# Stories Indigenous Inner-City Young Adults Tell About School

by

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## Abstract

This research explores the stories that young adults who are part of the Indigenous community in Winnipeg's inner city tell about their lives during the years they were in school. Much has been written about the alarming and long-standing discrepancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous graduation rates. Likewise, the negative effect of living with poverty on educational success is clear. This research speaks to the existing data by presenting detailed stories of what it means to be an inner-city Indigenous student. The question that guided this research was: What do the stories told by Indigenous inner-city youth about school reveal about their experience there? In pursuing this question special attention was paid to the potential differences between how participants saw themselves in comparison to how they felt their schools saw them.

This research was guided by a storytelling methodology which was derived from scholarship in Peace and Conflict Studies, Indigenous Studies, Educational Sociology, and Critical Pedagogy. Data was gathered through a series of in-depth group storytelling circles and individual interviews with each of the eight participants in the research. Findings reveal that while in school, participants navigated three terrains of experience. One was with the system of state institutions that dominate life in the inner city, creating a sense of surveillance and threat. Another terrain was life at home, with families and friends, and in neighbourhood organizations troubled by endemic material and psychological challenges but also characterized by culture, connection, and pride of place. In between these terrains, participants experienced school as a space in between — connected by policy and practice to the system and by vital but rare caring individuals and cultural practices to their family, cultural, and neighbourhood life.

**Dedication**

There are two people who I dearly wish could have seen this work completed.

One is my Dad, Barry Kuly. He died when I was finishing my coursework for this degree. He raised me in a sea of stories, modelled how to tell them for me, and much more importantly, showed me the importance of listening to them.

I love you Dad.

The other is my best friend, Franklin Halderson. He died when I was writing this dissertation. He wrote a note for me to open after he died. It read, “The suspension of disbelief is one of life’s avenues to real magic. Another is love. I’ve always admired your storytelling prowess, let it shine buddy.”

I did my best buddy.

I dedicate this work to their memory.

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I want to acknowledge my daughter, Ruth, and my son, Jack. Dad's back. You can feel free to hold me to all the promises I made to you over the last two years.

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# Chapter One: Introduction and Context

## What Happened?

I began my teaching career in an inner-city high school. In the very first year, I was assigned to teach English Language Arts to a class of grade nine students. When I received my class list, I was surprised to see that there were nearly forty names on it. Almost all the surnames on the list were Indigenous, which is the norm in Winnipeg's inner-city schools where the population is predominantly composed of First Nations and Metis individuals and families (Winnipeg School Division, 2016). I asked my colleagues why the class had so many students enrolled in it when most of the other classes I taught had roughly twenty or so students. The response was that the guidance department enrolls that many because, "half of them don't show up."

On the first day of class roughly twenty-five students out of the 40 on the list arrived. I taught those students with all the skill that I had at the time. Even with my lack of experience, I could tell something was wrong. Over the course of the semester, the number of students coming to class dropped off steadily. By the time we returned to school from winter break to complete the semester, only three of the students on the original class list attended the class regularly. I remember thinking that I must have done something wrong. I was sure that I would get called into an office somewhere to be spoken to by someone. I never did get called in or spoken to. However, at the end of the year I did receive a letter. It was from the school division's head of human resources, cc'ed to the chief superintendent. The letter told me that having completed a year of successful teaching I was no longer probationally hired. It congratulated me on receiving tenure and becoming a permanent employee of the school division.

This story has bothered me for years. It is the story that I used to explain why I wanted to do this research to the people who volunteered to be part of it. Those people shared experiences like the students who were enrolled in my grade nine class. They are from the inner city, almost all Indigenous, and they went to schools like the one I taught in. I told them about my grade nine class, and I asked them the same question that has bothered me for years, what happened?

In truth, the research questions that guide this research are far more bounded and grounded than, "what happened?" I will lay them out in detail later in this chapter. However, at its heart the question of "what happened" is very relevant to this work. It is well known that Indigenous youth and inner-city youth graduate at levels much lower than those who are non-Indigenous and live in middle-class and affluent neighbourhoods (Bronwell, Fransoo, & Martens, 2015; Government of Manitoba, 2018b; Lezubski & Silver, 2015; Silver & Mallett, 2002). There is also a lot of research and opinion on why those differences exist (Battiste, 2013; Gordon, White, & Gordon, 2014; Kanu, 2007; Noguera & Wing, 2006). But what is not as well understood is what the gap in educational attainment looks and feels like for those who experience it first-hand—that is, for Indigenous inner-city students. This research sets out to surface that reality. It relies on the generosity of students like those who were in my grade nine class—students whose stories can tell me the things I cannot ask of the many students who did not complete that grade nine class from years ago. What happened?

This chapter introduces the research that I undertook to find answers to that question. In it I explore the geographic, demographic, ethnocultural, and economic context for the study. Following that, I explain the overall purpose of the study and the specific research questions I used to fulfil that purpose. The chapter concludes with an outline of the contents of the chapters within the document and explains the rationale for their organization.

**Context**

This study is focused on social conflicts faced by students in the heart of the city of Winnipeg. Within the inner city, diversity and poverty are concentrated. The schools within the inner city serve families who come from the widest variety of ethnocultural backgrounds in the city—the clear majority of whom are Indigenous. Regardless of background, household incomes in the inner city are drastically lower than those in the rest of the city (Lawson, 2005; Winnipeg School Division, 2016). It is what Galtung calls a highly dynamic society within which conflict, "becomes apparent because it stands out like an enormous rock in a creek, impeding the free flow, creating all kind of eddies and turbulences" (1969, p. 173). Understanding the conflicts in the lives of Winnipeg students begins with understanding life in these neighbourhoods. Accordingly, this section will examine the historical, geographic, and demographic influences in the inner city.

Before going further it is important to point out that term inner city is problematic. It is used as a general term to represent urban regions characterized by a complex of intersecting social and demographic realities including poverty and racialization. The term is often geographically inaccurate—many central regions within cities are gentrified or gentrifying. Also, the term is often used as a generic term for very specific realities. In Winnipeg, as will be shown, the inner city has characteristics attributable to the history of settler-colonialism, racial capitalism, and Indigenous resistance that give it a distinct identity (Toews, 2019). Finally, inner city doesn't have an effective corollary. Often when poverty and racialized families are concentrated within one part of the city, affluence and white families are concentrated in other parts. Thus, the term doesn't effectively point to the conjoined reality of inequality—for some to have so much, others have to have very little.

Despite these problems, I have chosen to use it throughout this work for three reasons. First, in Winnipeg, the term is geographically accurate. The middle of Winnipeg is where racialized (mainly Indigenous) families live and where the impacts of poverty are greatest. Second, while the term may be losing its currency elsewhere, in Winnipeg it still connotes a specific area and set of conditions. This is particularly true in the discourse around education in Winnipeg. The largest school division still refers regularly to schools with inner-city characteristics and teachers regularly use the words inner-city schools when discussing their field. Finally, I am confident that I make it clear in this work that the racialization and poverty in Winnipeg's inner city are linked to broader forces that deliver advantage to some by creating disadvantage for others.

**Inner City Winnipeg: History**

The city of Winnipeg is named after the Cree word for muddy or fertile water. The origin of the name, and the water it refers to are keys to understanding the way history has shaped the present reality of the city and its residents. The land that Winnipeg sits on has been and continues to be Indigenous[1] territory. The confluence of waterways in the region creates transportation routes to the South via the Red River, the East via the Winnipeg River system, the North via Lake Winnipeg and the West via the Assiniboine River. As a result, the region has been both a home and a meeting place for countless years. The history of Indigenous life is much longer that

[1] Throughout this work I use the term Indigenous peoples as a collective representation of First Nations, Metis, and Inuit individuals and groups. In cases where I know a person or a group's specific cultural identity I will refer to the appropriate First Nation or Indigenous identity. In doing this I am eschewing the use of the term Aboriginal and the legal and anthropological connotations it carries. Furthermore, I recognize that names are political and should change based on the will of those who they refer to (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012, p. 161). In this spirit I follow Metis scholar and activist Chelsea Vowel's assertion that, "It is possible that in five years I will look back on my use of this term with shame, but future me can just hush because present me doesn't really have a better word" (Vowell, 2016, p. 10).

the history that has passed since European arrival; however, it is fair to say that Winnipeg is now a settler-colonial city possessing all of the complex dynamics of oppression, violence, denial, and opportunity attendant that status (Hugill, 2017; Hugill & Toews, 2014; Veracini, 2008, 2013).

While historical accounts of Winnipeg rarely overlook the early Indigenous history of the region, Indigenous presence tends to vanish from consideration as authors turn their attention to nation-building, industrialization, and urbanization. However, Indigenous peoples have never left. As Anishinaabe writer Tanya Talaga (2018) says, “we were always here,” and “we are not going anywhere” (pp. 1, 185). Their abiding historical connection to the land called Winnipeg is encoded in the 1817 Treaty between Chief Peguis and Lord Selkirk as well as in Treaty 1, signed in 1871 between the Government of Canada and seven signatory First Nations. (“Treaties,” 2018). Despite this, popular history has reinforced problematic narratives about Winnipeg’s development that are steeped in tropes about the march of progress. As a result, the true story of “the dynamics of social and economic interaction” between Indigenous and newcomer groups has failed to permeate contemporary discourse in the city (Van Kirk, 1983, p. 7)

In reality, the pattern of multiple cultures co-existing around the rivers was established by First Nations and it persists to this day as Winnipeg’s present population has been built by successive waves of immigration to the area (Sinclair, 2018c). As the population has grown the city has spread across the prairie landscape and generations of immigrants have established themselves in neighbourhoods within it. At present Winnipeg’s Indigenous population is also spread throughout the city but is largely concentrated with the Downtown and North End neighbourhoods. These two inner-city neighbourhoods are not populated solely by Indigenous people as the most recent period of immigration to Winnipeg has added significant numbers of refugees to the area. In 2015 and 2016 Manitoba accepted nearly 30,000 immigrants, which

marked the peak of a decade of openness to newcomers in the province. In that period roughly 9% of immigrants were refugees, most of whom settled their families in the inner-city neighbourhoods of Downtown and the North End (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2018; Fast, 2017). The historical identity of Winnipeg as both Indigenous and meeting place has continued to the present day and that history is evident in the mixture of ethno-cultural[2] traditions within the inner city today.

**Inner City: Demographics**

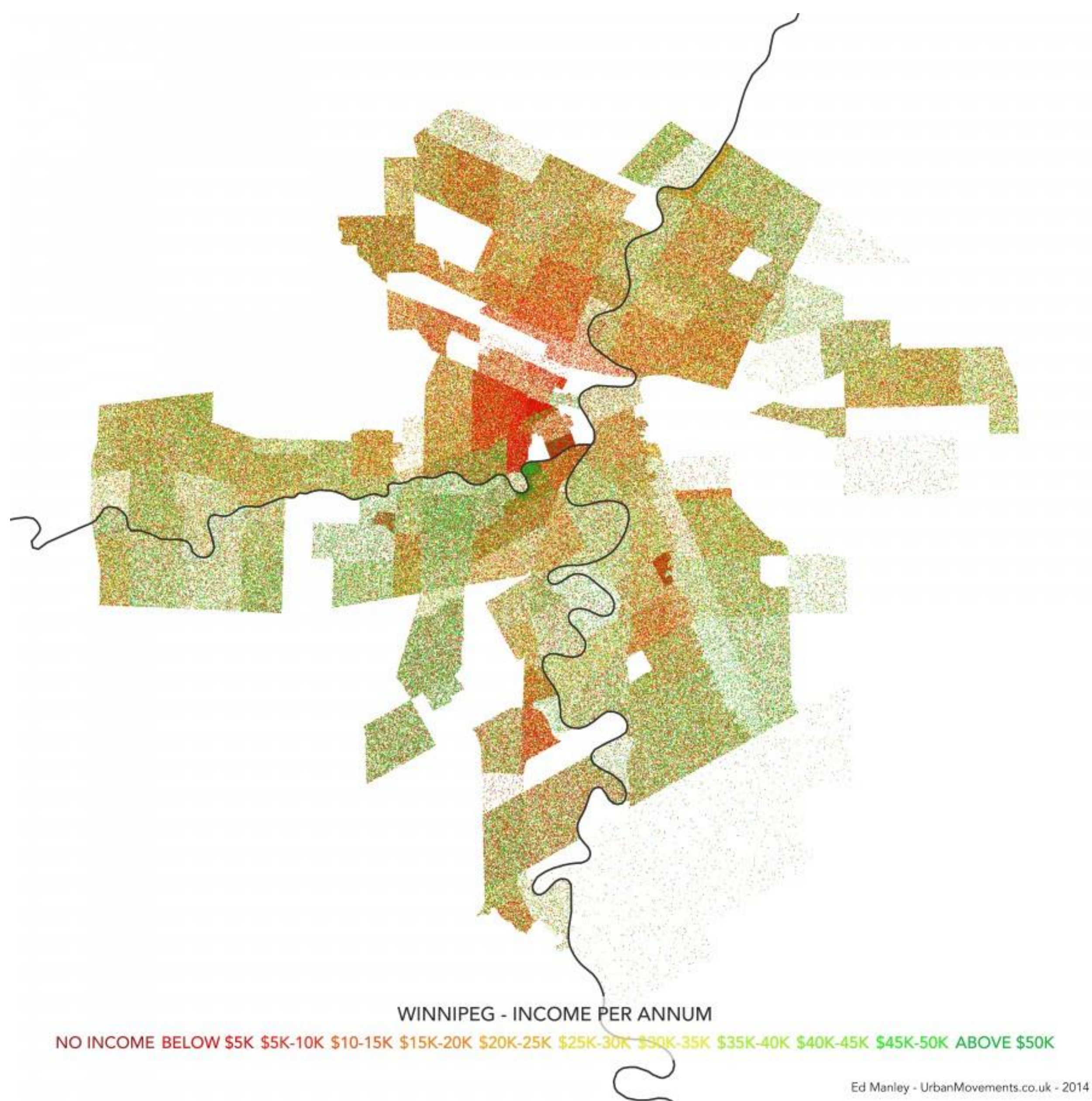
The focus of this study is the experiences of young people in the inner city. The ethno-cultural identities of these young people are distinct, but they live beside other, share the same playgrounds, shop at the same stores and, importantly, attend the same schools. The neighbourhoods they live in are challenging to say the least. As the map reproduced on page eleven shows, there is a staggering disparity in income between the haves and have nots in Winnipeg. This fact is often overlooked as so much of the poverty in the city is condensed within the inner city. Fully 33% of inner-city families live in poverty compared to 14% in the rest of the city (Lezubski & Silver, 2015). The burden of poverty extends across cultures as Indigenous, non-Indigenous, and newcomer families all face staggeringly high rates (Lezubski & Silver, 2015).

Poverty is complex in the inner city where low incomes are compounded by the influence of, "inadequate housing, poor health, neighbourhood violence, racism – that interact with and reinforce each other." (Silver, 2013, p. 3) Twice as many homes need major repairs in the inner

[2] I use the term ethno-cultural to refer to the aspects of an individual's identity influenced by ethnicity, spirituality, language, and skin colour. I use the terms race and racialization to refer specifically to the societal representation and treatment of groups or individuals (Omi, 2001, p. 243). Importantly, culture is conceived of within this work as referring not only to ethnicity but to a much broader range of identity variables (Nieto, 2010, p. 78).

city than in the rest of the city (Smirl, 2017). Those who do have work are more often employed in precarious fields than residents in the rest of the city (Smirl, 2017). Perhaps the starkest indicator of the effect of the complex of poverty related issues in the area is the fact that life expectancy in Point Douglas, one of the neighbourhoods that makes up the inner city, is 10 years less for men who live there than for their counterparts in Fort Garry, a middle class neighbourhood on the city's South end (Bronwell et al., 2015). Another stark reality is the vitality of street gangs that recruit from the local population (Comack, Deane, Morrissette, & Silver, 2013; Fast, 2017). Additionally, the criminal justice system affects the lives of inner-city families inordinately, particularly Indigenous youth. Shockingly, at present over 80% of incarcerated youth in Manitoba are Indigenous (Monkman, 2018; Monkman & Grabish, 2018) All of these factors shape the nature of life in the homes and along the streets of the inner city and they have direct significance for the experience of school within it.

***Figure 1: Winnipeg – Income Per Annum***




*Winnipeg by Income per Annum. Reprinted with permission of the author. (Manley, 2018)*

**Schooling in the Inner City**

From a distance, schools in Winnipeg are remarkably similar regardless of the neighbourhood they are in. In general, the physical buildings, range of mandated and optional curriculum offered, school sports played, clubs, and school-based social life all feature the same characteristics regardless of where they are. While a closer look will reveal significant and important variations between individual schools it is fair to say that at the level of curriculum, bureaucratic structure, organizational procedures, and structure, schools are more the same than they are different. In the face of this sameness are the diverse realities of the children and families within schools and they vary widely across the city.

To begin, the demographics in Winnipeg show that inner-city schools host a student population vastly different from the one found in other parts of the city. Inner-city classrooms are home to the most ethno-cultural diversity in the city, as the map on the page following shows. Most students in the South, West, and North East sections of the city are white or children of long-established immigrant groups. In the inner city, the students are predominantly Indigenous or recently arrived refugees or immigrants. Additionally, they come from young families. The median age of Indigenous inner-city residents is 25.5 years and the median for newcomers is 30 years old. This compares to a city-wide median of 39 years (Statistics Canada, 2018). These numbers are part of a demographic trend towards a young and growing percentage of Indigenous families within Winnipeg's population (Manitoba Bureau of Statistics, 2016).

The relationship between the school system and inner-city families is also a challenging one. Inner-city classrooms are filled with students representing a vast array of diverse ethno-cultural and social circumstances. Significantly, their teachers who largely come from mainstream, middle class backgrounds, don't represent the same kind of diversity (Ryan,

Pollock, & Antonelli, 2009). The cultural, historical, and economic identity of these students has not been a foundation for success in school. Poverty and racialized identities are both linked to lowered chances for graduation (Noguera & Wing, 2006). The statistics bear this out. Fully 37% of Indigenous people in Manitoba have no high school diploma compared to only 13.9% of non-Indigenous people (Lezubski & Silver, 2015; Statistics Canada, 2016).

Schools in Manitoba are supposed to create positive societal change. This aim is clear in the vision statement offered by the department of education which states that the goal of schooling in Manitoba is, "that every learner will complete a high school education with a profound sense of accomplishment, hope, and optimism" (Government of Manitoba, n.d.-a). The emphasis on every learner is important here as schools are supposed to be the place where everyone has a fair chance to thrive. The vision statement continues with the statement that the purpose of education is to prepare every learner for, "lifelong learning and citizenship in a democratic, socially just, and sustainable society" (Government of Manitoba, n.d.-a). To meet this vision, schools are supposed to provide a commons that fosters individual potential and teaches the values of pluralism and democratic community life. As the figures preceding indicate, they are not reaching that goal in the inner city. Factors like racialization, poverty, inadequate housing, and resulting health issues contribute to the challenges faced by every student in the inner city. However, as much as the factors listed above are daunting and concentrated in the inner-city, they do not overshadow the vitality of the people and communities within it.

