They represent a sacred way of pledging to follow a right and good way in our lives, so that we might heal as a people (personal comment, August 19, 2016).

Teachings such as these are part of an ontology that emphasizes how we are all integral parts of creation, something that Absolon (2011) offers as she discusses how Indigenous methodologies are informed by oral teachings of traditional knowledge that

are passed down generationally. As aforementioned, Debassige (2010) applies traditional teachings to higher education when he refers to the spiritual significance of walking with Anishinaabe *mino-bimaadiziwin*, or the Good Life approach, as a methodology when doing academic inquiry. McGuire (2003) also does this as she names the Seven Teachings as part of what grounds her research. The Seven Teachings form a directing focus of how we are meant to carry ourselves as we interact with others in our communities; they are traditional teachings that contribute to a conceptual framework for applied Indigenous knowledge that I endeavour to follow in my daily life and that I have been guided by as I complete this research in a good way. This understanding of how traditional teachings such as the Seven Teachings and others underpin Indigenous theory is a central theme of my study, where the teachings are foundational not just to the methodology and conceptual framework, but also to the spiritually grounded applied research methods, as discussed in the following chapters.

3.4   My Journey in Learning the Teachings

The challenge in articulating a conceptual framework is weaving the teachings offered within an Indigenous worldview into a workable tool with which to: a) skilfully construct and critically examine a viable research project, and b) at the same time retain the ideology of the teachings themselves as living elements that Indigenous people strive to follow in the present as learners, and work to carry for the future as teachers. For my conceptual framework I acknowledge how the Seven Teachings form part of a larger frame of teachings within a *maskikimiskanow* – a medicine journey, because they represent the essence of how I understand traditional teachings as forming a moral and

ethical guidance for how to walk in a good way, in a medicine way. Where did these Indigenous lessons come into my life, and how do they form a conceptual research framework that is a true representation of guiding principles? To answer that I need to again refer to how I position myself within my research journey.

I was not raised with many Indigenous traditional teachings; they came into my life in later years, and there is much I have yet to learn about my Cree culture. In Wilson's (2008) writing there are commonalities I understand, agree with, and link to my own approach to my inquiry, as his writings reaffirm and contribute further to my own learning about how one can articulate what is clearly a research paradigm that reflects an Indigenous conceptual framework based upon traditional teachings. It is important to me that my academic writing connects my own narrative, where my daily life is grounded in the intent of keeping and communicating the Seven Teachings, with the literature that reflects an Indigenous conceptual framework that acknowledges traditional teachings within the academic setting of a qualitative methodology. The element of spirituality flows from the teachings and into my framework, affirming *how* I am approaching my research, and I am grateful for this.

As aforementioned, Tisdell (2006) writes extensively about how spirituality connects with the culture and success of adult learners. She emphasizes the links between academic writing, cultural identity, and spirituality, and discusses the importance of arriving at a "culturally responsive epistemology that suggests research and teaching is both a spiritual and intellectual pursuit" (p.19). This exemplifies what is so essential for me in my research and writing: how my daily active life is informed by the spirituality of my Indigenous culture. Traditional teachings and Indigenous forms of

knowledge share a spiritual connection, and form the foundations of a culture that brings forward Indigenous teachings and knowledge by *doing*. It is one continuous circular path of education that is, in the best way possible, a demonstrative process about *how we go* in this world, using Indigenous methodology to bring forward traditional teachings. In order to find an example of this process, I need go no further than the community where I have raised my family and spent much of the past few decades.

3.4.1   Learning About *Haahuupa*

I am a former resident of Vancouver Island, having spent over 20 years there before recently relocating to Vancouver. These West coast lands are not my ancestral lands and these are not my nations, although we do share important bonds of Aboriginality and Indigenous ways of knowing and learning. I am grateful that for a good part of their early educative years, my children were fortunate to attend a local school on the island that is independently run by the Nuu-chah-nulth First Nations community. In this school, Indigenous language and culture are embedded right into the curriculum as important and essential elements of education. Although we were far away from our own Cree cultural ties, as part of their elementary education my children heard stories, songs, and oral teachings from Nuu-chah-nulth Elders and others that affirmed and reaffirmed the importance of "owning their words and owning their actions", in order to be respectful of themselves and others and in order to help them "go in a good way" in family, community, and nation.

At that time I myself was also fortunate to meet and talk with several of the teachers, support staff, and parents from the local First Nations community, and to receive the words they were kind enough to share with me about their Nations and their cultures. During the course of my children's last year of schooling at this place, I had many conversations with the school language teacher. I would arrive to pick up my son and daughter from her last period language class, and while the children read or played quietly, I listened as she shared some of her wise words about language, education, and the necessity of keeping the traditional teachings alive because they were life lessons we could follow. The school name *Haahuupayuk* translates as "the place of learning" (Alberni Children First, 2015), and the school website interprets *haahuupa* as "continuous learning with care" (Haahuupayuk Elementary School, 2015). From my limited understanding of the Nuu-chah-nulth languages and ways of learning, I knew *haahuupa* generally referred to the idea of "to teach", and yet I also knew that this simple definition would be considered incomplete without hearing the culturally specific demonstrative teachings behind the words and concepts, such as those included by Keitlah (1995), in her moving collection of words and wisdoms from Nuu-chah-nulth Elders. Language is how we learn about culture; I could not presume in any way to know even a bit about this word without first being a student and receiving some teachings about its cultural meaning.

I asked the language teacher if she would please share with me some of what her understanding of the Nuu-chah-nulth word *haahuupa* was. She was very kind. She talked about how language carries meanings that do not fit literal translations and then she shared with me some teachings of this word, describing *haahuupa* as lifelong

learning that incorporates traditional teachings, culture, family, and community with intent to show us all *the good path to go in a life* (L. Watts, personal communication, winter of 2002-2003). She talked at length about how Indigenous worldview is holistic and addresses how we are all connected, with each of us to be respected for our life choices. From her I heard that when we *haahuupa* someone, we do not judge, blame, or otherwise criticize in a negative way; we literally show them how to go in this life, using narrative and leading by positive-based example to model how to take in, interpret, and apply traditional teachings in a way that benefits individual, community and nation, and also respects the natural world, the ancestors who have passed on, and the generations yet to come. She further explained that to *haahuupa* another acknowledges the life long learning of a person, and also the individual stories of success and challenge that we all carry as individuals. She spoke of relationality, and of how all things in creation were connected, so that when one person hears the teachings and learns about living in a good way, walking in a respectful manner, and carrying the teachings forward, this positively influences those who support the person, and all those with whom the person comes in contact. People are supported and in turn support others: we are all one. This echoes other teachings I have heard from my own community that say that when we lift up one person with support and acknowledgement of his or her accomplishments, we lift up the whole community and encourage others to go in a good way.

It was a profound honour to hear this knowledge and language keeper impart her wisdom. Her deep caring about teaching, learning, and carrying culture and language lessons on to future generations was evident in all her ways of sharing her

understanding of *haahuupa*. In her words, I gathered how these teachings form a framework for a life purpose and plan. Keitlah (1995) offers the wisdom of Nuu- chah-nulth Elder Sam Johnson, who speaks of the continuity of teachings from grandparents and Elders and "how they raised their children as a family … where they first started to *haahuupa,* 'You will be like this growing up.' Not [only] once, for as long as they were growing up they would be *haahuupa* because they will go the right way when they grow up" (p. 198 – 199).

In the words of these Elders I also heard echoes of other oral teachings I have experienced from my own culture, from lessons about *mino pimatisiwin,* a Cree way of living life in a good way, and from *mino-bimaadiziwin,* Anishinaabe teachings on a good life that Debassige (2010) and McGuire (2003) speak of. All touch on elements similar to *haahuupa,* and describe *a good way to go in life,* where teachings are given to guide and support us through a circular understanding of life and time that affirms and reaffirms our ontologies and epistemologies, and how connections between sacred and secular are natural and necessary to all of our well being. Young (2005) alludes to how formative teachings create a collective understanding of *how* we learn, as she discusses her own interpretations of *pimatisiwin* with regard to academic research. In summary, the ideology of *haahuupa* is very similar in some ways to my own traditional teachings that I have had the good fortune to listen to. *Haahuupa, mino pimatisiwin, mino-bimaadiziwin* and other Indigenous conceptual frameworks for life are representative ways of relationally thinking about people, lifelong learning, and community that base themselves in relation to where a person is in this life, both literally

and figuratively because according to the teachings, we journey in life as we journey in spirit.

3.5 The Circle of Life as a Conceptual Framework

In my research area, an academic approach based on Indigenous traditional teachings forms a *circle of life* conceptual framework. This circular framework holds as parts of its structure and function a medicine journey, teachings of a good life, the Seven Teachings, and other teachings from the four directions and from all along the circle. It is a comprehensive framework that describes the Indigenous ABE student - participant journey, and also my journey as a student – researcher participant and Indigenous scholar, where I am grateful for the learning I have received of *maskikimiskanow* – the medicine journey, and of carrying *mino pimatisiwin* – a good life, along the circle of life path. How did I hear of these teachings? Previously, I had heard of them through ceremony and in earlier talks with Elders. To learn again and to hear the teachings while I worked on this study, I asked the ones who hold them and carry them for future generations.

3.5.1 A Need for Understanding

As part of my approach to this research and to my conceptual framework, I connected with people from my circle of traditional teachers, knowledge, ceremony, and language keepers, to ensure that my research was grounded in an ethically appropriate and valid way that honoured protocols and acknowledged the traditional oral teachings that I have been fortunate to experience from my Elders. Part of my walk with the Seven

Teachings involved meditative prayer for guidance in this study, which led me to realize that I first needed to understand more about the teachings of *pimatisiwin* and *maskikimiskanow*, before I could walk with them and further explain how they related to my research and theoretical framework. Just knowing the basic translations of the terms was not enough to enable me to respectfully integrate them into my research in a sound way that reflected appropriate reasoning. I could not include them just because they seemed to fit; I needed to see and understand where the words came from on a cultural basis, from the teachings and the language. As I myself am very much a beginner student and only carry a little bit of my Cree language at this time, it was with profound gratitude that I sat with those who are knowledge and language keepers. These included Cree Elders from my own community of Ochekwi Sipi, as well as other Cree knowledge and language keepers.

3.5.1.1 Hearing Again the Circle of Life Teachings

I met with Elder W from Ochekwi Sipi, and I offered her tobacco and a gift, which she accepted. Tobacco is one of the four sacred medicines from my teachings, and I have been taught to offer it when saying my prayers, and to offer it when asking an Elder or other person to please share some teachings and words with me. Not all Elders have these teachings of tobacco, and so with this research, I did offer tobacco to those who would accept it, and for those who did not take tobacco, I offered a gift without including tobacco. I asked this Elder if she would please remind me again of the teachings she had once shared with me many years ago, about the circle of life path.

These were teachings that she had in turn received from her Elders, and had passed on to me before, when I had asked her to please tell me about our lifelong path of learning. Now she reminded me again that we all travel this path in our lives, this learning path of lifelong education (Elder W, personal communication, October 13, 2017).

It begins in the East, in the place of new beginnings, where we are born into our lives and come into the world, fresh and so connected to Creator. In the East part of the circle of life we take in those first teachings that we receive as children; we learn the start of practicing the Seven Teachings of respect, honesty, courage, love, humility, wisdom, and truth. As we travel the circle to the South, as youth and young adults we learn the teachings of family, and how to connect with and support each other – how to further walk the Seven Teachings as we learn how to take care of ourselves and of each other. Following the circle to the West, we come to the place of introspection, where we pause and reflect on what we have taken in and experienced so far – how we have come to walk the teachings as we make our way around the circle of life. We aspire and have intent to walk the circle to the North, where the place of wisdom is. However, even though it is a circular path, it is still not a linear, one direction of travel that is described by this teaching. We do not start in the East and travel perfunctorily through South, West and on to the North. Rather, it is a visiting and revisiting of each direction as we follow our circle of life, so that one might go from reflecting in the West and travel back to revisit the family teachings of the South, before continuing on again to the West and beyond. I asked the Elder about the term "medicine wheel" that I have heard people talk about. It is important to note that the Elder acknowledged that we have no words for "medicine wheel" in our Cree language. When talking about the circle

of life teachings, the Elder shared that this is described in the language as a *maskikimiskanow* – a medicine *journey* around the circle of life, and so with respect to my language and culture, this is how I too describe this path of lifelong learning.

It takes time to travel a lifetime of learning, and this kind of learning is also a back and forth endeavour to find again teachings from along the four directions when it is time for us to pick them up. That was an important point that this Elder made: we each of us walk our own way along the circle of life, learning how to walk with the Seven Teachings, as she named them, and finding other teachings on our journey as we strive for *pimatisiwin* - to have a "good life" path on our *maskikimiskanow,* our medicine journey of the circle of life. From her words I understood that the journey was the lesson; it was not about where we ended up in our lifetimes – it was about *how* we travelled, because how we travel and take in the teachings and endeavour to walk with them is what makes the most difference in our lives and in the lives of others. We are to be respectful and not critical of the unique ways that a person travels. Not everyone picks up the same lessons, or at the same time. It takes each of us a different amount of time and learning to see where and when and *how* we are walking the teachings, and where we are going from there, and we never know how far we are meant to travel on the circle in a lifetime; that is part of the great mystery of life.

3.5.1.2 Teachings of a Good Life

The *maskikimiskanow* within the circle of life framework speaks to how Indigenous adult learners can be seen to follow a circular, spiritually informed, holistic path in lifelong learning that is unique for each student. As I worked through my

understanding of this Elder's teaching, I felt that I needed to learn more about the concept of the "good life" path that had been mentioned, because I saw it as an integral part of the framework. I turned to the literature and found that among others, Debassige (2010) and Young (2005) had respectively addressed the concept of mino-bimaadiziwin - "the good life" in Ojibwe, and *mino pimatisiwin* – " the good life" in Cree, as part of the academic research process. Goulet and Goulet (2014) write how "*Pimatisiwin* translates as "life" or "state of aliveness" " and is one of the foundations of Nehinuw (Cree) life theory and understanding (p. 59). Debassige discusses how this concept forms a precise methodology that is informed by principles of spiritual paths to learning (2010, p. 20). He notes that Spielmann (1998) " … concludes that the word bimaadiziwin is best understood *in context* and *in the language"* (p. 17), an important point that I have been careful to consider when bringing the lessons of *pimatisiwin* into my conceptual framework.

My knowledge of the Cree language is still quite small, and I knew that I did not know enough to understand the cultural significance of this term. Again, culturally, ethically, I also knew that I could not just write about this word simply because it seemed to fit into my framework: I needed to learn about it from a language perspective in order to truly see how it connected to the circle of life teaching. I needed to *hear* about this word so that I might take in and learn from traditional oral teachings about language, in the way that Archibald (2008), Goulet and Goulet (2014) and others have mentioned. Goulet and Goulet (2014) write specifically on how the Nehinuw (Cree) word *kiskeneetumowin*, is given to mean "knowledge", and their explanation illustrates how

one must, for example, *know* a word culturally and contextually to understand its meaning and connotations:

> The meaning of the root stem, *kisken-*, is "to know." However, in Cree, it is understanding that is emphasized. The Nehinuw word *nisitootumowin* encapsulates both the English concepts of meaning and understanding and is a central concept in learning. In the Nehinuw view, knowledge acquisition is not enough. Knowledge needs to be complemented with understanding. (p. 59)

I needed to understand more about knowing the cultural concepts and contextual meanings of *mino pimatisiwin* and *maskikimiskanow*. It was time to turn to other Elders who were language keepers as well as knowledge keepers.

3.5.1.3   Seeking Understanding of *Mino Pimatisiwin*

Elder U is a knowledge and language keeper and is fluent in her first language of Cree. I offered her a braid of sweetgrass, another of our four sacred medicines, and also a small gift. I gave the sweetgrass as a sign of respect and as a way of connecting the giving and receiving of her teachings to how we go about our journey as part of the natural world. Gift giving is a form of reciprocity that respectfully acknowledged the valuable teachings I was to receive from this Elder, and also the kindness she showed by sharing her time and her words: it is part of my Indigenous methodology, my research methods, and it reflects a good way of doing research. I asked her if she would please share with me some teachings about *mino pimatisiwin* and education. She accepted the sweetgrass and the gift and we sat down to mugs of tea. I spoke with her about my conceptual framework, and told her that I had received teachings from another Elder that had mentioned the "good life" path. I revealed that I did not have the

language to really understand the cultural meaning of what *mino pimatisiwin* was, and I felt it was important to bring it into my learning. I shared with her that my as yet limited knowledge about my Cree language precluded me from writing about this concept in my paper without first seeking guidance and teachings from a respected language keeper.

Her initial reply was somewhat of a surprise for me. She chided me gently for not seeing that although I might not yet have many Cree language skills, I was still, in the eyes of Creator, carrying an Anishinaabe – centred understanding of *mino pimatisiwin*. I had carried this since birth and she informed me that furthermore, I also knew on some inherent level that it was in my blood, right in my DNA. What an honour, to have this Elder, an Auntie who baked bannock and made moose meat soup, who had grown up in a tent in the bush of northern Manitoba, teaching me about DNA and how we carry the teachings within us, according to Creator's purpose.

I asked her where she had first learned the Seven Teachings and she said she had been raised with those teachings, as part of her upbringing (Elder U, personal communication, 2017). She went on to say that the Seven Teachings were akin to the teachings of *mino pimatisiwin*, and were all with us during the days of our lives, starting from when we were just born and raised as little children. They were seen in the loving family environment where we were taught how to respect ourselves and each other and Mother Earth. *Mino pimatisiwin* was in teachings like washing our faces and hands each day before joining our parents/ family members for sharing food at breakfast. It was about respecting ourselves and being responsible, respectful members of a family that helped each other to try to live a good way, in family and greater community.

These teachings were no great mystery shrouded in formal ceremony: they were how we greeted each day, so that ourselves, others, and all creation were treated with kindness and respect. According to Auntie, this way of living a good life contributed to balance and harmony in the home and in the community. As well, it gave a person the necessary life skills in order to be able to go out into the greater areas of new life experiences and succeed, while keeping him or her balanced and remembering what the purpose of life is, so that a person was less likely to become lost and separated from the teachings, family and community that help give us sustenance and good direction in life.

