MAPPING THE LANDSCAPE OF INDIGENOUS STUDENT SUCCESS

by

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Abstract

Mapping the Landscape of Indigenous Student Success offers Aboriginal students' voices as they describe the factors that contributed to their academic success in School District No. 83 in British Columbia (BC). For too long, the focus of research has been on blaming Aboriginal students, families, and communities for Aboriginal students' lack of success. This dissertation challenges the "deficit" model in so much of the academic literature on Aboriginal student success in BC. While the 16 Grade 12 students profiled in the study offered their insights on the meaning of academic success—they went far beyond a simple definition of success. They expanded the idea of success to reflect relational approaches that include well-being and happiness as measures.

In keeping with the relational ethics practiced by the students' communities, the study's methodology was also heavily relational. Students, their families, and the community were invited to learn about the study before it began. Once the participants were recruited, they shared their stories in one-on-one-interviews, as well as in talking circles, two methods that fit with the model of reciprocity and equality I aimed to generate in my study. I then carefully unpacked the students' stories within a theoretical framework of decolonization and inclusive educational practices.

As a Métis researcher, I found it necessary to build my own identity into the research process in order to acknowledge my complex history with the Canadian educational system. The Métis Sash also guided the data analysis process, serving as a metaphor to understand the dark history of Canada's colonial education system, which has directly led to challenges facing Aboriginal students today.

I offer students' stories of success as a way to counter the deficit thinking in educational discourse around Aboriginal students in Canada. A family type relationship based on mutual respect and a positive relationship are key to students' learning. This is evident from the

students' reflections in my research. A teacher's role in building a supportive, caring relationship is a gateway to success.

I hope that these findings will help guide BC schools in becoming more inclusive and engaging for Aboriginal students.

Lay Summary

This study examines the experiences of grade 12 Indigenous students in an interior British Columbia school district. Through this study, students will have an opportunity to express their perceptions regarding their schooling, as well as broader experiences. The study will help shed light on Indigenous students' perception of success and how to create a more suitable learning environment. The results of this study may inform students, parents, Indigenous leaders, educational policy makers, and planners in school districts regarding decisions about how to support Indigenous learners. These results can also inform practices in a range of public-school systems.

Preface

This dissertation is an original intellectual product of the author, Jean Irene LaPierre.

The field work reported in Chapter 3-4 was covered by UBC ethics application number H13-03346.

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List of Abbreviations

AEEA	Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement
BC	British Columbia
FN	First Nations
FESL	Framework for Enhancing Student Learning
FNEC	First Nation Education Council
FNESC	First Nations Education Steering Committee
LEA	Local Education Agreement
NAHO	National Aboriginal Health Organization
RCAP	Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples
SABAR	Strategic Alliance of Broadcasters for Aboriginal Reflection
SD	School District
SUNTEP	Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission

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It's been a very long journey and along the way I met incredible scholars who inspired me and encourage me to keep going. I owe particular thanks to Dr. Amy Metcalfe, Dr. Tracy Friedel and Dr. Cash Ahenakew who tag-teamed their support for me. Special thanks to Autumn, my guide and source of encouragement.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this research to the memory of my mother Geneva (Jean) Hayden whose teachings of respect, resiliency and perseverance have served me well. But her most important teaching was to be proud of who I am – a “Half-Breed”.

Chapter 1: Introduction

> *"Despite the painful experiences Aboriginal people carry with them from formal education systems, they still see education as the hope for the future and they are determined to see education fulfil its promise." (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples,1996)*

The impetus of this research on Aboriginal students' success— or the lack thereof— stems from my own personal experience as a Métis person in the dominant mainstream educational system in Canada. I can speak firsthand regarding the issues and barriers that hindered my success as a young Métis student throughout my years of education.

As a young Aboriginal learner, as early as grade three, I felt invisible in the classroom for many reasons. I remember the lack of representation of Aboriginal people's stories and history in the curriculum. I was desperate for anything that might have reflected who I was as an Aboriginal student. Scholar Marie Battiste (Mi'kmaq) and James Youngblood Henderson (Chickasaw Nation), an international human rights lawyer, advocate and educator, (2000) state: "For most Indigenous students in Eurocentric education, realizing their invisibility is like looking into a still lake and not seeing their own reflections" (p. 88). The feeling of isolation which began at grade three continued throughout my educational experience, and I later became a high school dropout. Looking back on it now, I describe my situation as "fading out" of the system, since I trace my disconnect with schooling to grade three, but I did not withdraw from school until years later.

The struggles I faced as a Métis child within the mainstream educational system have driven my desire to create change in the educational system that will enhance opportunities for Aboriginal students to experience success.

Many years and life experiences later, as I began to work as a professional in the education system, I identified with Aboriginal students who were struggling personally, socially, and academically as I had in the mainstream educational system. As a result of my experiences, I have dedicated myself to serving Aboriginal students and families over the last thirty years. I have advocated for students and families, who much like my own family of origin, have struggled with issues of poverty, racism, and marginalization. Brown and Strega (2005) describe marginalization as referring to the context in which those who routinely experience inequality, injustice, and exploitation in their lives (p. 6). Suzanne Fournier and Ernie Crey (Sto:lo) (1998) remind us: "Still, the landscape is littered with mines that Aboriginal young people must somehow dodge in order to succeed: systemic racism and higher rates of illness, disease, suicide, substance abuse, school drop-out levels, and unemployment" (p. 305). Education is just one space among many where Aboriginal people struggle to overcome barriers imposed by Canada's deep colonial roots.

I did not return to an academic space until I was a single parent with a desire to be self-sufficient. I attended university but I still did not believe I would be successful. I earned my B.Ed. and shortly thereafter, my Master of Education in Curriculum Studies. While I was able to largely overcome my own complicated history with education, I believe that educational changes to benefit Aboriginal youth need to happen at the decision-making level. Unless there are more Aboriginal people in positions of influence, change in educational practices in the dominant mainstream institutions will not happen.

A Note about Terminology

Like Margaret Kovach (Cree and Saulteaux) (2009), I use the term Indigenous to refer to Indigenous peoples and culture, however, I use the terms Aboriginal to refer to the diverse group of peoples in Canada who are generally referred to under Sec. 35(2) of the Constitution Act of 1982. The term Aboriginal is a general label that pertains to all Indigenous peoples in Canada, including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit. However, "First Nations people" can be used to describe both Status and Non-Status Indians, although it generally applies only to those people who are members of a First Nation (SABAR n.d)

In general, Indigenous people in Canada prefer to be identified by their Nation today, so I indicate individuals' Nation the first time I refer to them in this study. For documents from earlier time frames, I use the terms Half-breed, Native, and/or Indian.

Statement of Research Problem

When I began my doctoral studies and started to review the literature relevant to Aboriginal students' success, I discovered decades of federal and provincial government reviews, reports, and policy papers that point out the failures of Aboriginal students. At the onset of my studies, I knew it was time to focus on a strengths-based, resiliency-based approach to this phenomenon. McMahon (2007) supports the notion of educational literature and discourse moving away from Indigenous student failure and notions of student deficit, towards strengths-based research. It is important to examine the critical issues that tend to hinder Indigenous students' success in the dominant mainstream educational system, rather than blaming students, families, and Indigenous communities for a lack of Indigenous student success. Indigenous researchers argue that the country's public schools continue to fail Indigenous students by delivering curriculum void of their history, culture, and Indigenous knowledge (IK) (Battiste,

2002; Cardinal, 1999; Kirkness, 1999). As long as schools continue to be framed within the dominant society's paradigm, what Battiste (2013) describes as "cognitive imperialism" will continue:

> When Indigenous knowledge is omitted or ignored in schools, and a Eurocentric foundation is advanced to the exclusion of other knowledges and language, these are the conditions that define an experience of cognitive imperialism. Cognitive imperialism is about white-washing the mind as a result of forced assimilation, English education, Eurocentric humanities and sciences, and living in a Eurocentric context complete with media, books, laws, and values. (p. 26)

The dominant educational paradigm could be an ongoing challenge for some Indigenous students to navigate, yet others appear to navigate the system successfully. Pidgeon (2008) states, to succeed in today's educational system, Aboriginal peoples need to negotiate a system that does not value their own epistemologies and cultures (p. 342). My investigation into this phenomenon is intended to inform students, teachers, Aboriginal leaders, educational policy makers, and planners regarding Indigenous students' success in the school system.

As an example of this I will share a short story. In August 2018, I accepted a position as Superintendent in a school district in northern BC. In my role as Superintendent, I sometimes volunteer to cover for a school principal while they are away from school for the day. Recently, I was covering at a local high school in northern BC with grades 9-12 and a population of over six hundred students, 60% of whom are Aboriginal. On that particular day, I had the opportunity to have a discussion in the office with three Aboriginal female students who teachers had reported were in the hallways and not in class as expected.

Once we were done discussing my concerns about them wandering the halls, I asked them, “How is it being an Aboriginal student in this school?” Based on the expressions on their faces, I would say they were surprised to hear me asking for their point of view. They responded by telling me there was a “pecking order” in their school and the Aboriginal kids were not the favored students. I asked, “Who are the favored students?” Their response, in unison: “The white kids!” These students may have felt that their presence was not even missed in their classroom. This story speaks to the need for research that foregrounds Indigenous students’ voices, thoughts and opinions, in order to make changes in our schools. At the same time this is happening, I have encountered many people within the school system who are doing everything they can to make school a better place for Indigenous students, however, more needs to happen. This dissertation presents suggestions for change steeped in a theoretical framework of decolonization and woven into a Métis Sash which reflects who I am as researcher practitioner. The Métis Sash will also be used as metaphor to frame the findings in this dissertation. The Métis Sash is one of the most recognizable symbols of the Métis people. These days, the Métis Sash is mostly used ceremonially, as decoration and to show pride in Métis heritage. The coloured strands of the Metis Sash served as a metaphor to frame my research, pulls together the stories of the students and to serve as a theoretical framework of decolonization.

This study was carried out in the interior of B.C. in the North Okanagan School District No. 83 in between 2014 and 2015, where the average Aboriginal student’s six-year completion rate is 66%, which is below the current provincial average of non-Indigenous students at 85% (BC Ministry of Education, How Are We Doing Report, 2016/17). The BC provincial report (2016/17) also reflects that Indigenous students across the province continue to be behind, also at 66%, with non-Indigenous students completing at 86% overall. The Aboriginal “How Are We

Doing?" report provides information about Aboriginal students' performance in public schools (Government of B.C.) The report includes demographic information, assessment outcome, graduation rates, special education rates, transitions data, children in care data and finally, a student learning survey results where students in grades four, seven, ten and twelve complete. This document provides an overall view of how Aboriginal students are doing in comparison to non-Aboriginal students in school district in B.C.

A recent study, *Improving Outcomes for Aboriginal Students* (2019) noted that the BC government established the Aboriginal Education Branch in 1972 to make Aboriginal students feel more welcomed in public schools. Since its inception, this branch funds local curriculum via per pupil grants for Aboriginal students (p. 11). This education branch eventually oversaw the Aboriginal Education Enhancements Agreements which followed in 1999, which will be described in more detail below.

Established in 1992, the First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC) works to advance quality education for all First Nations students in British Columbia and to support communities in their efforts to improve the success of First Nations students. FNESC's mandate does not include Métis, Inuit, or non-status students, even though the effects are sure to be felt by all Indigenous learners. This committee had the political support of the BC Chief Action Committee of the time which was made up of Chiefs across the province. FNESC recognized the dismal high school graduation rates among Indigenous students, not to mention the small percentage of those who pursued higher education. To support its mandate, FNESC promoted First Nations' control of education programs involving First Nations learners. Some of their activities included policy development, research supporting First Nations initiatives, and

community discussions. Most importantly, the FNESC made possible the presentation of a united First Nations voice in liaison with the government (FNESC, 2008).

FNESC decided that First Nations' students were failing, in part, because of the lack of an Indigenous cultural framework in schools. As David Coulter, John Wiens, and Gary Fenstemacher (2008) assert, "Differing cultural frameworks engender tensions, sometimes exacerbated by conflicts within a dominated educational framework" (p. 14). FNESC decided that students would be better equipped to succeed within the dominant society's structures if their culture, language, and traditions were acknowledged within the school systems.

In 1999, the first "How are We Doing Report" (HAWD - BC Ministry of Education) showed the disparity between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students' school completion rates, which were a dismal 36% of Aboriginal students compared to 74% of non-Aboriginal students. These findings led to the *Memorandum of Understanding* with Aboriginal leaders and education partners (Fleming, 2019), which I discuss in relation to the development of required Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements (AEEA).

In 1999, a provincial initiative, in conjunction with FNESC, required all school districts to consult with their local Aboriginal communities to develop AEEAs. An important part of these agreements includes recognizing Indigenous culture, languages, history, and traditions in relation to Aboriginal student success:

> Enhancement agreements establish programs that reflect the culture of local Aboriginal people and increase knowledge and respect for that culture among all students and staff. Agreements emphasize the integral nature of traditional culture, language and history to Aboriginal student development and success. (BC's Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements Brochure, para 3).

Through these Enhancement agreements, the government of British Columbia acknowledged that Aboriginal students have not been successful in the past, and that the students needed support in order to succeed in the future; maintaining their culture is integral to their academic success. In recognition of this problem, a Memorandum of Understanding between the BC Chiefs Action Committee, the Minister of Education, the Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs, the BC Teachers Federation, and the BC Chief Action Committee was signed in 1999, which included the following:

> We, the undersigned, acknowledge Aboriginal learners are not experiencing school success in British Columbia. We state our intention to work together within the mandates of our respective organizations to improve school success for Aboriginal learners in British Columbia. (BC Ministry of Education, 1999)

As stated at the outset of this section, in spite of over 15 years of AEEAs in BC, Aboriginal students in the province continue to suffer from a disparity in completion rates when compared with non-Aboriginal students.

However, Fleming (2019) highlights that the well-documented gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students has been narrowed substantially in British Columbia over the past 15 years (p. 10). This suggests the need to continue supporting the BC Ministry's Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement (AEEA) policies to help facilitate Indigenous student academic success. However, according to the Ministry, "Commencing in the fall of 2016, the Ministry will no longer be involved in the development of EAs, believing that school districts and Aboriginal communities understand their value and no longer need Ministry support" (BC Ministry of Education, 2016). I agree that school districts understand the process and practice

better than anyone else, but I worry about whether school districts in general would value AEEAs if the government is no longer providing support with this initiative.

The current educational debates in BC should be situated within the long-term discussions on Indigenous students' academic performance. I explore this topic in more depth in Chapter Two, but in the following section I signal some of the key reference points framing this discussion in Canada.

The Black Strand of the Métis Sash – the Dark History of Education for Indigenous Peoples

The Hawthorne Report (Part 2, 1966 and 1967)

A key landmark document in the history of Aboriginal education in Canada is the two-volume Hawthorne Report (1966 & 1967), entitled *A Survey of the Contemporary Indians of Canada*. The study was commissioned by the Federal Government to review the economic, political, and educational challenges facing Aboriginal people. According to Weaver (1993), the Hawthorne report was significant as the first nationwide social science survey of First Nations peoples' conditions in Canada (p. 79). This study was a survey of the lives of Indian people in response to the government's mounting concerns about the slow integration of Indian people, which were reflected in their poor social and economic situations. According to Newhouse (Onondaga) and Belanger (2011), "Aboriginal politics were examined through the lenses of the "Indian" problem and the "Canada problem" (p. 352) in this report. Therefore, the report posed Indigenous peoples as "problems" to be fixed.

What followed in the Hawthorne Report were one hundred and fifty-one recommendations directed mainly to the federal and provincial governments (Carney, 1983, p. 609). Hawthorne (1967) compared environmental factors such as housing, food, clothing, and objects that impacted the early socialization of Indian children to their non-Indian counterparts. From his perspective, these disparities impacted the early educational experiences of the Indian child (p. 110-111). He also examined what Indian and non-Indian families valued in terms of their housing, physical environment, clothing, and objects (p. 111). In addition, Hawthorne studied the impact of perceived psychological stimulation between Indian and non-Indian homes and families. He suggested how this environmental deprivation would affect the individual achievement of certain skills and abilities, which would, consequently, take the Indian child longer to learn (p. 114).

The Hawthorne Report rejected the overall idea of assimilation into mainstream society and suggested that educational integration was the better option for Indian people to secure an economic future equal to that of non-Indian people. Dickason (Métis) (2006) refers to the Hawthorne Report as reflecting the centuries old policy of assimilation, and instead presents a view of the Amerindians as "citizens plus" because of their original inhabitancy (p. 225). Rather than viewing Indigenous status as a deficit, Dickason presents status as an additional layer of belonging that should be valued by the Canadian government.

The Hawthorne study was clearly conducted through an ethnocentric lens, as it upheld non-Indian values as the values Indians should strive to achieve. For example, Hawthorne stated that middle class homes offer more generally nurturant conditions for growth and development than the self-contained milieu of reserves (p. 110). In spite of the report's ethnocentrism, Hawthorne (1967) recognized the difficulties Indian children have when attending a non-Indian

school system. For example, from the first day of school, Aboriginal children experience few successes and many frustrations as they are unable to articulate the confusion and misunderstandings that arise. Hawthorne (1967) acknowledged these negative experiences in the following way:

> To recount the experience as the child meets it, entry into school is a drastic break with past experience. Life has not been empty or meaningless for him and he has already learned a great deal before he arrives at the schoolroom door. His character has a certain orientation. It is not the same for all Indian children in all tribal groups and communities but for very many Indian children there are similarities of orientation and knowledge, ones which are different from what the school expects and requires. What the school wants the child to be like above all is the ideal middle-class Canadian child. (p. 6)

For these children, negative self-images emerge and are reinforced by non-Aboriginal teachers and peers (p. 115).

Hawthorne also reported that the learning materials in Canadian schools celebrated the missionaries and voyageurs but "no text mentions the positive contributions of the Indians in the opening of the eastern provinces nor the help they provided to the initial explorers as guides along the many rivers and watersheds" (p. 121). Hawthorne's report resonates with my own experiences in grade school, where I experienced a similar lack of positive Aboriginal stories in the curriculum. I would also point to an absence of material on residential schools in general, and Aboriginal voices in particular, on the harmful and ongoing impacts of residential schools on Aboriginal children and families. During my own elementary school years, our family was living in a small rural Manitoba town where a residential school was located; the students would be

bussed into the public schools in town. Looking back, residential schools were not spoken about even when they were literally in our own backyard.

In essence, the Hawthorne Report put forward recommendations regarding the education of the Indian child which supported integration. The report recommended that Indian Affairs ensure success by promoting that teachers and schools have the same expectations for both Indian and non-Indian students, while also considering the differences in the background of the Indian student. The report also suggested that teachers should learn about the culture of the Indian student by getting to know them. On language and curriculum, the report suggested that remedial courses should be offered to students, and that university courses should offer language courses as part of their teacher training. Finally, the report suggested that the curriculum should include more material on Indian language to guide the classroom teachers. The report supported the establishment of more on and off-reserve kindergartens, as well as study halls and tutorials on the reserve in the evenings. This last piece suggests a deficit that the "Indian" child needs more help to be integrated into schools.

The Hawthorne Report was a topic of debate among Aboriginal communities and scholars for years to come (Cairns, 2001; Carney, 1983; Newhouse & Belanger, 2011; Plant, 2009; Weaver, 1993). It also served as a catalyst for the federal government to move away from an assimilationist paradigm. The essential changes that occurred during the period after the release of the Hawthorne Report were the marked discussions of Aboriginal education involving all three parties: Aboriginal (mainly Indian) organizations, as well as both the provincial and federal governments (Abel, Dittburner, & Graham, 2000).

Indian Control of Indian Education

The next major milestone in Canadian-wide discussions on the education of Aboriginal children was a policy paper developed by the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), titled *Indian Control of Indian Education* (1972). This paper presented the principles of local control and parental responsibility as the basis for First Nations' jurisdiction over education (Abel, Dittburner, & Graham, 2000; Hare & Barman, 1998). This policy outlined that, until that moment, decisions on the education of Indian children had been made by anyone and everyone except Indian parents (AFN, 1972, p. 27). The AFN also asserted that integration had not worked in either Indian or white communities, which resulted in many problems. This policy paper recommended that the success of integration hinges on these factors: parents, teachers, pupils (both Indian and white), and curriculum (p. 25). It also noted that Indian parents and children require preparation and orientation to enable both to adjust and succeed in participating in public schools. The AFN posits the responsibility of integration by both Indian and non-Indians; Indian children need to adapt to being strangers in Canadian classrooms, but non-Indians also need to recognize the value of other ways of life by learning about Indian history, customs, and languages (p. 26).

In 1973, the federal government accepted the policy paper in principle as a national policy statement. This paper reinforces the federal government's responsibility for the education of on-reserve First Nations children. Within their response, the federal government transferred administrative control of education to Aboriginal communities. This policy suggests that parental responsibility and local control include cultural and language programs, as well as teacher training on the historical contributions of Indian people in the curriculum. These policy changes are not much different than what is being asked by Indigenous people today, many years

later. I agree with Hare and Barman (1998) that this policy ultimately proved ineffective in enabling Aboriginal communities to govern their own education.

Aboriginal Education Policy in the 1980s and 1990s

Fast forward years later, looking specifically at developments in the field of education, and the provincial and territorial governments dominated the discourse in the 1980s concerning Aboriginal peoples (Abel, Dittburner, & Graham, 2000). However, the comprehensive four-year study on Aboriginal education entitled *Tradition and Education* (AFN, 1988) represented a turn, as it advances an argument for Indian control in terms of authority. It reaffirmed First Nations' rights to education in terms of self-government (p. 40). Once again, this report reiterated the importance of cultural relevance, curriculum, languages, staff, and early childhood programs, as well as the need for special education, life skills, counselling, transportation, adult, and post-secondary education (AFN, 1988). This list of policy suggestions is not much different than what was in the report of *Indian Control of Indian Education* (1972) sixteen years earlier. There is a striking continuity in the problems Aboriginal people were facing in education across the decades.

A study commonly referred to as the Sullivan Report (Royal Commission on Education, 1988) was commissioned in British Columbia to examine and report on K-12 education. The focus was not uniquely on Aboriginal students, however, the report generated concerns specific to Aboriginal students. For example, the Sullivan Report acknowledged:

> Few educational matters engaged the Commission's attention as much as our consideration of what is required to provide a sound education for First Nations children. Past experiences with residential schools, current socio-economic problems, the mixed

> record of our school system in providing successful experiences, and the appallingly low rate of graduation are sad chapters in a tragic story. (Royal Commission on Education, 1988, p. 57)

The Sullivan Report's (1988) recommendations bear noting since they are similar in nature to what the RCAP will also recommend a decade later.

> (1) improving home/school liaison, particularly throughout the early years of schooling;
> (2) orienting all children, through formally developed curriculum units, to the history, culture, status, and contributions of First Nations people
> (3) reducing the impact of an inflexible graded school system upon Native children and allowing, in the early years of schooling, for a continuous, incremental pattern of learning;
> (4) initiating means of assisting Native peoples in the preservation and promotion of their heritage languages, including their incorporation into classroom experiences;
> (5) discouraging any evidence of racial bias on school transportation and premises;
> (6) deliberating appointing or enlisting the volunteer support of competent Native adults as role models for all children;
> (7) encouraging teachers to improve their knowledge and understanding of Native cultures, heritage, and traditions through individual initiative organizational support;
> (8) providing continuing counsel to Native students to prepare them for living and working in a multicultural society. (p. 58)

These studies highlight a consistent message to education policy makers: that there has been very little movement towards creating equitable schools for Aboriginal students.

Moving forward to the next decade, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) (1996) called for a public inquiry to investigate and document the totally devastating impact that residential schools had on Aboriginal peoples (Hare, 2011). The RCAP was established in April 1991, and it submitted its five-volume report in October 1996.