***Figure 2: Winnipeg – Ethnic Origin***

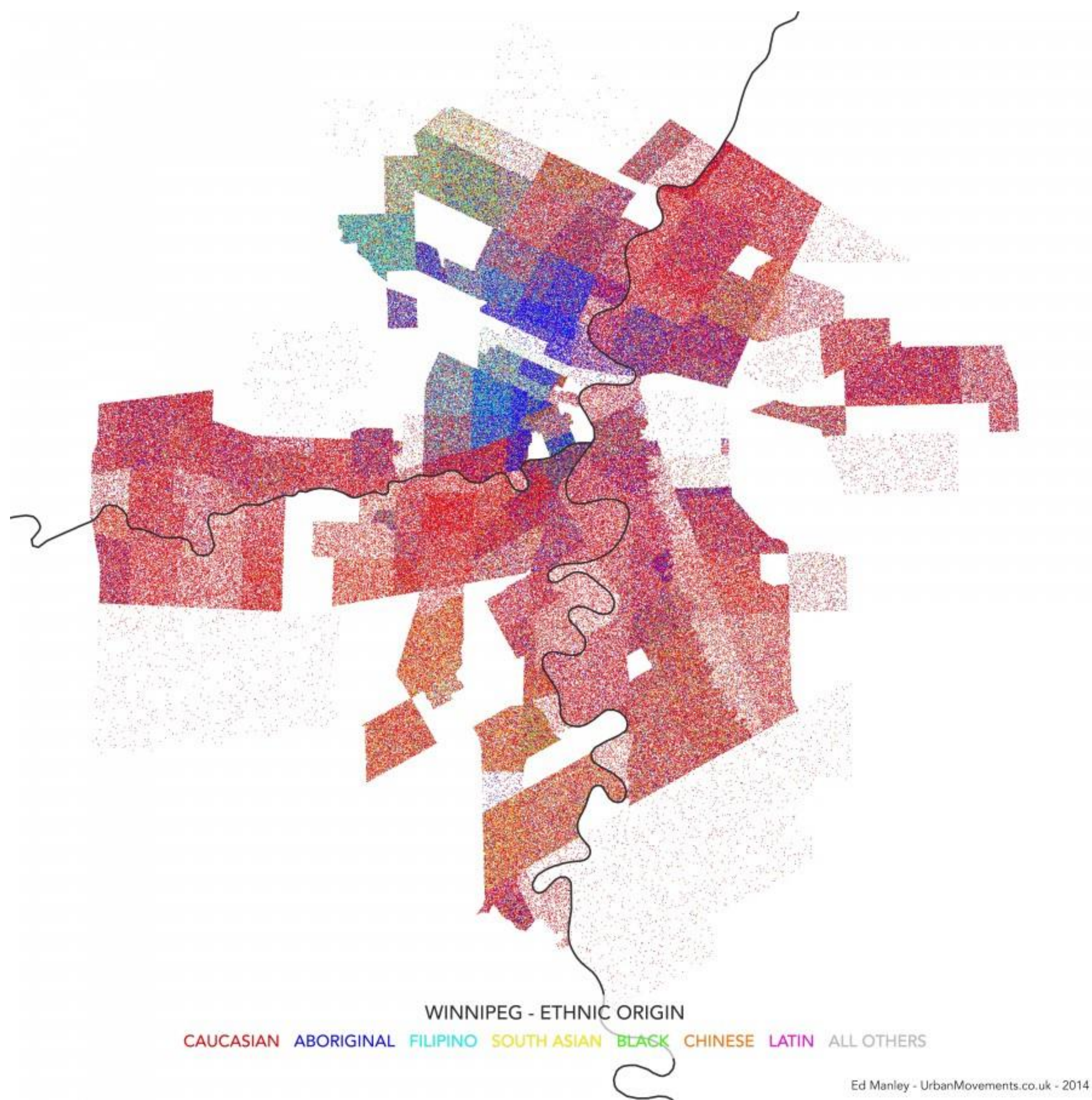



*Figure 2: Winnipeg by Ethnic Origin. Reprinted with permission of the author. (Manley, 2018)*

A brief example of this vitality in contrast to how the inner city is represented in public discourse in Winnipeg is pertinent here. In early 2008 two Winnipeg School Division trustees got into a public argument about parents having a choice in what school to send their children to. The argument included disparaging comments about dangers and low-quality education in inner-city high schools. The comments were reported in the Winnipeg Free Press (Martin, 2008a, 2008b) and were noticed by students in my first period Grade 12 English Language Arts class at Gordon Bell, an inner-city high school. Just after noon I received a panicked request over the school intercom from my principal to see her in the office immediately. When I arrived, she explained that she had just heard from the editor of the Free Press as he was going to be publishing letters that had been emailed to the paper by Gordon Bell students that morning. I told her the truth, I knew nothing about it. We later learned that the students in my class had taken it upon themselves to use their homework time in the computer lab to compose missives to the paper. The next day four separate letters appeared. The first began with the words, “Now, I may be just another dumb, poor student from an inner city high school, but I wouldn’t trade my experience here at Gordon Bell for any other high school” (Groening, 2008). Another detailed the value of inner-city education as follows:

> There are students of all shapes, sizes, races and colours. This is a very rewarding aspect of my schooling. I learn so much about the world by having friends who have lived in such different places. They've all experienced so many different things and we all learn from each other. We come together, we blend into something that not every school has – community. (Friesen-Hughes, 2008)

These letters should do nothing to contradict or gloss over the serious endemic challenges that are people living in the inner city face. At the same time, they should serve as a testament to two

things. First, racism, discrimination, poverty, and stigma testify to the profound social conflicts inner-city youth face, but these forces don't preclude moments of connection and insight that are equally profound. Second, in spite of it all, youth in the inner city are every bit as thoughtful, tenacious, and proud as young people anywhere else.

The preceding sketch offers an overview of the challenges that touch many, if not all inner-city youth. Digging deeper, two areas need separate investigation to effectively profile the social conflicts that face inner-city youth when they come to school. They are how schools approach poverty and how environmental and school-based factors challenge Indigenous students.

**Schools and Poverty**

As is clear from the preceding profile of neighbourhood data, a common challenge for all students in the inner city is poverty. The most obvious challenge faced by people living in poverty is material. Finding the resources to house, clothe, and feed children and also pay health and education costs is a gargantuan task for families who do not have enough. Owing to this, inner-city students will sometimes come to school without their basic needs met, as well as feeling stress because of the efforts required to meet them. The centrality of this issue is hard to overstate and it will resonate throughout this work. Additionally, it is important to highlight an added challenge created by poverty which goes beyond the material deprivation it creates.

Poverty, especially generational poverty like we have in Winnipeg, is a structural condition tied to economic and political policy (Gorski, 2018, p. 8). Despite this, myths about poverty that stigmatize those who withstand it are common within schools. A persistent and popular conception of poverty is that it is a societal inevitability attributable to fundamental

cognitive and cultural differences between poor people and middle class or wealthy people. This concept is crystalized in wildly popular publications and workshops that Payne (1996) markets to schools across North America. Presenting the idea that there is a 'culture' of poverty, the approach normalizes, "well-worn stereotypes that include the idea the families in poverty do not value education and that they do not plan for the future" (Nieto, 2010, p. 17). Gorski (2018, pp. 67–83) identifies that these demeaning stereotypes are connected to larger assumptions that the existing economic and political system are meritocratic and unchangeable. Nieto (2010) agrees and adds that the commonality of this thinking among teachers who care deeply about their students leads them into "hopelessness and despair" (p. 17). To make matters worse, the idea of economic inequity being inevitable prevents potentially transformative collective action:

> if poverty is predetermined and static, then teachers and schools can do little about it, and they can resort to blaming children and their families for their condition, rather than thinking about their own responsibility to educate students. (Nieto, 2010, p. 17)

As a result, students from economically marginalized neighbourhoods not only contend with material challenges but also with the negative assumptions and inaction of their teachers and principals.

Poverty is not equally distributed. As the maps included earlier in this document show, in Winnipeg poverty intersects with ethno-cultural diversity. The intersection of living with poverty and being from an ethno-cultural minority translates into additional challenges in schools. Not every inner-city student is from an Indigenous or refugee background but the neighbourhood is home to the largest groups of both. Interestingly, Indigenous and newcomer populations live primarily in the inner city but the density of the area's housing stock relative to the rest of the city may mask their demographic significance. In a statistical projection that would surprise most

Manitobans, Statistics Canada indicates that Manitoba may be the first non-white majority province in Canada (Robertson, 2017). Indigenous and refugee students, taken together, form the majority of the inner-city population and they share the challenges of walking into school with racialized identities. However, the history of their racialization and the ways that influences their experiences in school are different from each other, as the following sections will show.

**Indigenous Youth in Schools**

Indigenous youth come to school with family histories shaped by the legacy of colonialism. In particular, the Canadian government's system of residential schooling has left an indelible mark on families. For well over a hundred years the Canadian government, assisted by a variety of church denominations, removed school-age children from their families and forced them to attend schools where the curriculum and operating procedures attempted to strip them of their cultural identity (Truth and Reconciliation Comission of Canada, 2015). The system was so brutal and calculated that today over 70% of Canadians agree that the term cultural genocide is an accurate label for it (Hensley, 2015). On the heels of the decline of the residential school system the government of Canada continued to pursue an assimilationist policy through sponsoring the adoption of Indigenous children into non-Indigenous homes and communities (Sinclair, 2007).

An outgrowth of the family trauma perpetuated by residential schooling and forced adoptions is the current crisis of children removed from their families and placed into foster care through Manitoba's provincial department of Child and Family Services. The scope of this issue is hard to overestimate as in the North End of Winnipeg 1 in 5 children are currently living away from their families and it has been estimated that the number of children currently in care of the

state may outpace the number of children who were compelled to attend residential school (Robertson, 2018). Indigenous children inherit a legacy of family life characterized by government control and separation from ethno-cultural supports. Understanding the experience of Indigenous youth in schools is impossible without remembering that their schools are part of the government apparatus that they have been in conflict with for generations.

Despite these challenges, the Indigenous community is also growing, vibrant, resilient, and resurgent. The median age of Indigenous males in Manitoba is 21 as compared to a median age of 42 for non-Indigenous men (Manitoba Bureau of Statistics, 2016). Indigenous people now account for 18% of Manitoba's population and that percentage represents a 5% growth over the past ten years (Robertson, 2017). In Winnipeg's inner-city neighbourhoods anti-violence, poverty reduction, business incubation, and street safety patrols led by a growing group of Indigenous leaders are well established features of community life. Political engagement and representation at the municipal, provincial, and federal levels is also on the rise. Indigenous youth in Winnipeg's inner city are living at a time of tremendous challenge, tremendous change, and tremendous opportunity.

**Research Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this research is to find and share some stories told by Indigenous youth who live in and attended schools in heart of Winnipeg. This may not seem to be a significant aim. However, the stories I am looking for and the people who will tell them are rarely heard and even more rarely listened to. Within public discourse, Indigenous youth are too often represented by statistics and stereotypes. Worse, when their experiences are considered in any more depth than that, individuals are portrayed as the sum of the tragedies that have befallen them (Tuck,

2011; Tuck & Yang, 2014). Within school discourse, the same students are often configured as constellations of deficiencies and treated as problems to be solved (Kanu, 2002, 2011; Nieto, 2010; Noguera & Wing, 2006; Silver & Mallett, 2002). Preparing for this research has often made we wonder if it is not more accurate to see schools as constellations of deficiencies that present problems for Indigenous youth to solve. My own experience is replete with examples of times when a combination of my ignorance of students' realities and my acceptance of assumptions about them left them unrecognized and underserved.

There are two inspirations behind the overall research purpose. One is to offer more evidence of the simple fact that Indigenous lives in the inner city are just as full of nuance, complexity, joy, and wonder as anyone else's. With more evidence of that available, the impulse to see Indigenous lives and inner-city citizens solely through the lens of deficit and stereotyping may be reduced. Likewise, these stories can help trace the intersections between individual agency and the historical and material conditions that influence Indigenous reality in the inner city so greatly.

The second inspiration for this research is a desire to understand more about what it feels like to go to school in the inner city as an Indigenous student. It is obvious that school does not function the same way for these students as it does for others. Hopefully through the careful elicitation and honest presentation of stories from young Indigenous adults who recently left inner-city schools a better sense of what experience school creates can be achieved.

I have used the following question to respond to the overall purpose of this research:

*What do the stories told by Indigenous inner-city youth about school reveal about their experience there?*

This research question is purposely broad. To bracket the scope of the inquiry too narrowly would be a means of imposing my own restrictions on what the participants in the study felt were the salient aspects of their experience. My primary task in receiving the stories that this research elicits will be to interpret them on their own terms, discovering the participants' own categories of meaning rather than my own. That said, there are specific sub-questions that I will also use to ensure that the inquiry stays grounded within the broader purpose of the research. These questions are:

*What do the stories reveal about the experience of life in the inner city?*

*What do the stories reveal about the experience of being Indigenous in school?*

*What do the stories reveal about any differences between how students see themselves and how they feel schools see them?*

With these questions as guidance this research will take on the task of collecting the stories that reveal more about the texture of life for students whose reality is poorly understood within Winnipeg schools and society.

**Chapter Overviews**

Chapter Two surveys a wide body of scholarship related directly to content in the research questions. The literature is drawn from Indigenous studies, Peace and Conflict Studies, and the education fields of critical pedagogy and the sociology of education. The chapter begins by examining the experiences of Indigenous youth in two ways. First, by looking at perceptions of Indigeneity in Canada and how they have been shaped by history. Second, by looking at the actual conditions that Indigenous youth experience in school. The chapter then uses a social cubism approach to synthesize literature that posits schools as a zone of conflict with literature

on the relationship between power and schooling. Finally, the chapter closes with a consideration of the limitations and possibilities of conflict transformation with schools.

Chapter Three outlines the methodology for this study. As storytelling is commonly understood as a method of conducting research as opposed to a methodology for conceiving of research, this chapter is dedicated to deriving a methodology more than explaining it. The chapter pulls from existing research in Peace and Conflict studies and Indigenous studies on the nature of storytelling as a communicative and generative process of meaning making. These insights are contextualized into the field of qualitative methodology through considering symbolic interactionism, narrative inquiry, community engaged research, and critical pedagogy. The methodology is further developed through a critique of colonial epistemological assumptions and a survey of decolonial approaches to conceiving of knowledge production. Finally, the chapter synthesizes the diverse methodological perspectives it covers into a working description of the storytelling methodology that guided this research.

The fourth chapter engages with the practical question of how the research was conducted as well as the ethical, personal, and socio-political factors that were taken into consideration. The chapter explains and offers a rationale for the storytelling circle approach used to conduct the research. That rationale is grounded in my own experience, the implications of my position as a white middle-class settler Canadian, the social positions of the research participants, and the context of the research. The steps taken to follow ethical principles offered by the university as well as those offered by the community are outlined in the chapter. In addition, the chapter considers the limitations and possibilities of the study along with introducing the young adults who participated in it.

Chapter Five is the first chapter of research findings and it reports on the existence and nature of something the participants called “the system.” The system is explained to be composed of a variety of state-run institutions, like the police and the provincial child and family services apparatus, that exert a large influence in the lives of the participants. The chapter surfaces the power relations at play in the operation of the system and the psychological and material results they create in the lives of the participants. Themes of surveillance and incoherence feature prominently in the stories that are surveyed. Finally, the chapter reveals the connections and differences between schools and the system.

Chapter Six focuses specifically on the experience of school for the participants. Based on their stories, the chapter reveals that the participants felt watched but not seen while they were in school. There is a significant gap between how the participants saw themselves and how they felt they were seen by school. In that gap there is evidence of ignorance and discrimination on the part of the school system on the basis of race and economic status. The chapter also reveals the challenge participants faced in trying to succeed in school with dignity, confidence, and identity intact.

Chapter Seven responds to the conclusion drawn in chapter six that the participants often managed to graduate in spite of school practices rather than because of them. In it, crucial human factors within schools are profiled. They include the importance of including Indigenous culture and local community life within schools. Beyond those factors, the chapter focuses on the stories participants told about remarkable individual educators who made a profound difference in their lives during and after school. The characteristics that these educators had in common are distilled and explained, leading to conclusions about the indispensable role upstanding individuals play within the school system for Indigenous and inner-city students.

Chapter Eight provides a counterpoint to prevailing discourses about Indigenous life and about Winnipeg's inner city. It offers a dual focus on the role of culture in the lives of the participants. One focus is on ethnic culture. This focus begins by sharing the stories participants told about discrimination they face because they are Indigenous. These stories are juxtaposed with an in-depth consideration of the wide range of ways that participants draw strength from being Indigenous. These stories also reveal the simultaneously individual and collective nature of ethno-cultural heritage. The other focus is on the culture of the community where the participants work and live, and where they attended school. This unique culture is expressed in the stories that they shared about the formal and informal grassroots organizations that support the vitality of neighbourhood life.

Each of the findings chapters considers elements of participants' stories that relate directly to their experience in school. Chapter Nine does as well. However, it extends beyond the factors that influenced participants' school life into a consideration of the remarkable traits their stories show they possess. The chapter begins with stories about family life. These storiesreveal difficult truths about multiple serious challenges in the homes of the participants. They also show the emotional sophistication of many participants who have drawn lines between conditions like addiction and characteristics like familial love. Each participant, in her or his own way, shared stories that left me wondering about how they had accomplished so much and how they had maintained their determination and optimism on their journey. The final part of the chapter is dedicated to those stories and the insights they reveal about the character of the participants and the conditions that created them.

The final chapter of this dissertation offers a brief statement of the conclusions that the research process has left me with. My sense is that the true value of this research is in the

findings chapters as they are concerned with the key task of surfacing of the stories that I was told. My hope is that the worth of this work will be judged by the degree to which I was able to honour those stories and communicate what they say about the participants' experiences with integrity. However, there are some conclusions that can be clearly drawn from looking at the research process and from looking across the stories that were shared. Accordingly, the final chapter briefly shares observations about the use of a storytelling methodology and about the key insights about life in and out of schools drawn from the process of hearing the stories shared by the participants.

# Chapter Two: Review of Literature

## Maps for the Journey

This research took me on a journey. This chapter highlights the scholarship that provided the maps for the journey. The literature is drawn from scholarship across distinct fields (Indigenous studies, Peace and Conflict Studies, and Education). Despite the differences between their fields, many of the scholars share a common approach. They write about the connections between things. Specifically, they write about the relationship between Indigenous people and Canada's state and society, the relationship between Indigenous people and schooling, the relationship between conflict and schooling, and the relationship between social norms and the process of schooling. Together, they illuminate the material, historical, sociological, ideological, and cultural topography that influences the lives of the young people who shared their stories with me. Without understanding that topography, I would not be able to do justice to the deep significance of those stories.

This work is about the social conflicts faced by Indigenous students in the centre of Winnipeg. Data on school success rates along with economic and health data indicate that the conflicts they face are the most pressing and most entrenched. I also consider how school figures into the dynamics of these conflicts and explore the idea of school as a zone of conflict transformation. Accordingly, I begin with a map that surveys literature on the structures that have influenced the perceptions and realities of Indigenous life in the inner city, with a particular focus on schooling. Following this, I combine theories of conflict analysis and education scholarship to map the dynamics of school-based conflict. Finally, I offer a map of the limitations of and possibilities for school-based action for conflict transformation.

***The Limitations of Maps***

For me, this work creates a troubling tension. It asks me to detail the conflicts that visit the lives of students in Winnipeg schools like the ones I taught in for 15 years. To do so, I present an accurate, but truly disheartening list of factors that tilt the table against Indigenous youth in the inner city. These facts and the theories that explain them are what the maps I consulted for the research journey show. They are so disturbing that it is hard to imagine that the young people who face them could possess and maintain the same kind of vitality as people less encumbered by inequity. By laying out these maps, I run the risk of creating a "damage-focused narrative" (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 241) that defines marginalized solely people by their challenges. The statistics are accurate, the historical abuses are real, and the contemporary biases vicious but they do not tell the whole story. This is the problem with maps. They turn three dimensions into two. Being marginalized is not the same thing as being dehumanized. But to see this you need stories to accompany your maps.

Because I have spent most of my teaching career within the inner city, the facts and theories about the place evoke memories of students I taught. Each of these memories presents a story marked by the trajectory of an unjust history and material deprivation but also by moments of agency, vitality, aspirations, laughter, and curiosity. It is a paradoxical reality. I hope this dissertation illuminates the paradox by bringing the stories of Indigenous inner-city students forward in a way that communicates the holistic reality of their experience in their words. The chapters that express my research findings are dedicated to stories. This chapter is about maps. Still, I have included two of my own stories to ensure that the third dimension, the human one, is not forgotten.

**Map #1: Indigenous Youth in School**

I hesitate to speak in generalities about who Indigenous students are. My experience as an inner-city teacher tells me that Indigenous youth have as wide a range of relationships with their ethno-cultural identity as any other group. In my time at the school I met students who were deeply immersed in their culture, drew strength from it, and who taught me and their peers a lot of important things. I also met students who were Indigenous but had little connection to their culture. However, regardless of individual Indigenous students' relationship with their own identity, their ethno-culture is a factor in their history and in how they are seen and treated.

Statistics make it abundantly clear that Manitoba schools do not serve Indigenous students well. The provincial government has recently released disaggregated data on student assessment which reveals this (Government of Manitoba, 2018b, 2018a). The province boasts an average four-year graduation rate of roughly 77%, a five-year rate of 81%, and a six-year rate of 83%. However, for Aboriginal students that rate drops to 46%, 54%, and 55% respectively (Government of Manitoba, 2018b). This gap is not merely a problem at grade 12 as the overall provincial average for grade nine credit attainment is 93% while for Indigenous students it is 67%. The disparity in school success is alarming and widespread as similar inequities exist across the prairie provinces ("Auditor's report on aboriginal graduation rates should be a wake-up call," 2016; Government of Manitoba, 2018b).

In considering these stark numbers, it is important to remember that the Indigenous students they report on are not a homogenous group. Just as there is no such thing as a 'normal' student there is no such thing as a typical Indigenous student. It should go without saying that it is wrong-headed to assume that low graduation rates point to an inherent deficiency of culture or genes. Yet, that very idea made cultural deficiency theories prominent in educational policy for

years (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). These flawed theories fostered practices that treated difference as a disability, cemented on the idea that some cultures were deprived and in need of nourishment with the ideas, values, and practices of the mainstream (Kao & Thompson, 2003; Varenne & McDermott, 1998). The ludicrous and ego-centric assumption beneath these theories is well articulated by Davis' (2009) reminder that, "other cultures are not failed attempts at being you" (p. 201). Still, it is a deeply rooted assumption and combatting it requires knowledge of the historical, perceptual, and material influences that contribute to contemporary inequity and conflict.