In listening to this Auntie, it was very much like what West coast Elder Z had shared about how she was raised with the teachings of *haahuupa* as part of her every day experience while growing up in her family – there was no formal acknowledgement of what they were being taught about *haahuupa*, but there was an understanding of the importance of growing up in a good way, and of learning life skills to become a balanced, responsible member of the family and community (Elder Z, personal communication, September 5, 2016). I thanked Elder U for her teachings and stories. I then understood a bit more about this teaching, but I still had to address other unanswered questions about the word itself before I could write about it with regards to my research.

3.5.1.4   Finding Understanding of *Maskikimiskanow*

The second person I asked about *mino pimatisiwin* was Elder V, a knowledge and language keeper whom I had interviewed before as part of my initial inquiry. This

time he again accepted my tobacco and gift, and he shared with me an important teaching about how the Cree culture was illustrated through this word. He explained that *mino pimatisiwin* was understood as the way we travel around the circle of life as we make / as we learn our medicine journey in life. *Miska* is 'to find', and *miskanow* is a path, "a holistic journey that we look for and find via our culture, our language and the teachings we receive into our mind, body and spirit as a whole person" (Elder V, personal communication, 2017).

From his words about the medicine journey, I gained affirmation of previous teachings I had heard before, that told how the wisdom which sits in the north of the *maskikimiskanow* around the circle of life is not a singular element, but rather represents an understanding of the knowledge that we gather as we make our way around the circle. I thought again of how the Seven Teachings include *knowledge* or *wisdom,* and I realized that for me, *wisdom* represents an understanding of knowledge, akin to how we travel the circle of life and receive our teachings as we go. It is how we accept and integrate these teachings that leads to wisdom informed by a demonstrated understanding of knowledge, on path of "good life": this is our praxis.

Looking at how the word *mino pimatisiwin* is formed, he noted that *mino* in this sense meant "good", as in choosing a good path in life. *Pima* spoke to "moving forward" in life, as on a path of learning and growing. *Tisi* could be understood as part of the root word of *mitisi* – our umbilical cord that connects us to our past, present and future and also to Mother Earth and Creator: it also relates to our blood memory of how we figure as an integral part of creation, moving forward and carrying our memories of how we are all connected, and how these connections make us all stronger.

The Elder spoke at length about how we travel with our ancestors alongside us to help us learn about *mino pimatisiwin.* He added that the suffix *win* spoke to our intent to master these skills, to move forward with the intent to lead a good life carrying our teachings forward with us, while acknowledging at the same time that there is the "great mystery" of life, and we are not meant to know everything. He shared that from his knowing, this teaching of the circle of life path was described in Cree as a *maskikimiskanow* – a medicine journey where we learn to "walk in beauty", because "you are supposed to develop along the way … somewhere along the line, you know your journey to be medicine when you can say good things to people … give good teachings to people … give good words to people, your life becomes medicine." He emphasized that "the word medicine wheel is not in the Cree language – not in different dialects either. We Cree have *miskanow* – from the time you are born, to a teenager, to an adult, to an Elder. That's your *miskanow*" (Elder V, personal communication, October 12, 2017). This is much like Elder W had noted. Elder V did respectfully acknowledge that some people used the term medicine wheel, although from his extensive knowledge of his first language of Cree, and from his traditional teachings that he has received, it is not a term originating from our specific language and culture.

From this Elder I heard that while we travel our *maskikimiskanow* and have in our mind, body, and spirit that idea of *mino pimatisiwin,* a good way of life, we are presented with occasions to bring the teachings from Creator into our lives. I thanked the Elder for sharing his words and his time; I had been offered an opportunity to take in precious learning about my Indigenous culture and language.

3.6   Conclusion

In this chapter I have recounted some of the lessons I have received that led me to a deeper understanding of Indigenous ways of knowing within the entirety of my academic inquiry. I am truly honoured and humbled to receive these many teachings from these kind Elders. They come together to inform more of the structure and function of my conceptual framework, where the circle of life path is a medicine journey and a learning journey within the great mystery of life. In our *maskikimiskanow,* as we travel through the four directions, we practice *mino pimatisiwin* and hold that intent to have a good life, carry the teachings, and learn how to walk in beauty. As a researcher I am mindful of the ways these teachings inform the *how* of my approach to this study: I hear the Elders' voices recounting the teachings as I walk the steps I take to go about this work. When I need guidance about what to write and how to write, I remember their words, their smiles, and I am lifted up. The next chapter presents the steps involved in the research design of this case study, including descriptions of locations and participant selection, as well as the interview processes.

Chapter 4: Research Design and Methods

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter the design and what might be described as the functional components of the research process are outlined and detailed. It is meant to help the reader visualize the actions that were carried out during the study, such as where, with whom, and in what way I listened and conversed, how these activities were intended to contribute towards fulfilling the purpose of the research, and in what manner they were subsequently analyzed. I believe that describing a research design not only answers the more direct questions of what was done and why it was done in such a way, but it also illuminates the more nuanced connections between the *how* and the *doing* and the overarching purpose of the process. In this study, the research design shows how traditional teachings that ground and sustain a way of life also ground and sustain a way of academic inquiry within a specific area of research.

4.2 Bringing the Teachings In

What does it mean to bring the teachings into the design of the applied research methods and analysis? I believe that Indigenous approaches to methodology and methods illustrate how principles of traditional teachings are inherent within the ontology and epistemology, as discussed by Debassige (2010), Wilson (2008), and also by Elder V (personal communication, October 12, 2017). Bringing them in means humbly acknowledging how they innately exist and how they give something more than mere structural format: they inform the specific ways of *being* and *doing* within a research process, grounding the methodology and conceptual framework, flowing into all parts of

the research methods and analyses, and bringing a reminder of what Hanohano (1999) refers to as the "spiritual imperative of Native epistemology" that is present within Indigenous education studies (p. 206).

I am a beginning learner of this part of my culture, much as I am also a beginning researcher. In order to understand more of how traditional teachings are manifested and demonstrated within this research, I sat and listened to the Cree Elders I sought guidance from as they shared their wisdom and knowledge. They reminded me that in the Cree teachings of *mino pimatisiwin,* our ways of *being* and *doing,* and the form and structure of our daily life within a *maskikimiskanow*, are influenced by our choices to bring in teachings such as the Seven Teachings, and others. Through listening to the Elders, I saw that as a graduate student doing research, the daily life of my own medicine journey was influenced by how I sat with the teachings to guide my words and actions as I interacted with my co-participants, listened to their stories, and wrote my thesis.

As an example of this I wish to acknowledge a teaching that was brought into my daily life some time ago, and that has been with me throughout this research process: the teaching of tobacco. I don't know much of this teaching, only what I have been gifted with so far. It is one of the four sacred medicines given by Creator to the people, and we pray with it when we connect with Creator, as noted by Benton-Banai, (2010) and Wilson and Restoule (2010). For me this teaching has been a way of *being* and *doing* during this study, linking purposeful ways of carrying the knowledge with demonstrative action for the highest purpose. It is an important Indigenous research method that is discussed later in this chapter.

From methodology to framework, to data and analysis, I endeavour to walk the

teachings that have been brought in through each step of this study, using self-reflection

and trying to see clearly with my "Indigenous approach to research" eyes as I go on.

There is guidance for *mino pimatisiwin* and a good way to do research within the

maskikimiskanow – the medicine journey around the circle of life, that I believe connects

with the Seven Teachings of respect, honesty, courage, love, humility, wisdom, and

truth. The four Rs of research articulated by Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) - respect,

relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility - are also teachings that I remember and

endeavour to bring along for guidance. It really is all about more than just dry, lifeless

rhetoric; it is about *being* and *doing* and walking the walk to the best of one's abilities. In

academic research as in life, I believe we really do look seven generations back and

seven generations forward as we go on our *maskikimiskanow*: walking with the

teachings gives us good vision to see how our scholarly work connects with past

lessons and moves forward to inform new, mutually beneficial ways of understanding

ourselves and our communities.

4.3   Methods: Walking the Teachings

From pre-planning to present writing of this research, I have endeavoured to walk

the teachings in every part of this study. I carry intention and awareness of how *mino*

pimatisiwin forms a basis for the methodology, adds structure and purpose to the

conceptual framework, and is an ongoing, essential research method that is employed

throughout the inquiry. This is an important point: I believe that Indigenous research

methods are derived from what we believe and how we believe, as per Wilson (2008),

and that they exist as a demonstrative example of how we apply our holistic, relational ways of knowing and learning to the entire process of planning, carrying out, analyzing and completing our academic research projects. The methods embody the *how* of the *doing*, and in this way, they show in what manner we walk the walk as we carry our understandings of the teachings in our daily lives. Restoule, Archibald, Lester – Smith, Parent, and Smillie (2010) echo this sentiment, as they describe how Indigenous research methods require the researcher to prepare in a holistic manner that includes spiritual preparation, when readying to carry out academic research in a good way.

One example of this from my study is recognizing the teaching of tobacco as a research method. I know little of this teaching; I practice what I have been blessed with so far in my own *maskikimiskanow*. For many years I have prayed with my tobacco, placing it on the ground as I give thanks to Creator. Long before this thesis project started, and regularly while I am researching and writing, I continue to place my tobacco down on the earth and ask Creator to please bless and guide this study, and to prepare me so that I am able to work in a helpful way each day. I give thanks that this research comes from a good place that respects the teachings and all the participants, and I ask that every step of it be done with the highest intent for walking with *mino pimatisiwin* on this *maskikimiskanow*.

These are part of my traditional teachings – to offer the sacred medicine of tobacco when connecting with Creator, and for me this is an essential research method and also an important protocol that forms a part of creating "good life" research. It is one way, one method that I use to create a respectful relationship with all facets of this inquiry, including meaningful participation by myself in offering my tobacco and prayers

in an effort to produce culturally relevant, ethical, credible, ongoing research results. Crate (2005) affirms how the teachings of tobacco are an integral part of the Indigenous research process:

> The departure from 'pure' academic research methods began in my preparation that came *before* contact with the research participants. This preparation, the offering of tobacco and prayer, also took place on a daily basis while the research was ongoing. … I have learned that tobacco was given to the Indian to use as an offering in prayer when saying thank you for something: the new day, the water, the medicine plants, the animals, and all living things put here on earth by creator. Tobacco is also used as an offering when asking for help with something … . (p. 25)

For Crate, being mindful of Indigenous approaches to academic inquiry extends to employing Indigenous research methods so that the work is supported, blessed, and carried out in a good way through the ceremony of tobacco. Wilson and Restoule (2010) offer that the central ceremonial role of tobacco is not merely method, but rather an overarching, decolonizing methodology within Indigenous academic research, as they write how "allowing the ancestral knowledge to speak through the teachings of tobacco gives voice to knowledges that have been stripped away, rearticulated, and restructured" (p.43).

In addition to walking the teaching of tobacco, I have followed my lessons and have respectfully asked my Elders and the case study location Elders for their guidance and ways of knowing; this too is an essential research method within this study. I was taught by my Elders and through ceremony to "ask an Elder" in my search for assistance with direction, perspective, and knowledge. Wilson and Restoule (2010) emphasize the importance of Elders, and they note "learning from Elders is one of the "methods" Simpson (2000) lists as critical to Aboriginal research" (p. 31).

What is essential to understand about the previous and following discussions on research methods is that as part of holding true to an Indigenous approach to academic inquiry, the methods reflect the ways of knowing and learning that ground the overall approach, as discussed by Absolon (2011), Chilisa (2012), Drawson, Toombs, and Mushquash (2017), Wilson (2008), Wright, Wahoush, Ballantyne, Gabel, and Jack (2016), among others. The methods are not just derivatives of the methodology and conceptual framework: they are a continued expression of them, as another form of praxis that links theory and practice.

4.4   A Qualitative Case Study Approach

My research interest in ABE placement assessment and school experiences specifically centres on hearing the voices of Indigenous adult learners as they recount their individual histories. My main research goal was to have Indigenous adult learners share their own stories about how they have experienced ABE, so that I could gain an understanding about what the process looks like from their points of view. In addition, I wanted to invite the supporters of the students, as well as the instructors, administrators, and Elders in residence from the school to also share their stories: this adds important perspectives to the study of the ABE experiences of the students.

I have chosen to use an Indigenous qualitative methodological approach within a case study format, using one on one interviewing as the main method of data collection. This is appropriate given the context of my study: mindful listening to the stories of Indigenous learners from within an urban education institute. There are several additional explanations for choosing this approach to research design. For example,

Merriam (1998) defines a qualitative case study as being "an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit" (p. xiii). For this inquiry, a case study approach allows for a closer view of the bounded individual setting of an urban Indigenous place of adult learning, and of the adult basic education students enrolled there. Additionally, in seeking to document the phenomenon of the Indigenous ABE experience via the stories of the students set within the context of an individual school location, this study followed what Yin (2014) defines as a descriptive case study format, thus aligning with Baxter and Jack's (2008) observation that a "specific type of case study design will be guided by the overall study purpose" (p. 547).

The advantages of employing a case study design are noted by many, including Yin (2014), who notes that a qualitative case study format is especially useful for addressing the how and why of a particular phenomenon. An example of this is seen in this inquiry, where a case study focuses on hearing Indigenous adult learners describe their experiences of ABE. Tetnowski (2015) states that one of the benefits derived from case study design is that it offers "rich description" because it "allows for deeper description of a phenomenon" (p. 40). In this study, rich description is seen in the in depth interviews that were carried out, and it contributes to the quality of the research, as discussed in the next chapter.

Rubin and Rubin (2012) describe qualitative approaches to interview-based research as encompassing "… that which is not ordinarily on view and … that which is often looked at but seldom seen" (p. xv). To prepare myself to hear the students share their personal stories and to prepare my writing to make room in academic literature for

these seldom heard voices, I drew inspiration from my own background as an Indigenous adult learner who has also attended placement assessment for upgrading courses. As I thought about what my path had been like when I returned to school, I wondered what the experiences and feelings of these students might be. In what ways might I carry out my methods of inquiry, so that I would respect their unique histories of education experience, and also honour the spiritual guidance that forms my daily way of life? For me, again it was about returning to the teachings.

To ground this academic work, I sought to integrate a theoretical framework created from and supported by the oral traditional teachings of the *maskikimiskanow* – the medicine journey around the circle of life, that connects with the teaching of *mino pimatisiwin* – the good life, and the Seven Teachings of respect, honesty, courage, love, humility, truth, and wisdom (which I interpret as an understanding of knowledge from the *maskikimiskanow*, that informs the beginning of wisdom). I felt that by carrying these teachings, by really trying to live them each day and then bringing them into my research, I would be best prepared to be a kind and discerning listener / interviewer, and an ethical and respectful student researcher /writer, and to me that mattered a great deal.

4.4.1   Case Study Location

The case study was carried out at the Native Education College (NEC) in central Vancouver. This private Indigenous education college was begun in 1967 as the Native Education Centre, started by Ray Collins as an urban resource here in Vancouver to assist Indigenous adult learners in furthering their educations (NEC, 2017). Today the

college is a non-profit society, governed by a board of nine members of the Native Education College Society. Built of cedar and with a central gas fire in the main gathering / student lounge Longhouse area, the building evokes a sense of sacred space and speaks to the cultures of West coast Indigenous peoples. Along the East wall of the Longhouse are hung photographs of Elders, each with a written teaching or lesson, some wise words that the Elder has given to share with the people.

Nisga'a artist Norman Tate and his family carved the totem pole that stands beside the East doorway of the Longhouse area of the school. Tate acknowledged that it is a "powerful storyteller" whose design recalls a Nisga'a story of humans and animals living in peaceful balance with all of creation. The pole is called *Wil Sayt Bakwhlgat*, which means "the place where the people gather", and it is a positive statement to the Native peoples of Vancouver (Jensen, 1994). This exemplifies how the idea of place has great meaning for Indigenous peoples, and how important connections are made that recognize a physical location on Mother Earth where people gather to take part in life experiences. Places and people matter in our living histories.

The NEC was identified as a possible case study location as it is a well-established centre for Indigenous adult education, has a regular intake of Indigenous adult learners for its Aboriginal Adult Basic Education program (AABE), and includes placement assessments as part of the program intake. In the AABE, Aboriginal content is an integral part of many ABE course foundations, as for example in the English curriculum where Indigenous - authored books, such as *Monkey Beach* by Haisla writer Eden Robinson, are featured. An average of 200 students register at NEC per school year (September to June), and of those students, approximately one half, or an average

of 100 adult learners are registered in ABE courses each year (Administrator R, personal communication, July 17, 2017). In addition, the college is centrally located in Vancouver and draws a large population of Indigenous ABE learners from the lower mainland, from outlying areas of the province, and also from outside the province.

After receiving approval of my study proposal, I submitted my research application to the UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BREB), which included request for approval for letters of information and consent forms for participants. In addition, I met with administration personnel at NEC to present my ideas for this inquiry, and to respectfully request that they be reviewed and assessed by the administration and board of directors. Subsequently I received approval for my research project from the UBC BREB on July 5th, 2016, and then I again met with the NEC administration to ascertain if the research proposal that had been approved by UBC would also be amenable to the interests of the NEC administration and its school community. For their review I also presented sample letters of information and consent forms for all participants (student letters are located in Appendix A), as well as sample interview questions (located in Appendix B). In accordance with Indigenous approaches to research, and as stated in my request to NEC for approval of my project, I asked that I please be informed of any institutional or cultural protocols which need to be followed for the thesis project, and I confirmed that respect for such protocols would be given at all times. In December 2016 I received approval from NEC for my research project, and I began to arrange and carry out the qualitative case study in December 2016.

4.4.2   Participant Recruitment

ABE courses were offered at Native Education College for three semesters during the time period of January to July 2017. Selection criteria for participants allowed for inclusion of all students who were enrolled at NEC at some point during the school terms of January to July 2017, and who had also participated in an ABE intake assessment within the past two years. Excluded from participation were students who were not at enrolled in coursework at NEC at some point during the above mentioned time period, and who had not participated in an ABE intake assessment within the past two years. As aforementioned, preliminary letters of information as well as letters of consent were prepared for students, student supporters, instructors / administrators, and Elders in residence.