> The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples can be regarded as a watershed for a number of reasons. First, it involved hundreds of thousands of people across Canada expressing their commitment to the idea that all Canadians need to hear the stories of Aboriginal peoples. (Long & Dickason, 1998, p. 5)

The RCAP (1996) reviewed government policy with respect to the Aboriginal peoples of Canada—the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit— among other things, emphasizing the need for reform to achieve equitable academic opportunities for Aboriginal students. The RCAP's landmark reviews documented the struggles and challenges facing Indigenous peoples, and created several recommendations, with the following common themes:

- Aboriginal control of education;
- Courses in Aboriginal studies, history, language, and culture;
- Training and hiring more Aboriginal teachers;
- Inclusion of Aboriginal parents, elders, and educators in the education of Aboriginal children;
- Special support programs for Aboriginal students related to counselling, substance abuse, remedial education, and retention programs;
- Funding of support services for students in post-secondary studies;
- Aboriginal language instruction from pre-school to post-secondary education;

• The resolution of federal, provincial, and territorial jurisdictional conflicts over responsibilities; this could be resolved by the federal government recognizing its funding responsibility for Indigenous education;

• Training Aboriginal adults for teaching, para-professional, and administrative positions in education;

• More emphasis on pre-school and kindergarten education. (RCAP, para 27)

The themes that emerged in the RCAP report remain salient in today's discussions, and they are a focal point of my reflections and discussion throughout this study.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Other Policies

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) was initiated in 2008 as part of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA). One of the elements of the agreement was the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada to facilitate reconciliation among former residential school students, their families, their communities, and all Canadians (Government of Canada). It was intended to educate the general population about the truth of the shared history in Canada and in order to lay the foundation for reconciliation on a national scale.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada report, entitled *Calls to Action* (2015), addressed a substantial number of issues, ranging from child welfare, education, language, culture, health, and justice. Due to the focus of this dissertation on the K-12 education system, below I include Sections 62 & 63 of the report in their entirety, as they are directly relevant to my study's focus on education. These sections state:

62. We call upon the federal, provincial, and territorial governments, in consultation and collaboration with Survivors, Aboriginal peoples, and educators, to:

i. Make age-appropriate curriculum on residential schools, Treaties, and Aboriginal peoples' historical and contemporary contributions to Canada a mandatory education requirement for Kindergarten to Grade Twelve students.

ii. Provide the necessary funding to post-secondary institutions to educate teachers on how to integrate Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods into classrooms.

iii. Provide the necessary funding to Aboriginal schools to utilize Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods in classrooms.

iv. Establish senior-level positions in government at the assistant deputy minister level or higher dedicated to Aboriginal content in education. (Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, Volume One, Summary, p. 238)

Over the last number of years, the BC Ministry has worked on renewing their overall curriculum to include Indigenous ways of knowing. This ideal is supported in the BC *Graduation Program Implementation Guide* from December 2018. The BC Ministry has been in the process of renewing the curriculum with a view to having Indigenous worldviews, perspectives, and content thrive in all curricula (K-12). According to *Aboriginal Worldview and Perspectives in the Classroom* (2015) Aboriginal perspectives will be embedded into all parts of the curriculum in a meaningful and authentic manner. This includes extending Aboriginal perspectives into the entire learning journey (p. 4). As in all new things, there are educators who buy into the ideal early on, those who do so reluctantly, and, sadly, those who do not support this at all. From my experience in two BC school districts, much of this implementation falls on the shoulders of the Indigenous Education departments within school districts. For the integration of

Indigenous worldviews in the curriculum to be successful, it is vitally important for all educators to embrace this aspect of the renewed curriculum. The report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) emphasized a similar message, as stated below:

> The Commission believes that to be an effective force for reconciliation, curriculum about residential schools must be part of a broader history education that integrates First Nations, Inuit and Metis voices, perspectives, and experiences; and builds common ground between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, p. 238)

The section below focuses on the K-12 school systems in Canada which are the focus of this study. In the particular school district in which this study was undertaken (No. 83), the Board of Trustees of the district was one of the first to adopt the TRC's Calls to Action and Implementation on February 9, 2016 (SD 83 Board Meeting Minutes, p. 3). The Implementation Committee jointly created an implementation plan with the First Nations Education Council and educators to implement their interpretation of the calls to action. The Calls to Action (2015) include:

> 63. We call upon the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada to maintain an annual commitment to Aboriginal education issues, including:
>
> i. Developing and implementing Kindergarten to Grade Twelve curriculum and learning resources on Aboriginal peoples in Canadian history, and the history and legacy of residential schools.
>
> ii. Sharing information and best practices on teaching curriculum related to residential schools and Aboriginal history.

iii. Building student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect.

iv. Identifying teacher-training needs relating to the above. (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, p. 239)

The foundation of the recommendations is a series of calls for action directed to the federal government in all areas: funding, legislation, institutional development, education, and policy. These calls are intended to redress past harms and begin to move forward toward reconciliation (Absolon, 2016, p. 52). Aiken and Radford (2018) identified the TRC's Calls to Actions as an "elaborative framework with 94 action areas that focus on building awareness of the truths documented by the TRC, correcting injustices through policy and practice, building cultural competence, and ensuring human rights are respected" (p. 42). However, as Wotherspoon (2006) noted, teachers admit to tensions around implementing policies such as those elaborated in the TRC recommendations. They see their role as delivering the curriculum in a manner that employs a "universal standard," independent of students' cultural heritage, particularly if they teach math and sciences (p. 686). Wotherspoon (2006) states that this perspective is in contrast to counterparts who consider it essential to adopt social and pedagogical accommodations to promote inclusion of Aboriginal people. For example, Wotherspoon (2006) suggests that, "school systems that seek to improve education for Indigenous people and other minority groups must establish mechanisms that simultaneously balance the teacher's occupational interests with the community needs and desires" (p. 692). The challenge of creating respectful learning environments lies with the educators, who participate in the racism of omission when teaching curriculum devoid of the shared history of Canada.

Decolonizing the colonial system of education begins with being willing to implement the TRC Calls to Action. As the TRC (2015) recognizes:

> Fully implementing this national education framework will take many years but will ensure that Aboriginal children and youth will see themselves and their cultures, languages, and history respectfully reflected in the classroom. Non-Aboriginal learners will benefit as well. Taught in this way, all students, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, gain historical knowledge while also developing respect and empathy for each other. (p. 239)

I believe that the government—in conjunction with the school district leadership, teachers and Indigenous nations, and communities— is responsible for deconstructing and decolonizing the education system in order to move forward in a respectful way.

Statement of Purpose

Early on in my EdD program at the University of British Columbia, I saw the value in studying Aboriginal student success as it relates to District No. 83's Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement (AEEA). By focusing my study on the school district where I worked at the time, I have been able to draw on my role as the District Principal of Aboriginal Education, as well as a researcher, in examining the implementation of the AEEA in School District (SD) No. 83.

In order to understand the real impacts of the AEEA in my district, the students' voices and experiences are central to my research. This study explores graduating Grade 12 Indigenous students' understanding of the factors that contributed to their academic success within the context of North Okanagan – Shuswap School District No. 83. Success will be generally defined

as students completing a BC Dogwood certificate; however, throughout this study, the students have an opportunity to articulate other working definitions of success, academic or otherwise. I chose to focus on students because it is important to examine their perspectives on the critical issues that help or hinder their success in the dominant mainstream educational system. A great deal of this analysis has been situated within a deficit model that blames students, families, and Indigenous communities for the lack of Indigenous student success. In the meantime, this research often ignores that schools continue to be framed within the dominant society's paradigm. This research will examine the phenomenon of Aboriginal students' success in SD No. 83, which can inform students, teachers, Aboriginal leaders, educational policy makers, and planners when making decisions regarding Indigenous educational policies.

Research Questions

There are some qualitative examinations of British Columbia's AEEAs with a focus of including Indigenous students' voice and their conceptions of success. By exploring Indigenous students' experiences, this research will contribute to the literature on Aboriginal students' success. To understand why some Indigenous students are more successful academically than others, it is important to hear their voices and their school experiences. What are students' understanding of success, and how can we use these understandings to contribute to overall academic success for all Aboriginal students? This study will examine the daily realities and lived experiences of Indigenous students by exploring their meanings of academic success, as well as the triumphs and the challenges they face. My goal in exploring these narratives is to consider how students' experiences can inform best practices for implementing future AEEAs and school practices.

Subsequently, my overarching research question is as follows:

What are Indigenous students' perceptions of the factors that contribute to their academic success for Grade 12 in North Okanagan School District No. 83?

The sub-questions are as follows:

- *How do Indigenous students define success and how does their understanding coincide (or not) with the Ministry of Educations' definition of success?*
- *What supports do students have at school, home, and community that promote success?*
- *How does the AEEA in North Okanagan SD No. 83 support students' overall success?*
- *What are some of the challenges faced by Aboriginal students in SD No. 83?*

My role as District Principal of Aboriginal Education at the time of this research gave me unique access to students in order to engage in discussions with them regarding the topic of success. My research is one way I am enacting my passion for creating conditions that support Indigenous student success. I agree with Agee (2009) that research questions are only a beginning point in an ongoing inquiry process (p. 433).

For decades, researchers and educators have focused on the "failure" of Indigenous students and, in the process, have recognized that the schools themselves fail Indigenous students (Battiste, 2002; Kirkness, 1999; Wishart, 2009; Wotherspoon, 2006). However, the issue of "success" remains consequential and warrants further investigation, most specifically through a different lens: the students'. One of the research studies undertaken on the topic of Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements (AEEA) is a graduating paper by Budai, Deighan, Matthew, and White (2012), which investigates the experiences of educators involved in the

implementation of the AEEA in the Burnaby School District. However, this paper does not include the experiences of students. Further investigation into students' experiences and voice on academic success is warranted for the following reasons:

- Indigenous students' perspectives will help us understand students' academic success.
- The lens of the academically successful students might provide recommendations for promising AEEA programs.
- Their insights can contribute to filling the gap in research literature and further studies.
- This may lead to potential design and implementation changes at the school level, which, in turn, will create an environment for Indigenous students that offers greater opportunities for academic success.
- Taken together, this proposed research and its findings could lead to improvements in the future developments of AEEAs and the implementation process of AEEAs.

In the next section, I will provide background on the history of Indigenous identity in Canada to give the broader context for this research. Then I will move on to a deeper exploration of Métis identity to situate my own positionality in relation to the study.

Indigenous Identity in Canada

To illustrate the history of Indigenous peoples, I will use the imagery of the stained-glass window designed by artist Christi Belcourt (Métis). The window was commissioned by the government of Canada to commemorate the legacy of former Indian residential school survivors

in the context of Prime Minister Stephen Harper's apology to survivors in 2008. The glass window was installed in October 2012 directly above the west door of Centre Block. On November 26, 2012 the window was presented to the Speaker of the House in a dedication ceremony on Parliament Hill.

Belcourt (2012) describes her stained-glass piece as the story of Aboriginal people with our ceremonies, languages, and cultural knowledge intact. Through the darkness of the residential school era comes an awakening sounded by a drum, an apology spoken to the heart, hope for reconciliation, transformation and healing through dance, ceremony, languages, and resilience to the present day. She describes the piece in these words:

> *Giniigaaniimenaaning* means looking ahead, but as it's been explained to me by Mide Kiwenzie, it also contains a deeper meaning that it means *everyone* is looking ahead towards the future for the ones yet unborn.
>
> At the bottom left, you will see the ancestor smokes in the sacred lodge. From the west (represented by the button blanket motif) to the east (represented by the sky dome motif), our ceremonies, languages, and traditional knowledge were intact. This section represents the time before residential schools existed. Important ceremonies marking the transition from childhood to adulthood, such as the strawberry fast, were taught and practiced. Harvesting blueberries, learning about medicines and knowledge of plants and animals were passed from one generation to the next. Beadwork and beautiful artwork, reflecting our pride, adorned our clothing and sacred items. The roots represent connection to the earth and to our ancestors. It is expected that, when rendered in glasswork, the colours and white/clear glass circles, or crystals, will give the bottom section an ethereal feel as they will glow from the darkness.

For generations to come, this permanent commemoration of the legacy of Indian residential schools and of the historic apology will encourage Parliamentarians, as well as visitors to Parliament, to learn about the history of Indian Residential Schools and Canada's reconciliation efforts.

Belcourt's piece reminds us that one cannot examine the current state of affairs in Canadian public education without reviewing the historical impact of colonization, as well as ongoing colonial practices in relation to Indigenous people. I will briefly describe the history of Canada's Indigenous peoples from first contact with Europeans, and then present an overview of the revival of Indigenous rights over the past several decades. Specifically, I will focus on how the Indigenous people of British Columbia have reclaimed their voice in their children's education.

Indigenous Peoples' History on Turtle Island

Prior to contact with Europeans, the Indigenous peoples of Canada were comprised of several independent, self-reliant nations. Ottmann (2009) states that, prior to European contact, there was an established way of life for First Nations people. This life included a political, economic and spiritual structure that promoted balance (p. 100). The history of Indigenous peoples in Canada in the period shortly after contact tells of a balanced nation-to-nation relationship, in which the economic needs of both groups were filled. Europeans traders—principally the British and the French—wanted furs and the First Nations peoples wanted the goods Europeans could provide (Brizinski, 1993). The First Nations leaders that the early Europeans encountered were bold, respected, and accountable to the people and the Creator (Ottmann, p. 102). The Europeans initially depended on First Nations communities for survival, and they eventually made treaties in many parts of what is now Canada in exchange for the land.

However, this interdependent relationship soon changed as Europeans began to exploit the land and resources, and then to open the doors of these lands for settlement. The introduction of disease and widespread epidemics devastated Indigenous populations, thereby making the task of exploitation significantly easier. In his book, *Clearing the Plains* (2013), Daschuk argues:

> … that the spread of foreign diseases among highly susceptible populations comprised a tragic, unforeseen but largely organic change. Those people who place human agency and greed and expansion of colonial powers at the centre of the decline of indigenous nations in the western hemisphere are missing half of the story; the role of biology cannot be ignored. It was a fundamental principle in the history of indigenous America. (pp. xv-xvi)

The next chapters of Indigenous history are filled with accounts of assimilation practices and policies targeting Indigenous people, with the aim of dismantling their societies and cultural practices and gaining access to Indigenous lands.

According to Frideres (2008), "the first effect of colonization was the destructive impact on the social and cultural structures of Aboriginal groups. Indigenous peoples began to lose their political and cultural autonomy, as nations and as peoples" (p. 318). The Indian Act of 1876 (Government of Canada, 2003), which was legislated by the federal government of Canada, changed the lives of First Nations people because all-encompassing limitations and regulations were imposed (Ottmann, 2009). The Indian Act of 1876 effectively controlled all aspects of First Nations peoples' lives and was instrumental in the government's assimilation practices. Newly created reserves isolated the people from the rest of society; traditional forms of Indigenous government were outlawed, and traditional ceremonies and spiritual practices were banned. Frideres (2008) continues by stating that Aboriginal social, religious, kinship, and economic

institutions were ignored, rejected, and replaced by Euro-Canadian institutions. In addition, colonization involves the interrelated processes of external political control and Aboriginal economic dependence (p. 318).

Residential Schools

The establishment and functioning of the residential school system is one of the saddest chapters in the history of Indigenous peoples in Canada. As the TRC (2015) explains:

> For over a century, the central goals of Canada's Aboriginal policy were to eliminate Aboriginal governments; ignore Aboriginal rights; terminate the Treaties; and, through a process of assimilation, cause Aboriginal people to cease to exist as a distinct legal, social, cultural, religious, and racial entity in Canada. The establishment and operation of residential schools were a central element of this policy, which can best be described as "cultural genocide." (Introduction)

One of the primary functions of the Canadian residential school was to get rid of the "Indian problem" through separating children from their traditional home life, which would hopefully lead to the permanent dislocation of children from Aboriginal cultures (Keegan, 2005 p. 6).

John Tootoosis (Cree), who headed the Federations of Saskatchewan Indians in the late 1950s and 1960s, gave the following statement about the residential school experience:

> When an Indian comes out of these places it is like being put between two walls in a room and left hanging in the middle. On one side are all the things he learned from his people and their way of life that was being wiped out, and on the other are the white man's way which he could never fully understand since he never had the right amount of education and could not be a part of it. There he is, hanging in the middle to two cultures and he is not a white man and he is not an Indian. They washed away practically

> everything an Indian needed to help himself, to think the way a human person should in order to survive. (as cited in Dickason, 2006, p. 228)

Tootoosis' explanation shows how devastating the residential school experience was for Indigenous students, who were left without a clear sense of their identity. However, the story does not end here, nor does the impact of these assimilation practices on the education of Indigenous people.

Returning to Belcourt's description of residential schools (2012), as told through the glasswork, we pick up with the middle section of the stained-glass story:

> This section of the window represents the "sad chapter" of the residential school era, where more than 150,000 children were forcibly removed from their homes and often subjected to unimaginable and horrific abuses. As Prime Minister Stephen Harper stated in the Statement of Apology on June 11, 2008, the objective of the residential schools was to "remove and isolate children from the influence of their homes, families, traditions and cultures." The children shown here are taken from historical photographs, with artist renditions of other children. The building, rendered from a photograph of the Shubenacadie Indian Residential School, is included because often these buildings represented the institutionalized system of abuse and assimilation. Children were not permitted to leave and, therefore, the buildings became their prisons. The lines that cross over the children represent the silencing of the children who were unable to speak about the abuses they were enduring.

Generations of families were torn apart, and their language, cultures and traditions were severed by the imposing will of the dominant society, in particular through the residential school policy. Paquette and Fallon (2010) elaborate on the damaging effects of the residential school

‘experiment.’ Among the harms they mention are the further marginalization of First Nations’ languages and cultures, the subordination and dependence of First Nation peoples, their loss of respect for self and others, the destruction of a sense of belonging and kinship, and a collective loss of responsibility as autonomous human agents (p. 16). The intergenerational impact of this era haunts Indigenous people to this day, as they struggle to rebuild their individual and collective lives in a homeland that was once solely theirs. Hare and Barman (1998) explain the ongoing harms of the residential school system this way:

> Though Aboriginal education has undergone many transitions, the problems and issues that characterize it in the past remain. To understand the current issues facing Indigenous people, we must begin with the history of schooling. Residential schools represent a horrific, yet important era. Designed to assimilate Indigenous children into mainstream society and remove any traces of their language and culture, these schools failed dismally … Measures of educational success can be seen in the increasing numbers of Indigenous students graduating … but the legacy of residential schooling endures. (p. 331)

The devastating intergenerational effect of residential schools continues to be felt in Indigenous people and communities everywhere. Hare and Barman (1998) continue:

> The family unit is the center of Aboriginal society and serves as the primary medium for cultural continuity. Any disruption to the family inevitably results in disruption to the community. Many of the problems endemic to Aboriginal communities, such as family violence, alcoholism, suicide and poverty, have their roots in assimilation and colonialism, which residential schools have played a major role. (p. 343)

Belcourt’s stained glass window continues in the top left panel, with the breaking of the silence and the beginning of the stories being told. She (2012) describes:

In 1990, Phil Fontaine, then Grand Chief of the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs, and later National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, became one of the first Aboriginal leaders to speak publicly about the abuses he suffered as a child at residential school. The shattered glass represents the breaking of the silence in the 1980s as survivors from all over Canada began to speak openly about what happened to them at the schools. The broken glass also represents the shattered lives, shattered families and shattered communities that resulted from the government policy of forced assimilation. The drum dancer sounds the beginning of the healing. The circles moving up and out from behind the drum represent the transformation that governments and churches made, from taking initial positions of denial, to acceptance, and finally to acknowledgement and admission, paving the way for an apology. The snow falls and the moon glows from a northern sky. The dove with the olive branch brings an offering of hope for the beginning of reconciliation and the renewal of the relationship between Aboriginal peoples and the rest of Canada.

While they are only a small part of the whole, some stories of residential school experiences reflect a happy time of learning for Aboriginal youth (Weber-Pillwax, 2001). In fact, many years ago, I had the opportunity to work in the primary classroom of an Indigenous educator in an inter-city school in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, where the population of Aboriginal students was over ninety percent. The teacher informed me that, if not for her education at Lebret Indian Residential School, she would not have become a teacher. When I met her, I promised myself that I would share the story of her circumstances to show how her education benefitted her and the countless children she taught in the years that followed.

I would be remiss if I did not include a brief overview of assimilation practices aimed specifically at Métis people, as a way of acknowledging the diversity among Indigenous people. Below I explore this unique piece of Indigenous identity in Canada.

A History of the Métis People in Canada

In Christi Belcourt's stained glass window, she acknowledges other Indigenous peoples, such as the Métis and Inuit, who also had been affected by the residential school system. In the top panel of the stained-glass, she (2012) explains in a hopeful manner:

> In this panel, symbols representing Inuit, First Nations and the Métis Nation are featured alongside the iconic maple leaf. Canada, as represented by the maple leaf, is shown among the Aboriginal icons as a way to symbolize the hope expressed on that day by the Aboriginal leaders in their official response on the floor of the House of Commons. On behalf of all Aboriginal people, Indigenous leaders graciously accepted the apology from the Prime Minister.

Métis are distinct Indigenous peoples, with their own histories, languages, and cultures. (Racette, 2004) believes "the term Métis (May-tee) as it is currently pronounced and broadly applied was seldom used historically. Métis, (Meh-tis), Mechif (Meh-chif), Metif (Meh-tif), Bois Brules or Half-Breed were used synonymously"(p. 26). These terns she suggests was used as racial categories and indicators of social class. Sherry Farrell Racette (Métis) (2004) states that a collective Métis identity appears to have been well established in Canada by the mid-eighteenth century (p. 26).

The colonization of Métis peoples is embedded in the establishment of the Canadian Settler nation. The Métis people were born historically from the union between the European fur traders and Indigenous women, creating the emergence of distinctive Métis collective in various places and at various times across the country. During early contact, children of these unions were either raised in one culture or the other–either Indigenous or European; however, soon thereafter, a new nation in the Red River area formed from the blend of both cultures, dating back to the late 17th century. Métis identity pertains to descendants of people who were "mixed" shortly after contact. In other words, folks are not Métis if they are the products of similar unions today (personal communication with Tracy Friedel, 2019). Today, the term Métis is used in a broad sense to identify all mixed-blood (Native and European) people and sometimes non-treaty Indians (Payment, 1990, p. 19).[1] However, according to Vowel (2016), she suggests that there is a difference in the use and interpretation of the term Métis. For example, she states that the big *M* Métis are the descendants of the Red River Métis where a new nation was born, and a new culture was created. On the other hand, the small *m* Métis are generally a mix race that are not culturally based (p. 38). I'm proud to say that my family is the big M Métis where for generations, Métis married within the Métis cultural group.

The Métis people's experiences were similar to the First Nations peoples in that they were a displaced people with inherited experiences of exploitation, racism, and marginalization. However, unlike Canada's other Indigenous peoples, overall the Métis people today do not have a land base to call their own, with the exception of eight provincially legislated Métis settlements

[1] As Dickason (2006) reminds us, the Indian Act applies only to 'status' Indians, that is, those who are registered and listed in the official band rolls (p. xii).

in Alberta. The Canadian government created laws designed to undermine the rights of the Métis people and to prepare the way for the incoming European settlers. The Métis people were dispersed during experiences such as the Red River Resistance of 1869/70 and the Resistance of Batoche in 1885. Many Métis people are caught between two worlds, not welcomed by the white community but also not eligible to live on reserves. The name "Road Allowance People" was coined by white government officials and land owners to describe the dispossessed half-breed and Métis people who, having nowhere to go after the Resistance of 1885, built their homes on unoccupied Crown lands that had been set aside for highways or roads (Campbell, 2010, p. 4). In the aptly named *Half-Breed*, Maria Campbell (Métis) describes how half-breed families were removed from immigrants' lands and they subsequently drifted to the road lines and Crown lands where they built cabins and barns (Campbell, 1973).

Bonita Lawrence (Mi'kmaq) (2004) contends that the determination of who was considered "Indian" and who was considered "half-breed" represent colonial categories steeped in the Indian Act of 1876, which categorized Indigenous people at the time in relation to the settler state. For example, Lawrence explains how different member of the same family chose various categories, so some chose to identify as "half-breed" while others "became" Indian through the colonial process of identification (p. 86). Lawrence (2004) and Chartrand (Métis) (2006) explain how the poverty and racism directed at Métis people led to further economic and social marginalization. Racette (2004) states that while many Métis families and communities have been affected by profound poverty and racism throughout the twentieth century, they have continued to survive, renewing and regenerating their identity, especially in the last three decades (p. 2).

Half-breeds and Métis were excluded from formal education due to federal government policy, which left many families lower in the class structure. The Royal Commission on Indigenous Peoples (1996) describes the education of Métis people as follows:

> From early contact, education for Métis people emphasized religious studies, with some basic arithmetic and writing. Métis people in some areas attended residential schools, and in the northwest, the sons of affluent Métis received the formal education of the privileged, often being sent to eastern Canada or England for higher education. Missionaries provided limited instruction to the children of Métis people who followed the migration of the buffalo. However, most Métis in rural and northern areas had little access to more than primary school until the 1950s. (Volume 3, p. 406)

Often Métis people needed to break the cycle of poverty and lack of educational opportunities by moving into white communities. Sealy and Lussier (1975) confirm that the attitudes of some communities they moved into were extremely negative, which they demonstrate through excerpts from a rural municipal council meeting published in a local weekly newspaper. These excerpts reveal concerns about treaty and non-treaty Indians with large families moving into their villages and trying to establish residence. It further describes that the town council decided to inspect their homes and possibly take action to remove them from the village (p. 151).

My early life experiences in rural Manitoba were situated in this context, alternating between outright and more subtle hostility towards Métis people living in white communities. Education was not a welcoming space for me. I struggled to adapt to the expectations of white educational institutions. Below I share my personal history and how it has led me to carry out the present research study on Aboriginal education in Canada.

Background/Positionality: A Proud Half-Breed

- *"To be of service to others is our sacred gift to the next generation" (unknown).*

This dissertation is an extension of my experience of being unsuccessful in a K-12 public school more than fifty years ago. In this personal reflection, I will use the terms “half-breed” and “Métis” interchangeably to reveal the shift of identities I experienced due to the colonial acts of the federal and provincial legislation pertaining to Indigenous peoples. My family was decidedly half-breed. As Howard Adams (Métis) (1999) declares, the term half-breed had been alright to us in our exclusive ghetto, where only we lived and associated. As with Adams’ experience, the term carried little shame or humiliation in our circle. In fact, in my family, the term half-breed was used with pride, as my mother would say, “you’re half-breed, be proud of it,” or “a half-breed never gets stuck,” when referring to figuring out a dilemma. In her dissertation, Racette (2004), follows the lead of Maria Campbell (Métis) and Harry Daniels (Métis), who propose a respectful rehabilitation of the term “Half Breed”, which is not only found in historic documents, but was and continues to be a commonly employed term at the ‘grassroots of community and conversation’ (p. 34). The term half-breed only became negative when used by others outside the community in a derogatory manner, leading us to often want to hide our identity and heritage.

Many half-breed and Métis families were affected by poverty and suffered racism stemming from years of colonization and lack of access to schooling. My mother did not talk about her lack of education, but she told us once that she went as far as grade three. Later, as an adult, I realized that education had not always been an option for half-breeds or Métis during the 1930s, around the time when my mother and her sibling were of school age. I did not realize that she was barely literate. I remember questioning why she signed our report cards with different

versions of our last name, and this question would upset her. Little did I realize that since our mother's family did not own land and, therefore, did not pay taxes, their children were not eligible to attend public schools.

Over sixty years ago, when I was a young child, my half-breed family was living outside a white rural community. Back in the 1950s and early 1960s in these communities, it was unusual to find non-Indigenous single parent households, much less a young Indigenous woman with six children living amid their white community. Despite my mother's lack of formal education, she managed to raise six children independently, by working hard with sheer determination. She ensured that we attended school and she did her best to get us to do our homework. It was a challenging task in my case, considering how disengaged I was from school at an early age.

In addition, this community was not very welcoming to Indigenous people. They complained ardently to child welfare services of the time that our mother was not fit to raise her children, and that her children should be removed from her care. Fortunately for this young family, my mother's parents, who were a strong half-breed family, also lived nearby, thus providing us with a haven within a predominately racist environment. As a family, we narrowly escaped the "60s scoop," which is explained by Pierce, Hemingway, and Schimidt (2014) as:

> Through the 1960s, Aboriginal children were apprehended in large numbers, prompting Patrick Johnston (1983) to coin the phrase "the sixties scoop." Social workers were key players in this activity. In some provinces, like Manitoba, social workers developed an active system of adoption that involved moving Aboriginal children to adoptive homes in the United States, especially to jurisdictions like Louisiana (and specifically New Orleans). (p. 216)

Dickason (2006) further explains this phenomenon of out adoption as closely related to the residential schools. The policy of placing 'neglected' or 'disadvantaged Aboriginal children with white families, either as adoptees or in foster care temporarily gained strength as residential schools fell into disfavor, Dickason continues:

> The **'Sixties Scoop'**, as it was popularly known, took off in Canada in the 1950's and reached its peak during the 10960s and early 1970s. In all, 15,000 Aboriginal children were adopted into non-Native families, 3,000 from Manitoba alone… These children were scattered far and wide after being removed from their families, many of them ending up in the United States and some even further afield. (p. 229)

Within my family, the youngest child was a little half-breed girl, quiet and shy. From a very young age, she knew she did not belong in the white people's community or school. What the teachers taught did not resemble anything familiar in her home or family. The little girl felt invisible when history was being taught because she could not see her family reflected in the stories. This little girl was often uncomfortable, especially when the teachers would teach things, she knew to be untrue about "natives," especially when people referred to her community as "savages." Years later, the same little girl eventually left school. I was this little girl.