***History***

The pathway that Indigenous students take to classrooms leads not just from their home to their school but also from the past to the present. Classrooms are part of the apparatus of government in Canada. That apparatus has played an outsized role in the lives of Indigenous people since its founding. When Indigenous students enter classrooms, they are part of a history of engagement with the state in general, and the state's educational institutions in particular, that goes back generations. The scope of this work is too narrow to detail the history of the relationship between the Government of Canada and First Nations, Metis, and Inuit peoples. However, it is necessary to trace parts of that history as the legacy it has created is an undeniable dynamic in the lives of contemporary Indigenous students.

The system of residential schools grew out of a few church-run boarding schools in the 1870s and grew to become a central feature of government policy and practice over the next hundred years. That small number of church-run schools eventually grew into a coordinated system spanning the entire country. Most of the schools had closed by the 1980s but the last one

operated into the late 1990s (Truth and Reconciliation Comission of Canada, 2015). The schools were filled by students who were forced to attend, often after being apprehended from their First Nations by government force. Apart from the dislocation, students in the school were disallowed from speaking their language or practice their culture and many suffered neglect and abuse. Milloy (1999) points out that in the schools, "discipline was curriculum and punishment was pedagogy" (p. 44). Augmenting the threat of physical punishment was chronic underfunding and poor living conditions. The severity of the privations can be seen from the fact that residential schools often did not have playgrounds but regularly featured graveyards.

A fact that is often overlooked in detailing the history of residential schools is that they were never intended to introduce Indigenous students to the enlightened world of liberal education (Milloy, 1999). Rather, the aim was cultural erasure and social assimilation:

> The school was a circle–an all-encompassing environment of resocialization. The curriculum was not simply an academic schedule or practical training but comprised the whole life of the child in the school. One culture was to be replaced by another. (Milloy, 1999)

In the view of the public, politicians, and churches that supported them, the schools were a solution to a pressing problem. That problem was Indigenous people. The assimilationist intent was unabashed, as expressed by the chilling words of residential school mastermind Duncan Campbell Scott before parliament in 1920, "I want to get rid of the Indian problem. Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic" (Scott, qtd. in Milloy, 1999, p. 46).

The net effect of separating families and breaking up cultural practices and lifestyles for such a sustained period is immense. Much of the contemporary social and familial dysfunction

within Indigenous communities is linked to the system. One study of Indigenous inner city students revealed that 57% of those studied had at least one grandparent living with them who had attended residential school (Silver & Mallett, 2002). Because the system operated for so long, in some Winnipeg families successive generations attended the schools which reinforced the damage and projected it into the present.

Residential schooling was only one aspect of the imposition of the state into the lives of Indigenous people. As the school system was waning, the government continued to violate the dignity and sanctity of Indigenous families under the guise of the discourse of care. The term 60's scoop refers to the common practice of apprehending Indigenous children and placing them in non-Indigenous households as foster children or adoptees (Walker, 2018). The scope and effects of this practice are only now coming to light in Canadian discourse (Sinclair, 2007). In addition, the apprehension of Indigenous children from their families has not waned. Once again, using care as a mantra, the Child and Family Services system enters Indigenous homes with dizzying regularity. It is estimated that there are presently more children separated from their families in culture by CFS apprehension across the country than ever attended residential school at any given time (Robertson, 2018). As I have already cited, the negative influence of the state on Indigenous lives is also evident in the outsized representation of Indigenous bodies in the penal system (Monkman, 2018).

There is a clear trajectory running from the operation of residential schools through the 60's scoop to the contemporary operation of CFS and the penal system. King (2012) comments on how, while Canada has apologized for residential schooling it has said, "nothing about the institutional racism that Aboriginal people have endured and continue to endure" (p. 123). That institutional racism has not left the school system. Verna Kirkness (1992, 2001) sees premises

similar to those she experienced in residential schools operating in Canadian public schools. She indicates that the attempt by public schools to integrate Indigenous perspectives "has not been one of true integration where the different cultures are recognized; rather it has been a program of assimilation where First Nation students are absorbed into the dominant society" (Kirkness, 1992, p. 14). This connection is not metaphoric.

In a very real sense, residential schooling continues to operate today. Talaga's (2017) heartbreaking research into experience of First Nations students who died while living away from home to attend school in Thunder Bay shows how the basic principles of dislocation and neglect are alive and well. Mary Anne Clarke (2014) adds validity to this perspective in her thesis on the complexity of conducting social work in a Northern First Nations. The truth is that today when Indigenous students leave their homes and walk into school, they are walking into an institution that has damaged people like them. Likewise, those institutions are run by a government that they have little reason to trust. Given this, it is remarkable that a study of Indigenous students in Winnipeg schools revealed that their families do value and support their children's educations. However, as might be expected given the history just recounted, the same parents report their support is unacknowledged and their presence is unwelcome (Silver & Mallett, 2002).

***Perception***

The effects of history on contemporary students are not limited to the legacy of distrust and broken relations between Indigenous families and schools. The messages of inferiority presented to Indigenous students in residential schools were also communicated to non-Indigenous students in public schools. Therefore, the unease that Indigenous families may feel

about school may be exacerbated by the way they are perceived. Racial identity construction is deeply influenced by social interactions (Silver & Mallett, 2002, p. 37). Answers to the question who am I? are found to a large degree by how one is seen by others. How Indigenous students are seen is a definite factor in their path through school and much has been written about the construction of an image of Indigeneity in Canada.

In *The Imaginary Indian,* Daniel Francis (1992) demonstrates that an imaginary image of Indigenous peoples exists at the core of Canadian discourse. Arguing that “the Indian is the invention of the European” (p. 6), Francis traces its invention through photography, literature, film, and in the history of theatrical entertainments and cultural practices. As European interest and Eastern Canadian society focused on the West, artistic and photographic impressions portrayed Indigenous people as romantic but doomed. These images, which homogenized Indigenous people into one continental tribe united under a feathered headdress, told the story of the “tragic disappearance of the Indian” (p. 30). It was a disappearance that, although tragic, was seen as inevitable.

Reinforcing their own anxieties about the virtue of progress, images of the Indian as “slaves to their environment” (p. 52) helped Canadians prop up their belief in the virtue of their own economic and political practices. As Francis explains:

> Because they did nothing with the resources of the land – built no cities, tilled no fields, dug no mines – Indians deserved to be superceded by a civilization that recognized the potential for material progress. (p. 52)

While the Indian (who never actually existed) did disappear, Indigenous peoples did not. Nevertheless, the march of ‘progress’ relied on the disappearance of the Indian and so the

existence of real, diverse, complex human Indigenous lives presented "a contradiction in terms" (Francis, 1992, p. 59) to Canadian discourse.

But the narrative imagination is robust. Studies of social studies curriculum and texts show that the representation of Indigenous life has been typified by stereotyping, pan-Indigenous iconography, and stories of extinction (Clark, 2007; Truth and Reconciliation Comission of Canada, 2015). The way to deal with the existence of actual Indigenous people was supplied by "national stories," and " myths" that "validate and affirm important cultural values" (Francis, 1992, p. 81). One of these values was a sense of ownership over Indigenous lives.

The idea, of Indigenous lives as objects for consumption, underpinned and was reinforced by the sense of ownership in the stories of the missionaries and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. These adventure narratives created a fetishized image of the Indian as a figure in need of taming, protection, and improvement. This ethic is starkly evident in the assumptions behind Canadian public policy:

> It was the sina qua non of government policy that Indians had to abandon their identity as Indians before they could become full Canadians. In other words, Indians had to be destroyed in order to be saved. (Francis, 1992, p. 215)

Despite the enactment of this policy in The Indian Act, the reserve system, the residential school system, and myriad other forms, Indigenous peoples have survived. This does not mean that the image of the 'imaginary Indian' has lost its place in Canadian discourse.

Francis makes the point that "images have consequences in the real world: ideas have results" (1992, p. 194). Contemporary Canadians have inherited the consequences of the portrayal of the Imaginary Indian and therefore have very little truth to draw on in building relationships with real Indigenous people and communities. If popular concepts of Canadian

history were nourished with truth of Indigenous – non-Indigenous relations, useful light could be shed on the promise and peril involved in how we relate to each other. For instance, Van Kirk's (1983) work on the lives of women in the fur trade could show how cooperative and mutually beneficial relationships focused on shared interests thrived for at least three generations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in the area now called Winnipeg. Just as importantly, it could also show how the imposition of imported ideologies could destroy those relationships and create long-lasting division.

Briefly stated, Van Kirk (1983) profiles the ascendancy and precipitous decline of 'country' marriages between Indigenous women and European men in the early and middle stages of the fur trade in the Red River Settlement. She details the development community marked by creative and practical approaches to profound cultural differences that was divided and dismantled by the imposition of racially discriminatory ideology. Her work puts light to the lie that Indigenous peoples were doomed by impersonal forces of 'progress.' The story she tells is not of inevitability but of real people making real decisions to hurt other people, often people connected to them by blood and ceremony. In so doing, she provides a lesson full of nuance and contemporary relevance that moves past an "emphasis on the concept of victimization" (Van Kirk, 1983, p. 7) and speaks of responsibilities and relationships. Sadly, it is a lesson that hasn't yet entered the canon of contemporary Canadian understanding of its past.

Oversimplifications have held sway in Canadian thought to such an extent that they are "strong enough to prevail over common sense" (Francis, 2000, p. 194). That common sense, if consulted, would alert us to the continued vitality and presence of Indigenous culture all around us and lead us to the hunch that our Indigenous neighbours' ancestors were likely just as complex and creative as they are. The failure to consult our common sense is well illustrated in

Coutt's (2018) work on the dynamics behind commemorating Canadian historic sites. Regardless of the ample historical evidence of inter-cultural connection, we cling to a view of development wherein white society changes over time but "Native people and Native culture are trapped in a state of stasis" (King, 2012, p. 78). It creates a situation wherein "white society was allowed to change, to evolve, without losing its defining cultural, ethnic and racial characteristics but Indian society was not" (Francis, 1992, p. 59). As a result, Canadian discourse is predicated on the assumption that being Indigenous means being tethered to an irrelevant past or assimilating to mainstream white culture.

The complex of assumptions represented by the imaginary "Indian" may seem rooted in the past, but they still resonate with present currency:

> When we look at Native–non-Native relations, there is no great difference between the past and the present. While we have dispensed with guns and bugles, and while North America's sense of its own superiority is better hidden, its disdain muted, twenty-first century attitudes towards Native people are remarkably similar to those of previous centuries. (King, 2012, p. xv)

For Indigenous students attending Canadian schools the implications are clear. Schools are institutions of the state and operate with a clear normative function (Osborne, 2008; Schick & St. Denis, 2005; Varenne & McDermott, 1998). The norms the system seeks to enforce are based on the same ill-informed and assimilative premises just profiled. Furthermore, the teachers who work in the schools inordinately represent the mainstream of Canadian society (Ryan et al., 2009). As Francis (2002) states, "Non-native Canadians can hardly hope to work out a successful relationship with Native people who exist largely in fantasy" (p. 224).

This point is troubling as schools and teachers are expected to do more than build successful relationships with students. They are supposed to aid them in the process of developing into self-actualized citizens. However, through the lens of mainstream Canadian discourse they will be seen as problems to be solved rather than promises to be protected. Perhaps not surprisingly then, Indigenous students encounter a challenging material reality in schools.

### *Material Reality*

Schools have cultures of their own. Every choice made in school about who works in them, what is and what is not taught, and how those things are taught are expressions of that culture. Much of this culture reflects the values and practices of mainstream society. Because of this, Indigenous students experience gaps between their own cultural experiences and expectations and those of the school. These gaps aren't always obvious as school culture, just like mainstream culture does a good job of masquerading as universal (Dei, 2008).

### *Asking to be Seen: The Story of Mya's Presentation*

In my second year of teaching at Gordon Bell I had an encounter with a student that speaks to the subtle but powerful way that the culture of schooling creates conflict for Indigenous students. Grade 12 students at the school were expected to complete a research presentation to their peers as a capstone project for their English Language Arts course. The topic of the project was up to individual students and they were given access to time and resources to complete it. Because of the choice offered, the topics students chose were very diverse. In years past, presentations varied from the likelihood of nuclear war breaking out to a

surprisingly well-argued piece suggesting the moon landing was a hoax. Students rarely consulted with me about their choice of topic as I was clear with students that what mattered most was the depth of research undertaken and the impression that presentation made on their peers. I assessed the research quality, but the impression marks came from the students who made up the audience.

Two days into the research period one of my students, Mya, came to me with a question. She wanted to know if the topic she had chosen was okay with me. I told her that it was her choice. She continued to explain that she knew she could choose anything but that she was concerned that I wouldn't approve her research. Mya wanted to do her presentation on residential schools but there wasn't a lot of written material that she could use for her research. It would be years before Canada's Truth and Reconciliation commission began its work. Milloy's (1999) book, *A National Crime: The Canadian Government and the Residential School System 1879-1986* wouldn't be published for another year. The story of residential schooling had not yet entered public discourse in the way it has begun to now. The source my student wanted to use was her Grandmother who had attended residential school. I would like to tell you that my immediate response was to say, of course, your Grandmother's experiences are at least as valid a source of information as whatever the student trying to prove that nobody landed on the moon is using. I know I would say that now. But I didn't. Instead I told Mya that she could definitely use her Grandmother's experience but would also have to find published sources and that she would have to be careful to ensure balanced representation. With remarkable grace, Mya agreed and thanked me for my permission.

Mya's presentation was powerful and better researched than any of the other pieces that year. Her peers were astonished and gave her top marks. As I watched her present I realized that she

had gone above and beyond the requirements that other students followed just to be able to tell the story of something with deep personal, historical, and political significance for all of us in the room. I began to realize a bit more about how my assumptions determined my teaching decisions. Most importantly, I felt deep gratitude for Mya and regret for ever having admitted barriers to her work. I approached her after class and told her that if she ever wanted to bring her Grandma to the class to speak to students I would be honoured to host her. She thanked me but explained that being in a school often made her Grandma feel physically ill.

I need to be clear about why I am sharing this story. I do regret the resistance that I presented to Mya's presentation. That isn't the point. I am not sharing the story to use my tears of regret to expiate my guilt, as Accapadi (2007) might put it. The story isn't about my personal reckoning it is about my professional identity as arbiter. It is about how assumptions about what counts as important or relevant knowledge in classrooms are communicated. It is about the fact that Mya had to ask permission at all.

When Indigenous students attend Winnipeg schools they are likely not going to find teachers who share their cultural background (Kanu, 2002; Silver & Mallett, 2002). The lack of representation of Indigenous people within the teaching profession doesn't just mean that students won't have role models for success within the culture of school, it also means that Indigenous students will be taught by teachers socialized into mainstream beliefs about Indigeneity. In their study of inner-city Indigenous students, Silver & Mallett (2002) shared that students reported "a divide on culture/class/experiential grounds" (p. 18) between themselves and their teachers. The students in the study indicated that this divide prevented the development of effective educational relationships. Students also reported experiencing overt racism in the form of stereotyping and name-calling by peers and covert racism in the form of lowered

expectations from their teachers (Silver, 2013, pp. 23–25). This finding accords with research that shows that the historical narratives and cultural differences combine to create a hostile social milieu within schools characterized by multiple racist microaggressions (Clark, Kleiman, Spanierman, Isaac, & Poolokasingham, 2014).

The cultural divide between Indigenous students and their teachers is reinforced by the content and instructional methods featured common in schools. Cole (2006) speaks of the roots of the divide in his reminder of the foundational difference between Indigenous and Western concepts of education:

> Before the whites came we taught our children
> without pathfinder or ministry of education prescribed curricula
> we had no special ed needs education was for every person
> it was called living in the village (p. 225)

Given the breadth of the theoretical division between the two educational paradigms, it is not surprising to find that it is hard to bridge in practice. However, significant efforts have been undertaken to suggest how to incorporate Indigenous approaches and content. Silver and Mallet (2002) report that students appreciate these efforts but also identify most as being superficial at best, involving "Aboriginal day and pow wows" (p. 22). Students did express a clear desire for more and deeper integration of courses and content relevant to their experience and educational desires.

Kanu (2011) investigated the experiences of Indigenous high school students in inner-city Winnipeg. Her study also identified the importance of culture as a mediator of learning experiences. The students in her study reported a number of things about school that hindered their learning which included: the absence of Indigenous teaching methods (e.g., storytelling,

community-based learning, learning through observation, etc.), a lack of meaningful oral communication, a lack of collaborative learning approaches, curriculum that didn't represent or relate to them, and teachers' interpersonal relational style (Kanu, 2011, pp. 63–85). The factors identified by students "signal a vibrant counterpoint to the dominant system of education which fails to connect meaningfully to the lives of Aboriginal learners and the communities from which they come" (Kanu, 2007, p. 85).

Kanu also looks at two models for integrating Indigenous topics into the curriculum at the classroom level (Kanu, 2007). One model, which aligns with the approach most common in schools in Manitoba, involves adding in topics without altering methods or the organization of assessments of existing topics. The other reworks existing practices to integrate Indigenous methods as well as topics of study. Her work reveals that the former approach made no significant difference in the experience of Indigenous student but the latter, deeper level of integration led to increased success and satisfaction. There is, however, a very important qualification to this success. Neither approach increased the regularity of attendance, retention, or graduation for Indigenous students. Kanu's (2007) conclusion is that this is because neither approach was able to address the social factors that kept Indigenous students at home, even when they really enjoyed being at school.

The impact of social factors on the school experience of inner-city Indigenous youth cannot be underestimated. Students in Kanu's (2007) study reported family needs tied directly to poverty as the reason for their missing classes. While students failed classes because of the needs of their families it does not follow that their failure has anything to do with the value attributed to education within their families. Rather, it points to the amount of time and labour involved with attending to economic need. McKinnon's (2009) assertion, "it takes all day to be poor" (p. 1)

speaks to the fact accessing basic needs like food, shelter, and health is a full time endeavor for families in poverty. When asked, Indigenous inner-city families speak clearly about how highly they value education (Silver & Mallett, 2002) despite the often unwelcoming environment it presents to their children. However, no matter how highly it is valued, school has to take a backseat to obtaining basic needs.

Students endure stress when trying to balance their family needs with their academic needs. Absences mean they fall behind in their school work and frequently result in tense relationships with their teachers and school staff. All of this is exacerbated by the effects of micro- and macro-racial aggressions and absence of Indigenous experience in curriculum. The unsurprising result is a high rate of conflict with staff and other students. Within the discourse of schooling, absenteeism and 'acting out' are often seen as evidence of a lack of care or respect for education. From the perspective of Indigenous students such actions are about taking care of needs and standing up against aggression. In other words, their actions are acts of resistance to "an institution which many of them see as being, in important and tangible ways, quite alien to them" (Silver & Mallett, 2002, p. 30).

Resistance is a key issue in the school lives of Indigenous students. The school system presents students with teachers who come from a different class and culture, a curriculum that ignores and misrepresents their history, instructional methods that come from a different paradigm, and a structure that punishes them for helping their family. King (2012) is clear that, "Native people have never been resistant to education" but asks, "why, in the name of education should we have been required to give up everything we had, to give up who we were in order to become something we did not choose to be" (p. 119). He is, of course, discussing residential schools in this quote but the same existential crisis persists today. Schools still present

Indigenous students with the terrible question of how to preserve their ethno-cultural identity while attaining school success. Reimer (2013) points to the decision many Indigenous youth make to leave school as being rooted in a complex of conflicts connected to the mismatch between school expectations and their lived reality. Silver and Mallet (2002) go further in suggesting that Indigenous drop-out rates may reflect that "they are choosing, for perfectly understandable reasons, to reject school" (p. 25). Tuck's (2011) work with Indigenous school leavers presents students as caught between choosing "dangerous dignities" or "humiliating ironies." Leaving school preserves their dignity but endangers them in a society that requires a high school diploma (at least). Staying in school grants them success but also confers on them the humiliation of a reward granted by a system that doesn't value their identity. It simply isn't a fair choice.

The scope of the challenges faced by Indigenous students has prompted scholars to propose a wider view of the situation. Despite attempts to integrate Indigenous perspectives Battiste's (2000) assertion that, "no force has been more effective at oppressing First Nations cultures than the education system" still resonates. Kanu (2007) speculates that macrostructural changes to the education system are warranted because, "microlevel classroom variations… cannot provide a functional and effective agenda in reversing achievement trends among Aboriginal students" (p. 38). Clearly, the challenges Indigenous youth face in school, whether they are tied to the history of schooling, the perceptions that stigmatize them, or the material factors they contend with, are serious and numerous.