Permission was requested and obtained from the NEC administration and from ABE instruction staff to speak with four different ABE classes, in order to give brief 5 to 10 minute presentations on my research inquiry, hand out letters of information to interested students, and answer any questions that might arise. The presentations were carried out and several students within the classrooms expressed interest in the study, and asked for letters of information. In addition to handing out letters of information in ABE classrooms, random recruitment of eligible students also took place in the common seating area of the Longhouse portion of the school. This is where students gather to eat, have coffee, and sit and visit. It is a large cedar-walled room with tables and chairs at one side near the canteen counter, and padded benches around a central gas fireplace on the other side. As I sat at a table and kept busy with my own writing tasks, I

observed the everyday life at NEC, and I viewed students in the common area interacting with each other and with the Elders, instructors, and administrators.

I eventually met with students who came up and asked me questions about what I was doing at NEC. I introduced myself, and explained the basis of my inquiry and how I was requesting student participation. Letters of information were handed out to those interested students who met inclusion criteria, and snowball sampling also occurred when students shared the news of the study with other eligible student participants. Regardless of who approached me and asked me questions, I tried to connect with the people and maintain a good relationship, whether they fit the participant inclusion criteria or not. For example, on several occasions people from the surrounding community, young and old, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, stopped by, as well as present and former NEC teachers, Elders, and students, and parents, grandparents, and other family members of NEC students. They all asked who I was and appeared genuinely interested in the study. I felt welcomed by these kind brief meetings, and I saw how the college was a focal point for community.

During this early portion of participant recruitment, I also made appointments to speak with four administrator / instructors, which resulted in three of them consenting to be interviewed: one administrator, and two people who worked dual roles as administrator / instructors. The fourth person was not available for interviewing. In addition, I was introduced to four Elders in residence who came to sit in the student lounge area, and subsequently three of them agreed to meet for interviews. The fourth Elder was not available.

A total of 10 Indigenous adult learners were sought for interview participation, along with a support person for each student. With snowball sampling, the final number of students interviewed was 13, plus one support person. The total of NEC personnel interviewed included one administrator, two administrator / instructors who held dual positions, and three Elders in residence. In addition, a total of four knowledge and language keepers from my own Cree culture were interviewed to provide a grounded understanding of the teachings that inform my methodology, conceptual framework, and research design. One West coast Vancouver Island Nuu-chah-nulth knowledge and language keeper was interviewed to provide understanding of the educational teachings my family has received while living on traditional Nuu-chah-nulth territories. Additionally, two other non - NEC administrator/instructor personnel who currently work within ABE were contacted for interviews as they had both had extensive experience with ABE intake assessments, and could provide added perspective to the background of this study. In total, 27 interviews were completed. Interviewees were each randomly assigned a unique, alphabetical code (A through Z, AA, BB, with no "X") to respectfully maintain anonymity and protect their privacy. All participants received thank you cards and small gifts to acknowledge their kindness in sharing their time and their words.

4.4.3   Meeting the NEC Participants: Patience and Protocols

To begin the research process with the participants at NEC, I visited the school an average of twice weekly beginning in early January 2017, spending 3 – 4 hours or longer each visit sitting in the common gathering space in the Longhouse area. After a week or so I had begun to converse in regular way with the canteen cook, and also with

the maintenance staff. They were interested in knowing who I was and what my cultural ties were. I explained who I was and where my family was from, and also why I was there at NEC. A further week into January, one of the ABE instructors stopped to say hello, and to kindly invite me into the classroom to make a presentation about my research project. As aforementioned, I subsequently visited this class and the classes of three other instructors, gave brief presentations about my research, and handed out information sheets to interested students.

By the end of January no potential student participant had come forward to express interest in an interview, although at least 24 students had received an information sheet from me. I continued to come and sit and regularly interact with people at NEC, as I realized the importance of creating a good relationship with my research community, a topic that one of the participants from the case study by Blodgett, Schinke, Smith, Peltier and Pheasant (2011) comments on in a concise, meaningful manner:

> Any researcher going in to [*sic*] First Nations community is going to have to build relationships prior to actually initiating a project. It is important to demonstrate that they have friendship to offer and that their research is for the betterment of the community rather than personal pursuits such as academic notoriety. I think the more time a researcher devotes to the beginning stages of a research project and the development of community friendships, the easier it will be going into a community and seeking approval from the appropriate authorities [and from the participants] to commence a project. (p. 528)

My supervisor advised me to "just keep showing up" and to have extra patience. I understood that from the students' point of view, I was likely to be viewed as a stranger, who although connected by Indigeneity, was still someone with whom they were unfamiliar. Moreover, I was also connected with academia and research, two elements

with which many Indigenous people have had less than positive experiences. I wondered if any students would agree to be interviewed. I also wondered if any student who agreed to take part in an interview would respond to my list of questions that I had prepared for my 'semi-structured' interview format. Casual silence was okay, but I worried about total silence: what would I do if no students shared their words?

On February 1st my first student approached me, asked for more information about my research project, and expressed interest in taking part in an interview. I thanked the student, and we chatted a bit as I outlined why I was there and why I was interested in meeting with the students. I described how I was asking adult learners if they would share how they experienced ABE, and I asked if the student would like to participate. The student asked me to clarify the question and I explained in greater detail. From this exchange it occurred to me as how I might re-vamp the interview process to move the first question - asking the student if he or she would share some of the story of their ABE experience – into the preamble to the interview questions. After the introductions and casual preamble, I would then ask a direct first question about when the student had completed the ABE intake assessment. I felt that this change would help to signal the start of the "research" conversation, and move the interview process from casual preamble to more directly within the context of the ABE experience, beginning with the assessment. This change for the first question was done for all student interviews. Sample interview questions are located in Appendix B.

After this initial conversation, which also included the student and I going over the letter of introduction and the consent form together, we proceeded with the interview questions. I was happy to have met my first student participant. Bit by bit, slowly more

students came forward to talk with me. Some were interested in participating in the study and some declined, and at least one student shared that he/ she was not comfortable with "anything to do with the university or with research" (anonymous student personal communication, February 1, 2017). I was very grateful for all the students who came and spoke with me, whether to be interviewed, or to share time and words of a different nature. I see them and the other participants as co-researchers whose contributions come together with my own to create a concerted effort in this study.

4.4.4   Interview Locations

In all ways, the students and other interviewees were respected and their needs were given priority during the data collection. For the main part of my project I carried out personal, one-on-one audio-recorded interviews with thirteen Indigenous adult learners at NEC, spanning the period from February to July 2017, in order to hear their stories about how they have experienced ABE. I asked all participants to choose an interview location that they felt most comfortable with. This was done to respect the well-being of the interviewees, even though I realized that some selected locations might at times be more noisy, and therefore the resulting conversations might be less clear and more difficult to transcribe (and this proved to be true). This presented me with an opportunity to use my "good listening ears" and to take in oral communication, using an Indigenous research method of "mindful listening" to hear these voices. It reminded me of what an Elder had once said years ago, about how we listen with our hearts as much as we listen with our ears, and how we needed to remember that skill

and not rely too much on having everything (e.g. from the teachings) recorded electronically and on paper.

The common Longhouse area of the cedar building remained the preferred choice of most students for an interview site, and all but one of the student interviews were held there at the students' requests. When asked where they would prefer to be interviewed, some students mentioned that the Longhouse area was "comfortable", "quiet", "handy", and "close by" and was therefore a preferred location. This area proved to be quite noisy during several interviews, which subsequently resulted in periodic difficulty obtaining clear audio recordings and a greater amount of time spent transcribing interviews. One student chose to be interviewed in an upstairs classroom, stating it was because of the greater quiet there as compared to the student lounge/ Longhouse area (student J, personal communication, July 10, 2017). The student supporter interview was carried out by telephone, at the request of the supporter.

NEC administrator R chose to be interviewed in his/her office, and administrator / instructor T chose the student lounge as a convenient spot to converse. One administrator/ instructor chose to sit outside on a sunny day to share time and words. This was a great, fresh air location, although transcribing revealed that street noise decreased the clarity of some words. NEC Elder in residence Q also sat with me in the Longhouse/ student lounge area, while Elder P chose to be interviewed in the Elders' room on the second floor of NEC. My conversation with Elder O began in the student lounge, and continued on off – campus, at a mutually agreed upon café location that also proved somewhat noisy.

Interviews with two of the Cree Elders were held at their homes in Manitoba, while the third Elder was contacted in person in rural Saskatchewan, with a follow – up phone call completed at a later date. A fourth Cree Elder was initially contacted by phone, with an in- person follow up interview held at a later date in rural Manitoba. The West Coast knowledge and language keeper was interviewed at home in a beautiful, remote coastal location on Vancouver Island, and the two non- NEC administrator/ instructors were interviewed at or near their homes, also on Vancouver Island. With gratitude and respect, I acknowledge the traditional territories and lands of all the Indigenous Peoples where this research took place.

4.5   Conversations and Methods

Sutton and Austin (2015) note that "qualitative research is used to gain insights into people's feelings and thoughts …" (p. 226), an intimate practice that when looked at through the lens of Indigenous principles and protocols of research, reminds us of the tenets of respect, relevance, reciprocity, responsibility put forth by Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991), as well as the Seven Teachings as described by Benton – Banai (2010). Following these guidelines for treating others well, the NEC participant interview process began by my giving an introduction that acknowledged the local traditional territories, described who I am and what my cultural and familial ties are to the land, and offered the participant opportunity to do a similar introduction. This grounded the interview process (Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008) and acknowledged that the interviewee and I are both connected by land and family ties to the same web of life here on Mother Earth. It also provided a more relaxed way to make connections with the student before

beginning the interview questions about ABE. Additionally, at the start of each interview I offered a small lunch to the participant from the school canteen - usually a sandwich or bowl of soup and a drink - as this is part of the protocol that I have been raised with, to offer food and refreshment as part of reciprocity and respect for a person's contribution to the work of the study. As an important and essential part of the pre- interview procedure, I went over the letters of information and the letters of consent with each participant, to ensure that everything was clearly understood, and any questions the interviewee had were answered to the best of my ability, in a respectful manner.

As well as listening to 13 NEC students, I held a telephone interview with one support person connected to a student, someone who had encouraged the student during the student's assessment process and return to school. This interview was in order to hear another perspective on Indigenous adult learners and ABE. At or after the interviews, each student and the student supporter participant were given a thank you card, along with a gift certificate to a coffee shop.

Three NEC Elders in-residence were also interviewed to hear their perspectives on ABE students, lifelong education and Indigenous ways of teaching and learning. Each Elder was presented with a small gift and a thank you card at the start of the interview to acknowledge his/ her contribution. In addition, one administrator and two administrator /instructors who work with the ABE program at NEC were also interviewed. These participants also received thank you cards and small gifts in appreciation of their time and effort.

For interviews with non-NEC participants, a similar method was followed, with food being offered and thank you cards with small gifts also included. For those Cree

Elders who observed the ceremonial use of tobacco, it was offered to them first, along with a small gift. It was understood by the Elder and by myself that if the Elder did not wish to engage with the interview process, the Elder would show that by not accepting the tobacco. It was further understood that in accepting the tobacco, the Elder might then indicate that I would be notified at a later time as to whether the interview would go ahead. These protocols, and the specific use of tobacco as an important Indigenous research method that connects to Creator as "a practice of faith", are noted by Wilson and Restoule (2010, p. 31).

Audio interviews were transcribed, and participants were given unique coded alphabetical reference letters that appear on their audio - recorded interview files, as well as on their typed transcripts and in this written thesis. Participants were offered the opportunity to review their typed transcripts and edit their interview responses.

4.5.1   Hearing *With* the Participants

It is not my intention to mishear or misconstrue the words that the interviewees have offered in the interviews. I understand that the process is a partnership of sorts, a give and take of reciprocating kindness and allowing of verbal and non-verbal space for 'conversation' that will result in an honest exchange of listening, speaking, and learning. Steven High (2010) acknowledges the writings of Greenspan (1998), and reminds us of the importance in oral history "of 'knowing with' rather than simply 'knowing about' " (p. 103). I would say that it was my intention to know and to hear *with* the people I interviewed. It is my aim to add to the existing body of knowledge concerning Indigenous ABE by having practiced mindful listening and now with my writing, to offer a

place for these voices to recount their experiences and interpretations so that others might also learn and hear *with* the students.

While I was sitting in the school student lounge and waiting for my first student interview to occur, I wondered and worried about how the interview script would be viewed by the students. To further hear *with* the participants, the interviews were of a semi-structured type and standardized questions were limited in number, which allowed emphasis on an open format style and would give all interviewees an opportunity to freely express their stories in their own words. I wondered how it would all unfold, and how my questions would be weighed, measured, and hopefully found answerable by the students. Thinking on this, I decided that it would be beneficial for the student – interviewer rapport to move beyond a semi-structured format of inquiry to one where the interview would be seen as a more casual, relaxed back and forth conversation, where I would take my cues about which questions to ask from the interview script based on what the student said, and how the student's body language spoke to me, adding a few of my own comments on the topics discussed and following a more casual, and (hopefully) more comfortable process not unlike that described by Kovach as "a conversation method" for Indigenous inquiry (2010), and by Bessarab and Ng'andu (2010) as the "yarning" method of Indigenous research. Yarning is presented as an "Indigenous cultural form of conversation … a data gathering tool" (p. 37) that brings "an informal and relaxed discussion" between researcher and participant, in which a familiar, general topic "social yarn" precedes the "research topic yarn" and enhances the information sharing experience for both (p. 38).

Similarly, Crate (2005) addresses the use of Indigenous research methods in interviews, where casual back and forth visiting as a prelude to interview questions is seen as a mutually beneficial way of acknowledging the role of conversation and the intent of sharing good words between interviewer and participant:

> … various methods [are] used which will help the research to 'flow', to happen in 'a good way', encouraging the research participants to participate, to share their views, thoughts, and stories. These methods are what I call Traditional Indian Research methods or *tapwéwina* (the truth). (p. 10)

This is akin to how Kovach (2010) describes the conversational method of Indigenous research inquiry, where "our doing is intricately related with our knowing" (p. 40). She goes on to comment on research protocols that in the best sense, would "ensure that activities are carried out in a manner that reflects community teachings and are done in a good way", reminding us "of what it means to bring old knowledges as Indigenous into places that are new to them as academic research" (p. 40, 41). It matters how Indigenous approaches to research and research methods are carried out: to be valid from an Indigenous perspective, they need to reflect the relational view of the theoretical concepts and the overall methodology that are underpinned by traditional knowledges, because the *how* of the *doing* matters. Rubin and Rubin (2012) describe an approach to qualitative interviewing that mirrors these guidelines and the practice of conversational inquiry:

> We call our approach … *responsive interviewing* because researchers respond to and then ask further questions about what they hear from the interviewees rather than rely exclusively on predetermined questions. Responsive interviewing emphasizes the importance of working with interviewees as partners rather than treating them as objects of research. We emphasize the importance of developing and maintaining an ongoing

relationship with the interviewees, whom we term *conversational partners,* and stress that this relationship imposes ethical requirements. (p. xv)

4.6   Interview Procedures

I chose to begin the participant sessions by first introducing myself with my family and cultural background, acknowledging the traditional territories of the local First Nations, and expressing gratitude to be here on this land. In this way I conveyed respect for the participants and for the research process. Sample interview questions are located in Appendix B. The interview questions served as a guideline: the conversation method and the inclusion of open - ended questions encouraged participants to share their own unique stories and perspectives. Permission was requested and agreed to for audio recording of the interviews. Prior to commencing the recordings, I previewed the interview process, identified any adjustments that needed to be done, and endeavoured to make it as smooth a process as possible for all concerned, while producing relevant, valid, ethical research results. Interview data for Elders W and Y included note – taking after the interviews had finished, without electronic or other form of recorded writing during the actual conversations. This was done to preserve flow of conversation during the interviews.

4.6.1   Additional Considerations

In view of the fact that many peoples, including and especially Indigenous peoples, may have had less than positive experiences with the education system, attention was given to possible stress that a participant might undergo while thinking, talking, or reading about a past, present, or future education experience. High (2015)

acknowledges this point of possible concern, and suggests that researchers be proactive by identifying helpful resources such as counselling and community support ahead of time, before the interview process begins. To address this consideration, and to follow BREB guidelines, contact information about counselling support that is appropriate, culturally relevant, and education centre approved was attached to each interviewee consent form as a matter of course, and was also verbally conveyed to the participants. After the completion of this research project, the interview recordings and all paperwork, including transcriptions and signed letters of consent, will be stored in a secure location at UBC, as per ethics board guidelines.

4.7 Approach to Analysis

In all ways, I intended that the treatment of the data from this study be in line with Indigenous principles and protocols of good research, so as to maintain a respectful relationship between all co-researchers, participants and places of work. Sutton and Austin (2015) discuss how "the most important part of data analysis and management is to be true to the participants. It is their voices that the researcher is trying to hear … for others to read and learn from" (p.227). When reviewing the words and messages that were shared by the participants, I endeavoured to look and listen with my "Indigenous research eyes and ears" as best I could, and to remember the Seven Teachings. I hoped that I was walking with honesty, truth, kindness, love, and humility as I listened and typed. All audio - recorded interviews were transcribed by myself, with assistance used for typing part of one transcription. For the two Cree Elders who were interviewed without recordings, typed transcripts of the post – interview notes were made.

To begin the data analysis I replayed the recorded interviews, listening again to the voices as they recounted their stories and shared their wisdoms. This was an important first step that allowed me to better hear and remember the subtle distinctions within the responses and the intermittent pauses. From this I heard more of the spirit of the person and the many emotions that coloured the interview experience at different times, as for example when I heard humour, hesitation, shyness, anger, surprise, warmth, kindness, compassion, and self-respect. I acknowledge that this method of reviewing the audio recordings to hear again the qualities of the voices and the echoes of spirit is very subjective, and is solely interpreted by the person who listens, although others do comment favourably on listening in greater depth for what is not necessarily put forth in words. For example, Yin (2014) writes that "For case studies, "listening" means of receiving information through multiple modalities – for example, making keen observations or sensing what might be going on – not just using aural modality" (p. 70). Chilisa (2012) notes the importance of identifying and acknowledging the "emotional tone – laughter, sadness, anger, and so on" within an interview (p. 168). Importantly, it offers an added dimension to the reflexivity of the research process, which is discussed in chapter six.