As a young Indigenous learner, as early as grade three, I felt invisible in the classroom for many reasons. Most of all, I remember not hearing or seeing Indigenous people's stories and histories, or anything that reflected who I was as an Indigenous child. Battiste and Henderson (2000) state: "For most Indigenous students in Eurocentric education, realizing their invisibility is like looking into a still lake and not seeing their own reflections" (p. 88). The feeling of isolation continued throughout my educational experience, and I became what is commonly

referred to as a high school dropout. I now view it as being a “a push out,” perhaps as early as grade three.

The findings of Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr, and Godber (2001) help to explain my own experience when they state that “the process of disengagement begins early in a child’s school career and is a gradual process of increasing feelings of alienation or lack of participation and identification in the school setting” (p. 5). I clearly remember entering grade seven and deciding that I was no longer going to be half-breed due to the racism I experienced at elementary school. I decided I was going to be French-Canadian because I could easily pass with the last name “LaPierre” —or so I thought. I did not think that my external appearance would give me away. However, when my mother found out I was trying to pass myself off as French-Canadian, I was in deep trouble; she reiterated her half-breed pride in a not-so-pleasant manner.

As a child, I also noticed that my mother did not come to the school, and that she generally avoided any school events or celebrations. I did not understand her reluctance at the time, but rather internalized that perhaps education was not so important after all. By the time I reached grade nine, I skipped more school than I attended. The logical consequence at the time was to repeat the grade. At this time in the 1970s in Manitoba, students were streamed into high school according to their academic record, as well as school officials’ perception of the student’s ability to later attend university. As a result of having to repeat grade nine, I was streamed to a technical/vocational high school because I was deemed “not likely to attend university.” My lack of connection to school continued, which led to an early school departure.

For me, the answer to my quest for education was to leave the K-12 system, only to enter the post-secondary system as an adult learner. I received my Early Childhood certificate by taking courses part time at a local community college. I secured work in a preschool environment

for several years. I continued to take college courses in a variety of areas, still believing that I was not capable of succeeding at university studies. This changed when I became a single parent and I needed to become self-sustaining. I was fortunate to be accepted into the Saskatchewan Urban Native Teachers' Program (SUNTEP) funded by the Gabriel Dumont Institute. I successfully completed an undergraduate degree in education while working full time. During this time, I was employed by the Saskatoon Catholic school system as a Native home/school liaison worker advocating for Aboriginal students and families. This was the beginning of my passion to create systemic change for Aboriginal students, a passion that is one of the reasons for this research. Shortly thereafter, I began my teaching career while continuing my quest for knowledge. I completed my Masters' program with a focus on Aboriginal education. My educational journey was one of healing the wounds of a colonial education system and breaking the cycle of marginalization. I return to the words of Belcourt (2012):

> In the middle panel, which represents present day, the young mother embraces her baby in a traditional moss bag. The child is back with her mother, representing children being raised by their parents and the breaking of the cycle of abuse. Within this panel are the words "I love you" and "I love you my child" written in Cree, Inuktitut, Anishnaabemowin and Mi'kmaq. The child's grandfather sings a traditional song signifying the restoration of songs, dance, ceremonies and languages.

At the beginning of this research, I was a District Principal of Indigenous Education in a school district in British Columbia. I have had the opportunity to collaborate and co-create our latest Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement (AEEA). It was through this experience of consulting with Elders, parents, students, and educators that I realized how important it is to give

everyone input into a valued guiding document. As a researcher, I feel it is my responsibility to give voice to the students' experiences because it is *their* success we are attempting to promote.

I include my personal story here to situate myself, by connecting my current research to my lack of success in an educational setting, as this provides the underlying motivations behind my research. Years later as an adult, while driving across a reserve on the plains, I saw a billboard which read, "to be of service, is our sacred gift to the next generation." This statement resonated with me because I truly believe it is my responsibility to make education a better experience for the generations of Indigenous children to follow than it was for me. This motto guides the current study. I end as I began, using Christi Belcourt's analogy of a stained-glass window. I refer to the bottom right of Belcourt's stained glass window, which depicts the circle of resilience:

> Returning to the bottom, the circle is complete. The grandmother sits in the lodge smoking her pipe for her grandchildren. Ceremonies are being practiced and traditional knowledge about medicines is being taught. There is hope and a new respect for Aboriginal cultures within Canada as Aboriginal people are witness to their own strength and resilience.

The stained-glass window is a depiction of the history, of the residential schools and their impact, but also on the ongoing strength of Indigenous people and students, as you will discover in the next chapters.

Thesis Structure: Chapter Outline

Chapter One introduces the research and an overview of the research questions. It briefly addresses my personal story and the impetus for this research, which continues to drive my passion to work in the field of Aboriginal education. I also undertake an examination on

Indigenous students' relationship to academic success with an overview of 50 years of recommendations from a variety of federal and provincial reports (Hawthorne, 1966 & 1967; RCAP, 1972; TRC, 2015). For the most part, these recommendations have not been heeded or implemented on the provincial and federal levels. It is my intention to offer up students' perspective to help define a decolonized framework from a strength-based approach. I provide a historical context for residential schools, driven by an analysis of Christi Belcourt's (2012) well-known glass work in the Canadian Parliament building.

Chapter Two contains a review of the literature on the challenges Aboriginal students encounter within the Canadian and other Eurocentric school systems. The literature suggests ways to address the challenges that inhibit their success. The educational context reveals the impact of wrongdoing to Indigenous peoples historically, which translates into generations of Aboriginal people struggling within the school systems today.

In addition to a brief review of Canada's educational policy history in relation to Aboriginal peoples, the literature review examines multiple theories about why Aboriginal youth drop out of school. The early literature blames students and families for the school failures, without acknowledging the history recounted above or examining the institutions themselves. The literature review closes with research suggesting a move away from the "victim" approach to one which examines school environments and, more specifically, standard teaching practices.

Chapter Two introduces the theoretical framework of decolonization using the colours in the Métis sash as a metaphor to outline the history of and lack of success of Indigenous students, and the searching for answers, the stories shared by the participants in this study and the hope for the future.

Chapter Three examines the storytelling methodology used in this study, which reflects an Indigenous approach that uses conversations and stories to examine the factors which contribute to Aboriginal students' success. Stories hold the key to Indigenous traditions, rituals, and social ways, passed on messages about loyalty, respect, responsibility, honesty, humility, trust, and sharing (MacLean & Wason-Ellam, 2006), qualities that help students in their daily lives. This chapter explains the study's approach to ethics, guided by the six principles of ethical Métis research as outlined by the National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO) (2010). After outlining the general methodology of storytelling and sharing circles, this chapter will describe how the methodology was applied with the students of School District No. 83 in this study.

Chapter Four offers analysis and findings centered on the students' stories, especially the factors to which they attribute their success. Based on the themes that emerged from this inductive analysis, I suggest strategies that schools, and classroom teachers can implement to further Aboriginal students' success using decolonization as a central concept.

In Chapter Five I offer the conclusion to my study, which includes my answers to my overarching research question, as well as the sub-questions. I discuss the implications of this research for Aboriginal education policy, and I offer recommendations that can be adopted at the classroom, school, and provincial levels, with special relevance for the province of British Columbia using the Métis Sash as a metaphor to a decolonized framework.

Conclusion

The Ministry of Education of British Columbia (2015) recognizes the need for curriculum to weave in Aboriginal worldviews and perspectives, as illustrated below:

> As part of its broader education transformation process currently under way, the BC Ministry of Education is embedding Aboriginal perspectives into all parts of the curriculum in a meaningful and authentic manner. This includes extending Aboriginal perspectives into the entire learning journey. From Kindergarten to graduation, students will experience Aboriginal perspectives and understandings as an integrated part of what they are learning. (p. 4)

However, I argue that this is only the starting point. As this introductory chapter illustrates, there is an overall need for a shift from the dominant worldviews to decolonization of education, which includes Aboriginal history, language, and culture as a way of moving forward.

My research offers ways for educators to integrate stories, as these hold the key to the traditions, the rituals, and the social ways of Indigenous peoples. These stories pass on messages about loyalty, respect, responsibility, honesty, humility, trust, and sharing–all those qualities that help students navigate the relationships in their daily lives (MacLean & Wason-Ellam, 2006). From my perspective, school staff need to examine their own pedagogical practices. In his keynote presentation in SD No. 83 in 2017, Dr. Leroy Little Bear (Blood Tribe) challenges teachers to examine their belief systems and to ask who should make the move to change: student or teacher? His answer, of course: the teacher.

Chapter 2: The Red and White Strands of The Métis Sash and the Hunt for Answers: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Chapter Two presents a review of relevant literature that examines the role of several factors that influence Indigenous students' experiences in school, including: the role of teachers, Indigenous students' experiences (in and out of school), cultural socialization, inclusive education programs, and reflections by teachers regarding race, privilege, and inequality. To date, many studies have attempted to identify why Indigenous students are not academically successful. The literature is filled with possible suggestions, mostly from the deficit model thinking, which lay blame on students, parents and poverty (Payne 2005; Whitesell et al., 2009). This chapter will examine several theories, highlighting those that offer constructive suggestions about how to make schools a better experience for Indigenous students in order to increase their academic success.

In order to address the obstacles to Indigenous students' success in Canadian public schools, I will frame my critique of the school system using a conceptual framework of decolonization and inclusive education, which I detail later in this chapter.

Literature Review

It is necessary to begin this study by looking at how Indigenous student success has been defined in academic literature. Several theoretical frameworks examine the concept of Indigenous student success, as well as possible barriers to their success within schools. In the following sections, I discuss research on the following topics: cultural socialization, cultural discontinuity, race, privilege, inequality, culturally inclusive education, and decolonization.

Quite often, the question is asked, “Why do kids drop out of school? What can be done to increase completion rates?” Black (2003) contends that the focus is often on blaming students for lack of motivation due to factors such as lousy parenting, addictions, and bullying; however, her research strongly suggests that school officials and teachers need to shine a bright light on their own practices. She further argues that schools need to reexamine their practices of suspensions and expulsions, which leads students to believe they are not wanted or accepted, pushing them closer to leaving. Ruck and Wortley (2003) cited in their findings that “… disciplinary problems, such as suspensions, are a factor contributing to the high incidence of early school leaving among minority students” (p. 186). A stronger critique of public schooling is needed.

> British Columbia has an overall graduation rate of 84%. Graduation rates of Indigenous students are on a steady increase (up 19% from a decade ago) but are not yet on par with their counterparts. According to a report from the BC Ministry of Education, 65.9 per cent of Indigenous students complete high school within six years, which marks a 2.1-per-cent increase over the previous year. (CBC News Report, 2018)

Due to the focus of this study on Aboriginal student success, it is important to review related literature that provides a framework for both substantive and theoretical understanding regarding Indigenous youth schooling experiences. The following section examines multiple authors’ understandings of Indigenous student success, or lack thereof, and the possible barriers created within schools. Such barriers include poverty (Payne, 2005; Wishart, 2009), Eurocentric curriculum (Kanu, 2002; Wotherspoon, 2006), lack of inclusive pedagogy (Betts & Bailey, 2005; Kirkness, 1999), cultural socialization (Yatta, 2002) and inadequate teacher training (Kanu, 2005; Schick & St. Denis, 2003). Ledoux (2006) suggests the same issues and problems have

been identified, and essentially the same recommendations are made in the literature over the past thirty years.

Dominant education systems are slow to change, despite educational reports suggesting change is required to create change in the success rate of Aboriginal students

Another decade later, the RCAP as described in a B.C. Antiracism Research draft report (2016):

> …reiterated the myriad ways in which public schools fail their Aboriginal students, including: racism; the use of biased standardized assessments; guiding Aboriginal students away from rigorous academic programs; the absence of Aboriginal perspectives in the curriculum; a lack of Aboriginal teachers, staff, administrators and decision-makers; and inadequate funding. (p. 53)

The BC Auditor General's Report (2015) listed eleven recommendations for the Ministry of Education to implement such as collaborating with boards of education, superintendent and Aboriginal communities to develop a system-wide strategy to close the gap and accountabilities if they do not. This report also suggests a curriculum that addresses colonization of Aboriginal peoples in BC and to create monitoring and assessment indicators of Aboriginal students' progress and to use data to inform decisions.

I agree with Kirkness (1999) that initiatives in Aboriginal education have resulted in conservative changes because educators have continued to rely on theories and practices of the dominant society. The lack of meaningful change is supported by tacit and overt racism among educators who are unwilling to challenge their own ideological positions.

Research indicates that the graduation rates for Aboriginal learners are lower due to the complex interplay between historical, cultural, and interpersonal factors that militate against Aboriginal people staying in school. Racial prejudice, frustration, and isolation contribute to the

lower academic performance of these students (Makokis, 2000; Schick, 2010; Wishart, 2009). Wishart (2009) shows that Aboriginal students continue to struggle with poverty, homelessness, drug use, addictions, depression, and suicide.

According to Statistics Canada (2006), for the average student (not necessarily Aboriginal), the early indicators of risk of dropping out of high school are related to the following issues:

a) Family background - 28% of *dropout*s live with a single parent and live in households with lower incomes.
b) Abilities - in particular, the average reading scores of dropouts (one measure of achievement) were significantly lower.
c) Self-perception – 25% of dropouts demonstrated lower levels of self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-mastery, compared to 15% of other youth.
d) Aspirations – 59% of dropouts had aspirations to attend college or university; however, one-quarter of those who dropped out reported that a high school diploma or less was their highest goal.
e) Behaviour – only a small percentage of dropouts (28%) had been "kicked out of school," which reflects that not all dropouts engage in problem behaviour.
f) Characteristics of peers – a lower proportion of dropouts reported that their friends felt that completing high school was important; however, their friends also engaged in negative behaviours.
g) Engagement and school climate – this include engagement in both the academic and social life of the school; dropouts reported being much less engaged, and less likely to be engaged, in out-of-school activities such as sports, arts, or volunteer activities.

h) Working while in high school – working during high school has been linked to poor academic performance, disengagement from school, and, eventually, dropping out. Students who worked less than 19 hours per week were least likely to drop out compared to those working 20 or more hours per week.

i) School climate – this refers to the school environment, such as school discipline policies and whether or not it is considered to be a friendly and respectful place. 49% of dropouts viewed their school environments in a less positive light, and felt discipline was not fairly handled. Many dropouts felt their school was not a respectful or friendly place.

Statistics Canada's Aboriginal Peoples Survey (2012) has switched their language from *dropouts* to completers versus leavers and list the following information:

- Off-reserve First Nations people, Inuit, and Métis completers and leavers had different personal, family, and school environment characteristics during their last year in high school. For example, higher percentages of completers reported having good grades, while leavers skipped classes or arrived late more often. Completers participated more often in extracurricular activities and also read books more frequently, than did leavers.
- Higher percentages of completers reported having many close friends with high education aspirations—friends who thought that completing high school was very important and who planned further education beyond high school.
- In terms of family characteristics, higher percentages of completers had a mother and/or father with at least a high school education, while leavers were more likely to have siblings who dropped out of school.

- More completers had parents who were involved during their last year in school—parents who spoke to or visited their teachers, attended a school event, or participated in school activities—although this was only true among off-reserve First Nations people and Métis.
- Higher percentages of completers felt safe and happy at their school. Completers were also more likely than leavers to report having received support from school staff during their last year in school. (p. 6)

In addition, according to Statistics Canada (2012), racism, bullying, alcohol, drugs or violence were problems at schools. It was also noted that leavers were more likely than completers to perceive this as a negative school environment (p. 20).

In addition to the current challenges *dropouts* face, the Aboriginal student population also deals with added complexities based on historical injustices against that still impact reality today. In particular, the legacy of residential schooling continues to resonate strongly today as it did over twenty year ago when Hare and Barman (1998) stated:

> To understand the current issues facing Aboriginal people, we must begin with the history of schooling. Residential schools represent a horrific, yet important era. Designed to assimilate Aboriginal children into mainstream society and remove any traces of their language and culture, these schools failed dismally … Measures of educational success can be seen in the increasing numbers of Aboriginal students graduating … but the legacy of residential schooling endures. (p. 331)

The intergenerational and devastating effect of residential schools continues to be felt by Aboriginal peoples and communities everywhere.

However, Schick (2010) argues a major reason is that the problem of inequality is often misdiagnosed as individual problem facing a particular group and not a systemic issue of social

and political proportions (p. 47). Wishart (2009) utilizes the framework of critical pedagogy to point out the need to situate formal learning in students' cultures; critical pedagogy provides a way of seeing an unjust social order by revealing the problems faced by young people living in impoverished conditions (p. 470). Wishart (2009), Silver et al. (2002), and Powers et al. (2003) suggest that barriers can be removed by: listening to students and involving them in the decision-making process, providing a safe school environment, offering program flexibility, ensuring quality learning opportunities for all, and providing opportunities for parental involvement. For example, Chodkiewicz, Widin, and Yasukawa (2008) offer suggestions for productive forms of community and parental engagement in supporting positive educational experiences and outcomes for Aboriginal children in schools.

Betts and Bailey (2005) apply complexity theory as a lens for observing educational phenomena by questioning western linear assumptions concerning learning. They compare western viewpoints with Aboriginal understandings that focus on community-based holistic learning and teaching. Betts and Bailey examine the lack of cultural congruence in public schools' work with Indigenous students by pointing out how the linear reductionism of western schooling often fails students who "do not fit." They suggest that we need to move beyond discourse about inclusion to change schooling so that diverse peoples find familiarity and comfort. Betts and Bailey (2005) suggest:

> Despite calls for differentiated instruction and inclusion education, based on diversity of student learning abilities and cultural background, respectively, curriculum is still dominated by a perceived universal, objective and ordered list of facts that every student must learn, which is rooted in Western metaphors concerning the nature of education. (p. 422)

In my experience in the dominant education system as a student, teacher, and principal, schools have the tendency to put forward the same rhetoric as stated above, with little movement towards a more inclusive school system. Betts and Bailey (2005) suggest that the "best of intentions are not sufficient" (p. 430) when developing cross-cultural and multicultural curricular recommendations. They advise us not to forget non-western ways of looking, lest we continue to colonize education, rather than embrace inclusive educational practices.

Below I review literature that suggests ways teachers can adapt their practice to better meet the needs of the diverse worldviews and learning styles of the students in their classrooms.

Teachers and Culturally Relevant Schools for Aboriginal Students

The conventional interpretation of the low achievement rates of Indigenous students often implies that the fault lies with Indigenous individuals, their families, and their communities. For example, in his study of teachers in Aboriginal communities, Wotherspoon (2006) finds that teachers blame the lack of educational and social success among Aboriginal students on family problems and parental disregard for education (p. 686).

However, other research increasingly contends that the school system—not the Indigenous student or their culture—must be fixed. According to Ledoux (2006), "the poor performance of Aboriginal students can be attributed to two main factors: the lack of culturally relevant curriculum and the implementation of teaching strategies which do not reflect Indigenous worldview" (p. 265). Wotherspoon (2006) notes that teachers admit to the tension around implementing policy, since they see their role as delivering the curriculum in a manner that employs a universal standard independent of students' cultural heritage, particularly if they teach math and sciences. Wotherspoon (2006) suggests that school systems seeking to improve education for Aboriginal people and other minority groups must establish mechanisms that

simultaneously balance the teacher's occupational interests with the community's needs and desires (p. 692). Parhar and Sensoy (2011) offer culturally relevant pedagogy as one solution, describing that "the principles of culturally relevant pedagogy offer both optimistic and concrete guidance to educators who seek to improve the academic and social achievement of culturally minoritized students" (p. 192).

I argue that in addition to cross-cultural awareness training for educators, it is necessary to create learning opportunities to challenge educators' assumptions, thereby creating space for inclusive education. Non-Aboriginal English and Social Studies high school teachers have recounted in a personal conversation that they are not comfortable teaching Aboriginal content in the curriculum because they are not Aboriginal. Their assumptions were challenged by questioning their teaching of the Holocaust even though they are not Jewish or teaching about the internment of the Canadian Japanese though they are not Japanese. What is the difference when teaching Aboriginal history? They failed to offer a compelling response to these questions. I reason that the barriers created by the school systems, are compounded by teachers' lack of cultural awareness and willingness to change teaching practices.

Centering the Experiences of Aboriginal Students: School and Non-School Factors

Several authors (Ledoux, 2006; Silver, Mallett, Greene, & Simard, 2002) argue students do not need to be fixed; rather, the educational system needs to change. These authors suggest the Canadian educational system marginalizes Indigenous students, as it does not reflect their cultural values and daily realities. Silver et al. (2002) examine Indigenous students' school experiences by interviewing students attending school in Winnipeg's inner city, as well as

interviewing students no longer in school. The authors claim the experiences of those interviewed reveal:

> …cultural/class/experiential divide between the Indigenous students and their families on one side, and the school system on the other side. The life experiences and cultural values of many Indigenous students and families differ significantly from what they experience in schools run by non-Indigenous, middle-class people who advance the values of the dominant culture. (p. 3)

Schools continue to marginalize Aboriginal students who do not see themselves in the hallways or curriculum of the schools. It is as if they are required to drop their culture, language, and history at the door when they enter the school. These authors cite the conclusions of the RCAP (1996) that for Aboriginal youth, "Education as they experience it is something removed and separate from their everyday world, their hopes and dreams (Vol. 3, p. 482). Silver et al. (2002) conclude that students encounter the cultural/class/experiential divide between themselves and the schools daily, in a host of ways. Many students respond to that divide, consciously or unconsciously, by resisting, and often rejecting, the school system.

Kanu (2002) agrees that public school systems fail Indigenous youth, who often leave the school system without the skills, cultural capital or knowledge necessary to be successful in Canadian society. Others (Hermes, 2005; Powers, Potthoff, Bearinger, & Resnick, 2003) explore the problems of cultural discontinuity that lead Indigenous students to drop out of school. Lovelace and Wheeler (2006) describe cultural discontinuity as "the lack of cohesion between two or more cultures" (p. 303). They go on to describe some of the ways this is experienced in the school setting specifically:

> Upon entry into school, differences in the functional use of language among culturally and linguistically diverse children have been found to account for the discontinuity they experience. Because children come to school socialized to language in culture-specific ways, the discourse structure and communication styles used by many children from culturally and linguistically diverse populations is incongruent with that of the teacher's style of interaction. (p. 303-309)

Bazylak (2002) and Auld (2007) express similar concerns about contrasting worldviews between students and the school system. They highlight the lack of engaging curriculum available to Indigenous youth. Auld (2007) argues that British Columbia's AEEAs are making a positive shift, whereby schools can better accommodate the Indigenous learner, rather than "fitting" Indigenous learners better into the school system. According to Auld (2007), the trend of AEEAs across B.C. school system is to "increase sense of belonging" as a goal, which is thought to move away from the deficit model instead of explaining lack of academic success; this approach focuses what is causing the achievement gap instead (p. 4). Auld (2007) noted that out of the thirty school districts that currently had AEEA's, fourteen of these districts had "sense of belonging" as an important goal (pp. 28-29) which focuses on the school's responsibly to create a welcoming environment as opposed to focusing on the student's lack of attendance as an example. Her study, which drew on culturally grounded theory, explored the relationship between the "sense of belonging" in school and school achievement in terms of school hiring practices, instructional practices, and ensuring students' and staff's understanding of historical contexts (p. 5).

Interestingly, Bazylak (2002) notes that most research tends to focus on the source of the problems Indigenous students face in schools, rather than what helps the students to achieve

success. Bazylak (2002) examined high school students' perceptions of success using sharing circles as his methodology. This method provided an opportunity for five students in his study to discuss their experience and to highlight positive factors in their own success, thus emphasizing the importance of identifying what students require to be successful. This shift toward exploring Indigenous students' perceptions (Antone, 2000; Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai, & Richardson, 2003; Cook-Sather, 2002; Donovan, 2015, Hare & Pidgeon, 2011) by creating a venue for students' voices through qualitative research and policy studies is long overdue. I view my own study as a contribution to this growing literature.

Through qualitative studies, other authors (Bazylak, 2002; Kanu, 2002; Melnechenko & Horseman, 1998; Powers et al., 2003; Silver et al., 2002) recount factors that students identify as contributing to their success. Melnechenko and Horseman (1998) focus on grades six to nine. Through informal group interviews, Melnechenko and Horseman (1998) identify factors that contribute to student success in the middle years. Discussion of these factors provided teachers with an opportunity to enhance educational practices for Indigenous middle years students in Saskatchewan schools. Bazylak (2002) added to this research through interviews with students that revealed the importance of access to supportive and flexible teachers, including Indigenous teachers as role models. Kanu (2002) suggests a key factor is to address intricate connections between culture and students' learning through more inclusive teaching practices. Powers et al. (2003) cite school climate as a crucial factor in students' success. Other similar themes emerge in the literature about Indigenous student success, such as schools creating a sense of belonging by creating a welcoming and caring environment (Auld, 2007; Bishop, 2008; MacIver, 2012).

In addition to school-related factors in relation to Indigenous student success—such as culturally relevant curriculum, accommodation of different learning styles, and an environment

that is responsive to culturally diverse students— several authors outline the impact of non-school factors (Bazylak, 2002; Kanu, 2002; Melnechenko & Horseman, 1998; Powers et al., 2003; Silver et al., 2002;). Melnechenko and Horsemen (1998) observe the importance of family support, positive friends, adequate family income, and community involvement, while Bazylak (2002) recounts discussions with students that revealed factors such as spirituality and drug and alcohol avoidance. Silver et al. (2002) conclude that parental support, high expectations, relationships with teachers, and a positive school climate all improve students' chances of success.

Research and teaching practice can complement each other, leading to better attention to the needs of diverse learners in schools throughout Canada. Attention to the role of non-school factors in students' success also increase our chances of addressing the challenges facing Aboriginal students in a holistic way.