**Map # 2: Schools and Conflict**

The word conflict carries negative connotations. However, conflict is an inevitable reality of human existence and occurs throughout human society. As Lederach (2003) points out, change and conflict are constant companions and personal, relational, structural, and cultural reality depend on them (p. 23). The field of Peace and Conflict Studies (PACS) looks at conflict from this perspective and develops methods for avoiding and addressing the violent consequences and destructive cycles that develop from the unsuccessful resolution or transformation of conflict. In the preceding pages I described historical, cultural, and material barriers that are faced by young people in the inner city. My belief is that these barriers are part of a cycle of conflict in need of transformation; the barriers young people from poor, Indigenous and refugee backgrounds face are the unjust results of that cycle. Looking at schools as conflict zones offers a constructive way to examine this cycle (Hyde, 2020; Reimer, 2013).

Conflict, at its most basic, involves the desire for and actions taken to fulfill one's needs. Burton (1990a) explicated this in his "Human Needs Theory." Unlike values and interests, which can be flexible and negotiated, needs are non-negotiable and so central to human becoming that humans will seek to satisfy them "by all means available" (Burton, 1990b, p. 36). Burton (1979, pp. 68–74) identifies the need for recognition and the need for distributive justice as two basic needs. Recognition refers to an individual's existence and place in his or her world. Meaningfully engagement with the world emerges from recognition. Importantly, the need for recognition is accompanied by the need for distributive justice. Humans do not just need to be recognized within their world, they also need to be recognized justly and have their actions receive fair reactions (Jeong, 2000).

The need for recognition is closely linked to individual identity. A person's identity is a matter of both individual and social construction and is therefore the primary vehicle for recognition (Cook-Huffman, 2009). Brubaker and Cooper ( 2000) point out that identity expresses the idea of the deep and unchanging aspects of a person at the same time that it expresses the exact opposite idea, the process of change and development over time. This "elusive and problematic" nature of identity is why it is central to much conflict (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Cook-Huffman, 2009). As a social category identity may be problematic because of its fluidity but for individuals, the sense of a unified and coherent identity needs not be upset by change over time. Whether it is a rational idea or not, we believe our identity is an abiding and faithful representation of our interior self in relation to the world. Thus, I can change my identity without losing it, so long as I feel I am making the choice to do so, on my own terms.

Identity becomes a factor within conflict when it isn't recognized in fair terms or when its development is compromised by outside forces. This is subjective terrain as identities are, in reality, always shifting composites of individual and group choices, social interactions, and impositions by authority (Cook-Huffman, 2009, p. 23). What doesn't shift is the importance of an individual's sense that she or he is the one making the choice. This often evidences itself when individuals or groups from minority groups interact with large scale state institutions (like schools) where power is exercised. In such institutions, how one is identified can be the basis for exclusion, inclusion, reward, or punishment. In such situations Jeong points out, "the deligitimation of discrimination is critical in accommodating the demands of those with a minority status" (Jeong, 2000). When discrimination is legitimated, people not only face the material consequences of the discrimination, they face a reckoning with a terrible question—how to be who they truly feel themselves to be.

When groups or individuals face challenges to the sanctity of a life lived within the definition of their own identities, they are encountering violence. While violence is a term usually used to denote physical harm or assault, Galtung (1969, 1990) offers an expanded conception. Galtung offers that violence is "the cause of the difference between the potential and the actual, between what could have been and what is" (1969, p. 168). From this perspective it is possible to see that violence does not have to be created by an individual act. Rather, indirect violence threatens or harms individuals but does not require an actor. Located within and perpetuated by institutional structures and social cultures, indirect violence represents systemic impediments to fully becoming that guard the status of the dominant and hinder the progress of the marginal (Galtung, 1969, p. 179).

The evidence of structural violence is often most clearly found in unequal social outcomes. However, while the inequality it creates is clear, structural violence is rarely identified as the cause. This is because structural violence is justified by cultural violence. Galtung (1990) explains, "cultural violence makes direct and structural violence look, even feel, right – or at least not wrong" (p. 291). Examples of this are easy to find. The shocking and long-term, multi-generational poverty in Winnipeg's inner city should be recognized as an injustice and responded to with moral and political force. However, because of the cultural assumptions that heap stigma on the poor, efforts to attack poverty are muted and the burden of response falls to charities rather than the community in general. Poverty remains an uncomfortable, but accepted part of life in Winnipeg.

The same dynamic can be seen in the example of long-term differential graduation rates and incarceration rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations. Galtung says as

much in his description of things to look for as evidence of structural and cultural violence working together:

> Resources are unevenly distributed, as when income distributions are heavily skewed, literacy/education unevenly distributed, medical services existent in some districts and for some groups only, and so on. Above all the power to decide over the distribution of resources is unevenly distributed. The situation is aggrieved further if the persons low on income are also low on education, low on health, and low on power (1969, p. 171)

Cultural violence allows inequity to go unnoticed by those who benefit from it which leads them to reason that those who struggle do so because of their own deficiencies rather than as a result of policies and practices of the status quo. It's a situation that resonates with my own experience as a teacher.

***Grad Photos: The Story of Seeing What Was Right in Front of my Face***

My first teaching job was in an inner-city school with an enrollment of roughly 800 grade seven through twelve students. The students in the school were predominantly from Euro-Canadian, Indigenous, and refugee backgrounds. I taught English Language Arts to the high school students. Like many high schools, the main hallway featured a long row of photographs displaying each graduating class. For years I walked by those pictures without ever noticing two simple facts that should have struck me as odd.

The first fact was that every year the number of graduates in the photos was fairly consistent, averaging around 55 students. Simple division reveals what was odd about this number. The school had six grade levels and a total of about 800 students. That should lead to a graduating class of about 130 students each year because that number is what you get when you

divide the total number of students by the number of grade levels at the school. Yet we consistently graduated less than half of that number. Digging into the numbers, I realized that our school had nearly double the number of students enrolled in grades seven and eight as we did in eleven and twelve. Fully half the students who started out at our school left without getting their diploma or having their picture on the wall.

The second fact about those photos I didn't notice for years was that the students in the pictures didn't accurately represent the students walking past them in the hallway. The trouble with the second fact came from looking at the skin tone and family names of the students in the graduating photo in comparison to the students walking the school's hallways. Our graduates were much whiter and bore more Euro-Canadian names than the rest of the students in the school. I remember mentioning these facts to my colleagues and like me, they were surprised that we hadn't really noticed or ever talked about them before.

Galtung (1969) explains how situations like the one with the pictures in the school hallway come to be:

> Structural violence is silent, it does not show – it is essentially static, it *is* the tranquil waters. In a static society, personal violence will be registered, whereas structural violence may be seen as about as natural as the air around us. (p. 173)

My colleagues and I broke up fights that happened from time to time at the school. We didn't like doing this but we did it because we knew part of our job was to protect students. What we didn't know was that not only were we failing to protect them from the kind of violence that meant some of them didn't have a fair chance at graduating, we were probably complicit in that violence.

Schools can be seen as conflict zones. This view is possible when one sees how structural and cultural violence operate to disadvantage certain students. However, simply identifying the existence of structural and cultural violence does little to offer a pathway to resolution or improvement. Finding a pathway requires and understanding of how and why violence operates. That understanding can be reach through the use of conflict analysis.

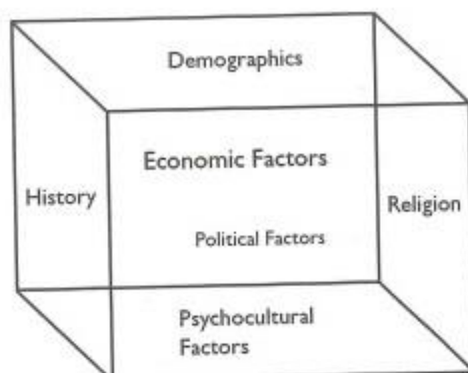
**Schools in the Cube of Conflict**

Social cubism is an analytic frame that captures the holistic and dynamic reality (Byrne & Carter, 2000; Byrne, Carter, & Senehi, 2002). Originally applied to ethnopolitical national conflicts, the relevance of the model for investigating social conflict and structural imbalance has been clearly demonstrated (McKay, 2002). Part of the reason for this is that it is a model that is able to move beyond perpetrator-victim narratives and capture the underlying factors that create conflict and lead to direct and indirect violence (Matyók, Mendoza, & Schmitz, 2014). As such, it is a useful model for capturing the complexity required in framing school as a zone of conflict. Moreover, it promises to offer new and productive insights for transforming the conflict faced by inner-city youth because its purpose is to, "identify and illuminate the causes, responses, and the consequences of social conflict, and its resolution" (Byrne et al., 2002).

To understand conflict, it is helpful to imagine a cube (see figure 3). Each of the six faces of the cube represents a separate factor in the conflict. Importantly, "the cube is dynamic, constantly in motion as the factors interact" (Mckay, 2002, p. 885). Each face of the cube grows in proportion to the scope and pertinence of the factor it represents. The cube skews and bulges, and the other factors are stretched and shrunk as they are drawn into or eclipsed by episodes in

the conflict. By mapping the key factors within conflict to the shape of a cube we can see the dynamics and learn of spaces where things that seem intractable may be transformed.

***Figure 3: The Social Cube***[3]




The dimensions represented by each face of the cube are: political, historical, psychocultural, religious (or spiritual), economic, and demographic (Byrne & Carter, 2000, pp. 45–56; Mckay, 2002, pp. 882–895). Political factors involve the macro- and micro-level interactions of groups in conflict with institutional authority. Psychocultural factors cover the role of culture, individual, and group identity in the conflict. Historical factors of conflict include the separate stories of the past that individuals and groups involved tell about themselves and others. They also include the history of the events that brought the conflict into being and developed it, especially as they relate to the other faces of the cube. Economic factors cover the relationships between the material realities and prospects of those involved in conflict. Demographic factors speak to the influence of the size and composition of groups in conflict in relation to each other. Religious factors involve the role of faith in animating conflict and,

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[3] *Figure 3.*The Social Cube. Reprinted from The dynamics of social cubism: A view from Northern Ireland and Quebec (p. 42). by Carter, N. & Byrne, S. In Byrne, S.; Irvin, C. Eds. (2000) *Reconcilable differences: Turning points in ethnopolitical conflict.* Hartford: Kumarian Press. 41-64

particularly for the examination of secular social conflicts, can be extended to include different concepts of the role of spirituality in discourse.

Social cubism paints a broad picture of a conflict in action. Each of the conflictual factors it describes can be the focus of in-depth study and the use of social cubism does not preclude that. What the use of the cube prevents is a myopic focus on one element of a conflict that distracts from how other factors are animating the process. By applying this model to the conflict experienced by inner-city youth in schools we can, "identify and illuminate the causes, responses, and the consequences of social conflict" (Byrne et al., 2002). It is a model that allows a way of ordering and connecting aspects of conflict that are made to seem random and disconnected by the silencing processes of cultural violence.

***Political Factors***

Public schools are the pathway provided for children to move from the private world of the family into the public world of the community. This is a pathway steeped with consequence for society and so, as Osborne states, "public schooling was designed more as a tool of social policy than as an instrument of universal education" (Osborne, 2008, p. 27). Induction into social norms is part of the basic purpose of school (Ben-Porath, 2012; Giroux, 1980, 1983; Kornelsen, 2016; Varenne & McDermott, 1998; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Which norms schools prioritize and how they impart those norms is the primary source of political conflict for Indigenous inner-city students (Silver & Mallett, 2002). The most obvious place to look for this is in how school curricula present ideas to students about what knowledge and experience is most valuable (Donald, 2011; Schick, 2014).

Long ago, Eisner (1979) established that schools have multiple curricula and that assertion is now accepted as canon by curricular theorists. The subjects taught form the overt curriculum. In addition, schools have implicit and null curricula. Elsewhere referred to as "hidden curriculum" (Anyon, 1980; Apple, 1971) these curricula, unlike decisions about what is taught, operate without transparency or debate. The implicit curriculum is composed of the way school time, space, resources, and rules are used. The null curriculum is composed of the things left out of school. It may be the most powerful of the political aspects of schooling as the null curriculum effectively prevents debate about what and whose experiences matter through silencing alternatives (Flinders, Noddings, & Thornton, 1986). The three curricula work in concert to create a sense of what is normal and thus facilitate the hegemonic function of schooling by presenting the status quo as natural and unquestioned.

Understanding the conflict faced by Indigenous students means recognizing that they face content, procedures, and assumptions that impinge on or outright deny their identity. Their experiences are rarely represented in the courses required for graduation or university entrance. Even when Indigenous life does find a space in core courses it is most commonly as an additive rather than as key content (Kanu, 2011). Similarly, when courses are dedicated to Indigenous topics they are electives like Native Studies, and don't merit the same status as English and Math. Furthermore, the organization of school life, the art in the hallways, the heroes and holidays celebrated, the space they are given, and the language they are spoken to in, can alienate rather than welcome Indigenous youth. The poor and the Indigenous face exclusion and intrusions in the larger society, a process that is both fostered and reproduced in the school. This dynamic, and the role of the three levels of curricula, repeats across the five other faces of the social conflict cube.

### *Historical Factors*

When inner-city students enter school, they often walk in carrying with them histories that put them into conflict with the school itself. For Indigenous students, a painful history with the state in general and state-run education in specific has equipped them with a well-earned distrust for the space. This history creates obvious problems at the level of overt curriculum as topics of study and even languages used are foreign. However, the hidden curriculum is also a significant issue as the rules that are implicit to those from the dominant society are not implicit at all for those from outside of it. Further complicating matters is the difference between the histories of the teachers and the histories of their students. The literature on teacher preparation is replete with research into the problem created by teachers who lack any experience in their history that prepares them for seeing students from marginalized background through anything other than a deficit perspective (Fine, 2004; Garmon, 2005; Mcintyre, 2002; Milner, 2010)

### *Psychocultural Factors*

Psychocultural conflict is present when the meeting of different cultures impinges on an individual's ability to find fair recognition within a system. Importantly, culture must be understood as extending far beyond ethno-cultural factors to include:

> the ever-changing values, traditions, social and political relationships, and worldview created, shared, and transformed by a group of people bound together by a combination of factors that can include a common history, geographic location, language, social class, and religion. (Nieto, 2008, p. 129)

When Indigenous youth enter schools the opportunity to take positive advantage of the dynamics of cultural formation is present. Doing so would involve building on the strengths of their home

cultures as essential tools to work with each other to navigate the cultural norms of the dominant society (Delpit, 1995; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Yosso, 2005). However, critiques conducted by multicultural education scholars point to the tendency for school practice to treat racialized experiences as worth less than others and to reinforce the idea that social structures are, if not just, definitely inevitable. Several common schooling traits that contribute to this are: curricular content drawn solely from dominant cultures, ignoring overt and systemic racism, ignoring the potential for school culture and practices to build intercultural connections, and a focus on the values of equality over equity (Banks, 2015, 2017). Each practice limits the transformative potential of school as a space for welcoming marginalized students into the process of renewing the social order.

### *Economic Factors*

The influence of economics on schooling influences the life of Indigenous inner-city youth in two ways. The first, which I have already profiled, challenges their ability to meet their material needs and stigmatizes them in the eyes of the larger society. The second, has to do with the reproduction of the status quo and the influence of social class. The Marxist premise that education systems are crucial players in the reproduction of inequality (Anyon, 1980; Bowles & Gintis, 1976) has been borne out in multiple contexts and times and its relevance today persists (Apple, 2004; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; MacLeod, 2009; Noguera & Wing, 2006; Willis, 1981). These studies show that the economic and social systems of exchange found in the greater society are replicated in the organizational, assessment, streaming, and instructional practices of schools. What results is a closure of paths to social and economic mobility for students coming to school in the inner city and a sense that social inequities are inevitable. Significant

intersections exist between the social and economic factors influencing inner-city students. This is not surprising as social and cultural capital and social and structural violence exist in reciprocal relationship with each other.

### *Demographic Factors*

Demographics present an interesting dimension to the conflict experienced within inner-city schools. While students in poverty and Indigenous students represent a minority across Winnipeg, they form the majority within inner-city schools. Meanwhile, their teachers represent the ethno-cultural backgrounds and economic class of the mainstream (Ryan et al., 2009). This creates a "double-minority" within schools wherein teachers feel they are the minority at the same time as their students feel the same thing. Byrne and Carter (2000) speak of double-minority situations as being characterized by a tone of defensiveness and a mutual sense of being under threat from the other. For Indigenous students, the sense of threat is implicit in the exclusionary practices of all three forms of curricula. But teachers, too, experience some level of uneasiness when they are in the minority. This is on display when they are asked to work with Indigenous topics.

Schick (2014) observes that teachers, "whose lives are enabled by a history of white privilege and present-day colonial systems" (p. 89) often express resistance to and resentment of teaching Indigenous topics. This resistance speaks to the persistent sense that Indigenous topics represent an 'extra' rather than a core part of the overt curriculum, work that falls outside of the school's responsibility (Schick, 2000). Ignoring the many socio-political agendas at play within schools, Indigenous content is resisted as an undue political incursion into academic practice (Schick & St. Denis, 2005). In her study of the implementation of treaty education resource

Schick noted a great deal of resistance and resentment, “even though the lessons ask so little and do even less to effect more equitable school outcomes, not to mention the task of supporting mutuality and respect in social relations” (Schick, 2014, p. 90). Thus, Indigenous youth, even when they form the majority in a school, may well come into conflict with conflict as whiteness defends itself from amendments to the overt curriculum.

### *Religious – Spiritual Factors*

Along with, and closely connected to the historical and psychocultural conflicts faced by Indigenous students in school are conflicts that emerge from religious and spiritual issues. The idea of a clear break between religious and secular spheres is taken for granted in Canadian public schooling but it is not a universally shared value.

For many Indigenous students, the policy of excluding religion from school discourse and practice is problematic. Indigenous conceptions of the spiritual are just that, Indigenous. As such, they cannot be assumed to fit within the same categories as the Abrahamic religious tradition. Furthermore, the cleavage between the secular and sacred as conceived of within Western educational tradition only fits within that tradition. This creates conflict in schools when the infusion of Indigenous culture, which views spirituality as embedded in culture in ways Western secular society does not, enters school discourse (Doige, 2003; Iseke-Barnes, 2010; Ritskes, 2011). As a result, barriers exist for Indigenous students to learn about and teach others about their ethno-cultural identity. Apart from providing another example of the denial of coherent identity perpetuated by the imposition of colonial categories on Indigenous lives, this also prevents a prime opportunity for conflict transformation. As Noddings (2008) points out, much

of the conflict in the world is connected directly to the misunderstanding and misrepresentation of spiritual belief and religious practice and schools could be a perfect space to address that.

### *Summary*

Cook-Huffman (2002) exhorts conflict scholars to, “ask how our theories work when applied to everyday life experiences.” Likewise, Sefa Dei (2001) argues that the value of social theories emerges from their ability to point to social improvement. The theory of social cubism meets those tests and works well to distill and describe the conflictual terrain inner city youth walk when they are in school. The social cube of conflict for Indigenous youth in school displays areas of common interest for transformative action. Indigenous youth come into conflict with school because of economic factors including structural and direct violence and the stigmatizing effects of poverty. They also face historical challenges tied to colonial agendas and practices. Spiritual and psychocultural conflict arises because of gaps between family culture and the culture of school. Finally, demographic and political challenges trouble Indigenous youth because of the overt and covert social functions of the school to reproduce a status quo that imagines them as problems to be solved rather than gifts to be delivered. Exposing these areas of common conflict opens possibilities for constructive action in specific parts of the cube of conflict.

## Map #3: Education, Conflict, and the Potential for Transformation

The scope of the conflict faced by Indigenous inner-city youth in schools is broad. Constraining the free expression of their identity across political, historical, psychocultural, economic, demographic, and spiritual fronts, if school-based conflict was war it would be a total

war. What is alarming is that despite all the evidence flowing from educational, health, and economic data the degree of conflict is not acknowledged. Galtung's (1969, 1990) concept of how cultural norms naturalize structural violence helps explain this, but the challenge of how to transform the largely unrecognized inequities remains. Perhaps the most frustrating thing about the persistent acceptance of inequity is that school could be the place where it is opposed rather than normalized. Freire's (1985) classic observation that, "because education *is* politicity, it is never neutral" (p. 17) still rings true but his calls for education to become the "practice of freedom" (2000, p. 34) still go unanswered, at least at a systemic level.

It may be that looking for whole system change may be the problem - even though the scope of the problem no doubt calls for it. Bekerman and Zembylas (2013), both veterans of peace education, suggest the same in their analysis of school-based efforts at conflict transformation. Their work insists that critiques of teachers and schools for not doing more must never forget the massive scale of the economic and socio-political forces that rely on the maintenance of an inequitable status quo. To their minds:

> Peace education would do well to look for educational solutions in the organization of present western world politics rather than in the limited parameters of their school settings or the solitude of their teacher's or students' minds. (Zembylas & Bekerman, 2013, p. 210)

The logical conclusion that follows this assertion is that working within schools to transform social conflict is doomed by how big those conflicts are relative to the limited scope of schooling.