The interview transcripts and note pages were then read over and coded by hand, using a basic open coding approach in order to identify key words and phrases, after which they were reviewed again to notice any possible broad thematic connections between key words and phrases. Following these initial exercises, a further in-depth axial coding was carried out in order to focus more closely on themes and ideas that were noticed to occur and reoccur within the transcripts. Sutton and Austin (2015) refer

to coding as "the identification of topics, issues, similarities, and differences that are revealed through the participants' narratives and interpreted by the researcher … to understand the world from each participant's perspective" (p. 228). Within this progressive analysis that started with identifying key feelings, words, and phrases, and moved to highlighting possible topics and overarching themes, I tried to respect the honesty of the participants' voices and show the truth of how they shared their words. Data results are discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

4.7.1   Assessing the Quality of the Research

A review of this study was carried out to ascertain its level of quality, as per guiding principles remarked upon by Chilisa (2012) and Tracy (2010). In discussing analysis of qualitative research, Chilisa (2012) considers "postcolonial indigenous perspectives of validity" that may be found within the elements of "fairness, ontological, educative authenticity, catalytic authenticity, and tactical authenticity. Chilisa (p. 171) also refers to Guba and Lincoln (2005), in her discussion of the relevant points of "positionality, voice, critical subjectivity, or self-reflexivity". Tracy's (2010) eight criteria for "excellent qualitative research", which are "worthy topic", "rich rigor", "sincerity", "credibility", "resonance", "significant contribution", "ethics", and "meaningful coherence" were also reviewed (p. 840). In addition, several other sources of Indigenous commentary on the subject of research quality were consulted, including Blodgett et al. (2011), Cajete (2005), Wilson (2008), and Wright, Wahoush, Ballantyne, Gabel, and Jack (2016). Discussion of this analysis as it pertains to strengths and limitations of the research is found in chapter six.

4.8   Conclusion

Wilson (2008) writes about ceremony as an essential part of research and research methods, as do Wilson and Restoule (2010), who also mention the Seven Teachings in their discussion of a good approach to academic inquiry. These authors emphasize how our awareness of spiritual wellness can be carried through our research so that it is embedded within and reflected by our expressions of academic writing. It is hoped the design of my research and the chosen methods I have used also reflect what I see as the inclusive, relational, positive- based nature of Indigenous theoretical frameworks and epistemologies.

This chapter has provided information on how the planning, design and implementation of this project was carried out according to Indigenous research methods that are in line with the theoretical framework elements of *maskikimiskanow*, *mino pimatisiwin*, and the Seven Teachings. Data collection procedures were discussed, including the selection of the case study location, the recruitment of interview participants, and the specific approach to how the interviews were carried out. The method of data analysis was outlined, and an overview of the quality assessment of this study was given. The next chapter presents the study results and discussion of findings, including a more detailed description of the results of thematic analyses, and condensed versions of transcribed student participant stories. Student suggestions for NEC regarding the ABE program are also described.

Chapter 5: Research Findings and Analyses

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents and describes the analysis of data gathered from the interview process, and seeks to address the research questions from chapter 1. The recorded interviews, notes, and other conversations are one kind of tangible representation of the *doing* from this study. It was my intent to respectfully carry out the presentation and analysis of the student and other voices, in accordance with principles and protocols of Indigenous research that have been described and discussed in prior chapters of this study. As is mentioned later in this chapter, I have endeavoured to be aware and also wary of imposing my own biases, and I have tried to let the data guide me in finding the themes that emerged from these many voices. In addition, I have strived to look with my "Indigenous research eyes" when assessing the quality of this study, understanding that it is an academic inquiry undertaken for the beneficial information it may provide to the NEC and greater education community, and also for the learning experience it presents for this novice researcher.

5.2 Writing About *Tapwe*

In this chapter the Cree words *tapwewin* and *tapwe* are brought in. I have only a small amount of learning around these words. I sat with Elder W and we talked about how *tapwewin* is understood as "the truth", noting that the "win" suffix connects with the idea of intent as previously mentioned by Elder V, and also discussing how *tapwe* is something I have heard in ceremony and I understand as a word that recognizes a truth being given. For example, I have sat in ceremony listening to a person speak, and I

have heard the others who are listening comment quietly, saying "tapwe" to acknowledge that a truth is being said and heard. I do not know much about these words; the most that can be said is that I know *of* these words. I myself have used them in ceremony to comment as mentioned above, when I hear a truth that touches me deep inside my spirit. As I sat and talked and listened with Elder W, I spoke about my study and my concerns with the interview data. It has been a great honour to sit and listen to the students and others who shared their words and personal feelings about Indigenous ABE. In describing and analyzing the data, I wanted to find a way of respectfully expressing that I had witnessed a truth being spoken by these co-participant voices in this inquiry.

I shared with the Elder that the intent in my use of *tapwe* was to acknowledge that the clear truths I had heard were to be held up and respected. Firstly, the personal stories of the students and other participants were their own words, to be shared and received in a very trustful way. They were not to be generalized or transferred to other contexts so as to disrespect their origins, or to mis-interpret or misconstrue their meanings. Secondly, with these stories, I would carefully, mindfully, consider not only what was said and transcribed, and perhaps paraphrased and quoted in this writing, but I would equally as well be considerate of what was respectfully left on the tapes and transcriptions, and not included within in this writing. Here I refer to the sharing of personal trauma, something that I feel is akin to what Bessarab and Ng'andu, (2010) discuss as "therapeutic yarning" where "the participant in telling their story discloses information that is traumatic or intensely personal and emotional. The researcher switches from the research topic to the role of a listener where the participant is

supported in giving voice to their story …" (p. 40 – 41). Witnessing the participants'

sharing of their stories was part of my learning experience as an Indigenous research

student. An important application of the principles and protocols of this study is the

knowledge and understanding that the sharing of these special kinds of personal stories

is not part of the scope or purpose of this inquiry. Here I have the intention and

opportunity to practice my learning about respect, kindness, truth, and knowledge

informing the teaching of wisdom from the Seven Teachings.

5.3   Student Stories

The qualitative data collected from this project was analyzed to interpret the

content of student story work pertaining to the ABE experience. Each student story was

not only examined by the aforementioned (see chapter 4) more select codification and

connection of recurring themes, but was also importantly looked at in its entirety, as

coming from one person. In honouring and witnessing the sharing of personal

knowledge and experience, the individual stories of each student's *maskikimiskanow*

were held intact. Simonds and Christopher (2013) comment on this method of data

analysis as discussed within the context of the traditional teachings of the Crow people.

A Crow Elder, one of their community member case study participants, described how

the process of codifying themes breaks up the stories that a participant shares and

"scatters" the knowledge. Other Crow participants shared further on this matter.

> They said that everything Crow people do has a story behind it and people
> share their experiences as a way of teaching others. … having scattered
> categories and breaking apart people's stories loses the meaning and the
> understanding of the whole picture and purpose of the story. (p. 2187)

In addition, the participants also remarked that the breaking apart of the story showed disrespect and disrupted the connection between the person who was sharing the story and the person who was receiving it. I have heard this kind of comment before, in teaching lodges when Elders stressed how important it is for us as learners to accept and take in a teaching in its entirety, without trying to intellectually dissect and analyse the lesser parts of the whole. As an Indigenous academic scholar I can appreciate this perspective. I also value the function of the thematic coding in data analysis that I have used in this study to look at commonalities and recurring themes, respectfully, and concurrently with an Indigenous approach to this research.

Working with Indigenous storywork is a process where connections between interview participant and researcher are uniquely different from a Western approach to academic data collection (Archibald, 2008). In this study, the sharing of personal storywork by the students, and also the teachings shared by the Elders and other Indigenous participants, is a kind of witnessing where a personal connection is recognized that honours the sharing and receiving of knowledge / oral history.

This sharing and receiving acknowledges a participatory role for both parties, where the researcher is trusted to respect the sharing of knowledge according to cultural principles and protocols. This is more than following the ethical guidelines set out by the supervisory Western academic institution: in my understanding this is following the Seven Teachings as I intend to do research in a good way with *mino pimatisiwin.* I look to see that I walk with *respect* for the participants, acknowledging the *knowledge* that informs *wisdom* about our unique paths of the *maskikimiskanow*, and exercising the *courage* to clearly see the strengths and weaknesses in the quality of this

research. This is understanding and applying the characteristics of an Indigenous research methodology that confirms the relationality of my co-researcher interview participants and myself. As a person on my own *maskikimiskanow,* I have listened to the student voices, and I have respectfully witnessed them recount elements of personal storywork that describe their unique paths on a *maskikimiskanow*. This is *being* and this is *doing,* as prescribed by Indigenous approaches to research.

Along this theme, Kovach (2010) touches upon several important points, noting that with Indigenous knowledge "our doing is intricately related with our knowing. … Protocols are a means to ensure that activities are carried out in a manner that reflects community teachings and are done in a good way. The same principle ought to apply to research" (p. 41). Additionally, Smith (2012) discusses how the relationships between researcher and participant are uniquely more personal and more continuous within Indigenous ways of doing research, as compared to Western methods, a point also acknowledged by Simonds and Christopher (2013).

5.4   Student Interview Results

The sample group of 13 students naturally varied in age, gender, and life experience. These differences within a given cohort of ABE are to be expected in addressing adult learners, as people return to secondary studies at different times during their individual lifelong learning process (Campbell, 2007; Little & McCreadie, 2013; Silver, 2013). I am of the belief that the inquiry benefits from the unique perspective each student has brought to the interview process.

For the first part of the meeting, I introduced myself and identified where my family ties were from. The student and I then engaged in "social yarning" as we made small talk and chatted back and forth, exchanging conversation about subjects such as where we both were from, and who our families were. This had the effect of creating a relaxed, more familiar atmosphere in which to have the interview, where researcher and participant co-researcher had the opportunity to form a more familiar idea of each other as people, before the conversation shifted to address the inquiry questions. I noticed that most of the students appeared to have a more relaxed posture and way of speaking within the first 15 minutes or so of the interview, although some were more relaxed within the first 5 minutes, and others took additional time. As well, from the manner (e.g. the kind of tone) of how the students spoke, as well as from other visual cues such as body tenseness, I understood a sense of the beginning of trust between the student and myself. Watching trust unfold in circumstances of listening and speaking with students is something I have also observed with my twenty years of work with ABE students.

To move from the "social yarning" part of the conversation, I reiterated that I was present to hear about some of the student's story of his or her ABE experience, whatever the student would kindly share with me. To open the "research yarn" segment of the interview, I began by asking the student when his or her assessment had taken place. This question did not negate the aforementioned statement that I was there to listen to whatever the student cared to share about the ABE experience: rather, it provided a concrete focus to signal that we were in what Besarab and Ng'andu (2010) refer to as the "research yarn" segment, and that I would be asking questions and encouraging responses that specifically told of the student's ABE experience. During

the interview process many students chose to respond in a similar manner by telling a bit (or considerably more) of their own story, and sharing some of their life experiences that had brought them to adult upgrading. I was truly honoured to hear how their paths of lifelong learning had brought them to NEC and ABE.

5.5   Student Vignettes

When I think of how I heard the students speak their words, and of how I recognized that to be a sharing of their truths, I think again of *tapwe,* a Cree word that I have heard in ceremony, when words are shared that ring true and those who hear them say "*tapwe"* to acknowledge the speaker and to honour the truths that have been shared. This section presents a series of vignettes that bring a brief offering of the truths that the students so kindly shared with me. Blodgett et al. (2011) identified the use of vignettes in their study "as a way of bringing forth the voices of indigenous community coresearchers" (p. 524). They acknowledge (p. 525) that their use of portrait style vignettes for depicting data from "conversational interviews" represents an authentic research method, as per the work of Ely, Vinz, Downing, and Anzul (1997), and note they serve to "reflect the different parts of the interview and illuminate the content that was brought forward" (p. 526).

I have preserved student anonymity with the use of coded identity letters, and the sometimes-awkward use of multiple gendered pronouns. I hope that in the editing and thematic analyses, I have been respectful in choosing how to bring voice to their words within an academic setting, while also exercising empathy and conscientious

consideration with the words that I have heard and not included here. I am honoured

and humbled by bearing witness to these student stories. *Tapwe.*

Student A

Student A returned to school with a history of employment and previous post-

secondary experience as a mature student, citing a strong personal goal to complete

grade 12 and receive a Dogwood diploma. A's perspective on education had been

coloured by negative experiences in earlier schooling, such that during the NEC intake,

A worried that "when I took the assessment here, I was afraid, because if I didn't get

that one sentence right, I was afraid of them calling me stupid, because it was so

ingrained in me." With personal determination that was further buoyed by emotional

support and unwavering encouragement from a family member, A persevered to enter

NEC and complete ABE coursework, finding community from teachers, classmates, and

Elders. At the completion of the first year of courses, there was a shift and celebration:

"Now I could move on; I am not stuck in that mire of being called stupid … I've got

everybody behind me pushing me forward." Towards the end of the interview, A glanced

up to the photographs of the Elders and their lessons and affirmed the inspirational

value and relationality of traditional teachings:

> 100%, that lore is passed on from one to one to one. Whether you are
> male or female, it gets passed on. It's up to us to grab it and pass [it] on.
> When I first came in here and I saw all these people, and I said, "They're
> passing that baton on." And maybe it's not from my people; just reading
> what they said – it's all one, it's all one.

Student B

Student B also brought previous post-secondary education as a mature student, along with an extensive professional employment history and a notably positive attitude. This learner was personally motivated to complete grade 12, and had attended NEC before for a short while, but says "I just wasn't ready, it wasn't my time, you know." B shared further that healing from PTSD has influenced his/her path as a lifelong learner, and that he/she values and is encouraged by the emotional support of family who say, "Oh I'm so proud of you … this is going to be a good thing!" This ABE student completed the intake assessment and found it "not terribly difficult" or arduous, describing it as, "There's no right or wrong, and there's no failure; there's just discovery of yourself." This student found the ABE experience at NEC to be mostly positive, because of the supportive and friendly people, the "more familiar" feeling of being around other First Nations students, and especially because of the Aboriginal course content where "we deal with actual issues that First Nations live with, you know." B is a role model for his/her children in returning to school to complete grade 12, and says of the overall ABE program within the NEC community: "Like it's just encouraged me to keep taking the next step … like it's a confidence builder once you get started. … you can't go wrong and you get self-discovery."

Student C

Student C came to NEC from the workforce, with a goal to completing grade 12 in order to prepare academically for post – secondary studies that would enable a change in employment and a new professional career. C commented that it meant more to him/her to "do it right" and get the experience of completing grade 12, rather than

apply for post-secondary studies as a mature student. Citing personal decisions to change his/her course in life, this adult learner was encouraged and sustained by memories of family to return to school by enrolling at NEC and completing the intake assessment. C did not go into great detail about his/her academic background before NEC, except to say that it had been very difficult and very "European" in nature, and quite opposite to what this ABE student expressed as the kind and compassionate ways of Indigenous teaching and learning that this student had experienced at NEC. C described what was found at NEC as:

> The European style teaching – that's not how they do it here. It's more of "let's see how we can make it work for you." That's what I like, that's what I get out of this school. … Here it's way different, it's like … there's a lot of respect for that, so I find it very soothing, very comforting. That mellow kind of atmosphere you're in inside when you come here. And it can help.

Student C, who self-described as a "more or less concrete Native", was inspired by NEC programs and the patience and consideration of Elders, teachers, staff, and students who shared their own knowledge of Native ways without judging or criticizing what C knew or did not know. This student emphasized that the supportive community of the school as a whole, and of one instructor in particular who was seen as a role model, encouraged him/her to keep going and keep looking forward. C expressed that the NEC community manifested a tangible atmosphere that other students felt too, and then summed it up by stating "everybody has that little space in their heart, where something's missing at some times. Hopefully this place will fill that; if not, it will show you how to."

Student D

Student D returned to studies while also attending to family caregiving, and cited support from family as an ongoing motivation for attending school, in addition to a personal determination to complete grade 12. D had previously tried and left ABE upgrading at NEC, and had recently returned as his/her life situation now supported and allowed the time for studies, and because "when it's time, that's when it will happen, and that's what it is for me right now." This adult learner had a positive experience with the intake assessment, and finds the environment at NEC "welcoming and homey", with its cedar Longhouse structure and central fire. D noted that the Elders provide an essential presence, and that the Elder photographs and teachings on the wall offer "a good kind of learning, a spiritual kind of learning" that is a part of the student lessons gathered at NEC, and a strong part of the community that he/she finds there. D shared how this "other" kind of education from supportive connections was just as important as the classroom coursework. This ABE student commented on my conceptual framework, saying that "the Seven Grandfather teachings, that's good, because it's like, in life - of everything that we do anyways, you know - that's how it is in everything we do … learning, living, breathing, everything." D also acknowledged the place of Indigenous teachings in education, saying, "that needs to be taught a lot" for both Native and non-Native students.

Student E

A family member who had previously attended NEC encouraged E to attend an intake assessment. E did not complete it then, but returned soon after to fully complete

a second assessment, after which E enrolled in ABE coursework. Of the assessment process, E says:

> Honestly, I was nervous. I lost half of my knowledge from high school, so once I did my assessment test, I was like – I don't know this, I don't know that, I don't know this, but I did a little studying beforehand, just so I can at least, you know, remember it. So I did it the first time; the first time I didn't do so good. So I went back home, I started studying those things that are on the paper, and I went back, and my assessment test came back pretty good.

This student mentioned that personal determination and strong family support were instrumental to his/her returning and completing the second assessment, and that family continue to greatly encourage E as he/she attends courses at NEC. This person's goal is to complete ABE upgrading and then enrol in a specific post-secondary program, in order to follow a particular career goal. E also shared that he/she would encourage other potential students to complete an assessment and enrol to finish grade 12 because "it's a great choice to come back to school", acknowledging that "when you get back into it, it's because you want the knowledge, you need the knowledge, especially in a world that's kind of confusing in multiple different ways. It's better to know the knowledge of this world, then not."

Student F.

This student has been active in the workforce, and has enrolled in upgrading to help facilitate new employment opportunities that will bring F closer to future career goals. NEC was chosen because it had "a good name" for Indigenous themed coursework, for a supportive environment for Indigenous students, and for good transferability of courses to higher education degree programs. For F the intake

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assessment was a very positive experience, although "it was a little scary" at the time, as F had been out of school for a few years and was a bit nervous. The NEC community of staff, teachers, Elders and peers is a source of strong support and encouragement, in addition to friends and co-workers who remind this student to be strong and remember why he/she is at NEC and what his/her future goals are. For F, family is far away, "about a 14 hour drive from here" and interaction with NEC Elders, even just seeing them sitting in the lounge, helps bring a sense of comfort and support. F notes that the Elders remind him/her of "home" and help make NEC "more a community than a school." F shared that the Elders' work helps all people at NEC, especially the students "just starting out on their own." This ABE learner added that the most moving experience at NEC had been the welcoming ceremony, where students, staff, and others were welcomed and acknowledged through ceremony as part of the NEC family community. F shared that it made him/her feel as if he/she had been welcomed in as a real part of the school.