Cultural Socialization and Inclusive Education

For over fifty years since the 1960s, policy and schools have attempted to refurbish what was originally taken away from Indigenous peoples through residential schools – their culture, loss of language and lack of inclusion of their history in the school curricula. Ledoux (2006) observes Canada's policy as changing from one of assimilation by segregation to one of assimilation by integration. Greenway (2002) as cited in a B.C. Teachers Federation (BCTF) Aboriginal Education publication, *Aboriginal education beyond words: Creating racism-free schools for Aboriginal learners* states when residential schools began to close in the 1960's public schools were totally unprepared for them. She continues:

> The subject areas lack Aboriginal representation, the histories/cultures of Aboriginal peoples are trivialized or omitted. Aboriginal people are portrayed in subservient or passive roles, Aboriginal stereotypes are perpetuated and reinforced, or a European standard is implicit in points of view and representation. Until the curriculum reflects some Aboriginal content, Aboriginal students will continue for find school meaningless. (p. 4)

Graduation rates have increased over the years, but Indigenous people continue to lag in education attainment rates. Perhaps as schools strive to include some of the many suggestions made over the years—such as Aboriginal content in the curriculum and creating schools that reflect Aboriginal cultures with teachers who are engaging parents—these changes make a difference for Aboriginal students. There is a shift in literature that suggests a move away from cultural discontinuity, which is explained in Ogbu's (1982) hypothesis as follows:

> It is generally thought by anthropologists that some groups do well in school because their cultures are congruent with school culture. Thus, frequently poor school performance of some minority-group, immigrant, and lower-class children in the United States and other contemporary industrial societies, as well as the academic difficulties of native populations in colonial territories and developing nations, are attributed to cultural discontinuities. (p. 290)

St. Denis quotes Ledlow (1992), who states that this conceptualization has resulted in that claim that 'cultural discontinuity' between the school and the Aboriginal family and community—the inability of Aboriginal students to make adequate cultural adjustments—causes high levels of school failure for Aboriginal students. However, there is ample evidence that racism and classism are equally, if not more, compelling reasons for these levels of school failure.

On the other hand, Kanu (2002) examines the sociocultural theory of cognition, in which children develop thinking, communication, learning, and motivational styles consistent with the culture into which they are socialized. She believes cultural socialization influences how students learn, mediate, negotiate, and respond to materials, instructional strategies, learning tasks, and communication in the classroom. Kanu's (2002) ethnographic study into the cultural influences on Aboriginal students perceived as "failing" is situated at an urban inner school setting with a high Aboriginal student population. What emerged were the following recommendations, summarized as follows:

1) To use Indigenous approaches to teaching and learning, such as storytelling and learning through observations and imitation.
2) To minimize teaching methods that feature verbal saturation (too much fast-paced talking), as it may impede students' learning.
3) To provide Aboriginal students with scaffolds that include details with concrete examples.
4) To maximize visually based instruction in the classroom.
5) For teachers to offer directive language in classroom communication.
6) To allow for cooperative and collaborative group work.
7) To include Aboriginal perspectives, histories, and cultures in curriculum materials and the teaching process.
8) To nurture high aspirations in Aboriginal students.
9) For teachers to be strict but to show warmth and respect for students' knowledge and experiences.

10) To create supportive classroom environments through increased opportunities for oral participation. (p. 117)

St. Denis (2011) on the other hand argues the following:

> Culturally relevant education rather than anti-oppressive education has become common-sense solutions. As well, the idea that 'primitives' learn less by instruction than by imitation led to research focusing on understanding different 'learning styles' and with the effect of creating a new set of stereotypes about the nature of Aboriginal learning styles (p. 170)

Kanu (2002) explains how an improved understanding of the influence of culture on Aboriginal students' learning can result in more inclusive teaching, as well as higher academic achievement and improved school retention rates of Aboriginal students (p. 99). Kanu argues that, in order to increase motivation, curriculum materials and classroom teaching-learning processes must integrate Aboriginal perspectives, histories, cultures and models of success. The caution is that "add-on" programs often trivialize ethnic cultures and view ethnic content from the perspective of a mainstream culture. This supports an earlier statement by Kirkness (1999) urging "Education into culture, not culture into education" as our practice; we must believe that "the answers are within us" (p. 33).

Some teachers are hesitant to integrate Aboriginal issues into the classroom or add Aboriginal content to the curriculum. Kanu's (2005) further study investigated teachers' perceptions of integrating Aboriginal culture and knowledge into the classroom, and found the following challenges in doing so:

- Teachers' lack of knowledge of Aboriginal cultures;
- The lack of Aboriginal resources;

- Racism of dominant-cultural groups (teachers/school staff);
- Lack of support from school administrators;
- Incompatibility between school structures and Aboriginal cultural values/practices. (p. 57-62)

Inclusive education can take on many meanings. For this discussion, I will adopt the cultural inclusion theory as described by Paul Whitinui (Māori) (2010) as "promoting cultural inclusiveness in our schools should not be at expense of denying Māori their *tino rangatiratanga* (rights to self-determine) but instead should ultimately enrich the learning experience" (p. 9). I situate the importance of including Aboriginal culture into the curriculum within a broader sense of inclusive education. Inclusive education strengthens Aboriginal worldview and perspectives and increases educational opportunities for all Aboriginal students; this will potentially strengthen Aboriginal cultural knowledge and improve the coexistence of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal knowledge (Hongyan, 2012, p. 53).

The British Columbia Ministry of Education (2016) has redesigned the curriculum to include Aboriginal worldviews and perspectives throughout. It is a three-year implementation plan, beginning with full implementation from K-9 in 2016/17, with grades 10-12 to follow. This could be the first step towards Indigenizing the schools and school systems, if teachers wholeheartedly implement the redesigned curriculum; however, in my observation there are some school districts in BC that have done better at implementing this change in the curriculum. There are teachers who embrace the change and seek ways to decolonize their classrooms. They do this by honouring Indigenous Knowledge, by acknowledging the colonial structures of education and schooling and by seeking guidance of IK keepers with a willingness to change how they teach students (Classroom observation, September 2019). Then there are those who are

willing to invite the Aboriginal education team into their class to do it for them and those who chose not to do anything different at all in their classrooms.

The Need for Teachers to Be Self-Reflecting to Construct Inclusive Schools

How many teachers in the dominant school systems have had their ideological assumptions challenged, or have taken the opportunity to unpack their assumptions? Teachers' predetermined assumptions about inequality and privilege often become a barrier within school systems. How much do racist attitudes continue, and how can one measure a racist perspective? Racism and the racism of low expectations is not the focus of this research, but it is worth shedding light on the possible underlying assumptions related to the need of creating inclusive schools and how do we attempt this if we do not discuss the proverbial "elephant" in the room. A study by Riley and Ungerleider (2008) concludes that "racism and discrimination are like rocks thrown into a pond; the ripples persist long after those who cast the rocks have disappeared. Such is the difficulty in identifying critical factors in the lack of educational success among particular students" (p.386).

A teacher's history and everyday pedagogical practice can deeply impact students' learning and lives. For this reason, Gravel (2006) argues that teachers ought to study their own practices. In order to embrace inclusive education, it is important for teachers to be able to examine their own pedagogies and assumptions, informed by reflection on their personal experience but also by a solid foundation in anti-racist pedagogies. However, teachers are not necessarily interested in doing the difficult analysis involved in unpacking their assumptions about inequality. Schick and St. Denis (2003) draw on the Foucauldian notion of power by inviting pre-service teachers to explore their own production as social subjects in a social,

economic, and political process and practice, in which knowledge and power are germane (p. 4). The authors challenge three common ideological assumptions in pre-service teachers:

1) Race does not matter. This assumption supports the belief that cultural difference explains inequality, and thus pre-service teachers "prefer instead to talk about cultural difference, thereby recasting the discourse suggesting the problem resides with the other and her or his culture" (p. 8). This equates to expecting the culturally different to "fit in."
2) Meritocracy, or the idea that everyone has equal opportunity, if they work hard enough. The authors explain that this assumption enables non-Indigenous people to say, "My family started with nothing, and we worked hard to get to where we are now. They just want everything given to them." If we imagine that we are all self-determining and unencumbered, then disadvantage and poverty can be attributed to lack of motivation and effort and an inability to make right choices (p. 9). This negates the systemic roots of inequality.
3) Goodness and innocence – by individual acts and good intentions, one can secure innocence as well as superiority. The authors state this assumption is the most challenging because the claim of innocence acts both as a cause and effect: one is produced as superior through innocence, and superiority is claimed as a sign of one's innocence. This allows students to say, "We weren't like some families. At our house, we were taught to respect all cultures" (p. 11). Goodness and dominant group innocence are maintained as commonsense assumptions that resist examination.

Schick and St. Denis (2003) conclude the above are examples of common discourses that reflect ideological assumption and deny the power of racial privilege. These discourses do not acknowledge that people are differently positioned in hierarchical structures that depend on

social and political differences. Dominance remains invisible, and inequality is explained as a product of cultural difference. The idea that opportunity is equally open to all ignores the unearned privileges conferred by their dominant group identity. Students are often unaware of, or choose to forget, how disadvantage has been constructed historically. They do not recognize that they continue to benefit from historical practices of discrimination, which allows them to make claims of innocence. That is why they can say, with impunity, "Why do they always bring up the past? I wasn't there" (p. 12).

One of the underlying assumptions teachers often maintain is that Aboriginal students should learn to adapt to the dominant culture to ensure their future success. Teachers often view this adaption as a necessary skill for their students, and they do not always question the cultural superiority implicit in this assumption. In their study of cultural congruence, Piquemal and Nickels (2005) explain this concept as how the differing cultural elements between in and out of school experiences affect school experiences. They discuss how the teacher in the study insisted "that Aboriginal students needed to learn how to interact in ways that are consistent with the dominant culture, so they would have the same opportunities in life as their non-Aboriginal peers" (p. 121). The teacher's belief included the concept that "in order to escape poverty, Indigenous students would have to learn Western ways of behaving and as a teacher she did not feel she had the authority to teach Indigenous culture in her classroom" (p. 121). This teacher continues to create barriers by her pedagogy and assumptions towards Indigenous students, without being willing to address those ideologies. The authors posit that Aboriginal students experience difficulties or cultural discontinuity because their culture differs, and they do not conform to how schools define what constitutes learning (p. 120).

Ruby Payne (2005) argues that, in order for people in poverty to navigate school successfully, regardless of their cultural or ethnic background, they need to learn the rules of the middle class. Payne does not imply that one must give up their culture, but, that teachers have the "responsibility" to teach the rules of the middle class, since schools are created by the dominant, middle class society. I disagree with this concept of asking Aboriginal students to define themselves according to non-Aboriginal peoples' construct. In a critical analysis of Payne's claims about poverty, Boomer, Dworin, May and Semingson (2008) argue their critical analysis of Payne's characterizations of people living in poverty indicate that her work represents a classic example of what has been identified as deficit thinking (p. 2498).

Dei and James (2002) argue that differences associated with race, gender, class, sexuality, language, culture, religion, and region must be recognized as social realities. Dei and James (2002) state:

> Specifically, an integrative anti-racism discursive framework views the multiple identities of adolescents as relevant to the process of learning. Practices that negate or omit adolescents' lived experiences are openly critiques. Integrative anti-racism involves accepting school practices that acknowledge differences among adolescents because such practices promote inclusion. Practices that overlook individual differences and promote success in a manner that is reflective of a more dominant homogeneous way of being and acting in the world exclude and alienate many individuals and groups and impoverish Canadians as a collective of diverse peoples. (p. 6-7)

To promote and work towards a truly inclusive society, educators must understand and teach about differences and how they are related to power. Educators must include students lived

experiences, acknowledge, and celebrate who they are thus becoming a truly inclusive education system. They must examine their positionality, reflect and be willing to do something about it.

In her research, Tracy Friedel (Métis) (2010) supports race as an important concept for educational policy, in connection with other factors such as class and gender. Friedel (2010) suggests that race contributes to inequitable outcomes for Indigenous peoples. She further argues, "notions of Indigenous identity as authentic and Indigenous cultures as superficial perpetuates racialization" (p. 18). Friedel adds, "A tokenized tweaking of the curriculum does little more than ensure that the dominant core curriculum is held firmly in place" (p.18). Similarly, Friedel (2010) agrees with Dei and James (2002) that "looking through the lens of the hypothesis of cultural discontinuity, too many Native students remain unsuccessful in school, often leaving without a high school diploma" (p. 5). Encouraging systematic reflections by educators on race, privilege, and cultural assumptions has the potential to substantially impact the experiences of Aboriginal students in Canadian schools.

LaFrance's study (1994) includes the Akwesasne people's Thanksgiving Address as an example of the divergence between Western schooling and Indigenous knowledge, which points to differences in their underlying philosophy and approach to life. The author argues that school must be a cultural negotiation at many levels. She believes that Western schooling separates education from life in such a way that school is not related to everyday living. Battiste (2013) sums up cultural relevance and inclusion as having been interpreted mainly through an additive approach that does not require teachers to interrogate their assumptions. According to Battiste (2013), teachers often use approved cultural content, books, resources, and speakers from communities without examining the power dynamics or lack of agency.

Theoretical Framework

Researchers have the task of applying conceptual frameworks that demonstrate the theoretical and practical underpinnings of their research. If successful, these frameworks illustrate "the thinking" behind "doing" (Kovach, 2009). To illustrate my thinking about the "doing," I combine insights from global literature on decolonization to explicate Indigenous-driven processes in Canada. In addition, I draw on the metaphor of the Métis sash as a way of examining the intersectional nature of Aboriginal students' path to success.

Decolonization

Decolonization is a lived process that brings about the repatriation of Indigenous land and life; it is not a metaphor for other things we want to do to improve societies and schools (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Tuck (Aleut) and Yang (2012) continue by stating:

> Clearly, we are advocates for the analysis of settler colonialism within education and education research and we position the work of Indigenous thinkers as central in unlocking the confounding aspects of public schooling. We, at least in part, want others to join us in these efforts, so that settler colonial structuring and Indigenous critiques of that structuring are no longer rendered invisible. (p. 3)

I interpret this to mean that, as Indigenous educators, we must be active in the process of confronting the colonial structures in education that limit Indigenous ways of knowing and the inclusion of Aboriginal content and worldviews.

According to Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Māori) (2012), decolonization is a process that engages with imperialism and colonialism at multiple levels. Coming to know the past has been part of the critical pedagogy of decolonization. To hold up alternative history is to hold alternative knowledges (p. 36). In Smith's (2012) words:

> Decolonization, however, does not mean and has not meant total rejection of all theory or research or western knowledge. Rather, it is about centering our concerns and worldviews and then coming to know and understand theory and research from our own perspectives and for our purposes. (p. 41)

For researchers, this implies having a more critical understanding of the underlying assumptions, motivations and values which inform research practices (Smith, 2012). Battiste (2013) writes about decolonization in the Canadian context specifically. According to Battiste (2013), decolonization is:

> a process of unpacking the keeper in education: its powerful Eurocentric assumptions of education, its narratives of race and difference in curriculum and pedagogy, its establishing culturalism or cultural racism as a justification for the status quo, and the advocacy for Indigenous knowledge as a legitimate education topic. (p. 107)

Anti-colonial theorist Franz Fanon (1963) states that decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is clearly an agenda for total disorder. He argues that it cannot be accomplished by a wave of a magic wand, a natural cataclysm, or a gentlemen's agreement; it is an historical process (p. 2), which implies the urgent need to thoroughly challenge the colonial situation. In his case, he was writing in the context of struggles for independence throughout the African continent. However, his words offer insight into the challenging work decolonization requires in Canada as well. I believe that the destruction of colonial constructs is necessary in order to make way for a decolonized way of thinking and doing. Likewise, for a teacher in a classroom courageous enough to review her practice, they must take it apart, which will cause a disruption; then they have to put it back together in a manner that honours IK and practices.

Decolonization is not just relevant to "our" Canadian or American Indigenous youth, but it is widespread, including the Indigenous peoples of other countries, such as the Aborigines of Australia. Richard J. Reynolds (2005) recognizes the historical parallels and the current challenges in the context of the failure of the school system in Australia to meet the needs of Indigenous students as well. It is beyond the scope of this paper to address the need for processes of decolonization worldwide, but it is imperative to note that similar research abounds in places where Indigenous people have experienced colonization and oppression (Reynolds, 2005; Shields, Bishop, & Mazawi 2005; Smith, 2012). Indigenous people everywhere in the world continue to be restricted by the confines of a colonial system, which allows little room for Indigenous knowledge as a legitimate paradigm. Decolonization opens space for re-centering Indigenous culture in our own histories.

Emma LaRocque (2010) (Plains Cree Métis) wonders if we can ever move past colonization when she asks, "can we move on when we have barely begun to understand the colonial process, especially as we lived and now being recorded by First Nations and Metis Peoples?" (p. 6). This speaks to the awareness of the lived experiences and the understanding of what and when we are experiencing colonialism.

For me, this research represents an act of decolonization. A central way of enacting decolonization for me is to incorporate my Métis history identity fully into my research practice. Below I outline the role of the Métis sash in framing my research as a decolonizing act.

The Métis Sash as Metaphor for a Decolonization Framework

Reaching back into my Métis ancestry and history, I honor the work of Maria Campbell (2010), whose *Stories of the Road Allowance People* reawakens memories of language and

culture in my family. As a young child, I remember sitting and listening to my mother and grandmother sharing stories in the Michif language; they did not share this language with the next generation due to their experiences of shame and racism. Campbell (2010) tells us that storytelling is primarily a tool for teaching culture, values, and spirituality. These experiences become the collective memory of a community, much like the stories in the *Road Allowance People*. Western-oriented educational institutions displace Aboriginal cultural worldviews and our oral traditions with various other imposed forms of literacy (Archibald, 2008). Campbell's stories draw vivid parallels between what I heard to be important to the Aboriginal students of School District No. 83 in the sharing circles. Strategies can be developed based on their stories, which presented their insights on topics such as the significance of family/community, connectedness to school, identity, and experiential learning.

In order to present the insights of the students in this study, I have created a framework that combines the elements presented by Campbell in the *Road Allowance* writings, along with the symbolism of the Métis sash. The sash is a powerful symbol because, individually, a single strand or factor can make limited contributions to Aboriginal student success. However, when several strands are woven together, schools can create change, rather than expecting students to change to fit the school system.

The roots of my family of origin are embedded in the history of the Manitoba Métis. These colours serve as a metaphor to describe my theoretical framework. The excerpt from the Manitoba Métis Federation (MMF) below describes how the colours represent the chapters of Métis history woven into each strand:

Figure 1. Manitoba Metis Sash.

The Métis Sash – A Metaphor

> Black: symbolizes the dark period after 1870 in which the Metis people had to endure dispossession, and suppression, at the hands of the Canadians … Many left their land and headed west; those who stayed behind moved north. Those who remained were forced off their land and became squatters, living mostly on road allowances. (MMF)

The black strand of the sash signifies the dark history of education told in Chapter One, including the lack of success for Aboriginal students.

> Red and White: are the colours of the Metis hunting flag. It has a white infinity symbol with a red background. During a hunting expedition, the camp flag belonged to the guide of the day. (MMF)

Like a hunting expedition, red and white represent the researchers hunt for an answer. These colours represent various theoretical underpinnings used to describe the "answer" to the lack of success of Aboriginal students, as reflected in Chapter Two.

> Blue and White: are the colours of the national Metis flag. It has a white infinity symbol with a blue background. This flag was flown on June 19, 1816 at the Battle of Seven Oaks under the leadership of Cuthbert Grant. (MMF)

The blues and white strands are the infinity symbol which has no end. This strand represents the stories told by generations before us, and the stories shared by the participants and the stories yet to come, as I explore in Chapter Three.

> Green and Gold: signifies fertility, growth and prosperity for the Métis Nation. Green and gold also mean we must move forward and reclaim our rightful place in Canadian history. (MMF)

Just as green and gold signify hope, this strand represents the findings shared in this research as described in Chapter Four. My hope is that these findings will inform educators and policy makers in creating a more hopeful future for Aboriginal youth in Canada. In doing so, I will use the metaphor of the Métis sash as I weave the strands of stories into a theoretical framework to strengthen my argument much like the strands of the Métis sash.

The Métis sash story is also a metaphor for oral tradition, which is supported by Hulan and Eignebrod's (2008) argument that oral traditions are distinct ways of knowing, and represents how knowledge is reproduced, preserved, and conveyed from generation to generation. They further state that oral traditions form the foundations of Aboriginal societies, connecting speaker and listener in communal experiences, uniting past and present in memory.

Greg Young-Ing (Cree) (2008) supports the importance of oral tradition in preserving and transmitting traditional knowledge. Baskin (2005) argues:

> Of course, there is no one Aboriginal voice. Rather, there are many. Each of us is a storyteller and each a listener. Together, we are the voices of Aboriginal peoples. Knowledge is passed on by these voices through our oral tradition - our storytelling. (p. 181)

The Métis sash simultaneously represents a conceptual framing for understanding the various elements of Aboriginal student success, as well as my way of honoring my cultural upbringing. I intend it to be a decolonizing metaphor as well, to demonstrate the power of Indigenous knowledges in reframing debates on policy that Indigenous people are all too often left out of in Canada, with a focus in education.

Concluding Thoughts

There are many theories to explain Aboriginal students' lack of academic success, such as blaming the victim—the student, the family, their poverty—which simply removes the responsibility of the teachers and the institutions to examine their own deficiencies. Researchers are beginning to examine Aboriginal students' experiences within the school. They coined many theories to explain the continued lack of success stemming from cultural discontinuity and the lack of cultural relevance (Bazylak, 2002; Hermes, 2005; Kanu, 2007; Powers et al., 2003; Silver et al., 2002). Above I examined the possibility of cultural inclusion, which stems from teachers' desire to locate themselves in terms of race and privilege **(**Razack, 2002; Schick, 2002; Schick & St. Denis, 2003).

What are the trends and gaps in the research, based on this literature review? The shift in literature is beginning to focus on the factors contributing to Aboriginal students' success, rather

than focusing on the failures of Aboriginal students. Also, the trend is beginning to focus on what *schools* can do differently, as opposed to focusing on what students, families, and communities can do to better fit into the dominant educational systems. The trend of reviewing how schools can better accommodate the Aboriginal student is significant to Aboriginal students' success. There is a shift in literature, toward examining the cultural discontinuity and cultural divide between home and school. I find it productive that the focus has shifted to what teachers, and schools can do to create changes in school climate, by building relationships and re-visiting the curriculum to integrate Aboriginal history, knowledge, and culture.

In spite of shifts in research towards a more holistic understanding of Aboriginal students' success, I identify an ongoing gap in research in examining the perceptions of Aboriginal students themselves. It makes sense to check students' perceptions and to support the factors that contribute to their overall success. My research will fill this gap, which will inform other Aboriginal researchers, teachers, school administrators, and policy makers.

In Chapter Three, I will present the methodology used in this research, in which participants share their stories within sharing circles. This reflects an Indigenous approach that uses conversations and stories to examine the factors which contribute to Aboriginal students' success. Chapter Three will include this study's approach to ethics, guided by the principles of ethical Métis research and UBC's guiding ethics.

Chapter 3: The Blue and White Strands of the Métis Sash: Storytelling and the Talking Circles

Indigenous research draws upon Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and connecting with self and spirit (Iseke, 2010; Kovach 2009; Simonds & Christopher, 2013). Indigenous ways of knowing, being, seeing, and doing maintain strong people, communities, and Nations towards a self-determining future (Ormiston, 2010). Storytelling is central to much of the Indigenous research that is conducted around the world (Bishop, 2009; Donovan, 2012; Wilson, 2008). Iseke (2013) offers that Indigenous storytelling has long been a powerful form of education that enriches the lives of the community, creating a sense of interconnectedness between family, community, nation, and with all our relations, as well as with the spiritual understanding of self and the spirit world (p. 573). According to Archibald (2008), the principal sources of Indigenous knowledge are the land, our spiritual beliefs and ceremonies, the traditional teachings of Elders, dreams, and our stories. She reminds us that the values of responsibility, respect, reverence, and reciprocity are essential to Indigenous knowledge. With Archibald and Iseke's ideas in mind, I developed a Métis approach to research that reflects my commitment to storytelling as a relevant form of community education.

My approach first started to take shape when someone asked me how I was going to prepare myself for the research. It was a powerful question which resonated with me. It required me to think about my own cultural grounding, which I define through my life and relationship with culture (Kovach, 2009). I answered this question by putting into practice the cultural teachings of smudging to cleanse my mind, body, and spirit with prayer and meditation. I did not

learn these teachings in my family but as an adult I made the effort to discover and experience teachings from Elders I was privileged to know and participate alongside in ceremonies.

Sacred space is understood as an energetic spiritual boundary that surrounds everyone and everything; it forms a circle around you (Dorion, 2010). In their research project, Kitchen and Raynor (2013), invited an Elder to lead the opening smudge at which sacred medicines (tobacco, sage, cedar, and sweet grass) were burned, and words of Indigenous wisdom offered. The smoke represents an intention to purify the mind and heart in order to establish clarity and balance (p. 48). As I have learned from and acknowledged my family's Cree and Anishinaabe ancestors within my Métis-ness, I have attempted to encompass these teachings in my life and my research.

Below I outline the tenets that guided my methodology throughout every stage of this research, including contacting research participants, acquiring their informed consent, conducting the talking circles and interviews with care for cultural differences among participants, and bringing the research back to the community in a meaningful way.

A Métis Approach to Ethical Research

The principles of ethical Métis research as outlined by the National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO) (2010) remind me that research comes with an inherent responsibility of high ethical standards. I borrowed the following six principles as teachings to guide my research, which I outline in this section.

1) Exercise reciprocity in research by building relationships between researchers and communities, while sharing responsibilities, benefits and learning from each other (NAHO, 2010).

This teaching aligns with my experiences living in a Secwepemc community in British Columbia for almost ten years, where I have become known and accepted as a trusted community member. Through community involvement, I have learned to acknowledge and respect the various local customs between the local Secwepemc First Nations people and the Métis community. Reciprocity is expected in the context of equal partnerships, which should naturally lead to equal responsibility and benefits. This research is an example of creating working relationships with parents, students, and the community, so that we all learn from each other and benefit from the process. Lavallee (2009) explains that research with an Indigenous community is a commitment that extends well beyond the final report, dissertation, peer-reviewed article submission, or conference presentation. It is a lifelong relationship and commitment.

According to Castellano (2004), individual perceptions need to be validated by community dialogue and reflection before it can become collective knowledge, and, later, the basis of collective action (p. 105). This reminds me of the reciprocity of reporting back to the community the results of my research which may prompt change in the educating of our Aboriginal students. Castellano (2004) suggests:

> In the world of Aboriginal knowledge, a discussion of ethics cannot be limited to devising a set of rules to guide researcher behaviour in a defined task. Ethics, the rules of right behaviour, 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. Ethics are integral to the way of life of a people. The fullest expression of a people's ethics is represented in the lives of the most knowledgeable and honourable members of the community. (p. 103)

Therefore, as a researcher it is imperative that I honor Indigenous ethics of creating reciprocal relationships with the students and their community; these relationships are a necessary condition

for the collective validation of my research. Later in this chapter, I explain the community event I organized to validate the research, and how it impacted my findings.