Importantly, Zembylas and Bekerman do not argue for abandoning school-based efforts for social transformation. Instead, they argue for looking at schools to reveal the existence of

contexts and practices that show the presence and scale of structural impediments to equity. Bekerman (2005, 2009) stresses that working for transformation in schools remains a vital practice, but that the illumination of asymmetrical power relations should be a major focus of the work, as it will provide a focus for action and reframe our sense of what is possible.

I approach the question of what social transformation schools might be able to enact from the perspective of a teacher. As such, I have to admit that even the moments of teaching when I was able to help marginalized students feel valorized and supported, did little to change larger social structures. Worse, even getting me to the point of realizing that it was my ethical responsibility to help those students find a comfortable space, took a lot of hard work on the part of some dedicated mentors (Kuly, 2016). It is hard for teachers to realize that they are part of the reproductive function of hegemony. Boler and Zembylas (2003) are clear that, "it is a painstaking process to develop a critical and conscious awareness of something as omnipresent as oxygen" (p. 107), and it involves "not only cognitive but also emotional labour" (p. 108). As hard as the process is, it is a crucial part of the development of what they call a, "pedagogy of discomfort" which:

> invites not only members of the dominant culture but also members of marginalized cultures to reexamine the hegemonic values inevitably internalized in the process of being exposed to curriculum and media that serve the interests of the ruling class. No one escapes hegemony. (Boler & Zembylas, 2003, p. 112)

Coming to realize that inequity operates simultaneously to privilege some and disadvantage others can be a disorienting and deflating experience.

The emotional and cognitive labour that resistance requires creates fatigue. To sustain the work, teachers must be supported by hope and allegiances. Luckily, inner city schools offer

sources of both. Yosso's (2002, 2005) idea of community cultural wealth reframes the discourse about cultural capital by pointing to the diverse and rich sources of strength that marginalized youth draw on to sustain themselves through the social conflicts they experience in schools. Family, language, and social connections sustain people whether they reflect the values of the dominant society or not. Yosso suggests that teachers can build allegiances with students and sustain their own efforts through recognizing the assets their students possess. Freire (1985) speaks of this practice in his exhortation that:

> teachers must be able to play with children, to dream with them. They must wet their bodies in the waters of children's culture. Then they will see how to teach reading and writing. (p. 18)

Immersed in the world of the students, teachers will more easily find ways to recognize how the overt curriculum silences possibility.

Understanding the unique strengths of marginalized youth also offers potential for transforming the barriers posed by the hidden curriculum (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). Marginalized youth, seasoned by the experience of oppression, come to school with forms of capital related to the challenges of navigating society without privilege, related to the strength of aspirations sustained despite the challenges, and related to the ability to recognize and critique the unjust challenges placed before them. These forms of capital are best able to transform social structures like school when they find allegiances within them. Finding common cause with classmates and teachers can create counter-publics (Weis & Fine, 2004), small heterotopias (Zembylas & Ferreira, 2009) where the relations within and across the asymmetry of power can be fostered and the norms of the status quo can be questioned, reformed, and reimagined – even if only for a little while.

Inner-city schoolchildren are dogged by daunting and unjust social conflict. The schools they attend are extensions of the system that creates those conflicts. It is likely too lofty a dream to imagine that schools could dismantle the apparatus of structural violence that has created inequity in Winnipeg for generations. Still, within Winnipeg's inner-city schools the dreams of those generations are embodied in classrooms, sitting together with their teachers every day. The persistence of public schooling, despite all its contradictions, still offers a space for resistance, however limited it may be. Finding that space requires that teachers and students learn to see each other across the divisions between them.

Buber (1961) spoke of the humanizing potential of dialogic education based on just and mutual recognition between teachers and students. He cautioned that for this potential to turn into reality, the teacher, "must be really there, really facing the child, not merely there in spirit" (p. 126). Ethnocultural, social, and economic reality make it hard for people who are different from each other to be truly present with each other. Doing so requires seeing beyond the limitations and conflicts created by social identity differences. But if schools, where the comingling of difference is still possible, can build bridges to true connection remarkable moments can happen. Ayers (2004, p. 14) suggests that by "opening our eyes to the kaleidoscopic reality of the world" we, as teachers, can begin "embracing our students, taking their sides as fellow human beings." Such solidarity may not transform deeply entrenched inequity. Still, relationships fostered across those inequities could serve to illuminate them and reduce the alienation they create. In that there is hope for some measure of transformation.

**Ready for the Journey**

At the beginning of this chapter I compared conducting this research to a journey and this part of it, the review of literature, to preparing and consulting maps before departing. Following that comparison, I have used this chapter to present three maps. The first map informs me that Indigenous life in inner-city schools is heavily influenced by historical trends and contemporary practices that reinforce racial misunderstanding and exclusion. The second map informs me that school is space characterized by conflict. Ordering that conflict reveals that school is part of the process of social reproduction and Indigenous lives are heavily implicated in that process. The third map informs me that school is also a place of possibility. It is true that schools are part of naturalizing and reproducing inequity in society. However, critiques of schooling like this one can expose that reality. Moreover, the agency of individuals within schools to recognize both the limitations of the system and each other's vitality still offers opportunity for constructive hopeful action.

As I stated earlier, maps have limitations. That is why I included the two stories that I did in this chapter. They are there to remind me that the abstract reality maps offer can only approximate the messy reality of real experience. They can describe how to get to a place, but they cannot tell you how it feels or what it means to actually be there. For that you need to sharpen your senses, open your eyes and ears to what you are experiencing along the way. That is the task the next chapter takes up. It theorizes a methodology for the research journey.

# Chapter Three: A Storytelling Methodology

This chapter develops the methodology that provided the intellectual framework for conducting this research journey. In it I list the ideas about the nature of knowledge, experience, power, and relations that influenced the inquiry. The primary inspiration for crafting this methodology is the act of storytelling. The pages that follow will explore storytelling deeply and broadly to outline how it provides a frame capable of carrying this research journey forward.

Seeing storytelling as a methodology is an emerging process (Senehi, 2020). Recent scholarship has identified the trend and this piece contributes to the 'bricolage' that characterizes the way scholars, particularly Peace and Conflict Studies scholars, are moving to seeing the world through storytelling (Flaherty, 2010; Hunte, 2012; Reimer, 2013; Senehi, 2020). My contribution will begin with considering the definition, function, and effects of storytelling. Following this, I will consider aspects of existing methodological traditions that help explain the precepts of a storytelling way of knowing the world. Specifically, I will look at qualitative research traditions that focus on lived experience, narrative, community knowledge, and the operation of power. I will also explore in some depth how critiques and approaches in the field of decolonial research speak to the transformative potential of storytelling as a way of knowing. In all of this I am crafting a response to two interconnected questions. The first is how does storytelling create and communicate meaning? The second is what are the principles that underpin the unique way that storytelling 'means' things?

## Storytelling

Consider the following scenes: Two people huddle together sharing a set of headphones while watching Youtube clips on an iPhone. Fifteen thousand people are crowded together in an

arena. They watch the time tick away in the third period of a hockey game with their home team down one goal, their goalie pulled and an extra attacker speeding off the bench to join the fray. A nine-year-old girl is curled up in her bed after lights out straining her eyes to learn more about Harry and Hermione by the moonlight shining through her window. A transit bus shakes its way down the street carrying people wearing headphones. Some are engrossed in their screens, scanning updates on their Facebook, twitter, or snapchat timeline. Others are listening to podcasts or listening to songs. A group of old friends sit around a table laughing as the memories of their lives together are brought up one by one. Each of these scenes shares the same common denominator. Whether dramatized, written, played out in real life, transmitted in a timeline, or turned into a song, each scene is animated by story.

We are surrounded by stories at every moment. Story is the seed that provides the life to much of human communion and communication. Persisting through the mediating effects of paper, screens, and speakers, that seed provides the vitality that draws readers, viewers, and listeners in. Everyone has heard and told stories throughout their life and so what makes a story a story is more or less, common knowledge. As with much common knowledge, it is rarely thought of in a systematic way. To think systematically about stories and storytelling we need to agree on what a story is. Senehi (2009) defines storytelling as, “someone telling someone else that something happened” (p. 202). A story, then, is the expression of things that happened.

There are a few qualifications to add to this definition. Except for a very small and specific set of stories about housecleaning, stories don’t happen in a vacuum. They happen in places, at times, and to things. Just as a verb requires an object, stories require settings and characters. Settings can vary incredibly across story forms, as can the meaning of the word character. All characters drive and react to the plot and setting in stories but that is about the only

generalization that can be made about them. Sometimes characters are humans and sometimes they are animals. Some characters are as concrete as physical objects and at other times they can be as abstract and ephemeral as an idea itself. The important thing is that regardless of the varieties contained within them, to be a story there must be a combination of plot, setting, and character.

The reason that these traits are the essential story ingredients is because without them stories can't communicate much of anything. Senehi (2009) reminds us that "stories have a point" (p. 203). The pathway of characters through time and space described in the action of a story takes on a meaning for those who experience the story. Those meanings are myriad and will vary from reader to reader, listener to listener, or viewer to viewer, but regardless of the variation a story always communicates something. Additionally, story meaning is not hinged to distinctions between truth and fiction. In fact, "narratives are never pure fact or fiction" (Senehi, 2009, p. 202) but they all tell their listener something.

The word story, then, refers to (a) a narrative that (b) recounts events and involves (c) a setting or settings and (d) a character or characters. Importantly, stories vary in form and use but they share the defining trait of communicating something. With this foundation established, we can turn from defining story to exploring the traits of storytelling.

### *A Definition of the Form*

Just as story is a universal feature of human life storytelling is similarly basic. In fact, it has been argued to be "an essential mode for apprehending the human journey" (Sobol, 1999). It is so common as to be almost as invisible as the air around us. And yet, it is a powerful part of our experience. So powerful in fact that Okri (1997) claims, "Storytelling, practiced with full

consciousness and oxygenated sense of responsibility, is one of the most dangerous and liberating of human activities" (p. 62). Okri's quote points in the proper direction for defining storytelling. The important parts of the form are the processes involved and the effects they deliver.

Senehi (2000, 2002, 2009) provides a comprehensive analysis of the functions of storytelling. Stating that, "storytelling is a universal way humans deal with knowledge" (2009, p. 203). Senehi argues that issues of knowledge, power, identity, and socialization are all implicated when stories are told (2009, pp. 204-206). Because storytelling shares and shapes knowledge, it is also a means of expressing and distributing power; stories tell us what matters. Likewise, storytelling serves to express, edit, transform, and codify individual and group identities; stories tell us who we are. The combination of knowledge, power, and identity that storytelling manages also makes it a primary tool for socialization. Regardless of whether storytelling happens at the level of individuals, families, social groups, or through the mass media, it is always expressing ideas about right and wrong, insiders and outsiders, and actions that have been taken or not taken. Stories tell us how to be with each other.

Importantly, storytelling is a highly accessible and often democratic form of communication (Senehi, 2009, p. 209). This is especially so in face to face environments where the interface between teller and listener is intimate and thus influences how messages are sent and received. The accessibility of storytelling is linked to the way it triggers both cognitive and emotional responses (Senehi, 2002, pp. 52-54). Because of this, storytelling is persuasive. "Stories, even personal stories, always imply how things should be" (Senehi, 2009, p. 207) and because they are persuasive their ability to exert moral pressure is powerful.

The moral function of storytelling is also fused with temporality. Storytelling works with time and memory. In the telling of a story, a listener is drawn to a time before the present and yet when the story ends they have moved into the future. By building connections between the past and future, stories inject long ago things with contemporary relevance and shape people's choices. In fact, Cruikshank (1990) argues that storytelling, from the mouth of a gifted teller to the ears of a good listener, is a powerful enough form to turn second-hand experiences into first hand events. Silko (1996) testifies to this power in saying, "we sometimes say the moment is alive again within us" (p. 43). In that sense, storytelling doesn't only recall the past, it reanimates it.

Just as all stories have settings, storytelling is linked to place. This extends beyond the way that certain stories remind us of where we were when they happened or how certain places are personally memorable because of what we did when we were there. In a real sense, "cultural and symbolic significance for persons and communities" (Senehi, 2002, p. 55) are tied to spaces and those spaces are tied to stories. Tuhiwai Smith (2012) has argued that one of the greatest acts of conquest performed by colonizers was in renaming the spaces they occupied because in doing that they erased the stories of the land. Silko (1996) recounts the experience of being told stories about places on the land while sitting in them because:

> that was when the stories worked best, because then I could sit there listening and be able to visualize myself as being located *within* the story being told, within the landscape. (p. 43)

Because stories, "encode cultural norms regarding the relationships between humans and the natural environment" (Senehi, 2002, p. 55) they provide geographic and cultural roots to their listeners.

Storytelling, then, is a basic human method for communication and reasoning. It delivers information at the same time as evoking emotion and is, thus, a unique and persuasive medium. By expressing, creating, and editing knowledge, storytelling also contributes to the operation of power, the definition of identity, and the expression of morality. Storytelling operates in specific domains that include time, memory, morality, and geography. Within these domains, storytelling evokes meaning in specific ways, a topic to which I turn now.

### *Storytelling and the Generation of Meaning*

Storytelling generates meaning in ways that extend beyond the content of the stories that are told. The three main generative aspects of storytelling are outlined by Archibald (2008) who explains that, "the power of storywork to make meaning derives from a synergy between the story, the context in which the story is used, the way that the story is told, and how one listens to the story" (p. 84). Kovach (2009) refers to this synergy as, "sitting in the now of story" (p. 102), an experience that she indicates is impossible to fully capture outside of the context of the telling and listening experience. Thus, storytelling meaning can be best understood as a holistic process involving factors that include the story itself, the teller, the listener(s), and contextual factors. The expression, the 'whole is greater than the sum of its parts' is important to keep in mind here as storytelling scholars point to the ability of storytelling to mean in ways not easily captured by dissection.

Thomas (2005) recognizes the creativity and autonomy of the storyteller in understanding how storytelling works. Noting that storytellers make choices about what is included in their telling, she looks for the inclusion or exclusion of elements of mental, spiritual, physical, and emotional aspects in the artistry of telling (p. 245). Each choice alters the holistic meaning of the

storytelling. The effect of these choices on storytelling meaning is increased by the immediacy and intimacy of the form—meaning builds from the act of being present (Senehi, 2002, p. 44). The power of that presence allows Archibald (2008) to speak about storytelling that "feeds and revitalizes mind, heart, body and spirit" (p. 85) which illuminates the sense that Kovach (2009) conveys with being in the 'now' of story.

Storytelling communicates in a holistic manner because of the connection fostered between teller and listener. Kovach (2009) states that when stories are shared they express, "knowledges while simultaneously expressing relationships" (p. 94). The relationships emerge because storytelling enmeshes the teller with the tale and the listener in the same moment. Sharing a story is as much relational as it is intellectual, a fact referred to by Kovach in her note that, "for story to surface, there must be trust" (p. 98). Interestingly, the act of telling stories itself can generate that trust. Coles (1989) notes that when we hear other people's stories, "we give shape to what we hear [and] make over their stories into something of our own" (p. 19). This is not a factor of being bad listeners. It is a factor of using our own bank of memories, emotions, relationships, and images to colour in the details of the words expressed to us in stories. This is part of the reason why Cruikshank (1990) states that, "storytellers need an audience, a response, in order to make the telling a worthwhile experience" (p. 16). In a real sense, storytelling is a co-creation between teller and listener. Storytelling requires trust and implies relationships; it also builds relationships by engaging teller and listeners in an act of creating meaning together.

Storytelling is also generated by contextual factors. In some cases the context is provided by cultural expectations. For instance, Simpson's (2000) work with Anishinaabe storytelling indicates "the cultural 'rules' regulating the oral tradition" (p. 26) are vital to understanding a story's meaning. Likewise, Borrows (2002) states that protocols about who tells what story when

are as essential to understanding stories as the content itself (p. 92). While Borrows refers to long established cultural protocols, context can also be understood in more everyday ways. Cruikshank (1990) notes that "the way the story makes its point or gains its meaning depends on the particular situation it is used to clarify" (p. 341). In her work with three elders in the Yukon, Cruikshank articulated how each of them would choose the story they told based on what had happened before the telling so that stories acted as commentary on events and interactions, accruing and communicating more meaning in the process.

The importance of context to the meaning of storytelling is clear within Indigenous oral traditions but it is also vital to understanding storytelling outside of that tradition. The people present, the place where it happens, and the time and expectations involved, all shape the nature and meaning of storytelling. Consider the following example of how context completely changes the meaning of the same story:

I am a fan of the work of the American poet Billy Collins. His poems are as much stories as poetry and the narrative nature of them is clear in his performances of them. He is a good storyteller. I have watched and laughed at the recording of his performance of the poem, *The Lanyard* (Fora.tv, n.d.) many times. In his performance of the poem which tells of how he made a plastic lanyard for his mother at summer camp he reads the line, "she gave me life, and milk from her breasts" and then pauses, looks up at the audience and continues, "and I gave her a lanyard." The audience erupts in laughter at the absurd juxtaposition. On the video of the performance the laughter continues through the rest of the poem.

Two years ago, I attended the funeral of the mother of one of my good friends. Everyone at the funeral knew parts of her story. She had been a single mom to my friend. Her last few years had been difficult for both of them. During the service, my friend got up to speak. He told

us that after she died, he was cleaning her apartment and found a poem he had given his mom years earlier. It was Billy Collins' *The Lanyard*. My friend read the very same lines, "She gave me life, and milk from her breasts," he paused, his voice cracking, and continued, "and I gave her a lanyard." Everyone at the funeral melted into tears.

While context is an essential aspect of storytelling, so too is the unique way that it communicates on two levels at the same time. Storytelling meaning emerges from how it, "simultaneously engages heart and mind" (Senehi, 2002, p. 52). Sending information while evoking emotions, storytelling seems to stimulate a way of thinking, feeling, and knowing at the same time. Nussbaum (2008) refers to this in her work on storytelling and empathy. Coles (1989) refers to the same capacity, arguing that stories are the language used by the moral imagination.

Storytelling generates meaning in unique ways. It communicates holistic meaning through a synergistic process that draws on aspects of the teller, the story, the listener, and the context of the telling together. Storytelling implicates and shapes the meaning of relationships as it proceeds. Meaning is an act of co-creation as teller and listener are joined in the process. Cultural and situational contexts are drawn on and reinterpreted in the telling of stories. Finally, stories generate meaning in three domains, the emotional, the intellectual, and the moral. Because storytelling generates meaning in unique ways, it has unique effects in the world.

### ***The Effects of Storytelling***

Storytelling teaches. Thomas (2005) points to the "essential role in nurturing and educating" (p. 237) it performs. That observation is echoed by Simpson (2000) and Cruikshank (1990) who both link storytelling to education. Silko (1996) specifies this by speaking of how storytelling is able to, "procure fleeting moments" that convey the experience of "how life felt

long ago" (p. 42). Importantly, storytelling isn't a didactic teacher. As Silko's observation points out, it teaches through evocation and contextualization. Cruikshank (1990) testifies that her storytelling collaborators taught her to be an insider in their communities by building a storied context around her that provided her with the knowledge required for that responsibility. Likewise, Borrows (2002) juxtaposes a storytelling education with legal reasoning. In legal education, the idea of precedent encoding principles for future application is common. In storytelling education, each story challenges listeners to extract lessons to re-contextualize in their own lives. Through a process of recalling and reminding, storytelling provides an educational model for helping people learn about the past in ways that maintain its contemporary relevance.

As mentioned earlier, storytelling has moral, emotional, and intellectual resonance. As such, it is effective at stating, shaping, and building adherence for values. The rules people follow are closely linked to the stories that they tell about themselves and others. Archibald (2008) is clear that stories encode cultural values. Borrows (2002) agrees and argues that because "stories are viewed as authoritative by their listeners" they "encourage a basic personal and institutional adherence to underlying values" (p. 14). In addition to building adherence, storytelling can also give listeners, "a sense of purpose, pride, and give guidance and direction" (Thomas, 2005, p. 238). But storytelling does not merely reflect existing values. It can also alter values. As King's (2003) comment, "Want a different ethic? Tell a different story" (p. 164) suggests, storytelling changes things.

Storytelling is also closely connected to the dynamics of conflict. At a straightforward level, storytelling can place real conflicts into storied contexts and get creative with them there. Cruikshank points to many such examples in her work where, "stories with a variety of dramatic

outcomes enable listeners to weigh alternative approaches to problems they may confront" (1990, p. 342). Additionally, the influence of storytelling in conflict extends beyond the content of specific stories. Senehi (2000) has identified storytelling as a key factor in the dynamics of conflict. As a means of expressing values and building adherence to them, storytelling builds and divides communities. It is thus also tied to the "intangible dimensions of intercommunal conflicts" (p. 99). As stories are told and touch on "social identities, power relations, knowledge, memory, and emotion" (Senehi, 2000, p. 97) the potential to transform conflict emerges. Significantly, this transformation could entail anything from intensification to resolution. The important point is not that storytelling will resolve conflict but that it is an inextricable part of them. Used mindfully, "as democratic, grassroots, cultural practice" (Senehi, 2000, p. 99), storytelling can be an essential tool for improving the prospects for positive change.