Student G

G came to NEC from the workforce as a self-motivated adult learner, and continues to work now during his/her studies, showing pride in his/her hard work and scholastic accomplishments, sharing "I'm getting stronger and stronger on my math." The intake assessment was not smooth or easy for this adult education student, who would have wished for greater assistance from the NEC personnel as to instructions before and during the process. In addition, G would like to see more up to date versions of intake assessment materials, as "it was out of date – the test that they gave me was

out of date." In addition, G would have liked to see more other people writing the assessment at the same time as him/her, or at least to have had a choice about writing it alone or with others. However, this learner is positive about enrolling in ABE and states "but it's worth it, it [the intake assessment] really is worth it in the end, that's what I would say." This student's home community is out of town and far away, although there is some family nearby. Of the NEC community, G says "it's like family … the fun we have … being friends and actually hanging outside the school together … when you're having difficult times, there's always somebody there to talk to … I just think, feel like it's home." G notes that in addition to receiving academic lessons, the NEC students also benefit from close connections and "they take away friendships, family, relationships with themselves and others."

Student H

H came to NEC as a caregiver and with ongoing employment. A busy person who self-describes as being super motivated to complete grade 12, this person arrived at NEC because a friend and co-worker came in to register and brought H along too. This student found the assessment process to be very positive: "so it was really good; I found I knew a little more than I'd thought -I felt pretty good about that – which also helped encourage me to come back. It was like, wow, you can do it, you're not as dumb as you think you are!" About the NEC experience, this learner says

> It's always nice to be understood. It's never nice to come back to school and have somebody say – oh, you dropped out … oh? It's like I know and they know, and we're trying to move forward. We're trying to go upwards and onwards, and a part of that is being humble enough to come back to school and get your grade 12.

Encouraged and greatly supported by his/her co-worker and his/her family, this ABE learner sees other benefits of going back to school in being a role model for his/her children, and also in spending time with the NEC Elders:

> I grew up in a white family, so it's really neat coming here and being able to sit with my Elder – she's part of our family … she offers suggestions when we are down, or frustrated, or had enough with school. She just sits there, and like all the Elders do, they all bring their own special something. … I think it's really cool because I never grew up with knowing any of that kind of stuff. So I think it's neat, and discussing stuff with them, like stuff out of our textbooks.

Student I

Student I came to NEC from full time work, heeding the advice of a friend who had heard that student I was unsatisfied at work and looking for a change. This adult learner arrived at NEC and requested an assessment appointment, in order to fulfil a goal to complete grade 12, and target a change in career options. Learner I found the intake assessment stressful because of the years away from school, but worked through it and went on to enrol at NEC, where he/she has the support and encouragement of friends, peers, and NEC personnel. About the assessment day, student I shared the experience with some pride:

> … and that was the day I told work that I actually wasn't going to be working there anymore. I've got to do this assessment to go to school – I'm not actually going to be working for you guys anymore.

This ABE student finds inspiration in the teachings of the Elders whose photographs line the wall of the Longhouse: "I think when you read like those, there will be certain ones that will stick with certain people in their walk – to guide." Of the environment inside the

college, this person comments, "A Longhouse, like a home. It's pretty good. Everyone comes here for that moment, forget about what is outside … come in here, do what you want to do – work toward that future, and it's pretty good."

Student J

Student J was inspired and supported by family to attend upgrading at NEC, in order to prepare for specific post-secondary coursework that will hopefully result in better career opportunities. When asked what motivated him/her to return to school, this student said, "I just knew I needed to do something more … than being a dishwasher." J interpreted the intake assessment as "looking to see what type of skills you have, and what you need to work on. … you need to start somewhere." This adult learner's experience was mostly positive, even "amazing" with the Indigenous content in the essay questions, and the assessment was completed over two days. J acknowledged that it is easier to do writing when you can relate to that writing, and he/she also added an important observation that culturally relevant questions provide a unique platform where Indigenous adult learners can voice an opinion:

> … and no one will criticize you and say no, sorry, you don't know what you are talking about. … so if you don't know what you're talking about here [at NEC], it's an issue, and they know that there are all different sides [to the issue]. But if you go to another institute, they … [non-Natives] have one-sided [issues] … they don't look at the whole picture.

This Indigenous learner realized that he/she would be better prepared for post-secondary coursework with the completion of upgrading in English and mathematics, and so enrolled in the ABE program. When asked about the NEC community, this student shared that at first things were unsure, and there was some concern about

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his/her lighter skin tone, but he/she quickly made friends. A big surprise for this adult learner was when his/her family members came to NEC and identified many of the Elders in the Longhouse photographs as being from their family group. When J's father told of the traditional teachings that these Elders had passed on to him, this ABE student said at that moment he/she knew that "okay, this is where I'm supposed to be."

Student K

Student K came into NEC with a history of previous employment and post secondary school experience, and was largely self- motivated to attend ABE coursework and carry on with post-secondary education. This student's intake assessment experience was smooth, and although there was a little worry about how his/her lighter skin tone would be accepted, K soon enjoyed a "warm welcome" at the college from peers, and found Elders and staff "always helpful." K notes that the ongoing support from student peers, as well as teachers and staff have helped to make his/her school experience an overall good one. After upgrading math, computers, and English at NEC, K entered the Family Community Counselling program here. According to K, although Indigenous adult learners may face challenges from such things as "intergenerational trauma, personal anguish … addictions, and just like systemic poverty", they support each other with "tolerance, [and] acceptance" and form close connections with each other based on commonalities in their lives. This is an important characteristic of the NEC community. K also saw the possibility of having student volunteers take a more active role in peer support within NEC, such as homework help and tutoring, something that would fill a growing need within the school community.

Student L

It took this student a while to enrol at NEC for upgrading.

> Like it took me a long time to even get to walking through the door
> because there was so much going on in my life. I've been wanting to do it
> like for a few years, but I just wasn't in the right frame of mind, or healthy
> enough to do that. … even just to complete my grade 12 or get my
> Dogwood, and that was something that I just always wanted to do. …it
> was a lot of work on my part, to overcome a lot of my obstacles, which I
> think I did a pretty good job.

L was self-motivated, and although experiencing stress from the assessment and from

the paper work of the application process, still speaks highly of the instructors, Elders,

and other students that make up the community, noting it is a "positive experience" to

be studying at NEC, where others are "non-judgemental of people and where they are

in their learning process." This ABE student acknowledges that adult learners walk their

own paths in lifelong learning, and remains positive about achieving his/her own goals:

"wherever they are and however long it takes them to reach their goals, I admire that in

them … I admire that they are really working towards bettering themselves, and trying to

do something with their lives. So that's what I think about when I'm here." This adult

learner also observed that retention rates in ABE decline after the first part of the

semester, and he/she wonders how this might be addressed: "I think a better job needs

to be done, or a better account, to bring in the students and to keep them interested."

Student M

Student M was inspired and encouraged by family members who had previously

attended NEC, and overcame personal challenges to go through the intake assessment

process, then enrol and complete ABE coursework. This student speaks about the intake and assessment experience, and the support and encouragement he/she received from family who had also attended NEC:

> I have PTSD, so going to school is very scary for me … I was like terrified of the whole thing. … I don't think I was actually paying attention at that point [when the appointment was made for the intake assessment], just because I was freaking out. … okay, there's the day of the assessment. I was having a panic attack … I came running home … I can't even make it down the street … but I want to go to school so bad. And [my family member] is like, I'll clear my day, I'll take you. So we did the assessment, and then I get my books right away … and I was like, I'm going to try to do this myself, and if I can't, and I end up coming home, then yeah, you can take me to school.

For this learner, writing the intake assessment went fairly smooth, although it went longer than expected, and M grew hungry, agitated and wanted to return home. This ABE student has great determination and a super positive attitude, and sees the assessment as a part of the path of education that leads to "multiple doors, multiple ways it could go", with students making choices to further their education based on where their interests take them. This adult learner sees NEC as an inclusive community where "the teachers are awesome", and notes that being in an Indigenous place of learning is a better fit than attending other schools because of how people really understand the students' lives, and care about supporting each other:

> Because of all the residential school crap that's happened, it's affected my family … so being able to relate to other people who've gone through the same thing, and realizing in the dark that we're not the only ones who've gone through this, that we can get through this together, that's what this school has done.

M's future plans include pursuing post-secondary coursework to lay foundations for new career goals.

5.6   Emergent Themes

Initial identification of basic subject elements revealed student story work on areas of (i) a broad description of the student's ABE experience, including intake assessment, (ii) the student's self-reflection on the value of education, and (iii) the learner's perspective on being an Indigenous student at NEC.

Further analysis of basic topics showed more defined themes of (i) returning to school: student stories of how they came to be studying ABE at NEC, including their background of previous education, what it meant for them to be motivated by self, family, or others, and how they identified with being "ready" to return to school. (ii) intake assessment: what the intake assessment experience was like for them, including suggestions of how the school might improve upon its policy and practices. (iii) finding community: how they experienced support and encouragement within the community at NEC, including peers, Elders, staff and an Indigenous place of being. What is presented next is a discussion of these student storywork themes, including pertinent comments and observations by other interview participants.

5.6.1   On Returning to School

"The student's desire to change her/his life through education, that is, to take control of her/his life, is the foundation on which NEC is built" (Haig-Brown, 1995, p. 215). This quote came to mind as I was writing, and I realized that when the adult learner participants shared how, when, and why they made the choice about being ready to return to school, these decisions were consistently framed by the students as a logical step in their lifelong learning paths. Some students were self-inspired to enrol as

an ABE learner, but most were encouraged to return to school by their peers, family, friends, or co-workers, some of whom had previously attended NEC and had shared their own positive ABE experiences with the would – be student. Many students cited the ongoing support and encouragement they received from family as a strong motivator for them to have strength, stamina, confidence and self-worth in pursuing their goal of completing grade 12. Not all students experienced a considerable level of help and inspiration from family and/ or friends about returning to school, but they still enrolled in spite of this lack. Even with varying degrees of support and encouragement in place, it was apparent that on some level the students had decided that going back to school at this time made sense for them. It was time to take this step because it was time, according to inner self and life context.

5.6.1.1   On the When and How of Time

During my days at NEC, I heard many casual comments around the lunch tables in the lounge that affirmed the students' perspectives of it being the right time for them to be at school now and complete this part of their education, in order for them to move on to their next steps in life. Time in this sense is less of a literal measurement of chronological function, and more of an acknowledgement of the internal rhythms of self and spirit, similar to how Elder V and Elder W spoke about how we each travel on our unique *maskikimiskanow* within the circle of life, stopping to visit and revisit the teachings when it's time for us to do so. What I heard and observed at NEC and from the student interviews, was that there was less of a personal sense of "being ready" to return to school, and more of an "it's time to do this" acknowledgment. Often this was

connected to student motivation, either by self or from others such as friends, family or

co-workers. What I heard from the Elders about "coming back when it's time" confirmed

this understanding, as did comments by Instructor / Administrator R.

Ormiston (2010) notes the importance of "understanding that the Elders have

wisdom gained through experience, and that they know when it is time for the teachings

to be shared" (p. 55). This was the biggest message about adult education from all the

Elders, that "it's time when it's time" and for each student, that time to return and pick up

schooling again was different, not only in *when,* but also in *how*. It looks different for

each student. Elder Q commented on how we each find our own process with

education, and shared that "everything you do when you learn, it all has different steps

to go" (personal communication, May 4, 2017). This makes sense in terms of the

maskikimiskanow that a person follows, as we go around the circle of life according to

our own choice of path, gathering new teachings, revisiting former teachings, and

holding that intent of *mino pimatisiwin* – to have a good life. The NEC Elders reminded

me that being unique individuals, our life paths as students, teachers, and Elders vary in

accordance to our own sense of time. We're all doing our best as we go along with what

is placed on our path. My Cree Elders also reminded me that in this world, within the

"great mystery of life" that is the "walk in beauty" as Elder D described it, Creator gives

us free choice of when and where and whether or not to stop and pick up our teachings

along the path, and we must remember that we are not meant to know it all. I like how

Pawnee Elder Frank Davis put it:

> As we walk down that path we'll find experiences like little scraps of paper
> in front of us along the way … If we never pick up those scraps of paper
> and read them, we'll never become wiser. We'll keep on wondering about
> life, and never learn the Creator's instructions… even if we pick up all

those scraps, we'll still be learning. Nobody ever learns all the answers. (Wall & Arden, 2006, pp. 100-101)

5.6.1.2   Motivations for Returning to School

In addition to a sense of it being the "right time" to return to school, many adult learners shared that in coming back to school, they were acting on their own feelings of self-motivation, or they felt motivated by others within their circle. Students arrived with their life circumstances and prior education experiences, and each was remarkable and unique. In discussing the many paths that lead to ABE, instructor / administrator S remarked on the challenges that adult learners may go through, agreeing that there are often very different circumstances surrounding each person's return to school (personal communication, June 16, 2017). Some ABE participants had left the workforce to return to full time study, while others continued to part time work while at school. Many attended courses in addition to being caregivers and homemakers for their families. Students (such as A and B) who had attended college as mature students and had then enrolled at NEC to complete their grade 12, held unique perspectives on motivation for returning to school for ABE. Importantly, even though they had previously completed post-secondary programs as mature students (where a grade 12 diploma was not necessarily required), and may have then subsequently worked within their field of study, the attainment of the grade 12 British Columbia provincial "Dogwood" diploma requirements still remained the overarching goal that motivated them on a personal level, and made such a positive impact on their sense of accomplishment and self

esteem. Instructor/ Administrator R also noted this about student motivation and sense of readiness in certain instances (personal communication, July 17, 2017).

Additional motivations for students to return to school included that it was a way to change the focus of their lives, to be a role model for their family members, and to increase feelings of accomplishment and self-worth, even if the students did not yet plan on pursuing higher education after completing grade 12. Other students connected completion of grade 12 to entering higher education and realizing increased employment opportunities in career fields selected by choice, instead of out of necessity. They shared that attaining grade 12 would help lead them to goal-oriented post-secondary education such as university, trades, or diploma studies. This in turn would increase their chances of finding more rewarding and stable types of work based on their career interests, instead of their being obligated to take potentially taking lower paying, less regular, or less satisfying work, based on making ends meet.

What I heard here were students sharing their dreams and realizing all the hard work that would go into achieving them, meanwhile recognizing that attending ABE was bringing them step by step closer to their goals. One student in particular commented on how hard work and success in the ABE program was helping to change his/her employment category from dishwasher to office worker. This brought to mind how Bougie et al. (2013) discuss that attainment of higher education levels from grade 12 onward are correlated to greater opportunities in realizing gainful employment for Aboriginal peoples. These life choices are part of following a *maskikimiskanow* and picking up teachings about the opportunities and abundances that come into our lives.

5.6.2 Intake Assessment

All of the student participants completed an intake assessment in English and/ or math, as part of their registration process at NEC. An important focus of this study was to determine what the assessment experience was like for the students. I know from my own experience as an Indigenous student returning to school for upgrading, that it is a life-changing experience to walk back in the school doors and be faced with an assessment as a first step to coursework.

My own K to 12 school experience had been less than positive, and I recall feeling nervous and unsure of how I would be treated when I entered the doors of the community college years after high school. Walking through the doors is an essential step; how a student is welcomed and made to feel comfortable makes a huge difference to whether he or she completes an assessment and goes on to enrol. This, and also how the assessment is delivered and received sets the tone of the relationship between a potential student and the place of learning. In addition, it is important to understand that this relationship, whether more positive or less so, is what becomes part of a person's student storywork that is carried back to the student's community and shared with other potential learners, so that it also becomes part of the relationship that the school has with the greater community (Instructor / administrator BB, personal communication, June 16, 2017). We are all connected by the stories we carry within our circles of communities.

5.6.2.1 Student Perspectives on Intake Assessment

Not all participants chose to answer all of the interview questions, including questions on assessment. For example, not all students responded to the question about how ABE assessment had influenced their education paths, or offered suggestions as to how the process could be improved for the students. When asked to comment on what their ABE assessment experience had been, most students stated that it had been a positive session, while others shared that their overall encounter had been influenced by previous negative school incidents. ABE instructor / administrator R noted that how adult learners have previously gone through the education system, especially if they have had traumatic or otherwise negative incidents, has a strong influence on how they experience ABE assessment and programming, including their need for particular support and encouragement. Other NEC (S, T) and non-NEC instructor/ administrators (AA, BB), as well as the NEC Elders (O, P, Q) and Elder Y, also noted that this was an important element of adult education to consider when figuring student supports.

Students agreed that what mattered most to them was *how* the assessment was presented, with kindness, respect, patience, gentleness and soft speech being cited as positives. However, they were not in agreement about how the assessment sessions had been delivered and received, and they reported conflicting messaging, instructions, and procedures from NEC personnel that resulted in differing kinds of intake assessment experiences for them. For example, many students' stories revealed that they had received a greater or lesser number of instructions about the content and process of the intake assessment. Some students shared that they were surprised by

the essay question, and that they had received no prior information about the optional take home element of the essay portion of the intake assessment process, while others said they did receive instructions about this, and that the take home element benefitted them time-wise, and reduced overall stress from the assessment process.

What is important to note here is that student perceptions of how verbal and non-verbal interactions between NEC personnel and students were conducted (friendly, patient, attentive, in a big hurry, not paying attention to the student, not ensuring the student understood the instructions) varied with each learner. Although memory recall and the emotions described by some students, as for example having had a good day or a stressful time during the assessment, may have influenced how they interpreted their assessment experience, their stories are to be held as their truth, and are to be respected and acknowledged as such. Some student stories tell of receiving more information and guidance, while others recount less information and guidance being given; each story is a little bit different in the details. Each story is a bit unique this way.

Looking at it from the perspective of the *maskikimiskanow,* this is how they have each felt, experienced and remembered this part of their lifelong education journey on a physical, emotional, and spiritual level. It is important for school personnel to hear about these different experiences, because these students' stories represent nothing less than their truths as they understand them. This is essential feedback that can help the school ameliorate the assessment process to increase the amount of positive interaction in the student – school relationship, and to bring new good school stories for students.