Building reciprocity, relationships, and shared responsibilities, I made a formal request to the First Nations Education Council (FNEC) to conduct my research with the students and the communities they represent. Permission was granted and good wishes were given, with the understanding that the findings would be shared with the students and the larger community.

2) Respect individual and collective autonomy, identity, personal values, gender, confidentiality, practices, and protocols (NAHO, 2010).

In relation to research in and with First Nations and Métis communities, the proper protocols vary greatly depending on the community and the situation. Within Indigenous communities, there is a continuum of traditional to contemporary practices, as well as individual to collective scales. I attempted to maintain awareness of individual and collective differences throughout the research process. We need only to look to the importance of protocol within Indigenous communities to recognize that how activities (i.e. methods) are carried out matters. 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 (Kovach, 2010).

As an example, when I first arrived, I brought with me teachings from other Indigenous cultures that are not widely practiced in Secwepemc communities. When I sought out an Elder, I would gift the Elder with the gift of tobacco. I quickly learned this was not a universal Indigenous practice; I was told that gifting tobacco was not always practiced in this space. However, giving gifts is common across communities, so I chose to gift the students with a small token of my appreciation for their time and energy. This teaching reminds me to respect people where they are situated, no matter who they are. Struthers (2001) reminds us that when doing

research with Indigenous populations, we should engage in a research process that reflects the cultural worldview of the researcher and participants.

This teaching also reminds me of the diversity among all nations, while at the same time recognizing the specificities of the Métis people who straddle two worlds, a First Nations world and Métis world within a Western world (Brown, 1993; Chretien, 2008; Edge & McCallum, 2006; Racette, 2004; Short, 2013).

3) Maintain safe and inclusive environments; research should be safe for all, youth and Elders, regardless of gender and sexual identity, and Aboriginality; consider the balance of the individual and the collective (NAHO, 2010).

Creating a safe and inclusive environment based on respect is essential for all those participating in the research. Once again, this teaching relates to approaching people with an attitude of inclusivity, including in relation to their beliefs around Aboriginality. I did this by creating a safe, caring, and inclusive environment, which was accomplished in part by explaining to the participants that we are all equal in the sharing circle, and each person's contribution is valued and validated. Indigenous methodologies seek to ensure that the research is culturally safe and culturally respectful through recognition of Indigenous worldviews, respect, and accountability. (Singh & Major, 2017)

4) Recognize diversity within and between Métis communities, in their worldviews, values and beliefs, geographic orientation, and politics (NAHO, 2010).

This teaching speaks to the diversity within and across Aboriginal communities. Researchers must recognize the diversity of Aboriginal worldviews, which reflect diverse values and beliefs. In the sharing circles, there were a variety of students who were First Nations, and Métis. There was also a student who chose to identify with Aboriginal people even though he was not

Aboriginal. He was welcomed and accepted in the sharing circle based on his close relationship with a nearby First Nations family and community. In addition, due to the diversity of students within this study, I wanted to be respectful and not impose my personal cultural beliefs on the students. Therefore, I waived my personal smudging practice prior to sharing circles.[2]

5) Research should be relevant and accurate; it should benefit all; it should be accountable and responsible; it should acknowledge, contribute, to and protect cultural knowledge (NAHO, 2010).

This teaching considers the need for the researcher to be accurate in their work by ensuring it reflects the participants' voice, with member checks included. The research should benefit all involved in the process. It also suggests acknowledgement of the participants and community partners. Once this dissertation process is completed, there will be a community celebration to acknowledge and share the findings. All participants will be invited to attend, along with family and community members.

6) Understand history, values, and knowledge; advance Métis methodology and include Métis experts; straddle worldviews; and be aware of insider-outsider perspectives (NAHO, 2010).

This final teaching reflects the significance of knowing the Métis context, understanding the relevant history that links to Métis values and knowledge, and underscores and reflects my lived history. As an insider/outsider of the public education system, and an insider as a Half-breed

[2] On a side note, the school district does not have an official smudging policy in place to offer those opportunities for students who may be interested.

Métis whose identity is strongly affiliated with my Indigenous ancestors, I've learnt to walk in several worlds and recognize a variety of worldviews.

Now I will explain the months-long process that led up to beginning the research process. Then I will outline the protocols I enacted to recruit participants with their full consent and knowledge of the process.

Building Relationships as a Prelude to Recruiting Participants

Relationships and reciprocity are key elements in undertaking Indigenous research (NAHO, 2010); therefore, it was important to build a rapport with the students prior to conducting the research. My intention was for reciprocity to produce greater equilibrium and congruence between researchers like me affiliated with the academy and research participants, often affiliated with the community—recognizing there are many variations within, between, and beyond these categories (McGregor & Marker, 2018). Baydala, Placsko, Hampton, Bourassa, and McKay-McNabb (2006) explain that, in their experience researching with Aboriginal communities, the academic researchers form mutual relations. They further this concept by telling:

> To create an ethical space requires the generation of a place that is protected from academic expectations of ideologically driven research, standing firm in a resolution to conduct oneself and the research in a community. Keeping an ethical space means creating an environment that demonstrates a passion, deep spirit, and commitment that moves people to share their stories; yet a passion that is tempered with care and patience so that stories can be heard. (p. 57)

The researcher should be on an equal footing with the participants from the community.

Within the school district and the AEEA, it is customary practice to create opportunities to gather, discuss, encourage, and support the Indigenous students as they move towards graduation. I participated in these gatherings to get to know the grads, and for them to become familiar with me. I sought to be a familiar presence to the graduating students by the time I initiated the research. As Kovach (2010) suggests, this process is crucial in order to have a certain amount of credibility and trustworthiness to encourage people to participate in the research. Paying careful attention to relationships with students and staff in the recruitment process facilitated trust between the researcher and the students. The school's Aboriginal Education Worker (AEW), with whom students are comfortable and familiar, created a list of students willing to participate in the research. The AEW screened potential participants in order to make sure they were deemed academically sound, which means that they were on track to achieving a high school Dogwood diploma in a British Columbia public school. In the end, sixteen Indigenous students from grade twelve participated from three high schools.

Participant Selection

My initial guiding parameter for selecting students is that they were graduating with a Dogwood Diploma. According to the BC Ministry of Education website, there are two programs that lead to a Dogwood diploma from the Kindergarten to Grade 12 system:

1. Dogwood Diploma: Secondary school graduation for most students in BC; occurs after acquiring 80 credits
2. Adult Graduation Diploma: Learners who are 18 years of age or older can combine credits earned at both secondary and post-secondary schools towards a BC Adult

Graduation Diploma (Adult Dogwood). Adult learners may also pursue a regular BC Dogwood Diploma.

In addition, there is an alternative credential for students with special needs who complete Individual Education Plan (IEP) goals; they are eligible to receive the School Completion Certificate (Evergreen Certificate).

In 2015, the First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC) of BC expressed grave concern that there were too many First Nations students leaving school with an Evergreen certificate, rather than a diploma (McNeil, 2015). FNESC interpreted these graduation rates as an indication of the racism of low expectations for First Nations children.

In the Auditor's General Report of Aboriginal Children in the BC Public School System (2015), one of the eleven recommendations was that the Ministry work with boards of education to ensure that School Completion Certificates are only granted to students who require a modified program due to a special need that prevents them from working toward graduation.

For this study, I gathered students graduating with a Dogwood Diploma and not Evergreen certificates, because the scope of this study did not include students with special needs.

Getting to Know Participants and Their Families

I invited potential students and parents to a luncheon at each of the three high schools, where I provided an overview of the research I was undertaking. I used this informal setting to present the purpose of my research, potential questions, the methodology, the ethics, timelines, and expectations. I also worked through logistical information, such as informed consent and signed permission forms from parents. I clarified that they could withdraw from the process at any time. I also indicated that more than one individual interview could be requested. Finally, I

explained to students and parents my methodology: conducting individual and focus groups interviews under the umbrella of sharing circles, sometimes known as talking circles. Sharing/talking circles are a customary practice that I have been using for years in my roles as a teacher and administrator.

Healing circles and learning or sharing circles are used as part of ceremony and as a way of healing (Stevenson, 1999). Sharing circles use a healing method in which all participants (including the facilitator) are viewed as equal; information, spirituality, and emotionality are exchanged, a process that is familiar and comforting for Aboriginal participants in Canada with knowledge of this practice (Restoule, 2006). Bazylak (2002) connects the two by referring to traditional talking circles as sharing circles, because "talking" does not fully encapsulate the crucial role of listening (p. 136).

In these contemporary times, talking or sharing circles are increasingly used by Indigenous researchers (Baskin, 2005; Restoule, 2006). Although both the focus group and the sharing circle are concerned with gaining knowledge through discussion, in a research setting the principles behind a sharing circle are quite different. Circles are acts of sharing all aspects of the individual—heart, mind, body, and spirit—and permission is given to the facilitator to report on the discussions (Nabigon, Hagey, Webster, & MacKay, 1999).

There are four high schools in School District No. 83 with school populations ranging from 167 to over 1200 students. The number of Aboriginal students in these four schools range from 30 to over 170 students (Enrolment Report to the First Nations Education Council 2016/17).

Only one of the high schools is located within walking distance of a First Nations reserve, and I am more closely associated with this school due to the nature of my work. I have

established a base line of familiarity with this cohort of graduating students over the years, and they know me as well. The size of this high school is approximately 250 students, with over 24% Indigenous students, the highest percentage in our school district's high schools (Enrolment Report to the First Nations Education Council, 2014/15). On average in the last six years, the number of Indigenous graduates has ranged from ten to 19 students, with approximately 50% of students on-reserve and the other 50% off-reserve or Métis. In May 2014, at this school there were 19 graduates, six of whom participated in this research (Grad Report to FNEC, 2014).

Of the other two research locations, one high school was in a larger urban area of Salmon Arm and the other in a smaller high school in the town of Enderby with larger number of Aboriginal students.

Seven of the students lived in a First Nations community or on reserve, and nine students lived in urban/rural communities within the school district boundaries. The diversity of nations among the students interviewed are listed in table below. By chance, there were an equal number of males and females.

Table 1: Participants' Self-Identification.

Nation	Number	Gender
Secwepemc (on reserve)	5	2F 3 M
Secwepemc and Okanagan (on reserve)	2	2F
Métis	4	3M 1F
Aboriginal	1	1F
Huron and Iroquois	1	1F
Aboriginal and Swedish	1	1F
First Nation	1	1F
Non-Aboriginal	1	1M

Once the participants were confirmed, we began the talking circles and individual semi-structured interviews, which I explain below.

Data Generation

As an Indigenous researcher, I believe it is important to be informed by Indigenous methodologies when listening to Indigenous students' perspectives on their school experiences. Their stories have been converted into the empirical data that makes up the study's findings. This research was primarily qualitative in nature; however, in order to indicate the need to examine Indigenous students' rates of success, quantitative data will also be presented as part of the findings.

Originally, I invited the students to use an additional participatory method, photo voice, to generate photographs as a means of sharing their everyday life and stories. Photography in research has not always been employed in a participatory manner but rather as a powerful means of communicating ideas about Indigenous peoples regarding colonial violence and oppression (Lydon, 2010). In my proposed research, it was my hope to decolonize the process by inviting students to communicate, in their own words, the meaning behind their photographs. Unfortunately, even though the students displayed a willingness to take photographs, none of the students followed through even with reminders and gentle coaxing. Upon reflection, I conclude that may not have been clear on the intention or perhaps it was not meaningful for them to participate in this part of the study.

My principal research method was to organize talking circles with groups of students. In addition, I conducted one-on-one interviews with students. Below I describe how I carried out these methods.

Talking Circles

My study relies heavily on an Indigenous research framework of talking circles,[3] which gave students an opportunity to feel supported within a peer-based setting to examine mutual factors about their ideas of academic success. The small groups of four to six students followed the Indigenous and Métis concept of talking circles, as presented in Bazylak's study (2002). This model values each participant's contribution as equal and reflects unity. Talking circles are based on the ideal that the circle provides equality of voice and power to the participants. Wilson and Wilson (2000) describe traditional talking circles as follows:

> Typically, group members sit in a circle that represents the holism of Mother Earth and the equality of all members. In some circles an eagle feather or other sacred object is passed around, following the direction of the sun. In other groups a stone is passed from speaker to speaker, symbolizing the connection among group members and to the guiding spirit. The holder of the object speaks "from the heart" and the group listens silently and non-judgmentally until the speaker has finished. Each member is given a chance to speak. A common rule of circle work is that members must not speak out of turn. In most instances, a complete talking circle comprises four rounds although time restraints, rules and norms vary with each group. Most important is that group members feel ownership of these rules. (p. 11)

The circles in this research used the format discussed in this chapter. However, because I wanted students' ideas to be free flowing and build upon each other's comments, we did not use an object for permission to speak. The guidelines for the sharing/talking circles were discussed

[3] I will use the terms "talking circles" or "sharing circles" interchangeably throughout this dissertation.

briefly, since participants in this study were familiar with them from previous experiences within the school setting in the Aboriginal Education program. Due to the familiarity of myself and the use of circles, students were comfortable in this format and were cognizant of the guidelines; therefore, students-maintained respect throughout the circles. The students within the circles were friends and were comfortable with each other. Most of them have been in school together since kindergarten.

On average, there were four to six students in the talking circles. Overall, there were 16 Grade 12 participants in three talking circles at three different high schools followed up with six one-on-one interviews. The first set of sharing circles were held in May 2014 and the second round of sharing circles were held in April and June 2015.

I will discuss the sharing circles in two parts simply because of the sequence of events. During the spring of 2014, students from the initial high school were gathered. The sharing circles were held in the Aboriginal Education room, which is a familiar place for the Aboriginal students who attend many activities in this room. There were six grade 12 students who agreed to participate with parents' informed knowledge and permission. I opened the session by acknowledging the traditional territory of the Secwepemc (pronounced "suh-Wep-muhc") (https://tkemlups.ca/our-land/), which I commonly practiced as a visitor in this nation's territory. I welcomed and thanked everyone in the circle for agreeing to participate in the research for which I gave a brief overview. The participants were relaxed, familiar and friendly with each other and with me due to the nature and extent of our relationships over several years. Within the sharing circles, I stressed confidentiality to create a safe space for the voices of all students, as well as for myself.

In preparation for the sharing circles, I purchased a new voice recorder, which required learning how to operate, record, save data and lock with a password. After the first session gathering data with the first sharing circle, I quickly saved the material to my computer. The participants agreed to individual sessions with me over either breakfast or lunch, at which point I gathered their background information and any other information they wanted to share on a one-on-one basis with me. I managed to gather the individual interviews within a few days. After my last individual interview, I went home only to discover I had lost my voice recorder after the last set of individual interviews. I searched for days, and I was devastated when I could not find it. I almost quit, but I decided to proceed.

The next set of Aboriginal students were set to graduate with a Dogwood certificate the following year, in 2015. I conducted two additional sharing circles at two different high schools. Once again, the sharing circles took place in the Aboriginal Education Rooms within the high schools. In this round of research, one of the participating high schools was one of the largest in the school district. The four participants and I were already familiar with each other. At the other participating high school, the six students participating were less familiar with me. From my perspective, those conversations were less free flowing and animated, and the conversations were not as in-depth as in the previous two circles with students who were more familiar with each other and with me. This also could be because the Aboriginal Education Worker remained in the room, even though her position in the room was at a distance from us. In keeping with the traditional practice of gifting, once the circles were concluded, I gave a small token of my appreciation for their time and stories to the participants.

Semi-Structured Interviews

I also wanted to offer a setting for students to present their ideas in a less structured way. I arranged for one-on-one sharing time with students for us to get to know each other better. This gave students a chance to speak in a more personal setting, without judgement from their peers, which was especially relevant for potentially quieter or shyer participants. Overall, I conducted two individual interviews during this second round of research.

The individual interviews took place in restaurants of the student's choice over a meal to create optimal comfort and ease. The interview or sharing of stories was semi-structured to allow the flow of conversation to develop. The students were asked open-ended questions to provide an opportunity to generate answers that are meaningful to them. The students shared their personal backgrounds, their life situations, their family situations, their struggles with the loss of loved ones, and experiences of racism within their school experience. One of the male students opened about his passion for carrying on his family's culture of hunting, and fishing.

Decolonization as a Central Concept in Data Analysis

Throughout the analysis process, I was guided by the theoretical framework I established in the previous chapter. The theoretical framework of decolonizing education requires acknowledging the tensions between Indigenous and Eurocentric ways of knowing and pointing out the challenges these conflicts bring to the educational system (Battiste, 2005). Battiste (2002) notes:

> Indigenous knowledge comprises the complex set of technologies developed and sustained by Indigenous civilizations. Often oral and symbolic, it is transmitted through the structures of Indigenous languages and passed on to the next generation through modeling, practice, and animation, rather than the written word. (p. 2)

Therefore, decolonizing refers to the ongoing process of coming to know the ways that colonizing relationships have shaped Indigenous and non-Indigenous lives and relationships to the land in the present (McGregor & Marker, 2018). Kanu (2005) further explains:

> The recent calls … to decolonize Indigenous education is part of a larger effort to reflect critically on the impact of colonization on Indigenous peoples, in particular internal colonization whereby carefully selected mechanisms, such as the subjugation of Indigenous knowledge and the use of colonial ideology to cultivate psychological subordination in the colonized, are employed by dominant groups to subordinate or regulate Indigenous populations. (p. 1)

Taiaiake Alfred (Kahnawake Mohawk) (2015) also comments that there is a whole spate of Indigenous scholarship emerging around the theme of Indigenous resurgence, which develops a critical view of the decolonization process in Canadian society (p. 6). He continues by asking the question, what you do about it? One of the answers lie in incorporating decolonizing perspectives, rooted in Indigenous knowledges, is one way to bring about greater success for Aboriginal students, while preserving cultural identities and Indigenous languages (Battiste, 2005; Munroe, Borden, Orr, Toney, & Meader, 2013).

In a keynote presentation by Kupki7 Wayne Christian (Secwepemc/Okanagan) (September 2016), Christian focused his comments on informing educators about the importance of recognizing Indigenous Knowledge (IK). He gave examples of decolonizing educational institutions, while encouraging educators to respond in culturally responsive ways that support inclusivity of all students. Gay (2018) suggests that culturally responsive teaching can be defined as using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles

of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them (p. 36). Parhar and Sensoy (2011) describe culturally relevant pedagogy as:

> 1) An inclusive classroom of meaningful student-teacher relationships, collaborative learning, and a respectful classroom climate; 2) Expanded conception of the curriculum that validates students' cultures, develop critical consciousness and agency; 3) A resource team including families and support workers; 4) Purposeful renewal of knowledge via research and professional development. (p. 189)

Whitinui (2010) shares the key finding in his study on Indigenous-based inclusive pedagogy, which is that schools who actively invest a greater amount of time and effort towards developing better in-class student-teacher relationships find students more receptive to learning and wanting to achieve (p. 7). This leads to students experiencing a feeling of social inclusion, which Absolon (2016) describes as:

> Feeling included and invited are important emotional experiences on the pathway to social inclusion, restoration and reconciliation. Being invited is a positive experience and says, 'we want you here'. We want you here indicates that your presence matters and what you have to offer will make a difference. Building relationship begins with an invitation. (p. 50)

In my experience as District Principal of Aboriginal Education in School District No. 83, I've noted that teachers invite Aboriginal teaching staff into their classrooms to add Aboriginal perspectives to their subject areas, as opposed to researching and implementing knowledge on their own. This could be the beginning step of recognizing IK as valid in our public schools; however, it will take bigger steps to truly decolonize the classroom.

Further steps are being taken to support classroom teachers in decolonizing their practice through the adoption of Section 63 of the TRC's Calls to Action, which focuses on following four streams: 1) developing and implementing K-12 curriculum and learning resources on Aboriginal peoples in Canadian history, and the history and legacy of residential schools, 2) teacher capacity/training to share best practices related to residential schools and Aboriginal history, 3) building student capacity for empathy, understanding, and mutual respect, 4) resources to sustain teachers' quest for IK, including students having relevant authentic Aboriginal literature in the classroom. The TRC's work in the district supports teachers in classrooms and schools in the creation of culturally responsive pedagogy.

In the end, these practices help to create classrooms where IK is included. School District No 83, implements the TRC's Calls to Action by requesting that one teacher representative per school attend ongoing training on how to become a "TRC Ally." This role states that it will be their responsibility to carry the new knowledge and learning back to their schools: teachers teach teachers. The response was astonishing, with 99% of the schools having a representative present at the training sessions, which were held five full days throughout the school year (Report to FNEC, 2016).

In my role as educator, I've noted that learning is a process and educators are in a variety of spaces in which informs their practice in decolonization process. I've also noted that students often judge their satisfaction in schools by their relationships with teachers and their teacher's willingness to create warm, supportive caring spaces in which they honor IK and the knowledge students bring with them to the classrooms.

I too recall that the teachers who truly cared made all the difference to my experiences in school.

Data Analysis

After conducting the talking circles and interviews, I had the data transcribed in order to begin the data analysis process. Not knowing how to begin to analyze the data, I read Saldaña (2016), but I found the presentation of the information to be overwhelming. Charmaz's (2014) grounded theory was also suggested, so I spent a great deal of time reading and taking notes from YouTube presentations by Charmaz on Grounded Theory (2012, 2013) attempting to make it fit with my data. However, since I did not start with this concept, it did not work. Data analysis was an ongoing challenge, so I researched other possibilities through YouTube, such as coding text using Microsoft Word (Peach, 2014); I made several attempts to implement, but to no avail. I also spend time reviewing NVivo data analysis software, but I was deterred by the technological challenges with using the program. Throughout the data analysis journey, I also referred to Burnard (1991), O'Connor, and Gibson (2003), as well as Burnard, Gill, Stewart, Treasure, and Chadwick (2006) on data analysis.

Ultimately, I found the most useful guidance on data analysis from Kent Lofgren's (2013) YouTube videos. Step one includes the following sub-steps: 1) quickly browse through all transcripts, 2) make notes about your first impressions, 3) re-read transcripts again, one by one, and 4) re-read very carefully, line by line.

Step two is to start labelling or coding relevant words, phrases, sentences, or sections. I did this manually, but it seemed cumbersome, so I decided to do these processes on a computer for ease. I repeated steps one and two again on the computer by reviewing the transcripts line by line, doing the initial coding by highlighting relevant words, phrases, and sentences, and then transferring to an Excel spreadsheet using the interview questions as my guideline.

According to Lofgren (2013), steps three and four require deciding which codes are the most important in order to create categories by bringing several codes together. Then the researcher labels them and decides which codes are the most relevant, and how they are connected to each other. Finally, step five suggests reviewing the codes to decide if there is a hierarchy among the categories, based on their importance to answering the research questions. Step six is to write up the results. This process made the most sense to the way I learn and think about my work, so these steps guided my data analysis process.

Living with the Data

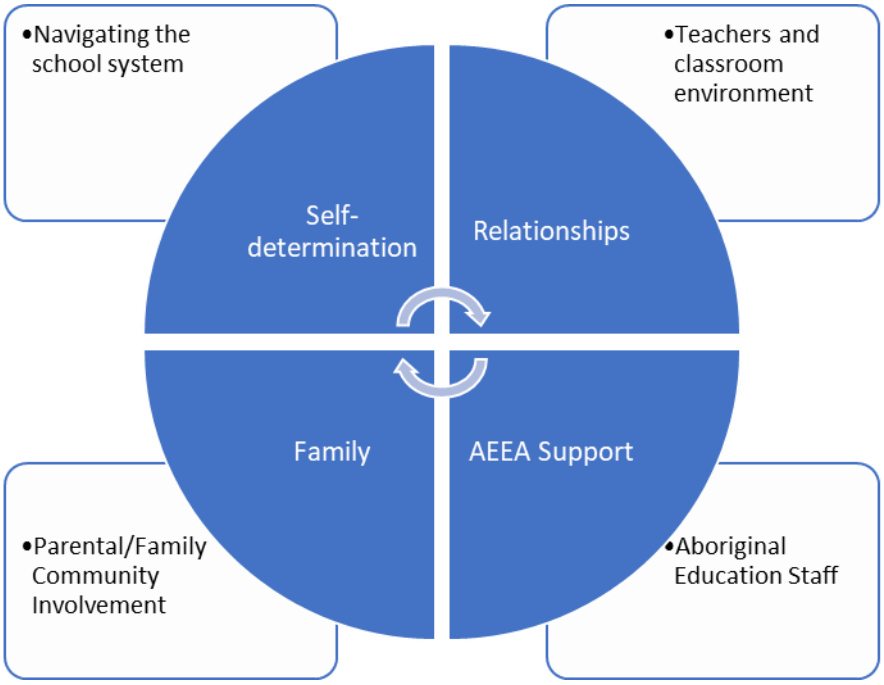
Once I had finished determining my data analysis process and did an initial analysis, I followed the advice of Sandra Kirby, Lorraine Greaves, and Colleen Reid (2006):

> This is the time to live with the data, to get comfortable with what the data say and to discover the larger, more holistic understandings. The focus is on seeing patterns or arrangements behind the big picture being studied. It takes time to think, so allow enough time to be thorough in the analysis and clear your mind before completing the final analysis. (p. 221)

One of the strategies for understanding links between categories, as suggested by Kirby et al. (2006) is the hurricane thinking approach (p. 235). I placed the research question in the center of a large table, which Kirby et al. (2006) refer to as the "eye of the hurricane." They suggested using category names, but I opted to use student quotes to represent "categories." I clustered them according to the meta-categories they formed. I left them on the table for a day or two in order to "live with the data." I repeated the process until the strongest ties (quotes) to the research question remained closest, and those less obvious sat at a distance from the research

question. Using this process made the most sense to me, and it gave me time to "live with the data." In that way, I became much more familiar with the data.

Figure 2. Diagram of Themes.



This diagram represents a visual I laid out on my dining room table that showed the overarching ideas that surfaced from examining the data. One theme that became apparent was the student's self-determination to navigate the school system, no matter how challenging. The students acknowledged that relationships with teachers and the classroom environment made the difference in their success, as it made their experience easier or added something more to navigate. The next section of the circle indicates the significant role the Aboriginal education staff play in supporting Aboriginal student success and having access to an Aboriginal Education room where they feel safe and supported. Finally, the significance of parents, families and community involvement was also noted as a priority to students in this study.