Storytelling has also been linked to individual healing and group resistance (Flaherty, 2010; Hunte, 2012). These effects may accrue to both tellers and listeners. Archibald (2008) speaks about the strength of stories to aid in her well-being:

> The strength of stories challenges me to think, to examine my emotional reactions in relation to plot and characters, to question and reflect on my behaviours and future actions, and to appreciate a story's connection to my spiritual nature. (p. 85)

Storytelling interrupts the plodding pace of the mundane so that people can think and feel more deeply about their hopes, pains, desires, and motivations. Telling stories can also offer moments of reflection and reframing to their tellers. Mollica's (2006) work with survivors of atrocities in the United States, Bosnia, and Cambodia focuses on the healing power that can come from survivors composing and telling their stories. Storytelling has also been used as a method for rebuilding cultural identities in rehabilitation work with war affected children (Stewart, Kuly,

Ezati, & McBrien, 2015). Narrative therapists believe that storytelling is a method of helping people become aware of the multiple stories influencing their lives and becoming authors of their own lives (Madigan, 2011; White, 2011). In a variety of contexts, storytelling processes have helped people work back through dehumanizing experiences and given them a chance to recollect, compose, and communicate their humanity anew.

Storytelling provides a pathway to healing for individuals but also for communities. At the community level, storytelling offers a way to speak back to power. Tuhiwai Smith (2012) speaks about the importance of renaming and reclaiming the stories of spaces to resist the erasure of Indigenous histories. Likewise, Thomas (2005) suggests that storytelling offers an opportunity to counter dehumanized narratives about community deficits. These narratives, often delivered through statistics, data sets, or alarmist headlines, lack any sense of the texture of real life or offer reason for hope. But, "storytelling creates spaces for the 'other' or those voices that have been excluded or erased, to be included in the dominant discourse" (Thomas, 2005, p. 244). The creation of 'others' may be an inevitable result of defining our own communities—but the lines of demarcation are open to change.

Storytelling can help expand the definitions of us and them. As Senehi (2000) points out, "storytelling and expressive traditions are a means by which people at the margins of the center of power appropriate language and articulate their knowledge" (p. 106). Fine and Harris (2001) have done extensive work on mobilizing this storytelling trait by employing "counter-stories" to resist and reframe ideological parameters. Flaherty (2010) employed storytelling as a means of empowering Ukrainian women through recognizing their shared experience. Likewise, Hunte (2012) enlisted storytelling to help with the articulation of the experience of Black tradeswomen.

Much related work within communities has used storytelling to create connection and speak across social boundaries (e.g., D'Arcy, 2017; Fine, 2018; Pearson, 2016; Roy & Roxas, 2011).

The ability of storytelling to communicate alternate realities provides space for resistance but also for connection. Cherokee author Thomas King's (2003) Massey Lectures saw him cross Canada and speak about the real life implications of the stories Canadians have told about themselves and about Indigenous people. The title of the lecture series was *The Truth About Stories* and King answers that question early and repeatedly through the lectures with, "The truth about stories is that's all we are" (p. 2). One of last lectures was titled, "What is it about us that you don't like" (p. 120). It followed lectures that laid out the history of Indigenous oppression at the hands of Canadian authorities as well as contemporary examples of what those actions resulted in. He closes the lecture with the following words about the story he has just offered:

> Take it. It's yours. Do with it what you will. Tell it to your children. Turn it into a play. Forget it. But don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You've heard it now. (p. 151)

With this King points out a central hope encoded in the heart of storytelling – that stories might cross boundaries.

The same hope was invoked by Niigaanwewidam Sinclair, when he wrote a letter in response to a racist condemnation of Indigenous people by the editor of the newspaper in Morris, Manitoba. That letter, which Sinclair brought to the town along with coffee to share, told the story of how the editor's words revealed his ignorance. The letter filled in the gaps in his understanding with stories from Sinclair's own life and concluded with the offering:

> It is time that we all learn a little history about who we are and maybe, if we're lucky, make some new paths. I believe that we are more than the words and images we have

> inherited. I know that we can make a better home than this, that we can expect more of ourselves if we are brave, honest, patient, and if we listen. It is time that we give each other gifts of responsibility. (Sinclair, 2013b)

The idea that learning new stories might lead to new relationships is clear in these words—a clear assertion of the power of storytelling to refigure reality.

The hope that storytelling might cross boundaries, create mutual recognition, and foster responsibility is well founded. Senehi (2002) has identified storytelling as a form with cross-cultural relevance and "narrative potency" (p. 110). That potency can reveal connections between people who have good reason to feel disconnected. In my own experience, I have seen how the first hand sharing of stories between students from different ethnic, religious, and economic groups has been able to create strong and lasting bonds (Kuly, 2015; Paskievich & Whiteway, 2008). It is perhaps for this reason that storytelling has been a frequent feature of post-conflict rehabilitation as well as the focus of reconciliation processes around the world (McKee, 2008; Stewart et al., 2015)

Storytelling teaches. As an educational medium it is particularly good at expressing knowledge in context. It is also a powerful vehicle for expressing and building adherence for moral and cultural values. Connected to this ability, storytelling contributes to the dynamics of conflict at a variety of levels. Storytelling has provided a means for individual and social healing as well as a method of expressing and generating resistance. It teaches connections between people and speaks across boundaries. Importantly, storytelling is a neutral medium and while the effects listed above can be used for constructive ends, they can likewise act towards destructive ones. In the context of large groups, there are many examples of just that.

***Storytelling, Identity Construction and Societal Conflict***

The preceding section identified the traits common to the storytelling, how it generates meaning, and the kinds of effects it creates. For the most part that section imagined storytelling occurring at the level of individuals and smaller groups. However, storytelling operates in similar ways with much larger groups. Analysis of large-scale conflict storytelling has been shown to be a key factor. This analysis has shown how storytelling defines and galvanizes group identities and crafts rationales for individual and group action. Using storytelling as a research methodology means considering the relationship between the way meanings are made at large scale and interpersonal levels. Therefore, this section will outline storytelling at the level of nations and large cultural groups. It will complete the picture of the personal and political function of storytelling and pave the way for considering how storytelling relates to research methodology.

The field of conflict analysis contends that identity and the processes of identity construction are central to human interaction and meaning making (Cook-Huffman, 2009). Seen through the lens of conflict analysis, identity is a core human need (Burton, 1990a). People denied their basic needs suffer and seek out their fulfillment. Thus, within the work of conflict analysis, understanding how people construct their identities is a key concern.

Identities are amalgams composed of an individual's experiences and relations to others at micro (interpersonal, familial, community) levels and macro (ethnic, national, cultural) levels. The shape of a person's identity is mediated by the degree of salience that the individual feels for each connection (Cook-Huffman, 2009). An inevitable part of the process is the development of a social identity that is constructed both by degrees of positive connection (who we are) and degrees of negative connection (who they are). The processes involved in social identity

construction are "projects whereby individuals come to a narrative sense of self by creating an integrated whole of their past, present, and future" (Cook-Huffman, 2009, p. 20). Simply stated, people develop identities in the same way they develop stories, by selecting and combining experiences with places and people to communicate a meaning that makes sense to themselves and others.

When a group comes into conflict with another group the nexus between identity, identity construction, and action becomes evident. These three components always exist in an interactive relationship with each other but in conflict, when actions are juxtaposed against those of others, the dynamics of the relationship are displayed in ways that are harder to see in other times. Using the genocide in Rwanda as their example, Rothbart and Cherubin (2009) show the dynamics of story, identity, and action in process. Looking backwards from the violence of the genocide to the forces that gave rise to it, they ask how Hutus managed to justify their reprehensible actions against Tutsis. The answer they arrive at is that a unique kind of storytelling that links identity to action was at play. The term they use to describe this storytelling is teliomorphic. The term combines teleology, interpreting present actions in terms of the ends they may create, with morphic, the capacity to shift and change. It describes storytelling to shape and galvanize support for a group's identity and actions.

In the Hutu imagination a frame story was created that took historical events from different eras and, ignoring the complexity of the truth of Rwanda's colonial past, conflated them into an ethnic origin story predicated on persistent and unjustified violent oppression at the hands of Tutsi forces. The historical narrative was reinforced by "the storytelling power" of media which amplified the belief that Tutsis were, "degenerate, criminal, and vicious through the storytelling power of those articles and broadcasts" (Rothbart & Bartlett, 2008, p. 228). The

result of all this storytelling was to create a, “model for subsequent understandings, serving as a cognitive guide for storytellers seeking to explain and understand subsequent events” (Rothbart & Cherubin, 2009, p. 64). Eventually, the storytelling process grew so powerful that to be a Hutu meant one who hates a Tutsi and the logic for genocide became unquestionable in the popular imagination.

The storytelling—identity—action dynamic is evident in other conflicts. Rothbart and Korostelina (2009) show how a similar process was used by Japanese imperial soldiers to justify the murder and rape of Chinese civilians as well as by Stalinist forces to justify the devastation of Crimean Tatars. Studies in Israel, Cyprus, and Northern Ireland have also shown the powerful use of hegemonic narratives to perpetuate division between groups (Bekerman, 2009; Bekerman & Zembylas, 2012; Byrne, 1997). Unsurprisingly, Korostelina (2009) recognizes that the degree to which a group uses stories of their identity to focus on value differences between group themselves and others can be used as a predictor for violence.

Whether or not it leads to violent conflict, teliomorphic storytelling shapes group identity. In situations where social, economic, and political power is asymmetrical, it contributes to the maintenance of inequity. Anderson (2017) has identified the use of narratives to do just that in Canada. Echoing Rothbart and Cherubin (2009), she defines narratives as, “discursive devices that combine history, collective memory, and myth into teleological communications of a nation’s past, present, and future” that “attempt to suture a country’s differences by representing its citizens as belonging to a larger national *famiglia*, the imagined community of the nation-state” (p. 4). The nation state imagined in these narratives is described with inclusive language that masks exclusionary action.

Mackey's (1999, 2016) work on commemorations and land disputes shows the construction of this 'inclusive' and 'multi-cultural' identity in action by tracing the purposeful ignorance of stories that contradict it. As Lund (2006) states, this has created a, "pervasive but erroneous notion that Canada has long stood for harmony and the acceptance of diversity" (p. 183) when the truth of the matter is that:

> Beginning with the first European settlers arriving in Canada, systematic discrimination has been practiced against individuals and groups based on racist ideologies. These immigrants promoted ethnocentric views, imposed a version of British cultural norms, and began the colonization of First Nations peoples. Official government policies entrenched racial segregation in schools and racialized immigration restrictions. (Lund, 2006, p. 183)

Importantly, truths that counter this narrative are available, but they face the continued challenge of being interpreted through the lens of Canada's belief in its own virtue.

To counter the teleological narratives that present Canada as a multicultural and progressive nation state it is necessary to see the origin and texture of those stories. Founded through Indigenous – European contact and conflict, Canada's myth making begins there. Donald (2009) identifies the roots of Canadian mythology in the image of the fort and the frontier. "The fort," he argues, "is a mythic symbol in Canada of high historical status that recapitulates the perceived civilizational frontier—a kind of cultural ditch— separating the Indigenous from the Canadian (Donald, 2011, p. 93). Similarly, Laroque (2010) profiles the operation of a false dichotomy in Canadian discourse between 'civilized' and 'savage' that effectively disallows Indigenous reality from permeating the Canadian mythology as anything other than relics of a backwards past. Supporting this false premise are entire narrative cycles

that create a blank canvas of an Indigenous other that acts as a blank canvas on which to project images that support the merit of Canadian society (Francis, 1992; King, 2012). The trend of excluding while claiming to include has deep roots in Canada and it is rooted to teleological storytelling processes that require critical investigation.

Being part of a community, whether it is an ethno-cultural group or a nation, is about deciding how that community's stories resonate with your own. Collective action can easily result when individuals feel their own stories of who they are and what they value do resonate with those of a larger group. Thus, storytelling is a core process for uniting individuals, groups, justifications, and actions.

**Storytelling in Context of Qualitative Methodology**

In the preceding section I outlined the definition, function, and effects of storytelling. Scholars have used these traits as a method for research because of their rich communicative potential, especially their ability to surface ignored or overlooked aspects of human experience (Bell, 2010; Nieto, 2003; Solinger, Fox, & Irani, 2008). Building on the fact that storytelling is an effective method for researching experience, my interest is in how it might be used as a methodology. Accordingly, in this section I will profile branches of qualitative methodology that approach meaning in ways similar to how storytelling generates meaning. More specifically, I am interested here in methodologies that conceive of knowledge as holistic, contextual, relational, linked to action, and simultaneously social and individual.

In this work, I use Tuhiwai Smith's (2012, p. 144) distinction between methods and methodologies. A research method is a technique for conducting research, and guides how to approach people, collect, and analyze information about or with them. A methodology provides a

theoretical frame for thinking about the purposes and parameters of the act of conducting research. Inevitably, some grey area exists between the methods and methodologies, but my primary question is developing a theoretical frame for seeing the world through storytelling.

### *The Interpretivist Approach*

As the name implies, qualitative research concerns itself chiefly with searching for and articulating the quality of human experience. While all qualitative research shares some commonalites, the particular pathway into human experience best suited for contextualizing storytelling is the phenomenological or interpretivist tradition within qualitative research. This tradition is concerned with the essential elements of human experience and adapts methods to pursue them. Veering sharply from positivist assumptions about the objectivity of human experience, interpretivist research is interested in exploring the commonalities and variations within human experience (McMillan, 2004, pp. 291–293). Influenced heavily by Weber's (1968) understanding of human motivations as central to actions, within the interpretivist paradigm, the aim is to account for the reasons people have for the things they do. Identifying and drawing connections between meanings drawn from the testimony of participants is the heart of the research task within the field.

The assumptions about the purpose and practice of research in the interpretivist tradition are fairly clear and accord with the general aim of uncovering the meanings that people make of their world. Taylor and Bogdan (1998, pp. 7–10) and Bogdan and Biklen (2003, pp. 3–7) offer a useful explanation of the parameters that guide this work. Qualitative research takes a naturalistic approach to inquiry by attempting to consider its subjects in their own settings or in situations closely connected to their lives. While the role of the researcher will necessarily affect

participants' thoughts and actions, the qualitative tradition does what it can to limit interference and acknowledges researcher effects wherever possible. Similarly, researchers look at the lives of participants holistically, casting a wide gaze that attempts to allow for the broadest context for understanding all the factors that influence their actions. The breadth of the gaze that qualitative studies employ is also a factor of the egalitarian view of knowledge common in the field. Eschewing hierarchies of social position, everyone within a research setting is assumed to have knowledge and every interaction is assumed to be potentially meaningful.

### ***Symbolic Interactionism***

One philosophical approach to guiding qualitative inquiry is symbolic interactionism. Based on the work of George Herbert Mead (1934) this approach focuses on the nexus between the interior and exterior lives of individuals within society as they interact with others and within structures. Mead argued that the meanings people hold about things guide their choices and that with every interaction the meanings that they ascribe to people, places, and things evolve. Importantly, this theory opens up vast fields of inquiry because it is premised on the idea that not only do meanings change over time, they also vary between people. From the perspective of symbolic interactionism objects have no inherent meaning and every individual continually develops a world of meaning that differs from every other individual while they share space within the same material world. While all qualitative research attempts to determine what people's actions mean, research in the symbolic interactionist paradigm traces the evolution and significance of the cognitive and affective maps individuals develop.

***Narrative Inquiry***

One area of qualitative research closely linked to the premises of symbolic interactionism is Narrative Inquiry. Pioneered within educational research by Clandinin and Connelly (2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) this field approaches experience through the lens of narrative and attempts to get at the processes by which people make their experiences personally meaningful. Recognizing knowledge as social, individual, and contextual, narrative inquiry is, “a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). The process involves researchers working with people as they investigate their lives while considering elements of temporality (how people’s past, present, and future shape their understanding), sociability (how interior states are shaped by relationship), and space (how place influences meaning). Following this process narrative inquiries become stories about how participants creatively adapt, excerpt, edit, and employ their own life stories to make meaning of their experience. What emerges is in a sense, a story about people’s stories as the final text is an account of how meanings have changed through the research process.

Narrative Inquiry embraces the changing nature of knowledge over time. Attempting to ‘read’ the stories of people as they live entails looking for change. A participant’s explanation of an event one day will be likely not be the same the next. Thus, a focus on the process of meaning making rather than capturing a singular interpretation is important. Furthermore, the act of research itself changes what things mean for researcher and participant alike. It is for this reason that narrative researchers term their studies as collaborations. Recognizing the ethical responsibilities inherent in asking and writing about people’s lives as well as the impact that

action has on those who participate, this research approach centers relationship and change in its processes and the ways it is presented as scholarship.

### *Anti-Oppressive and Community Engaged Research*

Context and relationship are key elements of narrative inquiry and both elements lie at the heart of community engaged research (CER) and anti-oppressive research. While narrative inquiry recognizes that the act of researching people impacts people, CER is intentional about ensuring that impact improves the circumstances of those they research (Reimer  et al., 2015, pp. 53–61). The principle of mutual benefit and the practice of genuine partnership lie at the heart of community engaged research. Within a CER model, research is a partnership between scholars and communities that delivers practical benefit to the community and increases the methodological and knowledge range within the academy. Recognizing and valorizing community knowledge and perspectives are essential to this process.

Two principles, engagement and evaluation, are key to understanding the unique approach taken by CER. Using the idea of a cone of engagement that expands from thin to thick depending on the level of reciprocity existing between researcher and community within a project, CER aims to conduct research that is done on the thick end, action taken with rather than imposed on or done to communities (Anderson, Douglass, & Furco, 2005; Janke & Clayton, 2012). This is a distinct variation from the traditions of academic research that draw a hard line between the ‘field’ and the ‘academy.’ Because CER believes that community knowledge is of equal worth to academic knowledge it requires a different evaluative structure than those developed to consider traditional academic research. Traditional academic scholarship is judged by whether its methods, findings and practices conform to and build on the discipline it is part of.

CER is evaluated by the fidelity of the research to the needs and experiences of communities and the growth of knowledge and insight for both the researcher(s) and their community collaborators (Reimer, et al., 2015, pp. 42–43).

A key concern with the power of research and researchers is shared by both CER and anti-oppressive research. Often, research conducted in marginalized communities that profiles issues people are facing can have the effect of pathologizing rather than helping participants (Tuck & Yang, 2014). Therefore, a commitment to processes and representations that attend to, "how power relations work in and through the process of doing research" (Potts & Brown, 2005) is necessary to ensure mutual benefit. One such approach is to conduct "desire-centered research" which Tuck and Yang (2014) explain as follows:

> Desire-centered research does not deny the experience of tragedy, trauma and pain but positions the knowing derived from such experiences as wise. This is not about seeing the bright side of hard times, or even believing that everything happens for a reason. Utilizing a desire-based framework is about working inside a more complex and dynamic understand of what one, or a community comes to know in (a) lived life. (p. 231)

Following a desire-based framework within communities speaks to a belief in the relational nature of knowledge, as well as its connection to power and action.

### ***Critical Pedagogy***

CER's focus on community development and reciprocal benefit is based on the premise that knowledge is linked to the operation of power and thus knowledge generation should pay attention to its effects in the world. Critical Pedagogy, a methodology originally developed within the sociology of education, offers a method for focusing on the operation of power. It

grew out of Bourdieu's (1989; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) theory of social and cultural capital. Rather than appearing as factors of economics and society, capital masquerades as inherent personal traits which are treated as "natural qualities emerging from an individual's 'inner essence'". (McLaren, 2016) Thus, people not welcomed into certain social practices and cultural networks face limited opportunities based on the assumption that they are, in some sense, of less value (Fine, 1991; MacLeod, 2009; Mills, 2008; Noguera & Wing, 2006; Willis, 1981). Scholars employing Bourdieu's model have shown that the seemingly natural persistence of the status quo in society is in fact a process of reproduction of inequality.

Scholarship on resistance to the inequalities of the status quo focuses on the ability that groups of people who have been marginalized may develop to find and use their agency to work towards their freedom. Paulo Freire's classic *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000) held that schooling is a primary site of the imposition of power in society and that education could be a tool for resistance. Profiling how much of schooling proceeds according to a 'banking model' of education that treats students as objects to indoctrinate and enter into the world as commodities, Freire proposed a process of 'conscientization' wherein local knowledge is valorized at the same time that the conditions that give rise to oppression are exposed – an approach shared across the field (Giroux, 1983). The two fold focus of Critical Pedagogy on resistance and oppression is well summarized by McLaren (1998) as follows:

> It should be a process of examining how we have been constructed out of the prevailing ideas, values, and worldviews of the dominant culture. The point to remember is that if we have been 'made', then we can be 'unmade' and 'made over' (p. 92)

McLaren's humanistic assertion aside, the field has been subject to significant critique based on a lack of attention to the human costs of life in an inequitable society.