5.6.2.2   Other Observations and Suggestions From the Students

Many students noted the importance of whether the assessment material contained Indigenous content. Learners were also concerned over what they felt were out dated versions of paper booklet assessment materials, some dating back to over 20 years. Instructor / administrator R agreed that there was a need for newer, more culturally relevant versions of ABE intake assessment materials such as for example the CAAT standard achievement assessment test (personal communication, July 17, 2017). Students shared the difficulties they had experienced in working through the assessment booklet, where some had challenges interpreting the mathematics questions, and others wondered if they had answered the English sections correctly. Many participants shared that they felt stressed and doubted themselves as to how they had completed the assessment.

What follows next is a summary of suggestions from students to the college, regarding intake assessment materials, processes, and other items of concern, taken from the interview data.

➢ The first contact, whether by phone or in person, sets the tone for how the student perceives NEC as being a supportive, friendly place to enrol. Students may want to just ask questions, and then perhaps return at another time to discuss assessment appointments, or to ask more questions. Students may feel stressed if they perceive they are being rushed, overlooked, or not given opportunity to voice their questions. Students may be hesitant or unsure of the questions they need to ask.

➢ NEC staff to verbally go over any paperwork handed out, without rushing or overlooking sections. Remember life happens, and adult learners are often busy with work and/or caregiving, and their goals for returning to school are often coloured by less than positive previous education experiences. Be flexible: students' schedules may conflict with school timetables, including attending intake assessment appointments.

➢ Train more than one person in handling intake assessments, including paperwork, so that if one person is absent, there remains a continuation of competence and compassionate knowledge about how students navigate this process.

➢ Respond to students' requests for paperwork in a timely manner, and if there is a delay, please maintain contact with the students, so they do not feel overlooked or stressed.

➢ Educate staff and Elders about LGBTQ communities and gender diversity, and how important it is to be considerate and respectful when asking or hearing how students prefer to be addressed, and if they prefer to self-identify in a specific manner.

➢ Emphasize and support student leadership initiatives within NEC, as for example with student ambassadors / liaisons, and peer tutors to network with prospective and new students. Expand peer tutor network to offer support to students preparing for intake assessment. For example, prior to the assessment, introduce prospective students to peer tutors/ student ambassadors / liaisons who have previously completed assessments, to help welcome the students, familiarize them with NEC, and introduce them to peer tutoring options. Peer tutors may offer group "brush up" sessions e.g. biweekly, to re-familiarize potential students with fundamentals of math operations / basic grammar and punctuation in a casual, relaxed environment. Recognize and support student efforts in these areas.

➢ Offer a campus tour to prospective students (perhaps with peer tutors/ student liaisons) before they make an appointment for an intake assessment. This will familiarize them with the layout and atmosphere of the college, and introduce them to the place and the people. Students also mentioned that they may be less nervous and more motivated to attend and complete their assessments if they had an idea beforehand of what the NEC upgrading coursework might look like in a real classroom setting.

➢ Prior to the assessment, introduce prospective students to peer tutors/ student ambassadors / liaisons who have previously completed assessments, to help welcome the students, familiarize them with NEC, and introduce them to peer tutoring options. Peer tutors may offer group "brush up" sessions e.g. biweekly, to re-familiarize potential students with fundamentals of math operations / basic grammar and punctuation in a casual, relaxed environment. Recognize these student helpers for their efforts.

➢ Provide clear verbal and written instructions about the assessment content and process when the student makes the appointment, preferably in an easy to read handout with larger size (e.g. 14) font.

➢ Provide a brief, informal, pre and post assessment chat with the student to prepare before and debrief after the process. Remind students if they have the option of completing the assessment over two days. In addition, check in regularly to see how the student is faring with the assessment, and whether there are any questions to address.

➢ Provide a more modern, up to date version of the assessment booklets, and wherever possible, bring in cultural content for Canadian Indigenous adult learners.

➢ Break the math assessment up into smaller sections, and have similar math operations grouped on separate pages (one page for addition, one page for division … etc.) to avoid confusion.

➢ Offer healthy snacks (juice, granola bars, fruit, muffins, etc.) to students, and offer to adjust the lighting in the writing room if it's too bright. Ensure students know where the restrooms and emergency exits are.

➢ Suggestions are to have an optional group assessment, for students who would feel more comfortable and less stressed with other students around.

➢ Survey (anonymously by paper or online methods) students on campus during each term, to know how they experienced the intake assessment, and to find out what suggestions and ideas they may have for improvement. Students want their voices to be heard.

5.6.2.3   Recognizing What a Student Brings to the Intake Assessment

Instructor / administrator BB shared his/her thoughts of how even though the same assessment may be given out in a similar manner for each student, the way the student goes through it is a uniquely personal experience, and the school needs to see and hear "the whole person" in order for the student to have the best possible outcome for learning. The whole person brings along stories of life learning, family, and community with him or her to the school and to the assessment, and this is part of what the school needs to see in order to better understand the skills and supports that a student has and has need of (personal communication, June 16, 2017).

Anuk et al. (2010) discuss how we carry a "learning spirit" within us that needs to be recognized and nurtured in order for us to bring our life learning to fruition, including when we participate in assessments (p. 74). Part of that nurturing is similar to the views of instructor/ administrator BB, and describes how the assessment personnel connect with the stories of the whole person of the student:

> Intake and assessment procedures are informal in that the instructor or coordinator has a "chat" with the learner, easing any tensions. … In this way, the learner feels the freedom to share information that, at first glance, may not appear relevant to the learning path. When the instructor or coordinator listens to the learner with ears, eyes, and heart, the learner shares a wealth of information that sheds light on life experiences in the learner's past, other than the aforementioned barriers to education that may have created blocks to learning. In addition, practitioners are able to discern what has nudged the learner back onto the learning path, what is trying to re-awaken the learning spirit. More importantly, the instructor or coordinator is able to ascertain key people or events in a learner's life that may be integrated into the learning path as a support. (p. 74)

All the instructor/ administrator personnel spoke of how listening to and understanding the unique needs of adult learners is of high importance to the process of delivering intake assessments.

Instructor / administrator AA agreed that schools could learn from ABE student views on teaching and learning, and further commented on the subject of student voice, acknowledging that although being "student centred" was of vital importance in adult learning and other schooling, in many places of mainstream education, it is missing.

> I don't know how we can actually say … that we should be student centred, if we don't include a student perspective, at least a student perspective – it should be all student perspective. … You can't talk about being student centred unless you listen to what it is that students say. (personal communication, September 15, 2016)

5.6.3   On Finding Community

As one student said, "Here's a good way to put it – come in for your education, but you leave with a family." These kinds of sentiments about the value and importance of making personal connections were expressed by all the student participants. When I first started this study, I had wondered about the assessment experience being the most influential part of ABE for the students, and this is reflected in the title of the student consent letter in Appendix A. (I did retitle the study at a late date to reflect its broader focus.) In contrast and beginning with the first interview, the students showed me that what impacted them most in their ABE experience was the finding of a supportive and caring NEC community that they could connect with in a positive manner, where they could find mutual help, motivation, and inspiration.

Gallop and Bastien (2016) discuss the "creating [of] supportive institutional space" for post-secondary Indigenous students, noting the high importance of finding this kind of community:

> For the participants of this study, being successful in this post-secondary institution did not come automatically from small class sizes and the opportunity to create connections with peers and faculty. Instead, it was the quality of interactions within these spaces that make the difference. … they needed to find individuals who could help them visualize success by minimizing the negative self-talk and sense of helplessness. Adopting positive self-belief could be a strong motivator for ongoing learning. (p. 218)

What Gallop and Bastien have stated regarding essential school supports for Indigenous post-secondary students also applies to ABE students – how they connect with community within the school matters the most to the kind of supportive experience they encounter, and to the overall positive quality of their ABE schooling. This is also in alignment with the findings of Lange et al. (2015), who noted the importance of places of community centred adult education that offer supports not only via programming (with for example culturally relevant curricula), but most essentially through a learning environment that respects, supports and compassionately encourages the health and wellbeing of the student as a whole person. They emphasized that this is of particular relevance for adult learners who may have had previous negative education experiences (p. 94-96).

At NEC, ABE learners found support and encouragement from the environment, including the people as well as the building itself. They acknowledged the Longhouse, with its cedar structure and central fire, the cultural content such as smudging, drumming and singing, and the genuine respect and kind, non-judgemental

encouragement they received from peers, Elders, instructors and administrators. Students also spoke about the importance of being recognized as whole people with many responsibilities and sometimes complicated lives; how they were seen made a difference to how they felt supported by the NEC community.

Instructor / administrator S commented on how the Longhouse serves to help create and maintain a supportive sense of community: "Every Indigenous culture has its own symbols. … This is where we gather, we learn about each other. … The Longhouse itself is all made out of cedar; cedar represents sharing and it also represents strength" (personal communication, July 4, 2017). Further to this, S went on to describe the story of the totem pole carved by Norman Tate and his family, which stands at the East wall of the Longhouse. S said that as much as it spoke of people in balance with the natural world, it also showed how people were meant to get along with, learn from, and strengthen each other by sharing together and supporting one another (personal communication, July 4, 2017). This brings to mind how one student said of her peers: "you work together and it ends up being better." When I look at the Longhouse, what I see and what I have gathered from the students is that the college - especially the Longhouse part of the college that is anchored by the totem pole – is a place where students and others balance and find grounding. It is a place that sustains them as "the land", and it really is, for many of the students, representative of "the land" and they have that connection to the land through the school, and through that place.

Students spoke of how the positive, patient attitudes and encouragement from teaching staff made a big impression on them and often influenced their decisions to try to stay the course and finish the semester in a good way. Teachers were sometimes

referred to as role models who inspired students to complete their studies, and offered

kind words of understanding when students were in need of extra support. It mattered to

the students that the administration and support staff interacted with them as members

of the college community, and listened to their concerns.

5.6.3.1 Elders as a Foundation of Community

"He calls me *kokum* [grandmother] and gives me a hug" (Elder Q, personal

communication, May 4, 2017).

The learners were all in agreement that the Elders played a vital role in keeping

and nurturing the community within NEC. By spending time with the Elders and listening

to the Elders talk about life and share Indigenous stories, the students were learning

things about being an Indigenous person that had not been presented to them before.

Students said they had better or good feelings about themselves after sitting with the

Elders, and that they felt more supported in their day - to -day life as students, by having

the Elders there as part of the environment. One student stated that she only needed to

look across the room and see that the Elder was sitting there, to feel calmer, and more

like she was part of a home community, or family at NEC. Instructor / administrator T

noted the central role that Elders fill within the NEC community:

> The beauty of it is, not only students talk with them: staff, myself,
> administration … They [students] feel comfortable being able to sit and
> talk to the Elder. You know, sometimes they'll be totally lost, and they
> won't even want to see the counsellors, but they'll go talk to the Elder, and
> the Elder will give them some advice and encouragement. That's very
> important. (personal communication, July 4, 2017)

NEC Elder O remarked on the significance of cultural teachings and the learning experience of being in an Indigenous community - supporting each other and being supported by others - that students find at NEC: "that 'other' education is as important to them, as the 'other' education, the more linear one, the English way, I guess … there's so many students who have said, " I didn't grow up with my culture, and I'm so happy to be here, to be exposed to it." " (personal communication, July 21, 2017). Elder P affirmed this view and observed that today in these times, the oral teachings of our cultures bring guidance to the students on how to go in a good way:

> Be it cultural, for everyday life, [for] education – it's like, it's another part of life skills. We can take a life skills course on how to help ourselves grow, but with oral teachings, it was the Elders' way of saying you're getting your life skills just by listening. (personal communication, April 24, 2017)

Instructor / administrator S also spoke about how traditional teachings matter to the sense of wholeness within the college: "One of the good things about NEC is that Indigenous knowledge is part of every curriculum. Part of it is having the Elders here; they have that background. …There's all different kinds of stories" (personal communication, July 4, 2017).

5.6.4   Other Findings

5.6.4.1   On the When and How of Time

Ormiston (2010) notes the importance of "understanding that the Elders have wisdom gained through experience, and that they know when it is time for the teachings to be shared" (p. 55). This was the biggest message about adult education from all the Elders, that "it's time when it's time", and for each student, that time to pick up schooling again was different, not only in *when,* but also in *how.* In terms of the *maskikimiskanow*

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that we all follow, this makes sense, as we all go around the circle of life according to our own choice of paths, gathering new teachings, revisiting former teachings, and holding that intent of *mino pimatisiwin* – to have a good life. The NEC Elders reminded me that being unique individuals, our life paths as students, teachers, and Elders vary. Elder Q said, "everything you do when you learn, it all has different steps to go" (personal communication, May 4, 2017).

We're all doing our best as we go along with what is placed on our path, listening so we will know when it's time to pause and hear the teachings. My Cree Elders reminded me that in this world, within the "great mystery of life" that is the "walk in beauty" as Elder D put it, Creator gives us free choice of when and where and whether or not to stop and pick up our teachings along the path. I like how Pawnee Elder Frank Davis puts it:

> As we walk down that path we'll find experiences like little scraps of paper in front of us along the way … If we never pick up those scraps of paper and read them, we'll never become wiser. We'll keep on wondering about life, and never learn the Creator's instructions… even if we pick up all those scraps, we'll still be learning. Nobody ever learns all the answers. (Wall & Arden, 1990, pp. 100-101)

I feel truly blessed to hear these words from this Elder.

5.6.4.2   Lifting Up

Over and over the participants spoke of how important it is to recognize the unique challenges for Indigenous adult learners, and to honour and acknowledge student success in little and big things, without judgment or negative criticism. This theme was evident in how the Elders spoke of the students who came and sat with

them, or of the students they watched and noticed sitting elsewhere. It was part of their role as community/ family members at NEC to encourage the 'lifting up' of the students, supporting them in their scholastic endeavours, as well as in their other daily roles such as parents, spouses, sons, daughters, siblings and peers. NEC Elder Q agreed that all parts of a student's life were to be acknowledged and honoured because we are all connected in a deeper way: "we have a family [at NEC], we're all together, we're all Natives, I said [to the student]" (personal comment May 4, 2017). Within the ABE community this view encourages others, helping to create a positive, supportive mood within the school for students, staff, and Elders.

I interviewed one student supporter N, a person whose family member was attending NEC to complete grade 12. This person shared that supporting and encouraging an adult learner from the family had been a very moving and positive experience. In the words and tone that this supporter used to describe the hard work, determination, and new confidence exhibited by the student as the student moved forward and overcame many personal challenges, I heard the student being lifted up and honoured. I was touched by the emotions I heard in this person's voice as N reflected on his/ her own education story, and expressed profound gratitude that he/ she could be there to encourage and support this family member. N acknowledged that helping this family member had brought benefits for the whole family. For example, N spoke of how "the spark" that lights up when this student has greater confidence and self esteem has travelled from the student into the family community: "it grows" (personal communication, April 22, 2017).

Students also acknowledged how their good feelings about school and their increased self esteem affected positive interactions with family and community, something that MacKinnon and Silver (2015) consider as well. I have heard this in teachings that remind us of how when we lift one person up, honouring and acknowledging the place he or she has within a place/family/community, we inspire that person to walk in a good way, so that others within the place/family/ community are also inspired to walk in a good way and help others. When we lift one person up, we lift up a whole community, similar to the teachings of *pimatisiwin* and *haahuupa.*

Administrators and instructors emphasized that a vital part of adult basic education was seeing how the uniqueness of adult learners was addressed and respected. What I heard from all of these educators was that ABE students need (and deserve) to be celebrated and supported in ways that respect the whole person, not just the adult who is sitting at a desk. Numerous students have family responsibilities such as children and Elder care and jobs to fit in along with their study time. In addition, some students face personal and family challenges such as poverty and food insecurity.

NEC educators all noted there is a large cohort of students who come from far away, and so being away from family and community support is yet another condition that students may experience. As educator T commented "they're looking for a sense of belonging" One challenge that students may also face at NEC is that there is a learning process that takes place for staff who may hold teaching certificates in K to 12, and who are adding to their knowledge and practice in ABE. All of these educators concurred that ABE students were to be commended for their hard work and heartfelt efforts to continue and complete their education. Theirs was a unique kind of education

experience, where family and peer support had strong roles in seeing them through their ABE studies, and where the students were also often seen as family and peer supporters, as well.

5.6.4.3   On Retention

One of the key recommendations from this study is the need for a review of how the concept of retention is interpreted and understood within ABE. As discussed in the previous chapter, adult upgrading as a part of lifelong learning represents one kind of teaching that a person may choose to receive on the *maskikimiskanow* in the circle of life. The circle is a non-linear path with a forward momentum that includes stepping back to retrace and re-experience teachings before moving forward again. Coleman (2012) discusses the life path of the learning spirit with Battiste, Henderson, Findlay and Findlay:

> In our indigenous ways of knowing, our elders have talked about how we come into this world. … into this body and this time and this place as a continuous learning process. … we can go in all kinds of directions. But we do come to a distinctive "here" with a distinctive purpose. So we end up finding along the path different kinds of inspiration that help us to keep on our path, to keep with new ideas and creativity, and other things like that. But those are a part of this learning path and part of the learning spirit that comes with us, as well as the learning spirits that are with us. (p. 147)

Instructor / administrator S acknowledged that he/she saw many kinds and stages of 'readiness' demonstrated by the students, and that sometimes students carry on and complete their studies, while others may need to pause and take a break from the school process. It is time when it's time, as one of the students said of being ready to return to school and complete a course of studies. The circle of life journey is an

example for how retention is experienced, and for how it might be viewed in a good way.

Elder O also acknowledged that a more fluid interpretation of retention is "important for success" of ABE learners and that the personal situations that affect the attendance rates of students may go unknown, unseen, and unaccounted for. This Elder noted that just acting on the decision to return is a part of a student's commitment to participate in further education to the best of his or her ability. Instructor / administrator AA understands how adult education enrolment is a step by step process that may take several tries, and comments on the effort it takes just to apply, let alone stay and complete a course of study in ABE:

> we can look at example after example of students who have started – taken a chance … you have to really acknowledge the strength and courage that it takes for a student to walk through those doors … I've had many students say to me "this is the third time or the 10th time that I've been up here [at the school], and I'm actually now sitting with you" whereas the other nine times they didn't get quite through the door. (personal communication, September 15, 2016)

NEC Elders in-residence are there to listen and talk with the students; this offers an important personal connection and cultural support that makes a big difference to help learners work forward to stay the course and meet their goals. The students know they are part of a caring community, and they are not alone Gallop and Bastien (2016) note the vital role that these kinds of bonds play in positively affecting the retention and achievements of Indigenous students.