One of my concerns was not being able to use all the students' quotes. In addition, I wondered how I was going to balance the student voices in this study. I was relieved to note that according to Kirby et al. (2006), not all data is selected. As they note, "Giving each bit of data an equal opportunity to be part of the analysis does not mean that each person's information takes equal space in the analysis" (p. 223). However, Kirby et al. (2006) also suggest that, at the end of the research, we should be able to demonstrate that the analysis is a percolation of all the information gathered in the research (p. 223). I wanted to ensure that I encapsulated students' perspectives, opinions, and stories in a manner that is respectful and honours their voices. I also wanted to ensure that I did not lose the essence of the individual student perspective versus the collective in the process of gathering quotes and creating themes. In keeping with the Métis ethical guidelines (NAHO, 2010), I shared my analysis process with students whose voices I gathered. They were given the opportunity to validate or reject the way I grouped their responses.

The students' stories will be presented and organized as findings around the following four questions:

- *What supports do students have at school, home and community that support their academic success?*
- *How does the AEEA in North Okanagan School District No.83 contribute to Aboriginal students' overall success?*
- *What are some of the challenges faced by Aboriginal students in SDNo.83?*
- *What advice would you give to schools/teachers/administrators to support Aboriginal students' success?*

My data analysis was also informed by the teachings of Kukpi7 (Chief) Wayne Christian (2016), which he shared with our school district in his opening keynote presentation to honor the land and the people on whose territory this research was conducted. With his permission, I recorded his speech and the notes listed below are from the transcribed pages of this event. Many of his words aligned with what students described as important on their journey through the education system. The cultural ways of being and relating to students, family, and community form the underpinning of the Secwepemc teachings.

In his comments, Kukpi7 Christian presented foundational values and beliefs that are significant to the Secwepemc people within the context of their history of colonization. Kukpi7 Christian explained the importance of the vision question as a rite of passage, with the discovery of each person's gift and how they can contribute to society. This relates to how teachers can work with students' strengths and honour their gifts in a holistic manner. Then Kukpi7 Christian spoke about the worldview of "our relatives" and the interconnectedness of all things in the universe. In this stream of thinking, families and educators have the responsibility to nurture the family. This ties in with the significant role parents and families have on the education of their children; children should not be educated in isolation. Kukpi7 Christian reminded the audience how challenging it can be for Aboriginal families to go into "your schools to talk with you as teachers because of our experience in the educations system hasn't been good."

The next value Kukpi7 Christian shared was to "take care of yourself" as an important lesson we teach young people as they grow. Through those direct experiences, and through modelling and mentoring, we need to develop students' strategies for problem solving and for learning. This speaks to the self-determination students in this study showed by learning to navigate a complex educational system to be academically successful. Added to this concept is

“helping each other,” or as Kukpi7 Christian suggests, “bringing in Elders that can tell you different stories or bring in people who have direct knowledge,” which is part of decolonizing the education system. He openly commends the efforts of the Aboriginal Education Department for supporting all Aboriginal students. In his keynote address (2016), he made the following statement: “I thank the Aboriginal support team that's here and I really support them and the work that they do. It's a difficult job they do, Irene and her team.” Kupki7 also spoke to the importance of a balance in teaching students, which directly correlates to the AEEA (2007-2012).

> I think one of the things that your system, the education system, really is intended to do is to develop not so much sort of academic but develop wisdom in the people that go through your system. It's all about intelligence. It's not just mental intelligence. It's emotional intelligence. It's spiritual intelligence. It's physical intelligence. If you think about it, we're made up of those parts of who we are as a human being – our mind, our body, our spirit, and then our emotions.

Kukpi7 Christian is a strong advocate for students within his community seeking that the school district creates a greater understanding of First Nations’ history, at the same time everyone should acknowledge the work that is already being done.

Kukpi7 Christian led a delegation of community members to present to the School District No. 83 Board of Trustees on the importance of adopting the TRC’s Calls to Action. He pushed for creating an implementation plan (The Board of Education of School District No. 83 Regular Board Meeting Agenda, November 10, 2015). The local newspaper headlines read, “School District #83 continued to make progress on a request from Shuswap-area First Nations bands to adopt recommendations from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Call to action

and to enhance aboriginal education for all students in the district" (Hughes, 2016). The article noted the following:

> The action was widely praised by Splatsin Chief Wayne Christian, who spoke to the board about the long-term implications of the residential school experience that has travelled through generations of local First Nations people. Christian went on to praise the school board for taking quick action. "We were here in November asking for some of these things and to see, three months later them actually happen, I applaud the board and Irene Laboucane [my former name] for their work."

Kukpi7 Christian supports the school district with his time and energy, and he attends events whenever possible. He spoke to a school-wide assembly on Orange Shirt Day in the School District. He shared the following, "this event is important because the school district trustees agreed to the truth and reconciliation recommendation, so this event is to mark that recognition" (October 2, 2016). Once a written draft of this dissertation was prepared, I shared the research with the community, which added an additional layer of analysis to this study.

Dissemination of Findings

As part of my commitment to bring my research back to the community, I planned a community event to share my findings. A dinner/information session was held on Tuesday, June 19, 2018, in School District No. 83. About twenty-five people were in attendance, however, none of the students involved in the research and their families were in attendance. In attendance were members of the First Nations Education Council (FNEC), who granted me permission to conduct the research in the territory of the Secwepemc people. On this council are representatives of the Salmon Arm Métis Association and a representative of the off-reserve families and students who self-identify as Aboriginal. There were five Knowledge Keepers (Elders) in attendance, who

gave positive feedback about the importance of relationships and positive school environments, which they appreciated due to their own negative experiences in residential schools.

I view myself as both an insider and an outsider in the context of my study, since I occupy the roles of researcher and practitioner simultaneously. Part of my responsibility as researcher and educator is to establish my reflexivity and location, which I address below.

Positionality

My positionality incorporates four principal elements. First, my individual experiences as an Indigenous person are instrumental in my positionality. In some ways my Indigeneity positions me as an insider, but I may also be viewed as an outsider since I am not originally from this Indigenous territory. Second, I work closely with Indigenous students, families, and communities, so I act as a go-between between Indigenous students, their parents, and the school district. Third, my role as District Principal of Aboriginal Education is to implement provincial education policy within the school district. At times, the complexity of implementing district policies places me on the outside because my position could be based on a position of power and a perception that, as an administrator, my loyalties may lie with the institution, rather than the Indigenous community. Fourth, as a researcher, I am in the community with the purpose of collecting "data" for a study aimed at earning a credential from an academic institution. These four positions cannot be separated from each other; I am enacting all of them simultaneously. When conducting research in Aboriginal communities, it's important to position oneself in the rules of right behaviour as described by Castellano (2004) which 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" (p.103).

I did not attempt to resolve these contradictions in my positionality. Rather, my approach has been to maintain reflexivity throughout, to be aware of how my positionality impacted every stage of the research process. In addition, I was also forthright with research participants, their parents, and the community at large about these different facets of my identity. These conversations were integral to maintaining an ethical stance throughout the process.

Ethics and Protocols

According to Clark, Prosser & Wiles (2010), to act ethically is to value integrity, inclusiveness, personal security, privacy, and dignity. At all times during my research I attempted to maintain ethical reflexivity. The researcher's awareness and sensitivity are reflected in the degree of honesty and truthfulness in dealing with others. These values are a measure of a researcher's integrity and professionalism.

The ethical issues and challenges posed by research with students need to be noted and addressed in compliance with the University of British Columbia's ethics process and approval. Since my research participants are minors, informed consent requires gaining agreement or permission from students' parents. In addition, participants should be informed about the research and what it entails, rather than deceived or coerced into taking part. This is particularly important in Indigenous communities, where research has often been a means of classifying and dehumanizing Indigenous peoples (Smith, 2012). Gaining consent also maintains rapport and relationships of trust between researchers and participants, so as not to detrimentally impact on the success of ongoing or subsequent research (Prosser, 2000).

Because the research was conducted in an educational institution with students, I also received permission from the Board of Trustees, the Superintendent, and the First Nations

Education Council. The First Nations Education Council is comprised of representatives from the four local bands: the Métis Association, the Board of Trustees, an off-reserve representative, and an Elder, who together guide the programs and services of the Aboriginal education department.

Anonymity and confidentiality were also considered as part of conducting ethical research; therefore, participants' names are anonymous throughout this study. The participants did not express concerns about their anonymity or their confidentially.

Concluding Thoughts

The provincial Ministry of Education of British Columbia recognizes the need for change with the updated curriculum and the inclusion of Aboriginal worldviews and perspectives which will be required to be woven throughout. However, I argue that this is only the starting point. In my introductory chapter and literature review, I illustrate the need for a shift in paradigms from the dominant worldviews, to not only include Aboriginal worldviews and perspectives but to change the way schools operate. This shift needs to occur within the provincial government, but its most important standard bearers should be teachers and staff.

Indigenous students have many insightful reflections to offer on how schools can contribute to their success. Teachers may be surprised to learn about how their students understand academic success. This study aims to bridge the gap between students, teachers, administrators, and provincial education mandates through actively soliciting and presenting the perspectives of Aboriginal students at three BC high schools.

As an Indigenous researcher, developing an Indigenous methodological framework has been the foundation of this study. I have conducted my own research with the utmost attention to the key features listed above: reciprocity, inclusivity, and respect.

Central to my methodology is valuing the place of stories in Indigenous cultures. Stories hold the key to the traditions, the rituals, and the social ways of Indigenous stories pass on messages about loyalty, respect, responsibility, honesty, humility, trust, and sharing–all those qualities that helped them within the relationships in their daily lives (MacLean & Wason-Ellam, 2006). Consequently, storytelling occupies a key role in my methodology as well, as evidenced through the talking circle and the one-on-one interviews.

In the following chapter I share the findings of my study, putting front and center the voices of Aboriginal student participants.

Chapter 4: The Green and Gold Strands of the Métis Sash: Weaving the Strands Together

Indigenous students' lack of academic success has been the center of concern in education policy discussions in Canada for decades. There is a plethora of research which examines this phenomenon (Anguiano, 2004; Beauvais et al.,1996; Egan, 2001; Kehoe & Echols, 1994; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001), all of which suggests the ongoing failure lies within the student, the families, and Indigenous communities. According to Long and Dickason (1998):

> Ethnocentrism dominated with assumptions of superiority of dominant individual groups, and societies. Consequently, Aboriginal and other marginalized peoples living in Canada and elsewhere were often blamed for having inadequate skills, for lacking understanding of European ways, and for their general unwillingness to commit themselves to alleviating their personal and social problems. (p. 2)

This explanation, commonly known as deficit thinking (Shields, Bishop, & Mazawi, 2005; Valencia, 2010), abdicates the responsibilities of schools and policy makers to ensure success for all students in their care. In his book *Dismantling Contemporary Deficit Thinking*, Valencia (2010) contends:

> The deficit thinking model, at its core, is an endogenous theory – positing that the student who fails in school does so because his/her internal deficits or deficiencies. Such deficits manifest, adherents allege, in limited intellectual abilities, linguistic shortcomings, lack of motivation to learn, and immoral behavior. (p. 7)

According to Shields, Bishop, and Mazawi (2005), deficit thinking is a pathologizing practice with colonial roots. These roots still pervade educational discourse, policies, and practices of schooling. Shields et al. (2005) describe this as follows:

> Pathologizing the lived experience of people often has deep roots in colonial and imperial history. Representing the Indigenous – the culturally, ethnically, and socially different – as the pathologized Other is endemic to the colonial discourse. (p. 2)

Considering the recent studies that include the voices of Indigenous students throughout years, I feel honored to be in the position of listening and hearing students' voices and opinions about their own educational experiences (Bishop, 2008; Donovan, 2015; MacIver, 2012). In the literature and the research, I conducted for this study, I hear the students echo my own experiences, many years later. As Donovan (2015) states:

> 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. Students' stories are a narrative rendering of their lived experiences that can inform educational professionals (teachers, researchers) of their understandings. (p. 615)

By examining students' stories, as gathered through my research study, I have been able to gather findings about how the students in this study successfully navigated a colonial system while facing repercussions of the deficit thinking described above. The purpose of this study is to explore sixteen graduating Grade 12 Indigenous students' understanding of the experiences and factors that contributed to their academic success within the context of North Okanagan – Shuswap School District No. 83. The overarching question in this study was, "What are the perceptions of factors that contribute to their academic success for Grade 12 Indigenous students

in North Okanagan School District No. 83?" This chapter will identify key findings that emerged from the stories shared by the students within the sharing circles and the one-on-one interviews.

My aim is to bring together their voices in order to inform teachers, administrators, and policy makers on what factors contributed to their academic success as Indigenous students. These findings can have implications for all students.

The Guiding Role of Metaphors in my Findings

I thought for a very long time on how to best present my findings, since I am primarily concerned with honoring the students who participated in this research. I employed the metaphor of the Métis sash within the methodology (see Chapter 3) to demonstrate how the strands of the sash are woven together, much like the stories shared by each participant. This metaphor honors the history of the Métis people, and where I situate myself in this research (Gerwirtz & Cribb, 2006; Russell-Mundine, 2012).

Grappling with the Colonial Underpinnings of School

I was the youngest of six children. Consequently, I felt left behind when all my siblings went to school each day. The school was situated across the highway from where we lived in our three-room shack. I missed my siblings when they were away at school. Whenever my mother would lose sight of me, she knew where to find me – at school. When I showed up at the school, the principal would take me home. Eventually, they both gave up and allowed me to go to school with my siblings. I was happy to be there, and I was five years old.

I had the most wonderful grade one teacher whom I adored, and I loved learning. I was so upset when school ended for the summer. I remember crying because I would not see my teacher for the summer. Little did I know that over the summer we would move to another town and another school. This move marked the beginning of my declining excitement for school, due to

the alienation and lack of belonging from the teachers and students. From those experiences forward, I remember little else from my school experiences, except for trying to go unnoticed so as not to bring negative attention to myself. Battiste's (2013) words resonate with me:

> Within my stories are not my personal struggles with schools or teachers or curricula, for I remember little about my Eurocentric education or the conventional approaches that I had been a part of. I tried to stay under the radar of the teacher, not to be noticed or labeled dumb. Little is there I care to remember. (p. 17)

Battiste continues by acknowledging that it is important to understand the collective struggles of Indigenous peoples framed within the patriarchal, bureaucratic enterprise of the Canadian government. Education is the manipulative agent, with various intended outcomes. Long and Dickason (1998) suggest:

> Prior to the 1960's ethnocentrism of superiority of individual, groups and societies dominated perspectives and the blame was on Aboriginal peoples for their own social problems but tended to change in the mid 1960's when colonial perspectives, colonial social structures and processes need to be examined in the light of the experiences and perspectives of marginalized people. (p. 3)

The Canadian government's paternalistic policies and attitudes in their relationship with Aboriginal people fostered a historical belief that Aboriginal people were not only inferior to thein non-Aboriginal counterpart but posed a problem to formulating the Canadian nation (Hare & Barman, 1998).

My personal educational journey frames my passion for creating spaces for students to leverage their voices for change within a decolonizing framework. As Smith (2012) suggests:

> Why then has revisiting history been a significant part of decolonization? The answer, I suggest, lies in the intersection of Indigenous approaches to the past, of the modernist history project itself and the resistance strategies which have been employed. (p. 35)

Part of the decolonizing journey belongs to Aboriginal people who must heal themselves; however, members of the dominant society must also acknowledge this educational disaster as part of a common history (Hare & Barman, 1998). I agree with the Honourable Senator Murray Sinclair (Anishinaabe), who emphasizes: "Education has gotten us into this mess, and education will get us out," (Speech at Thompson Rivers University, Oct 26, 2015). Below I explore the insights of Aboriginal students on how education can help us to “get out of this mess.”

Finding: Students’ Definitions of Success

Within the sharing circles, the students were asked to share their understanding of the meaning of “success.” I then compared their responses to that of the school district and the BC Ministry of Education. My intention was that I, as a researcher, did not impose my predetermined criteria of success on students. Agee (2009) would agree:

> With a qualitative study, a researcher is inquiring about such topics as how people are experiencing an event, a series of events, and/or a condition. The questions generally seek to uncover the perspectives of an individual, a group, or different groups. (p. 434)

I sought to gather students’ perspectives, unencumbered by my own definitions of academic success.

For this purpose of the study, I gathered students who were graduating with a Dogwood Diploma and not Evergreen certificates, because the scope of this study did not include students with special needs. I recognize that the selection is keeping with a colonial standard of success as stated by Battiste in her You-Tube presentation, “Decolonizing Education” (Listuguj, 2016).

This western notion of success is also discussed in detail in the Canadian Council on Learning (2007), where current data predominantly measure learning success within the framework of the formal educational system; these do not reflect Aboriginal experiential learning and traditional educational activities outside the classroom (p. 2).

Academic Student Success

The Ministry of Education's vision for student success is defined as enabling learners to develop their intellectual, human, social and career development. With that in mind, I asked the research participants how they defined success, to see if their understanding coincides with the Ministry of Education's definition of success: A Dogwood certificate of completion. It emerged that students did define success through academic success. In addition, they offered important insights to the overall term of "success" on this interpretation as follows:

> Academic is a bit more – a number you get on your report card and the work you put into your class; I think. And then success would be, like, it's just at the end of the day if you are happy where you are and comfortable where you are, I think that's a lot bigger of a part because I don't imagine plenty of people go to school and just think, like, that's right where I want to be especially not when you are young and just growing up. So that's what I see. (DP)

> For an academic success it's probably a little different but – um, yeah, because being in high school academic success is big because that's really the reason you are there. But at the same time being comfortable and happy in school. (HL)

> I think success is when you just do what you want. You are happy with who you are and

> what you are doing and trying to make things better for you and maybe other people as well. (DT).

> Success in general is basically just whatever you want to do and then there is school success where you have to take certain classes and do well in them so yeah. (J)

These students' comments point to two essential elements of academic success, or rather, highlight what's missing from the narrow definition of academic success. While they value getting good grades, since good grades help them to succeed in receiving a diploma, they also highlight a feeling of well-being and comfort in their definition of success. This supports the argument from the Canadian Council on Learning (2007), who state that when indicators focus on years of schooling and performance on standardized assessments, they do not reflect the purpose or nature of holistic learning—engaging the physical, spiritual, mental and emotional dimensions—for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples (p. 2). In a survey to develop a new Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements , participants were asked about what they considered Aboriginal student success, the themes that emerged from this survey included: Sense of belonging; academic success; awareness of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit history and culture for all students and Aboriginal student leadership (FNEC Report, 2012)). In a study of secondary school girls about school success, Fraser (2007) states that the Aboriginal girls in her study noted notions of success included enough money and the importance of developing strategies to overcome obstacles and of having self-confidence (p.ii).

Receiving a Dogwood Diploma

When asked about reaching a Dogwood Diploma, some students played down the

importance of one, while others viewed the diploma as an opening to post-secondary options for them.

> It's really just a piece of paper that says, like, yeah, you did it. Here you go. More or less it means you showed up enough. Here you go. Goodbye. And then they take the wave. I don't think you should define yourself by your Dogwood. But that being said -- yeah, if kids get 100 in every class and the kids who get 50 in every class both get the same piece of paper. (DP)

Student DP realizes that there is a range of success: whether one receives a well-earned Dogwood certificate or is barely passing the grade, it all equals the same result. However, other students realize that ascertaining a Dogwood certificate with good marks will open more post-secondary experiences.

> I'd say pretty good. It's cool that I'll be graduating with my Dogwood. It just means more opportunities in life. (DJ)

> Yeah, that’s the Dogwood. Means it’s a little piece of paper that depends on the rest of my life is what I mean. (FC)

Earning a Dogwood with good grades ensures better opportunities beyond high school, whether it be college or university. FC was determined to go to university and recognized the value of getting grades fit for post-secondary.

The overall analysis reveals the students' definition did not differ from the definition I initially set out. Students recognize the measure used for their success is limited in scope and they extend the definition to include other aspects of their being.

Their words did provide insights on other principal variables that could either contribute to their success or undermine it: relationships with teachers, parental support, community support, and Aboriginal Education workers' support (Anguiano, 2004; Bazalak, 2002; Davidson 2018; MacIver, 2012).

Keys to Success

The students who participated in this research have learned how to navigate the colonial education system with the support and guidance gained through key relationships. These relationships included a few special teachers who believed in them and parents who were involved, but all students acknowledged the Aboriginal education staff who invested in their social/emotional and academic success. For those students who were First Nations on-reserve students, they noted support from their band, although one felt she did not have any support from her band.

However, these same students faced external obstacles to their success, such as teachers not knowing the value of the social emotional and academic support provided from the Aboriginal education staff. Some teachers did not allow students to access support to help process personal experiences of loss, as well as the racism of low expectations (Bishop, 2008; Shield, Bishop, & Mazawi, 2005); Smith, et al., 1999; Valencia, 2010).

Relationships with Teachers and the Classroom Environment

As part of the talking circles and the interviews, one topic that frequently appeared was how the students identified that the relationship, or lack of a relationship with teachers, impacted their

ability to be successful in the classroom. This also proved to be one of the challenges students faced with the school system as a whole. A family type relationship based on mutual respect and a positive relationship are key to students' learning. This is evident from the students' voices in my research. The teacher's role in building a supportive, caring relationship is a gateway to success which includes well-being and happiness.

According to Bishop's (2008) study with Māori students, most of the students identified that the relationships with their teachers are the most influential factors in their ability to achieve in the classroom (p. 447). This was also evident in the stories shared by the students in this study when asked who contributed to their success. This is what they had to offer:

> Yeah, because there's definitely – like, I've met teachers where they know me. I know them. And it's a good class. We understand each other and then there's some teachers in this school who don't bother to learn your last name or how to say it. They put no effort into understanding you and some days you come to school after, like, a rough evening at home and you come to school. And they just make it worse. And they just don't understand your situation. And in turn it just makes that class worse and worse by the day. (HL)

This student has a strong cultural sense of who he is as an Aboriginal person, with a family committed to education; yet his reflections detail how teachers can have a powerful impact on his sense of belonging at school, especially in the classrooms.

> Yeah, it's like what we were saying earlier about some teachers who you like, and you get along with and you enjoy going to their class and you do better in that class. But teachers

> who you don’t get along with, you guys don't treat each other well for whatever reasons, you do – you don’t do as well in that class. You don’t enjoy it. (DP)

> Teachers that aren't like willing to understand you. I'd say what we were talking about. Just like I've had one or two bad teachers just don’t get along, like, even, like, losing someone. Yeah. And I missed a lot of school and they were like, well, I am just going to give you a zero on everything. (HN)

This student’s reflection names teachers who do not appear to care as “bad” teachers who are not empathic for a student’s life outside of school. This student is one of two students who have lost someone close in their family and found that some of their teachers still gave them zero on a late assignment, despite the student’s grieving process.

> Yeah, I agree with that. Like, even like I've felt disrespected from, like, a teacher in, like, the past few weeks and just, I'm like – and you kind of tell they don’t trust you. Like, you and your friends are marking test and you can just see them watching over you and looking at you and it's just like, I am not doing anything bad. Like, I've – when a teacher disrespects me, I just feel like it makes me not want to do good in their class because I don’t want to listen to what they are teaching and it’s just kind of frustrating. I feel like if you don’t get along with them, like, it actually affects your grade. Like, you can push through it but it's like I don’t want to listen to your lecture. (HM)

I wonder if teachers are aware of the effect their attitudes and behaviours have on students’ willingness to learn? This student reflects on how they feel disconnected and sometimes uncomfortable in their classrooms to the point of disengagement.

In his study with Māori students, Bishop (2008) continues by stating that "the students emphasized how the ways in which teachers taught – that is, how they interacted with Māori students – influenced them into either being engaged in their learning or not" (p. 447). Students in my study would also contend that teachers who were not only approachable but also respectful to the students benefitted students most in the way they interacted with them.

In Donovan's (2015) research in Australia he used "yarning circles," a methodology similar to the sharing circles in this study. He indicated similar findings:

> The relationship between the Aboriginal student and the teacher is a key feature when engaging Aboriginal students in a learning environment. This understanding of an authentic relationship was repeated by Aboriginal students across the Yarning Circles as they discussed the teachers that treated them like real people. An authentic relationship was foundational to many of the Aboriginal students wanting to engage with their teachers in the classroom. (p. 619)

This explains the importance of students' connection to their teachers and willingness to engage in the learning process in class when they feel respected and cared about in an authentic manner. As with Bishop (2008), Donovan (2015) compares authentic relationships to a family-like relationship, in which teachers treat students with respect in order to engage them:

> It is the relationship that many Aboriginal students build their engagement to their learning. Once they connect and trust the teacher then the Aboriginal students will engage with their teachers and work upon that relationship. Many aspects of Aboriginal students' learning are relational and built from the shared understanding that comes from a shared learning experience. (p. 620)

These authors agree that reflecting a family type relationship based on mutual respect and a positive relationship are key to students' learning. This is evident from the students' reflections in my research as well. A teacher's role in building a supportive, caring relationship either was a gateway to success or, when it was missing, represented another obstacle a student had to overcome.

In a study by MacIver (2012) on Aboriginal students' perspectives influencing high school completion, she concludes:

> According to the results of this study, teachers hold considerable power in influencing Aboriginal students' sense of belonging in school, through their interactions with their students, the curricula taught, and the instructional strategies selected. A benefit of this study is revealing to teachers how their actions influence Aboriginal students' school experiences. (p. 161)

This statement by MacIver sums up the sphere of influence of the teacher in the schools. Students in this study could easily cite which teachers were the "good" teachers by their relationships with students, or "bad" teachers who did not care about students in a relational, meaningful way. Several of the students either felt connected to their teachers or they did not depending on how the teachers interacted with them.

> Like, if you go into a classroom and you know that they want you to succeed and they care for you and they will stand there and answer every question you have. It's a lot different than if you go up to a teacher and they say, why have you've asked me four questions this class? You should listen more. Like, it just kicks you down a notch. (DP)

This student speaks to the importance of knowing teachers care about their success, which is partially indicated by their patience with the student's way of learning and by adjusting their teaching accordingly. This suggests that teachers' knowledge of how their students learn is an important aspect of teaching.

> Yeah. I think, like, just not being afraid to ask questions and communication is so important, like, sometimes I get scared of teachers and I, like, failed Math 10 and I asked that teacher absolutely no questions. And I was always scared of her and I never wanted to and then I failed it. (HN)

This student took on the responsibility of the communication aspect of her learning, however, she failed the class. It is unfortunate that this teacher did not know how afraid the student was of her, nor how this fear impacted her learning in this class.