Critical pedagogy's focus on the large-scale power impositions found within society has been critiqued for glossing over the emotional effects on individuals created by those impositions (Zembylas, 2015). Additionally, the scholarship on cultural capital has been critiqued as having employed a largely Eurocentric lens and ignoring the forms of capital that buoy up marginalized groups at the same time as marking them for exclusion from dominant society. Yosso (2005) argues that these forms of cultural wealth assist marginalized groups navigate society without having to sacrifice their familial, linguistic, and ethnic identities. Likewise, Tuck and Yang (2011) caution that research on resistance to power have used Eurocentric and status quo lenses to look at acts of resistance, assuming that upward social and economic mobility are the chief markers of success.

To be clear, none of these critiques diminish the potency of Critical Pedagogy as a tool for researching the ways that power and oppression operate in society. Rather, they seek to improve its accuracy and impact by centering human experience. Additionally, they point to the creativity employed by the marginalized in finding spaces of hope and vitality in the face of the challenges imposed on them. A useful means for harmonizing these critiques with the insights of Critical Pedagogy is offered by Ayers who suggests that the key is to recognize that the world offers a "kaleidoscopic reality" within which we can learn to look through the eyes of those we research with in order to better "take their sides as fellow human beings" (Ayers, 2004, p. 28).

### ***Summary***

Storytelling is best understood as a qualitative methodology in the tradition of symbolic interactionism. Storytelling generates meaning through the holistic and dynamic synergy of factors unique to every individual listener. As such, it embodies the symbolic interactionist

contention that individuals create the meaning of their world and that meaning shifts through context and time. As a methodology concerned with the narrative nature of human experience it draws heavily on the interpretative models common to narrative inquiry, particularly the way that narrative inquiry focuses on the omnipresence of story in the accounts people provide of their experiences and the agency of individuals to craft their own narratives. Storytelling is an interpersonal action that communicates relationship and meaning simultaneously. As a methodology it is therefore enriched by the ethical perspectives of Community Engaged and Anti-Oppressive Research, both traditions that center the sanctity and integrity of research collaborations. Finally, the act of telling one's story is a political act and the freedom to choose an identity based on the stories of one's choosing is not shared equally. Thus, a storytelling methodology is indebted to the idea that power is always at play in human interaction as articulated within the field of critical pedagogy.

**Colonial Methodology & Decolonial Criticism**

Storytelling is a communicative form that is inextricably tied to Indigenous ways of knowing, teaching, and learning (Archibald, 2008; Battiste, 2000; Simpson, 2000). This doesn't mean that only Indigenous people tell stories or understand their use. Kovach (2009) shares that, "story is not unique to Indigenous knowledge systems" (p. 97). But it is also true that Indigenous knowledge systems have unique insights about stories and storytelling (Doerfler, Sinclair, & Stark, 2013; Simpson, 2011). Yet, Indigenous insight has been denied, denigrated, and assimilated by Western knowledge tradtions. Understanding that process is an essential part of building a storytelling methodology. Indigenous understandings of storytelling offer crucial perspectives on the emancipation of knowledge from colonial assumptions. To share that insight

the connection between colonial thought and academic practice has to be explored. Thus, in the following section I profile the Imperial and colonial roots of academic thought and then highlight Indigneous ideas about the nature of knowledge that contribute to seeing the world through storytelling.

***Imperialism and Colonialism***

The historical connections and contemporary practices of academic research have been thoroughly critiqued in decolonial and Indigenous scholarship. This critique is borne of experience as opposed to abstract reasoning. Indigenous peoples have been manipulated and misrepresented by research to the point that, "the word itself, 'research', is probably one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world's vocabulary" (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012, p. 1). In response, alternative methods and methodologies have been offered by Indigenous scholars that are freed from the hierarchical and demeaning assumptions common to colonial research approaches. These methodologies and the critiques they are founded on relate directly to the construction of a storytelling methodology.

A central tenet of decolonial scholarship is that academic research is implicated in larger discourses of Imperialism and colonialism. Imperialism began as economic expansion into territories outside of European center which entailed the subjugation of local populations to the needs of the center. The abuses inherent to economic expansion were justified by enlightenment era philosophies of European exceptionalism and a dichotomized view of the world. Drawing lines based on legal fictions between the 'civilized' and 'savage,' 'tamed' and 'wild,' and Christian and Pagan world, European thinkers provided a justification for merchants and politicians to extend their economic adventures into permanent occupation of foreign lands

(Borrows, 2002, pp. 74–111; Jennings, 1975). The colonial system that emerged resulted in a global oppression of Indigenous peoples which, while variant in form from territory to territory, rested on the same Eurocentric premises (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012, pp. 20–29). The codification and justification of this oppression was always linked to the European intellectual traditions that formed the epistemological premises of contemporary academic research.

While significant variation between colonial structures existed across the globe, it is fair to say that in general, colonies operated as factories feeding wealth to European centers while the centers exported their ethos back to the colonies. Engagement on economic, religious, political, military, and intellectual fronts quickly resulted in complete occupation. Imperial centers received an influx of news, ideas, artifacts, and bodies from the colonies. Existing intellectual disciplines absorbed the influx into their systems of classification and when absorption wasn't possible, new disciplines were spawned. As Cole (2006) points out, "the noun 'anthropology' was invented because my relations did not fit into the noun 'history'" (p. 79). The splintering and categorization of Indigenous reality by the European structures wasn't limited to the invention of anthropology. Tuhiwai Smith (2012) details the process:

> It was a process of systematic fragmentation which can still be seen in the disciplinary carve up of the indigenous world: bones, mummies and skulls to the museums, art work to the private collectors, languages to the linguists, 'customs' to the anthropologists, beliefs and behaviors to psychologists (29)

Indigenous life was fed back to Imperial centres, broken down, sorted out, reassembled in new terms and then exported back to the colonies in a form that suited the narratives of the colonizers.

The narratives the centre told about the colonies justified the occupation in terms that edited, erased, and altered the story of occupied territories. These false narratives ensured the

effects of colonialism would project into the future as they became the canonical version of story of the colonies. As Fanon (1961/2001) observed:

> Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it. (Fanon, 2001, p. 169)

The legacy of educational action to 'distort, disfigure and destroy' Indigenous reality is present in the precepts of academic research methodology and that legacy is what is critiqued by decolonial approaches.

### *Decolonial Criticism*

The threads of colonial thought are deeply woven into the premises of academic research and as a result decolonial scholarship is suspicious of the epistemological foundations it rests upon. In particular, systems of classification, concepts of time and space, the use of binary reasoning, and the concept of the individual are all problematic areas identified by decolonial research. Each one imposes limitations on the expression of Indigenous conceptions of experience and advances the colonial desire to impose a particular order on the world. This fixation results in methods for sorting people, animals, places, and practices (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012, p. 45). Within the sorting systems, colonial epistemological assumptions about the nature of time, space, and people are evident.

In the colonial mind, time is conceived of as linear and the experience of it is assumed to be universal. The imposition of standard time around the globe provides a perfect example of this belief (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012, p. 53). In reality, there are vast differences between how the sun and moon interact with the landscape across the globe. Likewise, cultural groups around the

planet view the relationship between the past, present, and future differently from one another (Davis, 2009). Significantly, these localized truths persist. Talaga (2018) explains the six distinct seasons understood by Inuit, despite the fact that government offices in Iqaluit feature the same twelve month calendar that hangs in Ottawa, London, and Washington. Still, on the colonial wristwatch, time is imagined to click forward around the globe with the same mechanical infallibility.

Within colonial cosmology, land provides the stage for and support to human action. Around the globe the land, sea, and sky are termed resources and economic systems are based on the premise that flows from that rhetorical trick; they are only valued for the financial sums that can come from their extraction and processing. This, despite the fact eloquently expressed by Graveline (1998), "that which the trees exhales, I inhale. That which I exhale, the trees inhale" (p. 57). The importance of the truth of our connection to the earth is glossed over by a key tool of colonial logic, binary reasoning. Following the binary method, things are or are not. Thus, forests cannot be both integral to the health of our bodies and the health of our bank accounts simultaneously. Binary thinking creates winners and losers and, given the centrality of capital accumulation to the Western paradigm, it is not surprising that trees continue to disappear. Dei (2000) reminds us, "eurocentrism continues to masquerade as universalism" in part by using binary reasoning to maintain "the silence that surrounds marginalized knowledges" (p. 53).

Colonial systems reduce things to their "smallest individual component" (Wilson, 2008, p. 56) elements and then sort them by what they are or what they are not. Such binary classifications are powerful tools used to express mastery, even though their power often hides their inaccuracies. Wilson (2008) cites Tafoya's (1995) observation that Western paradigms force "amputations" on their subjects in order to force them to fit into "systems not designed for

them" (Wilson, 2008, p. 56). This practice limits the ways that colonial discourse can imagine the world. The process and logic are deeply seeded and examples of it are easy to find.

One of the first lessons taught to elementary students across Canada is the difference between living and non-living things. This appears to be a common-sense approach as living things can feed us and non-living things can't. There is nothing inherently wrong with this. The issue isn't that it is wrong, the issue is that it may not be the only thing that is right – alternatives exist. For instance, the same students might sit with an Indigenous elder in a circle and be passed a stone and have it introduced to them as a Grandfather whose existence here began long before they arrived and whose existence will continue long after they are gone, that is, if it isn't cracked apart and ground down in search of the minerals inside it. Herein lies the problem with the colonial approach to classification. According to its binary logic things either 'are' or 'are not,' there is simply no space afforded for anything to be 'both' – 'and' simultaneously. The platypus and the emus of the world be damned, there are mammals and then there are birds. Neither the twain shall meet. The uncomfortable and often messy reality of life is never strong enough to unsettle the categories imposed upon it.

A final epistemological belief common to colonial methodologies is in the relationship between individuals and communities (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012, p. 123). Accountability and creativity are seen as individual as opposed to communal traits. Frameworks that imagine individual identity and action as enmeshed in relationships that imply responsibility and kinship are considered marginal or alternative. The colonial sense of individual authority is exemplified in the Canadian approach to treaty making. Apart from the dubious sincerity of the Crown (Stark, 2010) another part of failure of the treaty process to, so far, deliver the mutual benefit it promised is connected to this sense of the individual. As Craft's (2014) analysis of the process of

making the first treaty in Western Canada explains, the perspective of the Anishinaabe signatories was that, "the individual, outside of the social and collective, is incapable of creating law – it is necessarily interactive and culturally rooted" (p. 15). Such a flexible, deliberative, and communal approach to individual and collective authority was simply incommensurable with the ideology of the government's negotiators. Their negotiators acted as if they had the authority to act once, for all, for all time. The space between their conceptions of individuals, communities, authority, and responsibility have engaged courts for generations (Henderson, 2010, 2015). That process, itself mired in the colonial tradition of binary argumentation, has delayed the possibility for Indigenous thought to find a central space.

***History: The Grand Narrative of Colonialism.***

The preceding rudiments of colonial methodology and the brief examples of the kinds of thoughts and actions they inspire are perhaps most clearly on display within the discipline of history. Colonial versions of history conceive of time as flowing in a linear path with each forward step on the timeline representing ascendant progress. Along the timeline, space is conceived of as a setting upon which individual leaders enact plans for civilization, conquest, and settlement. As the story of history unfolds it encompasses the globe to become a totalizing discourse that recounts the battle of binary oppositions for supremacy on the path to a perfected future. History is used to render coherent the messy reality we see around us every day. It does this by ignoring and editing the realities of the people whose lives and spaces have been damaged 'progress' that it details and folds their story into its master narratives (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012, pp. 30–32).

A basic story underlining contemporary understanding and rationales for colonial expansion is what may be the master of all the master narratives, The European Miracle (Blaut, 1993). This theory ignores the realities of Asian, African, North and South American civilization to present Europe as the inheritor, innovator, and purveyor of progress. It tells the story of how Europe distributes civilization across the world and gains the ability to define norms and install structures in far off lands based on the merit of its superiority.

Tuhiwai Smith states that, "stories of colonialism [are] part of a grander narrative and yet part of a very local, very specific experience" (2012, p. 24). Revisionist historians have shown this to be true by tracing how local realities, particularly those that counter the mythos of progress, have been elided within the canonical stories of specific nations. Jennings (1975) details how historians purposely edited their interpretations of the primary sources related to early American colonization. His work reveals how the stories told about Indigenous civilizations were shifted over time to make them seem much smaller, much more violent, much more disorganized, and much less sophisticated than they actually were. Each shift contributed to the logic of Euro superiority. As I touched on earlier, colonial history making is influential here as, "Canada's predominant symbols, narratives, and leaders still espouse a belief that this country was founded solely by Europeans" despite the fact that "Canada is built on a foundation of marginalizing Indigenous peoples" (Sinclair, 2016, p. 1). Examples of how this came to be are now easy to find. Daschuk (2014) reveals that contrary to the oft told story of British civilization spreading across the West through the hard work of immigrants, the true story of the 'settlement' of the prairies include the infection and purposeful starvation of Indigenous populations. In a similar vein, there are multiple examples of how facts of Indigenous life have been buried or

vilified within the mythic histories of the meritocratic march of progress (Peters, Stock, & Werner, 2018;  Sinclair, 2018a, 2018b).

One of the results of colonial history has been to obscure the story of Indigenous resistance and continued vitality (Ralston Saul, 2014). As a result, Indigenous people cannot find a story in mainstream history that provides a context for their continued cultural vitality in contemporary society. As colonial history recounts the march of progress the Indigenous becomes an identity locked into the past and essentialized by racial artifacts of a time long ago. Rather than being offered the space that other ethno-cultural groups are provided to access a history that explains the complexities of their cultural identity, Indigenous peoples only have access to a story stuck in the past (King, 2003; Talaga, 2018). By deleting the story of resistance and survival, the image of a long-ago people is all that survives. This cements the idea, "that Indigenous cultures cannot change, cannot recreate themselves and still claim to be Indigenous. Nor can they be complicated, internally diverse or contradictory" (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012, p. 77).

Colonial history springs a trap on Indigenous peoples who, quite reasonably, wish to reclaim the kind of complex and realistic cultural identity afforded to other humans. To do so they have to confront and dispel the errors of colonial discourse. In a cruel irony, they have to do it with the very same discourse that caused the problem in the first place. Fanon (1961/2001) details the operation of this second trap:

> At the very moment when the native intellectual is anxiously trying to create a cultural work he fails to realize that he is utilizing techniques and language which are borrowed from the stranger in his country. (Fanon, 2001)

Beyond the insult implicit in having to "assert and claim humanity" (Tuhiwa Smith, 2012, p. 27) is the absurdity of having to use the colonizer's language to do it. It is a task with dubious

prospects for success for, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde, 2015, p. 94). However, decolonial scholarship has not only articulated the traps sprung on Indigenous lives by colonial methodologies, it has also offered up a powerful and fundamentally different set of tools that are up to the job. By understanding these approaches to knowledge, the hegemonic limitations on Indigenous epistemologies, ontologies, methodologies, and histories can be eroded.

## Re-centering Relations in Methodology

Indigenous perspectives continue to find an expanded space within academic discourse. However, as the preceding section shows, their work has had to force itself into that space; they have not been welcomed into it. The methodology for this research relies heavily on Indigenous views of the world as a storied place (Doerfler, Sinclair, & Stark, 2013). My intention is to extend what Battiste’s (2000) said about Indigenous perspectives in school curriculum further into academic practice:

> The real justification for including Aboriginal knowledge in the modern curriculum is not so that Aboriginal students can compete with non-Aboriginal students in an imagined world. It is, rather, that immigrant society is sorely in need of what Aboriginal knowledge has to offer. (p. 201)

However, using the ideas of others insensitively is an old colonial trick and my intention here is to work with honesty and respect. As such, this consideration of my attempt to find a decolonizing approach begins with a consideration of ethics.

Piquemal (2001, 2004, 2005, 2006) offers an ethical framework for non-Indigenous scholars working with Indigenous peoples and within Indigenous knowledge systems. Her

framework focuses on reciprocity, a theme echoed across Indigenous methodological research (Archibald, 2008; Donald, 2009; Wilson, 2001). Additionally, she speaks of care. Indigenous knowledge, which this section will reveal is considered relational rather than individual, is connected to real lives and experiences. Attending to that fact means acknowledging the debt of the researcher to those sharing themselves with her. Likewise, care implies an ongoing effort to prevent the misuse of those things that have been shared.

Elaborating on reciprocity and care, Piquemal draws on Levinas' ( 1981) idea of alterity. It is a French term which translates poorly into English as 'difference.' More properly understood, alterity implies more. It connotes a recognition and welcoming of difference, celebrating the disorientation implicit in encounters with others. It is in experiencing alterity that evidence of one's own simultaneous connection to others and uniqueness from them is revealed and new possibilities emerge. Piquemal argues that research with Indigenous peoples should be committed to the preservation of alterity (2006, p. 118). Such a commitment recognizes that the history of Western research has sought to evaluate, marginalize, assimilate, and destroy difference. Thus it has been spoken of within Indigenous circles, "in terms of its absolute worthlessness to us, the Indigenous world, and its absolute usefulness to those who wielded it as an instrument" (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012, p. 3).

In highlighting alterity, Piquemal offers a path to researching relationally while being mindful of the power differences and dynamics implicit in the process. It is a point of particular importance to this attempt by a white scholar to join in the work of decolonizing while not trying to pre-empt, appropriate, or claim it. Rather, like Piquemal, I wish to respect the differences inherent in my position from those held by Indigenous academics and work in accountability

with the ideas I have learned from them. In that spirit, I proceed in this section with the humility of knowing:

> I must recognize that in the larger scale of things, the totality of all the relationships I hold and am beginning to understand are only a miniscule part of the grand scheme of relationships that are out there. (Wilson, 2008, p. 134)

Wilson's words speak to the importance of humility but also to the dazzling array of possibilities for new understandings that adopting such a stance creates.

### ***Relationality and Responsibility***

As the spark for decolonial critique comes from the recognition of the ruinous effects of colonization, it is not surprising that methodologies inspired by decolonial critiques are concerned with the impact of academic work on people. A primary flaw in the methodologies inspired by colonial thought is that the theoretical work that frames research is not tied to the operation of power. Decolonizing approaches share the opposite stance, contending that, "philosophy, as a discursive category neither is apolitical nor does it occupy an ahistorical space" (Dei, 2011) Recognizing the power of theory to create real world action, decolonial scholarship is concerned with using research to improve lives. Thus, the test of theory is fundamentally reoriented:

> The relevance of a social theory should be seen in how it allows us to understand the complexity of human society and to offer a social and political corrective – that is, the power and ideas to bring about change and transformation in social life. (Dei & Asgharzadeh, 2001, p. 298)

One key aspect of decolonizing methodologies is clearly a concern for the effects of research on the world.

The concern for the impact of research on the world does not emerge solely from recognizing the negative effects of colonial approaches. Rather, a key epistemological difference between Indigenous and Western thought revolves around the nature of knowledge. This difference lies at the heart of theorizing a decolonial approach. Wilson (2001) outlines it as follows:

> One major difference between the dominant paradigms and an Indigenous paradigm is that the dominant paradigms build on the fundamental belief that knowledge is an individual entity: the researcher is an individual in search of knowledge, knowledge is something that is gained, and therefore knowledge may be owned by an individual. An Indigenous paradigm comes from the fundamental belief that knowledge is relational. Knowledge is shared with all of creation… It is with the cosmos, it is with the animals, with the plants that we share this knowledge. It goes beyond the idea of individual knowledge to the concept of relational knowledge. (pp. 176-177)

The shift to viewing knowledge as relational rather than individual has implications that reconstruct notions of space and time, focus research purposes, and shape the notion of ethical action.

As Wilson (2001) indicates, within Indigenous methodology, space and time are conceived of in relation to humans rather than as separate entities. It follows then, that decolonial methodologies are bound to a consideration of how this interconnection influences the production and search for knowledge. Cole (2006) refers to a land-based spiritual connection between people, places, animals, feelings, and ideas that must be as much felt as seen to be

understood. In his words we are not to “forget or neglect the importance of groping in darkness, tactiling” (p. 30) our way to understanding. Life seen through a relational lens means being aware of how “humans are seen as intimately enmeshed in webs of relationships with humans and other entities that inhabit the world” (Donald, 2011, p. 103). And feeling one’s way to understanding recognizes the palpable reality of that enmeshment.