> … while concrete motivators, such as small class sizes and the availability of Aboriginal resources, encourage students to pursue postsecondary education, these factors are not specifically what maintain the students' ability to remain in their programs. Instead, the quality of the relationships

> developed during their academic program may be as important, if not more important, to their eventual academic success. (p. 218)

At NEC, the importance of this link of understanding between students and supportive personnel such as peers, staff, and Elders within the school community is something that is understood by the Elders, and is demonstrated in how they speak of the students.

For example, further to the subject of retention, Elder Q described how ABE students come to school along with their life circumstances and challenges that need to be acknowledged by teachers and administration in adult learning. This Elder shared that students sometimes lack confidence and are reluctant to apply to enrol. At other times students are discouraged and leave before course completion, or they lack confidence to return after an absence, because of worry and self-doubts. Q spoke of how students may feel a lack of self-esteem, and a need for extra encouragement, support, and compassionate understanding from family, friends, school peers, staff and Elders, when they are in need of breaking from studies for a period of time in order to attend to personal situations. They need this when they leave, and also when they feel ready to return again. That is part of what makes adult learners so unique. Q stated that NEC has a beneficial environment where Indigenous culture offers a special kind of support, such as connecting with the Elders in-residence, to help these students achieve their goals in school, when they first come in or when they return (personal communication, May 4, 2017).

Gopalakrishnan (2008) also notes that adult students may start, leave, and then return to complete ABE coursework according to their personal life schedules. He writes on the topic of retention, suggesting a more long - term interpretation of adult learner

success is needed, along with "a new definition of learner retention that tracks continued participation in future fiscal years" (p. 149). The author brings into discussion a longer view of adult upgrading programming in which students are able to "experience small successes early" in their semesters through a process of incremental achievements. These are then counted towards a cumulative assessment of upgrading credits that persists through school pauses a student may take. In this way, time and scholastic effort take on different connotations. Administrator R also acknowledged the value of a more qualitative interpretation of retention that spoke to role of the "small steps" that may help students transition into attending ABE. For example, students may need more than one start at attending ABE to "sample" the education experience before finding it to be a positive encounter that they can commit to with a sense of purpose (personal communication, July 17, 2017). In this way, small steps of 'try out' attendance assist the student to see how ABE education can be a positive choice, and at NEC, to see how the student supports within the school community can assist in making the school experience a good one.

Students need positive interactions with places of learning; this brings good school stories for them to carry. The long range, holistic view of accomplishment that Gopalakrishnan describes could help students benefit from increased self-esteem and acknowledgement of their scholastic achievements, two elements that may affect a smoother transition during their breaks from schooling and on their returns. This in turn can positively affect the kind of relationship an adult learner has with the school community, something that could have far reaching benefits. For example, Lange et al. (2015) describe a need for positive school interactions for ABE students, especially

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those who may have had negative previous school experiences: "New, more engaging and positive experiences with learning must take place for the learner to begin to tell a different kind of story …" (p. 98). At NEC, culture and community combine to offer a supportive, Indigenous approach to ABE education that strives to be student-centred.

5.7   Conclusion

This chapter has focussed on the main emergent themes of i) returning to school, ii) intake assessment, and iii) finding community, including data from student and other interview participants. Additional topics derived from the data were examined, including concepts of time, understanding how we lift each other up, and ideas of retention. A summary of suggestions from ABE students to NEC regarding intake assessment and college practices was also listed. The next chapter concludes this thesis, and revisits the goals of the study as well as the significance, contributions, and potential applications of the research. It also examines the strengths, limitations, generalizability and sharing of this work, and offers views on future research.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1   Revisiting the Goals of the Study

This research project intended to add relevant and suitable material to the existing academic literature on student experiences of Adult Basic Education, and to provide a new space in the literature for the voices of Indigenous ABE students. Additionally, it sought to provide informative data that would be of use to the case study education centre personnel, to the Indigenous student participants, and to the greater Indigenous and educational communities, by addressing the question of what is it like for people to return to school as adult learners, in terms of readiness to return, intake assessment, finding community. The question of what do ABE places of education need to know about the uniqueness of adult learners that come through the door was also examined.

Identification and examination of the major themes that resulted from student interview data showed that finding community at the education centre in terms of peer support, Elder presence, and teacher encouragement was the most prevalent theme, and was central to ABE student success and well being. Student stories shared essential information about what the challenges and roads to achievement look like for ABE learners, and how these paths are impacted by support systems found in the school environment. Speaking to a second key theme, the students provided relevant and useful observations about their experiences with intake assessments, including suggestions for improving the intake assessment process. Although student response was low to the interview question of how ABE placement assessment contributes to their learning, the students did all speak about how the overall ABE experience helped

to move them closer to their education and personal goals. The third core theme that was identified related to the decision about returning to school, and the student's sense of readiness about making that choice. The sense of readiness was connected to a sense of timing, which for many but not all students reflected motivation by peers, family, or co-workers. This is essential material that can help inform school policies and programs about ABE: it is valuable information that schools need to know about the adult learners who walk in their doors.

6.2   Addressing the Research Questions

The first research question set out in Chapter 1 asked, "What does ABE look like from Indigenous students' points of view; what are their stories about returning to school? What is of greatest importance to them in their journey as ABE students?" The students provided answers to this first question via their interviews, describing what ABE from an Indigenous student's point of view by sharing their stories about returning to school. Their responses showed that challenges, hard work, achievement, support, and friendships were part of this experience. What was of greatest importance to their ABE experience was the finding of supportive and encouraging community at the college, made in part by the staff, Elders and Longhouse environment of NEC.

The second question inquired, "With respect to Indigenous adult learners, what have been their experiences of assessment tools and practices currently in use for ABE placement? Have they encountered culturally relevant assessment practices?" Responses showed that many students experienced challenges in the navigating the assessment materials and process. These challenges included a perceived lack of

clarity and student support in how assessment instructions were delivered, uncertainty of one's skills to complete the session, and stress from students going through these challenges that added to the difficulty. For many students, these points related to previous negative school experiences. In addition, participants recommended that culturally relevant content and updated material be made available.

The third research question asked, "How do people who have encouraged the learners describe their experience as supporters? How do instructors and administrators understand the path of learning for an ABE student?" Interview data on personal supporters of ABE students was limited to one family member of a student. However, this person offered a rich description of the challenges and successes that the student has encountered, and of how being a supporter has had positive impact on family. NEC personnel and other administrators and instructors spoke at length about the special strength and determination of ABE students, emphasizing their uniqueness as Indigenous adult learners and the importance of recognizing and respecting them as whole persons. NEC Elders shared how vital it is to lift these students up, honour them, and support them as members of the school family, and also as part of a greater community.

6.3   Significance, Contributions, and Potential Applications of the Research

Kovach (2015) discusses Indigenous ways of knowing and learning and shares that "… there is a need for Indigenous presence within the academy that places value upon Indigenous knowledges, to provide a stewardship role for those knowledges" (p. 50). While this study does not focus specifically on Indigenous knowledges, it does

emphasize the important need to continue the affirmation of traditional oral teachings and Indigenous epistemologies and voices, and to bring space for these within academic settings.

Regarding adult learners, my research adds significantly to the current discourse on the topic of Indigenous ABE student experience, and is especially of value in view of the limited amount of this subject literature that is available for review. This study is a useful contribution to the advancement of knowledge about ABE placement assessment experience, Indigenous student story work, and adult learners. It is also of potential worth to assessment scholars, educators, policy research and development personnel, and education administrators who are interested in Indigenous adult learners, ABE assessments, and the relationship building assets of Indigenous methodologies and research methods. In addition, it may be of interest to scholars who study retention, and to other Indigenous students, their supporters, and their instructors. Tribal education authorities and education funding agencies would also gain insight from this study, into needed supports for students attending ABE and completing intake assessments.

Methodologically, this research contributes to the growing body of academic work that is based on Indigenous ways of knowing and learning. Importantly, this work incorporates an Indigenous approach that seeks *mino pimatisiwin* – the leading of a good life - in how the research is planned and carried out in a mindful, respectful way. The conceptual framework of *maskikimiskanow* – the medicine journey, is illustrated throughout this study, as the students and also I visit and revisit the teachings to gain insight as we each go our own way around the circle of life.

6.4 Assessing the Research

It was difficult to find a comprehensive assessment for Indigenous qualitative research or research methods, although authors such as for example Absolon (2010), Debassige (2010), Kovach (2010), Smith (2012), Wilson (2010), and Wright et al. (2016), have mentioned this subject area in some of the literature discussions relating to Indigenous methodology and methods, and/or decolonizing approaches to higher education, and/or culturally appropriate methods of research. For the purpose of assessing the strengths and limitations of this research, I have examined criteria set out by Tracy (2010), Chilisa (2012), and the Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS2): Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (CIHR, NSERC, and SSHRC) 2014), as well as criteria from other Indigenous sources, including the above-mentioned authors. I have tried to look at all assessment criteria with my "Indigenous researcher" eyes, bearing in mind the teachings that have been brought forth in this study.

6.4.1 Strengths and Limitations of the Research

Using Tracy's (2010) "Eight "Big – Tent" Criteria for Excellent Qualitative Research" as a guide, this qualitative case study was assessed as to the quality of its content based on the following measures: worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethical, and meaningful coherence (p. 840). Tracy's "parsimonious pedagogical tool" brings an awareness of "the complexity of the qualitative landscape" that allows for varied paradigms and encourages creative,

differing approaches to what we deem good qualitative research (p. 839). What follows is a brief discussion of how the strengths and limitations of this study are viewed with respect to each criterion.

One of the strengths of this work is that it represents a "worthy topic" as it is "relevant, timely, significant and interesting" according to criteria in Tracy (2010, p. 840). Now, more than ever it is imperative for Indigenous people to achieve at least a grade 12 standing, and as educators and fellow community members, we need to know and care about how people go through this experience. One delimitation of this research is that with its primary focus on the voices of Indigenous adult learners as they pertain to ABE and intake assessment experience, it has a specific scope and depth. The subject may not be of interest or significance to those wanting a broader view of education topics.

Criteria for "rich rigor" are reached by a study's use of "sufficient, abundant, appropriate, and complex theoretical constructs, data and time in the field, sample(s), context(s) [and] data collection and analysis processes" (Tracy, 2010, p. 840). In this light, this study can be seen to have many strengths, such as a strong, complex theoretical framework of traditional teachings that inform its methods. In addition, the data collection portion of this work was spread over the most part of a whole year, where culturally relevant and appropriate research methods were applied to a fairly large (27) number of interviews, and were also described in considerable detail in this paper. A limitation of this research with regards to rich rigor is that it did not collect interview data from all of the assessment and teaching personnel at NEC. This would

have added valuable content and context to the data collection and analysis of this work.

Sincerity in research is "characterized by self-reflexivity about subjective values, biases, and inclinations of the researcher(s), [and] transparency about the methods and challenges" (Tracy, 2010, p. 840). I feel that this study holds many examples of sincerity, especially in the way I have described stories about myself: my own journey of lifelong learning in a way that shares my experiences in life, traditional teachings and education, complete with the doubts, the lessons and the questionings. In addition, I have strived to walk with *mino pimatisiwin* in this work, going forward with intent to carry and demonstrate the Seven Teachings in a good way with every person and in every part of my research. A possible limitation with regard to sincerity and self-reflexivity is that it would have added to these elements to ask for feedback from the participants as to their opinions of my skills and demonstrated (or not) abilities as a researcher. For example, did the students find me too rushed or too slow during the interviews? Was my manner appropriately respectful to the Elders? Were my explanations clear and concise?

Tracy (2010) shares that credibility in qualitative research is obtained by elements such as thick description and triangulation (p. 843). This project contains thick description of the case study location and participants that helps one to envision the setting, while the rich detailing of the traditional teachings imparted by the Elders allows the reader to see how elements of the theoretical framework substantiate and inform the research process from beginning to completion. In this way, the "showing rather than telling" (Tracy, 2010, p. 843) aspect of credibility is brought forth. In this study, the use

of multiple perspectives on the subject of ABE, as presented by students, Elders, supporters, and administrator / instructors, provides a rich variety of viewpoints which can be seen to enhance credibility via triangulation. Mays and Pope (2000) note that although this kind of practice does refer to triangulation, it might be "better seen as a way of ensuring comprehensiveness and encouraging a more reflexive analysis of the data … that as a pure test of validity" (p. 51). It is therefore possible that this strength of multiple perspectives may overlap as pertaining to both credibility and validity.

"Resonance" in research includes "practices that will promote empathy, identification, and reverberation of the research by readers who have not direct experience with the topic discussed" and includes "aesthetic merit and evocative writing" as part of this interpretation (Tracy, 2010, p. 844). For this study, presenting the traditional teachings, student vignettes, and other stories in between the more ordered content of the thesis project brings strength to the aesthetic merit aspect. A possible limitation in this area is that further thick description of these items may have afforded a greater amount of resonance.

In her discussion of "ethics" as a research principle, Tracy refers to procedural, situational, relational and exiting ethics. This study has strong procedural ethics by the researcher's adherence to the guiding principles of BREB, and also by how the researcher (me) maintains a chain of control regarding safeguarding of audio recordings, written transcripts, signed consent forms, and other materials, including password protected encryptions on computers. Importantly, this study also follows the principles and cultural ethics protocols that are set out by the NEC. Overlaying all of this and connecting to Tracy's topics of situational, relational, and exiting ethics, are the

guiding tenets of the Seven Teachings, which provide a clear mandate for how all aspects of this project are to be carried out for the highest best purpose of all concerned.

Meaningful coherence refers to how studies "eloquently interconnect their research design, data collection, and analysis with their theoretical framework and situational goals" (Tracy, 2010, p. 848). In this study, the circular conceptual framework of the *maskikimiskanow* has been applied to each part of its form, continually referring back to how the data exemplifies stories of lifelong learning as part of the Circle of Life journey. In addition, the findings of this work relate back and address the research goals and questions, completing that circle. One limitation of this study with regards to meaningful coherence is that it lacked in data from student supporters, and so response to that research question was based on one respondent, and may have lacked substance. A further limitation of this study at present is that the sharing of the results and interpretation with the study participants at NEC has not yet happened. A series of presentations will be made to all interested participants a future date, including the board of directors of NEC. Feedback from these presentation sessions would have added significantly to the meaningful coherence and overall quality of this study.

6.4.2   Seeing the Strengths of the Research with Indigenous Eyes

What follows here is a brief summary that speaks to how this study has many strengths seen from within an Indigenous lens. For example, the case study design allows for use of primary data from the oral communications of student and other co-researchers that gives an increased credibility to the researched material. Kunkel &

Schorcht (2014) refer to ways of knowing in Tsilhqot'in culture that speak to the significance of citing and validating oral knowledge. The authors comment how "In Tsilhqot'in culture, narrators of stories must be acknowledged, along with translators and the context. Acknowledging the various people is a form of citation" (p. 49). Acknowledging who is speaking and relating their information, stories, and teachings speaks to observing cultural protocols about observing "voice" and maintaining connections and continuity in how oral knowledge is transmitted and received in a respectful, veritable and verifiable manner. Indigenous scholars such as Kovach (2010), and Smith (2012) also mention this subject.

One unexpected strength in this research came from discovering that I have kinfolk ties with two student participants. When we introduced ourselves and our family ties, we discovered that different branches of our families had "married in" to each other. In Indigenous ways of knowing, recognizing family ties strengthens the relationship between people, and can lend credence to words that are shared. The students and I were extremely pleased to find additional family connections so far away from our home communities, and I discerned a more immediate sense of trust and relaxation between researcher and participant. As aforementioned, it sometimes took notably longer for some of the participants to relax and a sense of a beginning of trust to be apparent. I did consider how this caution exhibited by some participants might have influenced the interview process and analysis results, but I found no discernable difference in manner, or content, with how these students responded to the interview questions. In addition, there was no change in how this data was collected or interpreted, as compared to all other data.

One of the overlying strengths of this study that contributes to its elements of quality is the guiding framework of Indigenous epistemology and methodology. The Cree word *tapwe* again comes to mind. It refers to 'the truth', and it is something that is said when one hears someone share valuable knowledge, or speak an important truth. In this study I have heard valuable truths from my co-researchers. Interviewing students, educators, Elders, and a student support person has formed a clearer, fuller, and more expressive and recognizable picture of how Indigenous students experience ABE. Listening to my Cree Elders provided invaluable understanding about the conceptual framework elements of *maskikimiskanow* - the medicine path, *mino pimatisiwin* – leading a good life, and the underpinnings of traditional oral teachings such as the Seven Teachings of respect, honesty, courage, love, humility, wisdom, and truth, which inform each step of this approach to research. Learning more about these elements has strengthened the framework of this study, and contributed to my own growth as a person. I understand that this is a lifelong learning process. Cajete (2000) speaks to the efforts and responsibilities involved with understanding and working with Indigenous approaches to knowledge, and really trying to see and understand those principles as a part of life.

> We have to reflect on Indigenous thought, Indigenous science, and Indigenous education based on their own merits and on their own terms. That is a key. We have tried to validate these ways of knowing through the Western system, but there is a point at which you see that they are completely different systems, different ways of knowing the world, and that you have to look at them based on what they are. Indigenous knowledge is an internally consistent system. It validates itself. It does not need external validation. But you have to understand it and its principles through the maps it has created … be responsible to ourselves, our communities, our ancestry, and our personal gifts. That's difficult. You

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have to work at it every day… we have to carry forward the best that we have and give that to the next generation. (p. 189)

As a final point, in Indigenous research Elder participation lends not only credibility, but also contributes to the resonance and meaningful coherence of a study, and without their participation, this inquiry would be considered of low quality and lacking in these elements. Without the Elder voices, this research would have been incomplete and invalid according to Indigenous principles and protocols of how knowledge is shared. In addition, not including Elder perspectives would have demonstrated deep disrespect to the Indigenous community of NEC, and to the Elders themselves, who hold knowledge and teachings that help to inform and assist others. For this work, Elders' words are crucial in understanding the many contexts of lifelong learning.