> Yeah, like, it's really easy, like, if your teacher doesn't show you respect then it's like, why should I automatically just because of their job title and what they are doing respect them back? Like, that's expected. Like there are teachers in this school that have been disrespectful and it's like – it makes the class so much harder because they are disrespectful to you versus if you have a very respectful teacher who is considerate about what they are doing, it makes it totally different – different atmosphere. (HL)

> I think it just creates a really bad atmosphere especially if you are trying to learn in it. Like, if you are being disrespected by a teacher – even if it's just once, it kind of sets a tone that is kind of irritating to go to and have to be at, do your best in. (HL)

Respect appeared to be a common tenet when speaking about relationships with teachers. The students felt strongly that respect was a two-way responsibility of both teacher and student. Cassidy and Bates (2005) state that students see their teachers' respect for them as a key to their success at school. However, if the teacher expects respect without earning it, it lessens the students' appreciation of the teacher.

> It was hard to have Ms. X because I didn't have a good first impression, I guess, because she's never really liked me then. So, it was really hard. I didn't really like that class. And now I just don't even like English [class]. (DT)

Students know when someone genuinely likes them and cares for them. And for this student, it led her to not engage with the teacher; additionally, it affected how she viewed learning in an English class. This would be yet another obstacle to overcome.

The students' experiences and perspectives fall in line with studies that include students' voices (Bishop, 2008; Donovan, 2015; MacIver, 2012) that recognize the value and importance of teachers' role in the success of students. This is a double-edged sword, where the teachers can make a positive or a negative difference in a student's success.

In their book *Pathologizing Practices*, Shield, Bishop, and Mazawi (2005) explore how schooling creates and perpetuates images of children that have deep impacts on students. These images can be destructive, or predispose some children to be successful, confident, and engaged, while leading others to become lower achieving, timid or aggressive, reluctant, and disengaged (p. 1). Gay (2018) also suggests the interactions between students and teachers, as well as among students in the classroom, frequently are identified as the "actual sites" where learning success or failure is determined (p. xxiii).

The Damaging Impact of Deficit Thinking

Further to this, the participants in this study shared stories when they felt less than the other students, or that they were treated like they were "stupid." A participant had this to say about a negative elementary school experience:

> And I was still, like, locked in that thing where how (name of school) did it was, like, they thought I was stupid or something. They treated me like I didn't, or I couldn't understand something just because they were talking and sometimes it's easier if I read something and then they explain it to me. (DT)

Teachers who limit their differentiated instruction showed limited understanding of all their students in the classroom. This student understood that as a visual learner, as opposed to an auditory learner, her preferred type of learning was not supported in this classroom. And yet she was made to feel stupid due to the lack of instruction suited to her learning needs.

Bishop et al. (2005) speak to the learning context in the traditional classroom, in which there is a distinct power differential between teacher and learner. This pattern of curriculum and pedagogical dominance is supported by theories of intellectual deficiencies, cultural deficiencies, behavior disorders, or a combination of these as reasons for nonparticipations by students (p. 14).

In addition, there are times when teachers may feel like they are helping students but, in fact, they are endorsing the deficit model.

> The teachers down here don't really make you do your work, they suggest it to you and tell you what's going to happen, but I mean they don't push you to do it. (FC)

> Miss X, who is a teacher is like no I'll help you. Come to the learning center and I'll help you learning it and then I'd go to learning center, we'd work out all the answer, she'd basically tell me the answers every time I got stuck 'cause she was so determined to keep me in the class so she just sort of gave them to me and I told her. (J)

The racism of low expectations under the cover of "helping" the student so they do not fail is equivalent to verbally expressing their lack of belief in the student's ability to do the work. Scholar Geneva Gay (2000) states, "If teachers expect students to be high or low achievers, they will act in ways that cause this to happen" (p. 74). It is the proverbial self-fulling prophecy of teachers' expectations, as explained by Riley and Ungerleider (2012):

> The term *teachers' expectations* describe the inferences teachers make regarding students' potential to achieve in the classroom. These inferences may be influenced by a number of factors. Some factors may be internal to the student, such as a student's aptitude for academic achievement or external factors such as IQ test scores, a student's family background, and comments made by former teachers regarding a student's performance may shape teachers' perceptions of students before they enter the classroom. (p. 305)

Having experienced the racism of low expectations my entire elementary to high school experience, I identified with the students who had to rise above school influences and expectations. The continued support of parents, family, and Aboriginal education staff enabled these students to successfully navigate the education system and complete high school. The challenge is not to internalize the negativity, spoken or unspoken, and move fearlessly towards the end goal: graduation.

Parental Support

During my years of schooling, my mother did not come to school for any parent-teacher interviews or events. Does that mean she was unsupportive? Absolutely not. It seemed to me that in my family, back then, schools were less inviting and more intimidating for Aboriginal parents and families. We lived in poverty, we were marginalized within the school and community, and we endured racism individually and as a family. Cassidy and Bates (2005) discuss dominant theories of individual deficits and the wider social inequities that influence school failure, such as students living in a single-parent home, coming from a family with minimal education, or being part of a cultural group that does not value education (p. 69). These authors argue for a more caring approach in fostering hope and building more promising futures.

I wish I could recount my mother's school experience, but it was something she did not talk about with us. However, despite her lack of physical presence at school, she did push me to do my homework. Quite often in my rebellious period, she would call the school regularly to see if I was in attendance. In her mind, it was her job to get all six of us to get our grade 12 education. Most of us gave her a challenging time about reaching that goal for her children. Anguiano (2004) suggests that most parents seem to agree that it is their obligation to provide students with a home and school environment that supports learning; however, they disagree about what constitutes such an environment (p. 63).

The students in this study overwhelmingly stated their families, mostly "Moms," influenced their academic success. There are several reasons for "Moms" over "Dads," such as single parent families. In addition, "Dads", "Grandparents," and families in general are mentioned as huge influences in students' academic success. This student shared the following:

My mom definitely does because she is a single mom raising five teenagers so if she can

> do that, it would be like, you can just do anything. It's kind of nice when you go back home, and you are like, oh, Mom. I did really good in this and she is like, oh, good for you. I am proud of you. (DT)

DT appreciates her mother's support, but she also understands the challenge of raising five children and viewing that a success. DT's mother is actively involved in all her children's education and supports the Aboriginal Education program in a positive way.

In HN's family, both her parents supported and encouraged her. Getting good grades was important because HN planned to attend post-secondary. Her mother works for the school district and is involved in her children's education.

> I'd say my parents too and even, like, some teachers I am close with. But, like, parents can, like, push you and you feel good about it but then you can also feel super discouraged, like, a bad report card can set you back. (HN)

HN worked hard for her marks and appreciated her parents' involvement, but also realized there was a strong expectation from them that she ascertains certain grades that would equal post-secondary.

HL asserts that his family, and especially his grandfather who is a residential school survivor, plays a significant role in his school completion and his quest to attend post-secondary school.

> Yeah, family is big, like, for a lot of people I think that's – the big push is your parents' success and your parents wanting you to succeed and helping you get there. That's big too. Yeah. My mom, my dad, my grandparents, like, hearing about my grandpa and how

> he went to residential school and how rough his schooling was and then knowing how I have it now. (HL)

HL is an intergenerational residential school survivor, but the strength and resiliency of his grandfather's experience helps him to be grateful in the current education system. HL plays rugby and is a culturally grounded student, which supports him in navigating the school system.

The students' stories in this section on parental engagement in their educational experience is reflected in Anguliano's (2004) study, which demonstrated the importance of family to a student's success in high school. Although the challenges might vary depending on family type, the need to understand family dynamics within a cultural context is essential to develop connections between family and educational systems. I would suggest that schools and teachers view their students from a holistic perspective, rather than just an academic perspective, and to consider, the student's individual lived experiences. Archibald and Hare (2017) explain that, within the Indigenous worldview, understandings of the world are holistic. For example, the spiritual, emotional/social, cognitive, and physical dimensions of self are inter-connected. All these aspects must be fostered for the learning potential to be realized.

Community Support

When the participants were asked about part their communities played in their academic success, on-reserve students responded:

> I feel like I could use a bit more help from my band, like, trying to, like – because I never really see the Band Education Coordinator around here. I seen her the other day, but she only comes once every three months. I don't really see her a lot. (DT)

> I think all the Elders always inspired me to learn the language and sing songs and stuff like that. (CC)

> Yeah, Kukpi7 is pretty supportive. He's always pushing the young ones to go, and they keep reminding us that we have a chance at free post-secondary. (FC)

These stories reflect the variation between First Nations communities. School District No. 83 lies with the four Secwepmec bands and each band has either an Education Director or Coordinator to work with the school district in support of their on-reserve students. Each First Nations community values education, as stated in the Local Education Agreement (LEA):

> 3.4 To facilitate and increase the percentage of First Nations graduates who demonstrate skills of self-sufficiency and responsibility such that they are able to gain immediate employment or gain successful entrance into post-secondary institutions. (2012-2016)

Each student's comments reflected that they felt connected to or supported by their FN band and/or community. Castellano, Davis, and Lahache (2000) remind us that, in order to transform learning, the classroom must expand outward to include community. They continue to stress that parents and Elders must become active planners and decision makers in education, and that education cannot be confined within the walls of an institution (p. 98).

In creating Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements (AEEA), part of the required process was to consult with parents, families, and communities; but this is just the beginning. Schools that engaged all areas of a student's life reveal stories of success. According to Preston and Claypool (2013), the main motivational features of educational success as perceived by 12 Aboriginal high school students in their study focused on four themes: a hospitable school

environment, personally relevant content/learning activities, unique personal issues such as family role models, and past learning experiences (p. 270). I concur with Preston and Claypool because of the value students place on a caring school environment which supports their learning. Along with this, I would add not only family role models but positive role models within the school such as the Aboriginal Education worker and the Aboriginal success coach teacher, who become like extended family to students. Some Aboriginal students refer to the Aboriginal Education Worker as their "school mom".

In the next section, I explore students' stories relating to the Aboriginal Education staff. Without a doubt, these staff members are the people most of the students in this study call upon for guidance and support within the schools. The AEEA (2012-2017) focus at the time of this study was to improve the overall academic performance of Aboriginal students by:

- Creating an environment that supports resiliency
- Supporting academic relevancy
- Engaging students/parents/community in positive, supportive relationships
- Encouraging language and culture steeped in respect.

The AEEA goals ideally are supported throughout the schools, however, often it would fall under the responsibility of the Aboriginal Education department and staff to ensure these goals were implemented.

Aboriginal Education Enhancement Support for Indigenous Students

Almost thirty years ago, I began my journey supporting Indigenous students. As a Native School Liaison, my goal was to support Native students and to bridge the families, schools, and students. My primary role was to build relationships with students, parents, and families and to be the connection between home and school. I loved being an advocate for students/parents and

families. Many other staff and I worked with Aboriginal students and families with the hope of keeping them connected to schools. Back then, the dropout rates were at 60% for Aboriginal youth (Melnechenko & Horsman, 1998). This statistic is understandable in hindsight, considering the lack of understanding of the history of Aboriginal peoples and a mindset of blame towards the student and family for their lack of success.

As District Principal of Aboriginal Education at the time of this study, I advocated for Indigenous students/parents and families under the umbrella of Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements (AEEA), where "enhanced" programs and services are provided to increase Indigenous student success. Often times, the responsibility for Indigenous students was passed onto the Aboriginal Education department.

The participants in this study did not know anything about the AEEA until I named a few who were staff in the Aboriginal Education program, and then they understood. The students' stories show how highly respected the Aboriginal Education staff are, and the importance of the Aboriginal Rooms as a safe, supported space for them within the school. In fact, many students had high praise and significant relationships with these staff and noted how they contributed to their success:

> X has contributed Help me with my homework, kept me on track. She just tells me I need to get done, and just do it. (CR)

I believe there is a presumption that students understand the complex nature of schools, and what is required to complete their high school journey. Cherubini (2014) reminds us that the experiences of Aboriginal students in public schools across Canada have been influenced by a complex combination of historical and socio-cultural realities. Aboriginal students have often endured an array of adverse experiences that have negatively affected their education.

> X cares a lot. I mean, if there is one person in the school that is going to care about the students is X and she does a lot for all of us to make sure we succeed cause her encouragement and that's to thrive and do our best really does help to have that backup sometimes. I mean, school was not easy. She helps make sure we get the resources we need to become successful in life. (FC)

Gay (2018) suggests that caring is one thing that most educators agree is important in working effectively with students. I believe Gay's statement is not meant just for teachers, but for every adult in the school to care about the success and well-being of all students.

> There's always that open door in X's room and that's always there. That's really big for a lot of people. Whether or not you use it is really up to you. Whether or not you need it is up to you. So, I think that is huge but, in the classrooms, it's like, you don't notice it. You are just another kid, just another number on a piece of paper to teachers but unless you do go into the room, go and get help or go ask for help. (HL)

HL did not always go into the Aboriginal education room but knew it was available when he needed it. He understood that it was a safe and welcoming environment. The Aboriginal Education Workers (AEW) strive to create a family type atmosphere, as Bishop (2005) suggests, so the students can seek information and direction as required to get courses done and be successful. In a similar study, Cherubini (2014) noted that Aboriginal students are empowered to request access to the Native Room for cultural support. They are trusted to leave the mainstream classroom and tend to their school work in a more culturally suitable environment (p. 40).

> I honestly would not graduate if it were not for X. She is – I don't know. With all my – it was halfway through last year, I think it was, and I just wasn't doing good enough and I wasn't passing things and I just didn't have as much achievement for it. And I talked to X about it one day and it was all in an afternoon and she's like, okay. We'll do this and this and this once a day. And then we can do this and then by May 1st, we'll do this and then halfway – and it was like – and then every day she comes and sees me and she's like, have you done this and this? Oh, no. And she's, okay. Follow me. We are doing it right now. (DP)

I'm not sure where this idiom came from, but it rings true, "what's good for Aboriginal students is good for all students", or as authors Restoule and Chaw-win-is (Nuu-chah-nulth aht) (2017) in their reflection paper argue, the traditional Indigenous ways of teaching and learning are relevant not only for Indigenous people, but for the education of all people (p. 4). As DP expressed, he also benefited from attending the Aboriginal Education room at his high school, since all students are welcomed. Once again, it is important to have some guidance to an already complex journey.

> Like, I see X and we talk and stuff. And she's always there and super supportive and I always feel like she cares so much, like, way more than teachers. She just comes across so motherly, I would say. (HN)

My overall question as we move through this section is why Aboriginal students need to find a space outside of their classroom to nurture them, where they feel celebrated, accepted and safe. Preston and Claypool (2013) suggest that immersing students in a nurturing, accepting, and

safe environment was the catalyst that unleashed the student's motivation to learn. The Aboriginal education room in schools that provided this valued space was staffed by Aboriginal Education workers; they place high value on the Indigenous staff and non-Indigenous staff who support students, emotionally, culturally, and academically.

When I asked students what they would do differently, many cited choosing better courses earlier, rather than selecting courses to be with their friends. They also mentioned the lack of direction provided by the academic school counsellors as another impediment. Of course, many also mentioned studying harder. This led me to hire an Aboriginal Success Coach teacher at each high school to assist students academically and co-create success plans with a student-driven goals shortly thereafter and their position continues today. The Success Coach teacher also liaisons with classroom teachers to assist students to navigate the school system with knowledge and confidence.

The AEEA provides the "enhanced support" for Aboriginal students and families. However, schools overall need to do a better job of involving parents and families by creating warm and inviting space, so parents and students feel welcomed in the school. In my experience, Aboriginal support staff are expected to fill in the gap for taking responsibility for Aboriginal students. Some schools with administrators who understand the shared history and their responsibility to bridge the gap do well, but there is much work to be done in this area.

In the various roles I have held throughout my career, working alongside Aboriginal students, families and communities, it has been rewarding but also very isolating and lonely work. In her study of Aboriginal teachers' knowledge and experience in public education reports, St. Denis (2010) states:

> Finding allies could be very difficult, because of what they perceived as a resistance and/or lack of interest in learning about Aboriginal people are still too common; and that sometimes their non-Aboriginal colleagues communicated their lack of interest through body language, and by not listening and not acknowledging Aboriginal teachers. (p. 61)

Being viewed as the Aboriginal "expert," simply because of who you are and the role you have within the education system, can carry a heavy weight. And at the same time, Aboriginal educators are given the responsibility to "solve" the issues of Aboriginal students, families, and communities, as if they need fixing. Having worked in several school systems across three provinces, I can attest to the fact that the implications of being Aboriginal in the field of Aboriginal education is daunting. Early on in my career as an Aboriginal teacher, I experienced racism as the legitimacy of my qualifications were questioned because I attended an Aboriginal teacher education program. A few years ago, the BC School Superintendent's Association (BCSSA) offered an "Aspiring Aboriginal Leadership Series" and informed Superintendents across the province about the program designed primarily for District Principals of Indigenous education and other Indigenous leaders. When I asked my then-Superintendent about it, he was surprised that I would be interested. And today, some of my former colleagues are surprised that I am a Superintendent of a School District because it sits outside the realm of just "Aboriginal education." In B.C. most Aboriginal educators in leadership lead the Aboriginal or Indigenous Education departments. As far as I know, I'm the first Indigenous Superintendent in B.C. out of the sixty school districts in the province and furthermore, the first female Indigenous Superintendent. Since my appointment in 2018, there are now four Indigenous Superintendents that self-identify as Aboriginal.

Insights for School Administrators

This study was geared to give voice to students. It was their opportunity to give advice to administrators and policy makers to promote continued success of Aboriginal students. Some conversations focused on the role of principals, and this is what they had to say;

> I think principals should always make sure, like, every teacher loves what they are doing because I feel some days, that like, some teachers just don't want to be teaching whatsoever and they kind of don't take it out on the class, but you can tell. Like, if a teacher doesn't want to be teaching or even just subs sometimes come in and I am, like, this is ridiculous. (HN)

> Tell him to go check out classes, maybe get him (Principal) to know teachers. (DT)

> Yeah, go sit in classes and see how they answer the students' questions and how they are teaching. He should know, like, how his teachers are teaching the students. (DT)

> That would be big, like, having your principal do understand that there's teachers in this building that shouldn't be here. (HL)

These students suggest that when principals do not know what is going on in classrooms, they are unable to ensure that teachers are passionate about teaching their students. The student interprets this as a disconnect between the principals' knowledge and teaching practice. However, according to Leadership Standards for Principals and Vice-Principals in BC (2013), one of their responsibilities is to know current teaching practices in every classroom through on-

going supervision (p. 14).

The students are passionate about what supports their learning environment, and they recognize the value in the roles of those who support them. They suggest that, at times, educational leaders need some advice about what should be happening in the schools and classrooms. These students have successfully navigated the system and by giving them voice, they are willing to share their knowledge and experience moving forward as soon-to-be graduates. In the next section, I share students' voices about changes in the school system which were different than what they expected. They were critical of the changes for several reasons.

Insights for Policymakers

Cook-Sather (2002) argues for attending to the perspectives of those most directly affected by, but the least often consulted about, educational policy and practice: the students (p. 3). Often schools change the way they do things without consultation from the students but rather inform the students what the change will be.

For example, one of the four high schools in the school district of this study changed from the traditional way of structuring the class schedules to an open learning concept. The students in this study were upset that it was not what they were told it would be:

> The way they explained it last year I thought was awesome because it's like you've got the 5 classes a week but if you're caught up then you can go somewhere else and work on a class you aren't caught up in. But instead they've got two classes a week, and then the rest is open do whatever you want time. (J)

According to this student's statement, it appears she had more time in her schedule than she was used to having in a more traditional environment. The change of having five classes per day to

having two classes a week in a more open learning structure was not comfortable and made little sense to this student.

> I mean like, it might be easier if they changed the curriculum along with the system. I mean the curriculum's the exact same just you're finish it by yourself instead. Like the way they kind of explained it to us last year is that it would be easier like the classes wouldn't be, there wouldn't be so many assignments. It'd be easier to learn independently. It's also directed like it really depends on how motivated you are, this system is completely designed for independent learning, and there's a lot of kids in this school who can't learn independently. Like they need to be in a classroom setting. (FC)

This student appears to be advocating for maintaining the traditional system for students who require classroom teachers and instruction in a more traditional setting. She too, found that she had more time in the week with so few committed classes. She said the only reason she was at the school on this day was because of our meeting

As adults, we often make decisions in the "best interests of our students," without taking into consideration their opinions, ideas, and experiences. I have relearned the value of young peoples' voices as I centered the conversations around what *they* had to say. I feel honoured to be part of the conversations with so many bright and talented students willing shared their stories and insights with me. It is my hope that I was able to capture their meaning and intentions. In the next section, I will summarize what I heard, and, with the best of intentions, I will share my concluding thoughts for this chapter.

Concluding Thoughts

At the beginning of this research, I was curious about what factors contributed to the academic success of Indigenous students while others struggled to graduate. In my review of the literature, I found that the focus was on the students' lack of success and not on what schools could do differently to ensure Indigenous students' success.

As a starting point, the students broaden the definition of success from the Dogwood completion to a more holistic perspective, which included well-being and happiness. The Dogwood certificate was an indication that they were able to navigate a sometimes unfriendly, colonial institution, which would ultimately enable them to move onto a post-secondary experience. Sometimes, getting good grades to attend post-secondary did cause angst among the students. Overall, the students realized that attaining a Dogwood was not an overall indicator of success. The students separated out academic success and personal success quite readily, but also recognized how personal situations of loss impacted their learning.

Firstly, I also understood from my own practice the importance of building relationships with students. That social capital carried both the student and me through sometimes difficult conversations. I always believed in maintaining high expectations for students by believing in their potential and knowing they will do their best to reach high. My own values as an educator were validated when listening to students' stories of how challenging it was to engage in classrooms where they did not feel respected nor cared for. I was equally reminded when students readily and enthusiastically shared stories about teachers who truly cared for them and empathized with them. These teachers would "cut them some slack" when students had personal difficulties, for example, by not penalizing them for late assignments, but granting extensions

instead. I would like to reiterate the importance of a family type relationship based on mutual respect and a positive relationship are keys to students' learning. A teacher's role is to build a supportive, caring relationship that is a gateway to success for students.

Secondly, my findings indicated the significance of parents, families, and community support for students as they worked their way through to graduation. Some parents were more comfortable than others advocating for their child at the school level, whereas others were more behind the scenes. When sharing their stories of their biggest cheerleaders, it was more about who was in their corner encouraging them, and who the students wanted to "make proud." For on-reserve students, band and community support was noted as well, whether the support was given by the Elders, Education Coordinator or Chiefs.

Thirdly, the "enhanced" support by the Aboriginal Education staff was significant in the personal and academic success of the students in this study. Little did the students realize that the staff was under the umbrella of AEEA with additional funding for programs and services. In their minds, it was simply "our school mom" that helped them navigate the complexities of the school system and ensured they were on track to graduate. Whether through paying attention to attendance, school assignment reminders, or socio-emotional support, the students gave much credence to the support they received from workers in their schools and the Aboriginal Education rooms, where they would find a safe cultural space to be Aboriginal.

Finally, the students exemplified self-determination when navigating a school system that was sometimes littered with the racism of low expectations. The resilience of the students was evident in their stories. Upon reflection, they shared how they would do things differently when selecting their courses or, if possible, shorten the time of gathering enough credits to complete sooner. For the most part, the students in this research demonstrated their tenacity to map out

their success with teachers who chose to have positive relationships with them, the Aboriginal education staff who continued to believe in them, their family and community cheerleaders, and ultimately, through their own volition . Their overall advice to administrators is to know what's going on in the classrooms in your school, to ensure that teachers create a culturally responsive classroom where all students can succeed.

In the next chapter, I will provide a brief overview of the previous chapters, a synopsis of the stories shared, and outline steps for future research. I will discuss the contribution and significance of this research, as well as its strengths and limitations.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This chapter summarizes the dissertation research, findings, and understandings that I learned through the students' stories and experiences. I will also discuss the strengths and limitations of the study, along with the potential contribution and significance of the research, including suggestions for future research. I will reflect on how research impacts my work as a practitioner as an educator in the K-12 field of education in Canada. I will end the dissertation with some personal and professional reflections.

The overarching research question guiding this study is as follows: What are Grade 12 Indigenous students' perceptions of the factors that contribute to their academic success in North Okanagan School District No. 83? In response to this question, the students in this study broaden the scope of what is commonly understood as academic success to include personal happiness as part of overall success. Through sharing their personal stories, the research participants illustrated the importance of relationships with teachers who hold the power to make a difference in their overall success in school. The participants also shared stories of the significant role that the Aboriginal Education Workers in their school played in their success, even though the participants did not always realize the workers were there because of the Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement. Through their stories, they demonstrated the varying roles their parents, families and communities played in their success. And finally, they shared how they were able to navigate the educational system, due to their resilience and their determination to be successful.

The findings of this research stemmed from a decolonized framework, using the Métis Sash as a metaphor, to meet the educational needs of Aboriginal students as described by the

students' voices in this dissertation. Re-imagining the Métis sash using a strength-based approach and these colours serves as a metaphor to describe my theoretical framework.

The black strand now signifies a strength-based relationship that focuses on the success of Aboriginal students by:

1. Developing teachers' capacity to create a culturally responsive, relationship based, learning environment, and to co-create learning with the students in the classroom.

The red and white strands represent schools and teachers seeking to build positive supports with students' families and community while recognizing it "takes a whole village" to raise a learner.

2. Planning and developing collective partnerships with students, families and communities with a strength-based approach to learning.

The blue and white strands represent the significance of IK and celebrates the culturally learning and sharing within the school systems.

3. Continuing to provide "enhanced" support to Indigenous with designated learning spaces where Aboriginal students can access culturally relevant support with quality Aboriginal staff.

The green and gold strands signify the continuation of a responsive learning environment where everyone has a collective responsibly to ensure students voices are heard.

4. Advising administrators and policy makers to be responsive to the students' needs in classrooms, creating space for student voices, and ensuring teaching compliance to the highest standards.

As I discussed in Chapter One, Indigenous students' lack of academic success has been the centre of many federal and provincial reports with a deficit-focused agenda. These government findings started with the Hawthorne Report of 1967/68, which was followed by Indian Control of

Indian Education (1972), and the significant Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) (1996), to name a few. A study by the University of Regina for the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education (2014) suggests the following:

> Research reports focusing on Indigenous education typically follow a familiar pattern. They begin with a statement of the problem, usually focusing upon demographic change, poor educational and socio-economic outcomes, and the need for action to remedy these challenges. They often discuss the pernicious effects of cultural assimilation and racism, reinforcing the need for substantive action to address these historical inequities. While all these things are accurate, they also can create an unfortunate perspective that essentially reinforces a deficiency. Within this narrative are the often-missed voices of strength, resilience and perseverance that can lay out a path to success. (p. 7)

I agree with this observation, because within the stories the students shared, they revealed the strength, resilience, and perseverance that they demonstrated while mapping out the landscape of their success. Without the perspectives of the students, it would be easy to remain within the same "deficit" understanding of their high school experience.

Overview of the Dissertation

At the beginning of this study, I voiced my frustration that schools continue to fail Indigenous students while blaming the students, families, and communities for their lack of school success. Rather than focus on how unprepared the students are for the school system; the school system needs to ask two questions: Are we ready to receive them and celebrate who they are as children? What we do to provide a culturally safe and family based responsive environment? In the meantime, some Aboriginal students will learn how to navigate the system, while others will simply give up and be pushed out of a system not designed with them in mind.

In Chapter One, my underlying intention was to examine British Columbia's Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements and their implications for Indigenous student success. Since I began my study, research in this area has expanded (Daniels, 2016; Lowen, 2011; McLean, 2008; Mitchell, 2011). The students in this research commented frequently that, by providing support to successfully navigate the school system, the Aboriginal Education Worker was key to their success. The education workers build the primary relationships with the students, act as the conduit between home and school, and move the students through the school system. So, the AEEA and the targeted funding provided by the Ministry of Education to provide the "enhanced" services by the Aboriginal Education department are instrumental in creating an environment that help students to be successful. As I moved through this research many of the students' stories referred to needing someone to assist them in the navigation of the school system in order to be successful.

In my practice as District Principal of Aboriginal Education, I was in the position to make recommendations to the First Nations Education Council on programs and services. In doing so, we hired Success Coach teachers to work with Aboriginal students from grade nine to twelve to create individualized academic plans and to help Indigenous students navigate the school system. In addition, we hired Social Workers to support students with their personal well-being. However, these were just parts of the whole experience for the students in the school system, and the students did not relate the Aboriginal education staff as being part of a support program that was the result of policy implementation.

Chapter One examined the history of government policy documents and the impact of these policies on Aboriginal peoples' lives. These early papers, such as the Hawthorne Report (1966/1967) and the report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) recognize the

importance of the involvement of parents, families, and communities in the education of their children. The Truth and Reconciliation Report (2015) reiterates the same message in Section 63 pertaining to Aboriginal education issues. As this recurring theme indicates, Aboriginal peoples need to have input in the lives of their children. One way they can do this is by reiterating Aboriginal histories, languages, and culture as central to their children's schooling, after decades of experiencing the forceable erasure of Aboriginal stories from the education system.

Chapter One wraps up this overview of the complex history of Indigenous identity in Canada with a closer look at the Métis identity. I examine my positionality in this research as a proud "half-breed," seeking answers to further the educational experience of future generations of Aboriginal students. As I move through my own personal journey of education and through my spheres of influence—from support worker to teacher to principal, and now Superintendent—my goal is to make a difference in the lives of Aboriginal students. And in doing so, I follow the advice of Elder Eddie Benton (personal communication, 2002) after I was assigned a school principal position. He told me that if I put the students at the center of all my decisions, I cannot go wrong. And I continue to follow his advice in my current role as Superintendent in a new school district bringing with me a "student centered" approach. For example, I believe students deserve the best we have to offer and in order to do so, we as a school district need to build capacity with staff. Currently, we have a handful of education assistants who have the training and education to do their role effectively therefore we will be offering an Education Assistant course in order to build the skill set of staff supporting students in the classroom And as with many school districts in B.C., there is an ongoing teacher recruitment challenge, especially in the North where we are located. We will be offering a Professional Linking Program in January 2020 for those who staff who have an undergraduate

degree but not a teaching degree. It is our goal to have fully trained teachers in our schools and classrooms for all of our students.

Most importantly, doing my dissertation on Indigenous student success has kept the importance of relationships with teachers and school staffs in the forefront of my thinking and doing. We as a district leadership are creating opportunities for professional learning for our Principals, Vice-principals on the significance of building those relationships. With that, I'm ensuring their yearly professional growth plan which includes an Indigenous Knowledge learning component.

To further address Indigenous students' success in schools, Chapter Two reviews several theories presented over the years that suggest how to make education a better experience for Aboriginal students, including cultural socialization, cultural discontinuity, and culturally inclusive education. To address the obstacles to Aboriginal students' success, I frame my analysis of public schooling with the concepts of decolonization and inclusive education.

To this day in the educational field, I hear comments that Aboriginal students fail because they are not ready for school, or they have too many problems at home (Principal/Vice Principal Meeting Notes, April 2019). These comments confirm Edelman's (1988) description of the construction of social problems as paramount to political discourse. In the case of Aboriginal students, they are discursively constructed as "the problem," thus reinforcing colonial ideologies (p.12). In effect, historically, the focus has been on the negative aspects of the Aboriginal student failure, which has repercussions in society's views of Aboriginal communities as well.

In reality, the schools and school personnel are not ready to receive Aboriginal students, by meeting them where they are and engaging with their families. I continue to argue that the educational system and personnel paradigms need to be examined, for its failure to adapt to

Aboriginal students to help them be consistently not only academically successful but to experience well-being and happiness. As a Superintendent of schools, I recognize that it is equally important to build school system capacity to make room for change. In doing so, we will build the capacity of those working with our students. I also recognize that some staff will embrace the need for a shift in their pedagogy and practice, while others will make excuses for not being willing to change their practices.

In Chapter Two, I explored decolonization as a conceptual framework. I introduced Indigenous authors who have written about the theory and practice of decolonization (Battiste, 2013; LaRocque, 2010; Razack, 2002; Smith, 2012). However, if we are truly going to unpack the notion of colonization within the education system, it requires a new way of learning and doing on everyone's part: teachers, students, and school and district leaders. Unless all stakeholders actively participate, decolonization becomes an additive approach, as suggested by Battiste (2013). The Accord on Indigenous Education (2010) suggests the following:

> Establishing mechanisms and priorities for increased Indigenous educational engagement, establishing partnerships with Indigenous organizations and communities, and using educational frameworks based on Indigenous knowledge are trends that have important implications for the Association of Canadian Deans of Education (ACDE). New ways of engagement are required in order to address these trends. The time is right for a concerted and cooperative effort that creates transformational education by rejecting the "status quo," moving beyond "closing the gap" discourse, and contributing to the well-being of Indigenous peoples and their communities. At the same time, ACDE recognizes that it has a role and responsibility to expand educators' knowledge about and understanding of Indigenous education. (p. 2)

Decolonization is a process that will take time to incorporate into our school systems. I was reminded recently, that decolonization includes not only acknowledging the traditional territory but to learn the traditional place names, to use some of the language of the territory, to know who the Knowledge Keepers are and to honour local knowledge. With this view I elaborate in this study, decolonization involves bringing inclusive practices into schools, working hand in hand with teachers and school staff. In order for it to be successful, teachers must unpack their own assumptions and be willing to examine their own practices with a critical lens in order to make space for change for all students. The students' stories in this research have made it evident that teachers are paramount to Aboriginal students' success.

In my current role, I see some schools making substantial changes on how they implement Aboriginal worldviews and perspectives. These changes are a starting point for the inclusive practices laid out in the new BC curriculum (2016). Kanu's study (2005) highlighted some of the challenges faced by teachers in this process; therefore, teachers are being supported throughout this process. There exists an abundance of locally developed resources within the school district to support classroom teachers and administrators. However, the more difficult challenge is overcoming the incompatibility of school structures and Aboriginal cultural values/practices. It will take many more substantial changes in order for Aboriginal cultural values and norms to be embedded throughout schools' pedagogy, curriculum, and daily practices. An additional professional standard was added to the Professional Standards for B.C. Educators (2019) which will assist in insuring IK is respect in the classroom. It includes the following statement:

> Educators respect and value the history of First Nations, Inuit and Métis in Canada and Impact of the past on the present and the future. Educators contribute towards truth,

reconciliation and healing. Educators foster a deeper understanding of the ways of knowing and being, histories, and cultures of First Nations, Inuit and Métis. (p.5)

In using the Métis sash as a metaphor (Chapter Two), I pulled together the stories of the students, weaving them together to strengthen the messages they shared. The "black" strand in the Métis sash reflects the dark history of education, discussed in the research and reports references in Chapter One, as well as the ongoing discourse of blaming Aboriginal students for their lack of success. The red and white strands represent researchers who are hunting for an answer by considering various theoretical underpinnings to understand the lack of success of Aboriginal students. In the hunt for answers, some researchers are starting to turn their attention to the school systems as the source of the failure, rather than the students (Archibald & Hare, 2017; Auditor General of British Columbia, 2015; Bishop & Glynn, 1999, Dweck, 2006).

Chapter Three presents the methodology used in this research, whereby student participants shared their stories and experiences within sharing circles. Using the Métis sash metaphor, I pulled together the blue and white strands that represent the infinity symbol; in this way, the participants' stories have no end, much like the stories told by the generations before, and the stories yet to come.

I was honoured to be part of the stories shared and it is my intention to share these stories in the most respectful way. Therefore, I followed the six principles of National Aboriginal Health Organization on Métis research (2010) as teachings to guide my research methodology. First, this research methodology was built on reciprocity between myself as a researcher and within the community in which I lived and learned. I shared my finding with students to confirm and validate my interpretations. Secondly, I recognize and respect that the stories they shared belong

to them; I am simply sharing them in this research. I struggled with the data analysis aspect of this research simply because I sought to be true to this teaching. Thirdly, a safe and inclusive environment was created based on established relationships, including between the students and the Aboriginal Education worker they knew and trusted who assisted with selecting the participants. The sharing circles were respectful, and inclusive of everyone's voice. Fourth, recognizing diversity and welcoming everyone in the circle was key to the methodology's success. The students knew each other. The fact that they were accepting of a student in the circle who was not Aboriginal reflects their willingness to be open-minded. The fifth expectation of research—being relevant and accurate—speaks to the importance of student voices, and their impact on future research. As a researcher, it is my objective to be as accurate as possible and any errors are my responsibility. The sixth and final principle—understanding the history, values, and knowledge of the Métis methodology—was carried out by being aware of how I straddle worldviews simply based on who I am. I acknowledge my insider/outsider perspective as an educator, and as someone who worked within the institution where the research took place. Part of recognizing my positionality was to recognize and acknowledge myself as a visitor in the Secwepemc territory. With his permission, I embedded the teachings and stories of Kukpi7 Wayne Christian. His teachings and stories support the findings of this research, which I will discussing the next section.

Chapter Four parallels the green and gold colours of the Métis sash, by which I express my intention that the findings of this research will also signify growth, prosperity, and hope for the future of Aboriginal students as they continue to map their path of educational success. During this research, there has been an increase of studies which reflect on student voices and experiences (Bishop, 2010; Donovan, 2015; MacIver, 2012; Shields, et al., 2005). It was through

talking circles with the students that the concept of success as more than academic success emerged; students pointed to a more holistic way of perceiving their worlds, to include personal well-being and overall happiness. Students in this study also realized that reaching the goal of a Dogwood certificate was simply one more aspect of moving through the school system, and with the merit of helping them to qualify for post-secondary education.

In Chapter Four, I examined the phenomenon of deficit thinking as it pertains to Aboriginal students; historically, this has been the lenses for reviewing Aboriginal students, and, unfortunately, it continues today. However, students in this study, as well as countless others, exhibit resiliency and self-determination as they circumnavigate the perils of deficit thinking and meet their own standards of being successful. Students in this study commented on how challenging it can be in Grade Eight to know which courses to take as they enter high school, and then those that will eventually lead them to a successful graduation. Often, Aboriginal students will be guided by deficit-minded school counselors to the easier math and English courses simply because they are Aboriginal. The students' advice in this study was not to take the easier courses, but for students to re-think their choices early on in their high school years.

Students unequivocally agreed that relationships with teachers and the classroom environment they create, based on respect and passion for their subject matter, make a difference in their lives. This is either the key to success or if there is an absence of the above, then it's an obstacle to overcome. Students in this study also noted the significance of family support. Whether students are from a single parent or live with both parents, and/or have a grandparent invested in the student's success, family support contributed to their success. Depending on the student, community support also proved to be a factor, depending on the amount of connection a student had to their community. This was most often reflected in conversations with First

Nations students living on-reserve, compared to those who lived off reserve or who were Métis. Chief Wayne's teachings and stories echoed the voices of the students where he emphasized the importance of building relationships while recognizing students' gifts and strengths.

The students in this study also recognized is the Aboriginal Education worker's dedication, caring, support and guidance. The support worker helped the students navigate the system by laying out the expectations and requirements throughout the high school experience. Repeatedly, at the annual Aboriginal Graduation Celebration over the eleven years I was part of the North-Okanagan School District, graduating students would acknowledge the Aboriginal Education Workers and Aboriginal education staff for their role in the students' success. Finally, the students had advice and insights for school administrators, which suggests that they hire teachers who love what they are doing, are passionate about education, and create a classroom environment that supports and encourages students in a respectful and caring manner.

Promising Initiatives

Since this research study began, there has been a rise in studies regarding educational success that are inclusive of student voices and perspectives (Bishop, 2005; Donovan et al., 2015). These reports focus on the changes in the education system required to create a school environment that lends itself to the success of Aboriginal students, rather than focusing on the students' need to change. The shift in focus is imperative and timely. In conjunction with the shift in research reflecting student voices, Archibald and Hare (2017) share stories of success and challenges in *Learning, Knowing, Sharing: Celebrating Success in K-12 Aboriginal Education in British Columbia*, and to learn from one another, and to mobilize our understandings so that Aboriginal education thrives (p.1).

In British Columbia, initiatives continue to highlight the systemic barriers to be addressed in order to overcome the inequities in school systems that impact Aboriginal achievement:

> The 'Equity in Action Project' represents some of the current directions being taken by our School District partners and us to address systemic barriers impacting Aboriginal student achievement. A focus on 'equity of opportunity' and a co-constructive approach is driving a review of practices and policies that may be creating obstacles for Aboriginal learners in the B.C. public school system.
>
> The Equity Scan defines a collective and collaborative decision-making process for school districts to enter into a genuine and meaningful self-assessment dialogue about the experience of education for Aboriginal learners and to respond in strategic ways to create conditions for success. (BC Ministry of Education website, 2016)

My understanding of the Equity in Action Project is for school districts to hold conversations with all stakeholders to find a way of creating a more equitable school experience for Indigenous learners. Within an open-ended dialogue and with the guidance and support of the BC Ministry of Education, each district will aim to find an agreement on the change a school district requires to level the proverbial playing field for Aboriginal learners.

Now, as a Superintendent of Schools in a different district in British Columbia (not the one in this study), I am saddened to hear that deficit-driven comments continue from some educators. I encouraged the teacher/parents/staff and two student participants to hold courageous conversations about how we can make the system better for Indigenous students. Unfortunately, as one bold member of the community stated, the conversations were very "teacher centric," focusing more on what the teachers needed in order to "deal" with our students. And unfortunate again, the teachers were offended by that comment (December 2018 Equity Scan Meeting notes).

I had hoped that the introduction of the Equity Scan represented a genuine opening for the province's schools to take a new approach to their Aboriginal students, who represent a resource for the school, not a burden. This reveals to me that there is still much work to be done to change the paradigm and shift to a more strengths-based resiliency model with which to support our Indigenous students. As part of the leadership team in our school district, we are striving to change the narrative from deficit to strength-based pedagogy and practice. One specific action I have led to carry this out is that I extended an invitation to Dr. Verna St. Denis to provide a keynote presentation, followed by workshops on anti-racism theory, in September 2019. The intent here is to offer insights to teachers' practice with the possibility of challenging their perceptions. Dr. St. Denis has agreed to be a presenter in our school district where she will present a keynote address in the morning followed by an afternoon workshop.

Since then, I have been looking for other models, in Canada and around the world, that I can introduce into the school district in order to put student voices at the center of making transformative educational change. Recently, in April 2019, I attended a conference in Saskatchewan where this initiative re-images the work of Russell Bishop's research and implementation of the Te Kotahitanga program in New Zealand, in which student voices are central. This is an excerpt on their program*:*

> Following Their Voices is an initiative designed to raise the educational achievement and participation of Saskatchewan's First Nations, Métis and Inuit students. Following Their Voices focuses on enhancing relationships between students and teachers, creating structures and supports for teachers and school administrators to co-construct teaching and learning interactions with students and creating safe, well-managed learning environments. Following Their Voices is based on research that was conducted with First

> Nations and Métis engaged and non-engaged students, parents/caregivers, teachers and school administrators about what is needed in order to be successful as a First Nations or Métis student in school. The 'voices' of these groups of people were profound in terms of the issues they identified. Their words and insights, along with international research, and guidance and advice from Elders and Knowledge Keepers formed the foundation of this initiative. (p. 6)

In order for this initiative to succeed, it is important for teachers to "buy" into the required intensive professional development. As Following Their Voices participants describe the program, they focus on "enhancing relationships between students and teachers, creating structures and supports for teachers and school administrators to co-construct teaching and learning interactions with students, and creating safe, well-managed learning environments" (Following Their Voices presentation, April 2018). This program requires teachers to have a growth mindset with a willingness to decolonize their classroom and to invite a facilitator into their classroom to observe them in action, making note of whether or not they employ a culturally strengths-based approach to the students in their class. Then the teacher and the facilitator meet to discuss what was observed and what aspects of the teacher's interactions need to be adjusted.

I appreciate teachers' and administrators' willingness to shift their pedagogy and move to a strengths-based, culturally relevant approach that focuses on building student success through relationships. Again, as part of the leadership team of my district, we will be seeking out more information on this program, with the intention of moving our school district forward on this important work.

Contributions and Significance of Dissertation

This dissertation contributes to the limited literature currently available that explores Aboriginal student perspectives about the factors that contribute to their overall success. The students' stories can guide administrators and policy makers in ensuring that positive, supportive relationships are at the heart of every classroom. Parents are sending us their children, the very best they have to offer to our educational systems. As a school system, we need to reciprocate and celebrate the gifts parents are sharing with us. What are we going to do as a school system? Will we criticize their home environments or the communities they come from, and say they are not good enough? Or will we seek their gifts and talents to help them be the best they can?

This study celebrated the Métis protocols which guided this work and incorporated the traditional methodology of sharing circles, based on the sharing of stories. This dissertation reflects the stories of Aboriginal students who have successfully navigated the complexity of the school system. This work honors the teachers who are compassionate and care about the students in their classrooms, and the Aboriginal education staff who walk alongside these students with empathy and understanding. This dissertation celebrates the guidance of the parents who, in their own unique way, encourage their students to stay focused on the end goal. This dissertation reflects who I am as a Métis person, whose overall goal is to be of service to the next generation, with the hopes that my sphere of influence benefits those who come after me.

Strengths and Limitations

The strength of this research is embedded in the stories shared by the students. . So much more can be done to incorporate student voices as we continue to decolonize our school systems. Their experiences can continue to shape the dismantling of the colonial discourse, if we only listen.

One limitation of this research is in the limited number of students who were interviewed for this dissertation; I included 16 voices, but there are many Aboriginal students yet to be heard. I focused my research on only three high schools in School District No. 83, and students' experiences are not necessarily generalizable to a larger population. Schools themselves are little islands of contextual variances.

Another limitation of this research is the time it took to complete. There have been many changes in the research and even though the completion rates of Indigenous students are on the upswing, there is much work to be done in the area of educating Indigenous students and changing schools and teachers' practices.

School districts in BC are required to have a Framework for Enhancing Student Learning (FESL), which includes overarching guiding principles and goals created by each school district system-wide approach of consultation. In my current district, the Guiding Principle #2 is*: How can we strengthen relationships and a sense of belonging at all levels?* One of the goals states the following; *Our schools are places where students, families and staff all feel a sense of belonging.* During our spring data collection, of the grade four and five students who completed the survey, 77% responded positively to feeling comfortable in their schools. In the middle school, 88% expressed being comfortable in school. High school students responded 86% in favor of being comfortable in school. And the accompanying goal is: *To ensure every student can identify multiple, positive relationships they have with peers and staff within the school community.* Data from the grade four and five students showed that 81% believed there are adults at school that cared about them. Middle school students who responded to the survey 94% felt there were adults who cared about them. High school students report that 92% felt there are adults who cared about them (FESL Spring Survey 2019, SD No. 52). At first glance, one would

wonder why the elementary students scored lower than the middle and high school students and worth investigating. One of our findings revealed, a low percentage of students participated in the survey overall and it's important to also note that many of our students who are non-regular attenders would be the student voices we would want to hear from to learn what impacts their learning and engagement.

Suggestions for Future Research

Further research with a focus on Aboriginal student voices needs to continue in order to fill the gap still open. In addition, not only do we need to do more research and hear their voices, but the bigger task ahead is to implement changes with those stories and voices in mind. There is a great distance from hearing the voices to implementation. Further research could examine how to incorporate student voice into the classrooms and schools. An example of this currently being implemented as I mentioned earlier is the *Following Their Voices* program in Saskatchewan, what are the outcomes of this program and how can we transfer this to school districts in British Columbia. Another option could be the development of an inquiry project based on listening to student voices, opinions and ideas as to what we can do to guide their overall success in our school district. This could also serve as a collaborative research project for educational practitioners in this current district.

Impacts as a Researcher/Practitioner

The participants in this research gave some practical advice to their school principals in School District No. 83, which I continually suggest to the principals in our schools in my new district. I have also taken their advice seriously by visiting schools and classrooms on a regular basis. In this way, as a Superintendent of Schools, I also become aware of what is going on in the classroom. I have witnessed amazing learning experiences sometimes and, at other times, not so

much. It is my job to make recommendations to the school principal about ways to take better notice of what is going on in their school classrooms.

It is my intention to bring this research to life in my current role and school district by implementing opportunities for all staff to hear what students have to say and contribute. As part of the Equity Scan, I mentioned earlier, in my district we have created regular Family Luncheons and Community Dinners to families' ideas on how we can make our school district a better place for their students. And finally, we will be hosting a student forum as an opportunity to hear what the students have to say. It will be a blend of students, including those who walk the hallways and avoid the classroom, as well as those who are already in leadership roles within the school. As a researcher practitioner, it is important for me to continue to learn from those voices that sometimes continue to be silent or not heard. But that is only the first step; implementing what we hear is the next step, so it is more than going through the motions. We, as educators, have a responsibility to listen, learn, and do.

Personal and Professional Reflections

Completing this study has been a very long journey. To guide my final reflections on this experience, I will use the First Peoples' Principles of Learning (FNESC), which reflect a respectful and holistic approach to teaching and learning. I will share each principle and my reflections in turn.

> With the increased inclusion of First Peoples' content in the changing BC curriculum, there is a need to incorporate First Peoples' perspectives across the curriculum. The First Nations Education Steering Committee and the First Nations Schools Association, in collaboration with teachers and partners, have developed the following Learning First

Peoples series of teacher resources to support English Language Arts, Science Social Studies and Mathematics courses. (FNESC, 2008)

"Learning ultimately supports the well-being of the self, the family, the community, the land, the spirits, and the ancestors." This principle reflects the holistic nature of my research and my work as a practitioner. I have not done this work in isolation, but with my family; the students and their families; my community; their Secwepemc communities; the land on which this research was conducted; and, of course, the spirits and ancestors that walk within me. It is my hope that my research supports the well-being of all those students involved in this work and those voices yet to be heard.

"Learning is holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential, and relational" (focused on connectedness, on reciprocal relationships, and a sense of place). Along this journey, I have strived to be holistic in my thinking and doing by smudging, praying, and meditating when the work became challenging. Many times, I felt like I was "spinning my proverbial wheels," and not getting anywhere in my writing. At times, I paused to ensure that my own personal educational experiences were not overshadowing the voices I heard. Many times, I left the work for long stretches of time, most often to question the "imposter syndrome" I struggled with, based in my deeply rooted beliefs of not being good enough or smart enough as an Aboriginal learner. I learned the importance of connectedness with students, family, and community through reciprocity. I feel that I earned a place in their community.

"Learning involves recognizing the consequences of one's actions." I take full responsibly for the work presented in this dissertation and for the length of time it took to complete. I thank the patience of my committee and their enduring support as I worked through

the “pauses.” I’ve learned to be patient with myself and the way I learned the lessons as I travelled on this learning journey.

“Learning involves generational roles and responsibilities.” I’ve learned that I’m not alone in this research, and I could not do it in isolation. I learned much through the intergenerational experiences of the students, and those that supported them on their journey. I take on responsibility by sharing their stories, so that they may help the next generations. The focus of my research, the writing, the joys, and the challenges also did not happen in isolation. My husband, our children, grandchildren, and friends have—in overt and covert ways—been on this journey with me. Their ongoing support and belief in me created a responsibility in me to complete, even when I was ready to give up when I lost my first round of research material. And my mother’s voice echoed in my memory to always finish something I started.

“Learning recognizes the role of indigenous knowledge.” As a “proud half breed,” I have relied on the knowledge of those researchers and knowledge keepers who have travelled the road of academia and willingly “broke” trail for others like me to follow; without them, my work would not have been possible. I value the knowledge that my mother and grandparents instilled in me so I can walk proud and hold my head up high, as my mother often told me to do.

“Learning involves patience and time.” This is a valuable lesson I have learned and sometimes needed to remind myself of. I needed to patient and kind with myself as I wrestled with both my health and my husband’s health throughout this research and dissertation. And I have learned to take a break from my studies when I needed to do so.

“Learning requires exploration of one’s identity.” I have always known who I am as a Métis person and in my family of origin. A powerful sense of identity was created, only to be challenged and tarnished by school and community through my younger years. As I conducted

my research and wrote this dissertation, it reaffirmed the value of my identity, and how the strength of one's identity can made a difference in one's life.

"Learning involves recognizing that some knowledge is sacred and only shared with permission and/or in certain situations." The sharing and learning in this dissertation are valued and shared with permission. I understand the sacredness of some knowledge and I respect that. I continue to feel honoured that the students in this dissertation share their stories with me and I thank them.

Conclusion

When I attend Superintendents' gatherings with the Minister of Education, I take note that the government's goal is to create the best education system there is, so that all students develop their individual potential and acquire the knowledge, skills, and abilities to contribute to a healthy society and a prosperous and sustainable economy (BC Ministry of Education, 2018). And I believe that, for the most part, administrators, teachers, and staff want to create opportunities for all students to be successful, along with their families and communities. However, there appears to be a disconnect in all of this. Until the completion rates for all students are on par, and there is no longer a need to "enhance" the learning for Aboriginal students, we as a collective have a lot of work to do and change. Those who continue to negate their roles and responsibilities of creating a school and classrooms that honour Indigenous knowledge and perspectives need to be challenged. It is critically important to acknowledge the cultural experiences, Indigenous Knowledge and Indigenous students voices, which should be honoured and valued.

All my relations!

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