6.5   Sharing and Generalizability of This Work

Tracy (2010) relates resonance to generalizability and transferability, where rich storytelling and description bring the stories and scenes within the data to life for the reader, and the "culturally situated knowledge" may not necessarily be transferable to other situations of research or other learning (p. 845). This is an important aspect of this study. The data gathered from this research presents the personal story work of Indigenous adult learners in a way that respects their points of view. The voices are placed in the forefront and are meant to be heard and shared in a respectful way that acknowledges and honours the speakers and their stories, keeping in mind that context matters, as do cultural protocols and understandings. Regarding issues of sharing and

transferability, it can be said with caveat that some concepts and findings presented from this research may transfer and relate in a general way to other sites and practices involved with the study of ABE. For example, other ABE students, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, may place value on culturally relevant assessment materials.

However, limitations do exist, as for example with understanding how the personal stories of the participants do not immediately apply to research results at other places of ABE programming and assessment. As previously noted, each ABE learner's experience is unique and belongs to that person, as do the individual stories that are shared. Smith (2012) notes that historically, researchers have often generalized research on Indigenous subject matter, without stopping to consider that it cannot automatically be applied to other Indigenous people in a valid or respectful manner. One Indigenous person does not speak for all Indigenous people. It is unquestionably respectful and always necessary to consider voice, ethics, and cultural protocols when examining whether research results are transferable or generalizable outside of the context from which they were generated. As Smith has discussed, this has not always been the case, and I do agree that Indigenous researchers and research participants have not always been treated with respect by others who might appropriate and misconstrue their words.

6.6 My Journey Through This Research

When I first began this study at the proposal stage, I struggled to choose an approach to research that made sense to the way I understand education and ethical inquiry, and also gave respect to the way my cultural and spiritual beliefs ground my

way of living each day. Others have thought about the roles of culture and belief in secular academia, and Newhouse (2017) comments on some of the challenges and benefits of bringing spiritual elements of Indigenous knowledge into higher education and research:

> They are seen as inappropriate for inclusion in an Enlightenment institution and as inimicable to the reasoned work of the academy. For us as Indigenous peoples as for many others, the spiritual facilitates our work. …The spiritual also reminds us of the ethics of our work, to approach it, as the Anishinaabe say, in a good way, and as the Haudenosaunee say, with a good mind. The spiritual also reminds us of our responsibilities as academics to tell the truth, to be conscious of our method, to be aware of our emotions and their effects, and above all, to do no harm. It is possible to do all these things without a spiritual foundation, as our Enlightenment colleagues will tell us. … Yet for us it would not be consistent with the idea of the good mind and would be asking us to forget who we are. … It would be asking us to continue the old assimilationist activities of the university. (p. 85 -86)

During my higher education, I had inferred from various conversations that straying from Western methodologies or ways of inquiry would result in the production of research that was somehow sub – par, and not suitably rigorous, valid, or otherwise acceptable in the eyes of academia. I had on several occasions also heard the quiet message, *sotto voce*, that anything touching on the spiritual was frowned upon in secular thesis work. Likewise, I received subtle notices that Indigenous methodologies and research methods were seen as anomalies within mainstream academic theory and practice, as for example my being asked to justify the inclusion of Elders as research participants, something that is fundamental to Indigenous research, and is clearly noted as such in article 9 of the TCPS2 (CIHR, NSERC, and SSHRC, 2014). Indigenous ways of knowing and learning were communicated as being marginal, uninformed sources

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that were not quite recognized as worthwhile approaches, if I intended to produce quality research that would be taken seriously by the academic *cognoscenti*. There was an *understanding*. Recently this subject came up for discussion within a group of Indigenous graduate students. One person recounted an encounter with this *understanding* and most of us there nodded our heads in acknowledgement; we too had witnessed commentary of this sort, sometimes largely unspoken and sometimes from other Indigenous people who had in some way internalized this understanding. I count myself as one who has personal experience with learning and unlearning this way of marginalizing Indigenous approaches to academic research.

I am a conscientious student, still working bit by bit to find my voice, and so in the early days of writing my study proposal, I quietly learned these lessons about the acknowledged authority of Western methodologies. I took them to heart, paying heed to the *understanding*. It was not easy and I struggled inside myself. I could see many examples of where the application of Western methodologies greatly informed a high quality of research. However, it was difficult imagining a better fit for my proposal than an Indigenous theory of lifelong learning, given the context of a qualitative study of Indigenous students set within an Indigenous place of learning, but who was I to question this?

I settled on using a Western qualitative approach, which I felt was appropriate, and would also lend credence to the elements of Indigenous methodology I felt absolutely needed to be included, but I did not feel totally satisfied and well about this choice, in mind, body, or spirit. I am forever grateful to the professor who quietly pointed out to me that an Indigenous methodology, complete with spiritual elements, could and

should stand on its own, not withstanding the fact that some academics were unfamiliar with this way of knowing or writing. It was nothing short of an epiphany for me that brought a new way of seeing (and much relief) to my path as a graduate student. My happiness was doubly so when my supervisor and advisor echoed these views and encouraged me to write about what was part of my culture and my learning journey.

I see all this as part of my *maskikimiskanow,* where I have moved forward, then stopped to retrace my steps as I revisited teachings along the circle of life as a student, and also as a member of my family, my culture, and my circle of communities. My family community has grown, and as mentioned before, I was very happy to meet two of my kinfolk within the group of student participants at NEC. This academic work has importantly presented me with many opportunities to learn more about graduate studies in education, and to gather valuable research skills.

Through this work I have also been graced with time to sit and listen and learn from the Elders. This has been an honour in every way; their teachings are a constant inspiration and illustration of how our ties to culture and language help to bring us forward, generation to generation. Younging (2018) acknowledges the special work of Elders and reminds us of "the internal cultural imperatives of Indigenous Peoples, and the ultimate responsibility of the current generation to be the link between the ancestors and future generations. Elders especially assume this ultimate responsibility, which requires knowledge, vision, observation, synthesis and communication" (p. 36). I say *ekosani* to the Elders for the work they do, and for kindly sharing their words and their time with me so that I might learn from them what they choose to teach.

6.7   On Future Paths

Although the interviews are finished, and the transcripts coded and analyzed, and the writing is done, this research will not be complete until it is shared meaningfully out in the greater community. With Indigenous methodologies, there is an emphasis on relationality, and the respect that this brings to the researcher – co-researcher/ interviewee relationship. A summary report is being compiled for sharing with the student, Elder, instructor and administrator participants within the case study community, including the NEC board of directors. Guidance has been sought from these participants as to how and when the material gathered might best be presented to their community, and at present arrangements are being discussed. For the students, and for the NEC, I will endeavour to present my discussion of data within an accepted format that acknowledges community protocols. It is important to me that my research shows how it focussed on hearing the stories of the students and making room for their voices to be heard, and how it is intended for the NEC community of adult learners, Elders, and educators who have shared their time and their words with me.

I am moved by the words of Borland (2006), as she counsels researchers to "open up the exchange of ideas so that we do not simply gather data on others to fit into our own paradigms once we are safely ensconced in our university libraries ready to do interpretation" (p. 319). The process of conducting culturally appropriate ethical research begins well before the interview and extends far after participants have shared their stories. Especially in Indigenous research, the respectful relationships that connect researcher and participant are often part of an ongoing acknowledgement of shared respect that extends beyond the study, as noted by Smith (1999). For my part, I

continue to attend cultural events at NEC, or drop by for coffee, and have maintained a casual connection with students I happen to see there or elsewhere within the city. I am honoured to be part of the extended community of this place and these people.

It is important to consider how this study may inform future research. Certainly more student voices are needed to inform about ABE experiences, and this is necessary across all Native and non-Native ABE programs. For example, at a recent conference on adult education, I was asked to consider increasing my student interviews to at least 100, in order to provide vital information for ABE assessment specialists. There is always room for more student voices. Culturally relevant curricula need to be brought in to more places of adult education. This would benefit both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. The Council of Ministers of Education of Canada (2012) has identified assessment and culturally relevant curriculum as two areas of concern in adult basic education. As pointed out by an NEC administrator/ instructor, and suggested by students, newer, more culturally relevant assessment materials are called for.

On the subject of retention, I would agree that more inquiry needs to be made on how we define and understand this term, especially with regard to the non-linear lifelong education model of the *maskikimiskanow* with its visiting and revisiting of teachings and directions. In addition, Gopalakrishnan's (2008) discussion of incremental achievement bears noting as an example of interpreting learner retention that connects with this concept. Administrator/ instructor R mentioned that one challenge for some adult learners and instructors is that K to 12 curriculum in an education degree, or in a higher learning curriculum may not specifically prepare a person to teach ABE, because of the

unique nature of the learners. I have remarked upon this as well, and as a graduate student in Educational Studies I have found it curious that there are few if any learning opportunities within the "adult education" department of the university that actually touch on the subject of ABE. Rather, ABE instruction and practicum is its own separate diploma program offered at an external institute. ABE is a vital link to higher education and greater employment opportunities; this teaching material would be a welcome addition and a valuable skill set to offer within graduate (or undergraduate) studies.

As a final mention about future directions for ABE research, I would state that the importance of Elder presence and participation in settings of ABE is vital, and that we should look beyond ABE settings, to see how Elders can inform and contribute to places of higher education, both Native and non-Native, as well.

6.8 Ekosani

As another way to say *ekosani* to the students and other co-researcher participants, I would like to conclude here with several words of inspiration that I was blessed to hear from them. *Tapwe*. These are their truths.

"This is the beginning. A pretty cool beginning. … It's too cool how it all finally falls into place once you start looking for it."

"I didn't want to actually go to school. Been so long, I'd be making a lot of mistakes, … somewhere along the way I decided 'that's it, time to make that dream a reality.' Someone said - just do it, what's the worst that could happen? You'll end up in school - so that's what I did, I ended up in school. Amazing!"

"I said the hell with it, and I came back. I said if I can get it, then great – that means I am not stupid. Walking out of here with that diploma, that was the icing on the cake"

"… he was the one who did the assessment, and he was very kind and gentle, talked very slowly, and I was like, okay, good. I got this."

"It looks like a test, but it's not really a test. It's just to determine where you are, to fit you in the best possible place for your education. Something like that. Because when I took it I felt bad that I wasn't smart enough, but people were like, no, it's just to figure out where you are. I have my family for [talking to about] that, but there are actually people out there who have family, and they don't have anyone to talk to about that."

"… anywhere I go there's always something to do with my [Native] heritage, so obviously in my thinking, that it's meant to be, you know, to help."

"Follow your dreams, like think about what you want, and what you bring to the table. It's a good time to get to know yourself."

"[going] forward to elevate my knowledge, my education. That's the way I'd put it."

"The moment I got in here it was a warm welcome. Everyone wanted to smile … they wanted to talk to me and ask where I'm coming [from], where I'm going, why I'm here, all that jazz."

"That's it. See you again. I don't think in any Native culture there's a word for 'goodbye'. That's weird. Ok, thank you, have a good day."

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Appendices

Appendix A   Student Consent Form

Department of Educational Studies
Faculty of Education
Education Centre at Ponderosa Commons
6445 University Boulevard
Vancouver B.C. V6T 1Z2
CANADA

Tel: 604-822-5374
Fax: 604-822-4244

Web: http://www.edst.educ.ubc.ca

UBC
a place of mind
THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

December xx, 2016[1]

Letter of Consent for Student

Research study title: Mindful Listening: Indigenous students speak about adult basic education placement assessment.

Who is conducting the study?

Francine Emmonds, Master's graduate student, UBC, is the **co-investigator of this research**, which is for her graduate master's degree in Educational Studies at UBC. Her thesis is a public document. Francine Emmonds is a member of the Ochekwi Sipi Cree Nation, and is a former student in adult upgrading at Saskatoon Community College. (femmonds@alumni.ubc.ca)

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[1] December 4, 2016

Dr. Shauna Butterwick, UBC Educational Studies (EDST) Department is Francine's research supervisor and is considered the **Principal Investigator**. She can be contacted via phone:(604) 822-3897 or email: (shauna.butterwick@ubc.ca).

Why are we doing this study?

Adult basic education and placement assessment are important subjects. We want to learn about how Indigenous adult learners experience ABE placement assessment. We want to hear their stories. We are honoured to be doing this study within the traditional territories of the local Indigenous Peoples, and we would like to acknowledge this.

Why are we asking you to take part in this study?[2]

You are being invited to take part in this research because you have completed a placement assessment for ABE within the past 4 years. We invite you to share your story of what your assessment experience was like. We want to listen to your story.

---

[2] December 4, 2016

What happens if you say, "Yes, I want to participate in this study"?

How is the study done?

If you say "yes", here is how we will do the study:

➢ First, before you sign this letter of informed consent, Francine will discuss the study with you and answer any questions you might have.

➢ During the study, Francine will meet with you twice, for about an hour each time, so we require about 2 hours of your time in total.

➢ The first meeting will be a one on one interview, and Francine will ask you to share with us some of your experiences of your ABE placement assessment. The interview will be about an hour long. Francine will ask your permission to audio record the interview. The interview recording will be transcribed into notes by Francine.

It is important for a student to have support and encouragement

during the assessment process, and it is also important to

respectfully acknowledge this support. At this first meeting, you will

also be invited to request the participation of a support person in

this study, someone who encouraged you during your assessment

process. If you ask your support person if he or she would like to

participate, and the support person says yes, then Francine will

first of all give a letter of information to the support person, to invite

the support person to be part of the study. If the support person

agrees to an interview, Francine will ask the support person to tell

his or her story of what it was like to offer support and

encouragement to a student who was going through the ABE

assessment process. This is entirely voluntary, and you do not

have to name or give the contact information of a support person, if

you do not wish to. In addition, the support person does not have to

agree to be interviewed. You will still be able to participate in the

study, whether you name a support person or not.

➢ At the second meeting, you have the opportunity to review and make changes to the notes of your interview. After you approve the interview transcriptions, the information will be studied as part of the project.

➢ The study results will be reported in Francine's graduate thesis and may be published in journal articles and books. A report on the results of this study will be made available to you, if you request it by adding your email or regular post mail address to the last page of this form.

Will being in this study help you in any way?[3]

➢ Taking part in this study might be of value to you as it is an opportunity to share your experiences. In the future, others may benefit from what we learn in this research.

---

[3] December 4, 2016

Will being in this study be harmful for you in any way?

➢ We do not think there is anything in this study that could harm you. In thinking about your previous education experience you may experience stress. To allow for this possibility, the contact information of a school-approved counselling service will be available to you at all steps of the research process. You do not have to answer any interview question if you do not want to, and you do not have to give a reason for not answering any question.

How will your identity be protected and your privacy be maintained? [4]

➢ Your confidentiality will be respected at all times. Information that discloses your identity will not be released without your consent unless required by law. All documents will be identified only by a code number; you will not be identified by name in any reports of the completed study. During the study, audio recordings and documents will be kept in a locked filing cabinet. Email correspondence will be encrypted and password protected. Only the Principal Investigator and the Co-investigator will have access to the research materials. After the study is completed, all research materials will be stored in a secure, locked filing cabinet at UBC by the Principal Investigator. After 5 years, all materials will be destroyed.

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[4] December 4, 2016

Will you be paid for taking part in this research study?

➢ Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. We will not pay you for the time you take to be in this study. However, we will pay the cost of your bus fare, parking, and childcare. At the end of the study, we will give you a thank you card and a small gift card to acknowledge your help with this research.

Who can you contact if you have questions about the study?

➢ If you have questions or concerns about what we are asking of you, please contact the Principal Investigator or the Co-investigator. The names and contact information are listed on the first page of this form.

Who can you contact if you have concerns or complaints about the study? [5]

➢ If you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and / or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the Research Participant Complaint Line in the UBC Office of Research Ethics at (604) 822-8598, or if long distance you can email RSIL@ors.ubc.ca or call toll free 1-877-822-8598.

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[5] December 4, 2016

Student Participant Consent and Signature Page[6]

Taking part in this study is entirely up to you. You have the right to refuse to participate in this study. If you decide to take part, you may choose to pull out of the study at any time without giving a reason and without any negative impact to you.

> ➢ Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.

> ➢ Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study.

_____

Student Participant Signature   Date

_____

Printed Name of the Participant signing above

_____

Email or mailing address if participant would like copy of completed study.

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[6] December 4, 2016

Appendix B Sample Interview Questions

B.1   Questions for Students

- Can you please share with me today, some of your own experiences with ABE? What was it like for you to return to school? How did you decide?

- When and where did you participate in ABE placement assessment?

- How would you describe your experience with ABE assessment? What is your story?

- What motivated you to attend an assessment?

- From your experience, what kind of purpose or role do you see placement assessment serving? How was it useful, or was it useful?

- Do you think your assessment experience made a difference to how your education plans will unfold/ have unfolded?

- If someone asked you what an assessment was, what might you say?

- Was there one person in particular who supported you in your return to school and through your assessment process? May I please ask to speak with that person, to hear their story of being a supporter of an ABE student? Is this okay with you?

- Do you have any questions or any comments that you would like to add?

B.2   Questions for the Student Support Person

- Can you tell me please, how are you connected to the student?

- How would you describe your role as a support person to the student?

- What is your story of being a supporter? What did you do or say to offer support and encouragement to this student?

- What does it mean to you to offer this support to a student in this community?

- Do you have any questions or any comments to add?

B.3 Questions for the Instructor / Administrator

- Can you tell me please, how do you connect with Indigenous ABE learners in general and with those who participate in the placement assessment process?

- What makes ABE learners different from high school or higher education students? What does the school need to know about the adult learners coming through its doors?

- How do you see Indigenous students going through the ABE placement assessment process? Do you think this a positive experience for them?

- Is intake assessment a doorway to higher education? Does this matter? Why?

- What is the importance of culturally relevant assessment? Where do you see it?

- Do you have any questions or any comments?

B.4   Questions for Elders

- Can you tell me please, how you understand the idea of education … of learning … of teaching … of assessment?

- How do you connect with the adult learners here?

- What makes ABE learners different from other students?

- Is cultural learning important for them? How does it provide a different kind of education, aside from the "reading and writing" that students learn here for their Dogwood?

- What do traditional oral teachings bring to the teaching and learning of adult education, or to education in general?

- Do you have any further questions or comments?