Seen through a relational lens, human minds and spirits are also wrapped up in connections (Wilson, 2001). Speaking of the spirit, Wilson (2008) points to a crucial connection between humans and the cosmos. Using the word spirituality but wanting to avoid connotations Western traditions accrue to the word, he clarifies, “spirituality is one’s personal connection to a higher being, or humanity, or the environment” (Wilson, 2008, p. 91). Human thought is part of a web of connection. Eschewing the idea of independent genius, Indigenous epistemology recognizes the partiality of ideas and their location in space and time. Seeing knowledge as relational rather than individual one quickly reaches the conclusion that “all knowledge is cultural knowledge” (Wilson, 2008, p. 91). This democratizing thought allows creativity and generativity as no tradition can claim a degree of objectivity over another; all ideas are related to one another.

Interpersonal relationality is a key aspect of Indigenous epistemology and it speaks to the unique role ethics should play within decolonial methodology. With poetic force and nuance, Cole (2006) explains that:

> ethics for us in not an add-on or a form to fill in
>
> it is intimate integration with the deep structure of our understanding
>
> of creation including its ongoingness it pre- co- and post- emptiveness. (p. 31)

Stating that all life is interrelated is only the first step. Recognizing the responsibilities implicit in relationships is the next. Accepting responsibility follows, and conducting oneself in thought and action according to that responsibility is the path towards scholarship that contributes to decolonial possibilities.

In his work on the development of the myths about the Canadian state Donald (2009, 2011) points to the "denial of relationality" (p.102) as the key point where problems of misunderstanding have started. Indigenous understandings of relationship as ongoing and recursive are clearly articulated in the histories of First Nations' engagements with each other and with their articulation of the treaty making process (Craft, 2014). Yet the Canadian state in its legal frameworks and public discourse continues to deny the connectivity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples thus refusing to, "engage carefully with the realization that their present and future is similarly tied together" (Donald, 2011, p. 102).

Offering a pathway out of this state of denial Donald (2011, pp. 103–105) suggests a search for how our different histories place us in relation to each other. Such a search will reveal the areas of broad mutual interest at the same time as maintaining an articulation of our differences. Following the principles of balance and reciprocity, both key to the maintenance of relationships, futures can be imagined that honour each other's rights and obligations simultaneously.

Embracing balance and reciprocity also involves adopting the key Indigenous epistemological principle of welcoming uncertainty in the spirit of "the humility of knowing" (Dei, 2008, p. 6). Saying that all life is interrelated does not mean the same thing as saying that all life is the same. Differences abound and at times those differences might seem diametrically opposed. Holding conflicting positions offends the principles of colonial rationality. As has been

noted, the foundation of Western civilization is a system of legal practices based on argumentation that pits side against side and declares winners and losers. An Indigenous paradigm, based on the reality that relationship does not imply unanimity, acknowledges difference and persists through the potential paradoxes created by simultaneity. Donald (2011) explains that simultaneously holding conflicting views is in fact the key to the emergence of understanding in saying, "creative potentiality… emerges as organic when entities, worldviews, and knowledge systems perceived as oppositional are held together, side by side, and in relations to each other" (p. 105).

Relationality implies responsibility. Once the interpersonal connections that bind people to each other and to the world are denied the responsibilities implied by them are ignored. Cole (2006) points out this reality in noting the distance between the relational and bureaucratic approaches to life that we witness in Canada:

> I don't know how it is canada has a federal department of indian affairs
> but no department of white affairs french affairs salmon affairs
> moose beaver deer bear not to forget the waterfowl and how did the conversation…
> get shifted into the western category of 'rights' including aboriginal rights
> we never had 'rights' before contact we had relationships we had community
> we had obligations we had community decision making processes
> that were meant to be inclusive of each person and like a hologram the whole
> is contained within each part that was our sense of 'individual' or relational. (p. 29)

Methodologies built on Indigenous epistemology must take seriously the relational imperative to live with each other well.

***Summary: "Gesturing Towards Decolonial Possibilities"***

No methodology, no matter how carefully theorized, can fully escape or undue the influence of colonialism. Universities are creators and arbitrators of official knowledge and are therefore steeped in colonial assumptions and practices. Jeannie Kerr, a white settler-Canadian academic and former teacher foregrounds her work with the acknowledgement that:

> I frame my educational work as gesturing toward decolonial possibilities. By this I mean that I will always be complexly entangled and complicit in the educational work that I attempt to do—the gesture is something that I can direct myself toward without the certainties of any specific and predetermined outcome. (Kerr, 2020, p. 176)

I echo Kerr's acknowledgement and recognize the dilemma posed by wishing to work in ways that will move towards a decolonial future from within an academic space caught up in the colonial past and present.

However limited the prospects of working against colonialism whilst being entangled within it may be, they are still worth pursuing. This is particularly true in Winnipeg. Owen Toews' (2019) work on the history of settler-colonial hegemony in Winnipeg points this out. His research points out the steady erasure of Indigenous reality from the city's meta-narrative and the contemporary conflicts that stem from that erasure. The research questions I am pursuing in this work were chosen in part to help combat the general ignorance of Indigenous resistance and vitality in the city. For related reasons, I have studied Indigenous understandings of storytelling to inform how to conceive of the idea of research.

Storytelling communicates content, context, and relationship simultaneously. Indigenous knowledges are founded on this idea of wholistic knowledge and this conception offers parameters for seeing knowledge in was that transgress colonial assumptions. Knowledge,

conceived of as an expression of relationship, destabilizes binary and hierarchical assumptions. In their place, the ties that connect people to each other and to the land rather than the differences between them emerge. These connections don't deny difference, they imply the responsibility to recognize it in context. Colonial systems of ordering knowledge produced taxonomies extracted from their context to better allow 'systematic' inquiry. Indigenous systems recognize that the most important meaning emerges from being in, rather than separating from, context. Embracing these insights has, I hope, contributed to a methodological framework that can offer a helpful contribution to the ongoing task of "gesturing" towards a decolonial possibility.

**Conclusion: Storytelling as a Research Methodology**

A storytelling methodology is built around the traits particular to the form and function of the practice of storytelling. It approaches knowledge as communal and tied equally to context and content. It conceives of people as creative actors who thread themselves together with their place and the past, present, and future. Just as storytelling is a means for understanding oneself and building connections to others, a storytelling methodology views the truth of identity as located in time and space, as well as being simultaneously individual and social—working across levels from the personal to the national. Storytelling is a co-creation between people and a storytelling methodology takes seriously the notion of reciprocity and relationality both in terms of the creation of knowledge and the responsibilities implicit to the research act. Above all, it is a research methodology that focuses on how experience, like a story well told, shapes the whole being, encompassing heart, mind, body, and soul.

# Chapter Four: Methods and Participants

In most qualitative dissertations, research methodology and research methods are considered within the same chapter. I have chosen to treat them separately. Storytelling is a commonly used practice in conducting research but conceiving of a storytelling methodology is a relatively new and continually emerging practice (Senehi, 2020). Contributing to that emergence means contributing to a lengthy process of "bricolage" (Kincheloe, 2001) that entails drawing connections from across diverse disciplines. As a result, the previous chapter stands on its own and this one moves from the theoretical concerns of methodology to the practical concerns of conducting research.

In this chapter I connect the storytelling methodology to the practice of using storytelling to conduct research and explain the scholarly, ethical, and procedural stages of its implementation. Accordingly, I begin by examining my role and position in the research relative to the participants and the appropriateness of the methods I have chosen to the research context. Next, I detail the ethical protocols I put in and followed in planning and conducting this study. Following that, I detail the process of gathering participants and conducting research with them as well as introducing the participants in the research. Next, I explain the data analysis process I undertook. Finally, I consider the utility and limitations of the approach I used.

## From Methodology to Method

The methodology developed in the previous chapter drew from three bodies of scholarship, Peace and Conflict Studies, Indigenous Studies, and critical approaches to Education. A central idea in Peace and Conflict studies is that research can, "make visible the knowledge of people who have been silenced, marginalized, and invisibilized." (Senehi, 2020, p.

46). Indigenous studies points to the need to speak back against the colonial practices that guide academic practice (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). Likewise, Indigenous scholarship sees knowledge as being rooted in relationship, communal interchange, and contextual (Archibald, 2008; Wilson, 2008). Critical educators are careful to point to the interplay of culture and power in schooling (Banks, 2015; McLaren, 1998; Sleeter & McLaren, 1995) as well as the crucial role of student biographies and meaning making processes as they experience school (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). The plan for this research employed storytelling to respond to all these insights.

Storytelling can be a democratic and non-hierarchical form of communication (Senehi, 2002). Owing to its accessibility, storytelling can bridge power difference by allowing all voices a space to be heard. When practiced mindfully, storytelling has an iterative effect (Archibald, 2008). One story calls up other stories in a process of deepening knowledge and revealing connections and shared experiences within groups of tellers and listeners (Bonds, 2016; Cruikshank, 1990). Storytelling expresses the process of a teller's becoming. It is simultaneously embedded in two contexts. The first is the context where the events in the story happened. The other is the context where the story is being told. As a result, storytelling is well suited to exposing the interface between individuals and the social structures that have interacted with as well as displaying the ways that tellers have come to make sense of their past in their contemporary lives.

**Storytelling Circles**

Storytelling circles were the primary method for gathering data. The method I used was developed from my own experience (Kuly, 2015; Paskievich & Whiteway, 2008) and from my

research into the application of storytelling to community based research (Archibald, 2008; Baskin, 2019; Bell, 2010; Corntassel, 2009; Reimer, Schmitz, Janke, Askerov, Strahl, & Matyok, 2015; Solinger et al., 2008). Importantly, I also had in-depth consultations with two Elders who informed this process greatly. One conversation was with Elder Ruth Christie. Ruth's expertise as a storyteller has been widely recognized and was recently acknowledged by the University of Winnipeg with the conferment of an honourary doctorate. The other conversation is detailed later in this chapter. Both consultations offered essential encouragement and guidance about processes to follow in conducting the storytelling circles.

The research plan called for me to have an initial meeting with the participants followed by four storytelling circles involving all research participants. After all the circles were completed, the plan called for one-on-one conversations between me and each participant. Before the one-on-one conversations, each participant would receive a transcript of their contributions to the storytelling circles for review. These transcripts would form the basis of the conversation and offer a chance for clarification or deeper discussion.

It proved impossible to schedule four circles at a time when all the participants could attend together. To adjust, I gathered the participants' availability and scheduled a total of seven storytelling circles. These circles took place between May and July of 2019. Just as in the original plan, each participant attended four sessions. Providing the alternative times allowed participants to attend at their convenience. An unexpected benefit of the alteration was that no one session included the exact same configuration of participants which created a fresh dynamic for each circle. Finally, as the plan laid out, I set up and conducted one-on-one discussions with each participant following the final storytelling circle. The one-on-one conversations happened in July of 2019.

The initial meeting with participants began with me distributing and explaining the informed consent form to the participants. I also used this initial session to explain my background and interest in working with them. As I explain later in this chapter, I used the story of my teaching failures and how they were connected to my lack of knowledge about Indigenous and inner-city students to explain my motivation in this research. After fielding questions from the participants, I gathered contact and schedule information from them, and the session ended.

Each storytelling circle varied in content from others but followed a similar format. The first circle began with everyone introducing themselves and telling the story, in turn, of their name. Following that round I asked the participants what they wished schools knew about them when they were students. Proceeding to my left, each participant was offered a chance to respond. If anyone wished to pass, they could. After the first round, participants responded to the stories that they had heard from each other with stories of their own. My role in the process was to clarify and rephrase questions when necessary, and to contribute with stories of my own based on the themes and topics that the participants brought up in their contributions. After the first storytelling session, which began with my direction to share name stories and the things that participants wished school knew about them, I took a much smaller role. In the sessions following the first, the participants took a much larger role in leading the storytelling. My primary role was recapping discussions from previous sessions and asking what those discussions had missed or had brought to mind for the participants.

I tried hard to keep the storytelling sessions as open-ended as possible. I did reiterate my research interest as being in experiences the participants had while in school before each session. Importantly, I followed this by stating my belief that the participants knew best what teachers needed to know and so I was happy to follow their direction. Following the participants'

direction, the sessions tended to focus on stories about life at home, life in the community, life in school, and stories about each participant's individual journey. For the most part the stories focused on the participants' time in middle and high school but at times the stories were about early education and the few years that had passed since they finished school. The details of what those stories communicated are reported in depth in subsequent chapters.

Before one-on-one interviews began, I transcribed every group storytelling session. I reviewed the transcripts and prepared a binder for each participant that included all the stories they told and interactions they had with other participants. I delivered these binders to the participants for their review. Following that, I had a private conversation with each participant where they were able to indicate if there was anything they wished to remove, clarify, or comment on in their transcripts. I recorded and transcribed these conversations and delivered transcripts to the participants for their review prior to beginning data analysis. The one-on-one interviews also provided an opportunity for me to express individual thanks, provide each participant with a small gift to express my appreciation, and for the participants and I to reach a sense of closure for the research process. The expression of gratitude and sense of closure was important because, as the findings of the research will reveal, the sessions did often lead to all of us sharing emotion-laden stories with each other.

### *Addressing Researcher and Participant Social Positions*

The choice of storytelling as the method for conducting this research was made in consideration of my own background, social relations in the context of the research, and the identities of the participants I was looking to engage. At the simplest level, the choice of storytelling was natural for me because storytelling is a deeply embedded practice in my life. I

grew up cradled in the stories my father told me. That upbringing led me to investigate folklore and oral literature in my undergraduate studies. I paid for my university education by working at a Parks Canada historic site where I was tasked with learning and telling stories to school children and tourists. I have performed as a storyteller at festivals and in classrooms and, as my students can attest, much of my teaching involves telling and eliciting stories. However, my comfort with the form is only part of the reason why it was the correct choice for this research.

If knowledge is indeed power then research, which creates knowledge, must be treated with care. As Senehi (2020) indicates, “knowledge making… has been mainly driven by socially advantaged groups with more access to the academy” (p. 46). The evidence of how inequitably power is distributed between settlers and Indigenous peoples in Winnipeg is clear in historical and contemporary data about economic status, educational attainment, and health outcomes (Bronwell et al., 2015; MacKinnon, 2009; Smirl, 2017). I am a middle-class, white, settler academic. The power difference between myself and the Indigenous youth I worked with in this research is a very real concern. It is exacerbated by the fact that I am a former teacher asking them about the challenges they faced attending schools. The choice of group storytelling as the research method was made with this concern in mind.

No research method is capable of undoing social inequity. However, storytelling does hold the potential to allow constructive communication across experiential and material divisions. In the research design I was careful to do two things to decrease the prominence of my voice and augment the comfort and authority of the participants. The first was to ensure transparency. After our initial introductions, the very first storytelling session began with me telling the stories of my failures to effectively teach Indigenous high school students. In those stories I also shared how the stories specific students shared with me about their own lives

alerted me to the gaps in my knowledge and the biases those gaps perpetuated in me. I asked for the participants' trust and I trusted what my experience has shown me about storytelling – that the process builds trust.

I also chose storytelling as a research method because of where the research was conducted. Winnipeg's North End is Indigenous land. This is true in terms of its history, and its burgeoning culture and demographics (Sinclair, 2016). A walk down its streets reveals murals, businesses, and community organizations that speak to that reality. Storytelling has rightly been identified as a primary mode of Indigenous communication, art, resistance, and knowledge generation (Archibald, 2008; Doerfler et al., 2013; Kovach, 2009; Sium & Ritskes, 2013; Thomas, 2005). More specifically, Winnipeg is Indigenous territory with deep Anishinaabeg roots and Sinclair points out that, "the act of story—and relationship—making among ourselves and with others is therefore an act of love; it is what maintains us, (re—) creates us, and ultimately, what defines us as Anishinaabeg" (2013a, p. 83). It would seem then that storytelling is a good fit for someone like me who is seeking to learn from Indigenous youth in Winnipeg.

There are two tests of the value of the storytelling approach employed in this research to bridge the power gaps between myself and the participants and reveal the truth of their experience. One is a private conversation that will happen when this dissertation is delivered to the participants who contributed to it (importantly, as will be detailed later, the participants were consulted throughout the data analysis process). The other test will come from seeing whether the ideas in the dissertation resonate with readers who share their experiences. The results of that test will only come with time. I do have one piece of anecdotal evidence to share that gives me hope that the storytelling process worked to break down the hierarchy of social position and elicited and amplified the voices and insights of the participants.

Part of the research plan was that I would provide food and drinks at every storytelling session. I asked them what food they liked beforehand. Some said they like pizza, others chicken. So, one time I picked up pizza and another chicken – both times I bought the food from chain restaurants that were easy to get to as I made my way from my workplace to the research site. At the end of the second storytelling session I asked what I should get for the next meeting. One of the participants suggested that I contact a local caterer. The woman who ran the catering business was an Aunt to one participant and well-known to a few others. They all knew her food well. Her business had grown organically based on her status as unofficial caterer for family and neighbourhood gatherings. I agreed and was handed her phone number. After a couple of calls, plans were made and every session after that featured much healthier meals, even though they often included a side of frybread.

I am not suggesting that the participants directing me to enlist a neighbourhood fixture to cater our sessions means that the use of storytelling magically erased the differences between us. However, the fact that the participants felt comfortable taking the initiative to suggest it and to lead me through the interpersonal connections I needed to make to set up the catering is significant to me. I believe it speaks to the establishment of some level of trust between us. I also like to believe that the trust that was fostered was due to and continued to grow because of the use of storytelling. Regardless of what I want to believe, there is one thing I do know—after the neighbourhood caterer began cooking for the storytelling sessions, they developed a distinct North End flavour and a literally and possibly metaphorical level.

***Ethical Considerations***

Permission to conduct this research was approved through the Human Research Ethics Board at the University of Manitoba. The certificate provided by the board is attached at the end of this dissertation. I ensured that my research plan met the requirements outlined for all research involving human subjects by the Tri-Council Panel on Research Ethics as well as the special requirements outlined by the Tri-Council for research involving Indigenous communities. I paid special attention to guidelines on ensuring participant confidentiality and mitigating risk. These provisions are outlined in the informed consent document which is also attached at the end of this dissertation.

I also undertook two additional steps before conducting the research. First, I reflected on the question of whether this research was really necessary. As Tuhiwai Smith (2012) clearly indicates, research done on Indigenous communities and individuals regularly benefits researchers far more than it does those who participate in the research. I interrogated my own motivations for undertaking this and thought about whether the participants would be benefited or hurt by being involved. As I reflected on my own experiences as teacher, I became confident that much good can come from an increased public and scholarly understanding of the experience of Indigenous youth in the inner city. However, that confidence did little to allay my concerns about asking for and using the stories of Indigenous inner-city youth.

The second thing I did responded to my concerns. Piquemal (2000, 2006) introduces the idea of levels of consent. She indicates that in some cases there may be two levels to consider, "that of the informant as an individual and that of another person recognized as the 'keeper' of knowledge belonging to a group" (Piquemal, 2000, p. 50). This idea provided me with a pathway to address my worries that despite following the Tri-Council policy I still had concerns about

being part of the historical and colonial processes of collecting and exploiting Indigenous narratives (Logan McCallum, 2012; Morton Ninomiya & Pollock, 2017; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). The participants I was hoping to work with were going to be young and relatively inexperienced with academic practices. Because they were adults they could provide informed consent on their own but I felt it necessary to look for a different level of, if not consent, at least informed guidance.

I was fortunate to know someone who I hoped would be able to provide this guidance. Janice Millar is a former teaching colleague of mine. She has expertise in Indigenous education and is also referred to by many in her community as an Elder. She raised a family in the neighbourhood where I would be working and spent many years as a school counsellor and community connection between Indigenous families and the school system. I felt that she could provide me with guidance about my blindspots, the things that I didn't know I didn't know, as I conceived of this research. Following the protocol she taught me, I brought tobacco to her and explained that I had questions about how to conduct this research in a good way.

Janice accepted the tobacco and told me to reach out to her in a couple of weeks. I did so, and we set up a time to have tea and a talk. It was a long talk. We talked about how to make it clear to the participants that the circles I would be conducting were not the same as sharing circles used within many Indigenous traditions. We also talked a lot about trust, how to earn it, and how to live up to the responsibility of receiving the gift of stories. I left the conversation with a deepened confidence in the value of the research. More importantly, I left with a better sense of what I would need to do to earn the trust of the participants both during the research and after it was complete. Janice didn't grant me consent. Instead she gave me guidance about how to make sure I earned the consent I would ask for from the participants in this research.

## The Participants

Over the following pages I will explain the procedures I followed for identifying individuals and recruiting them for participation in the research process. I will also provide a brief biographical sketch of each participant and make some observations about the effect of process we engaged in together. The biographies and observations are offered to help readers contextualize the research findings chapters that follow this one.

### *Recruitment*

The success of this research depended on its participants. Finding the right participants took a lot of forethought. Given my research questions, it was obvious that participants should be Indigenous and have attended school while living in the inner city. Setting a target age range for participants was not as obvious. People who were still in school would be in the midst of experiencing it and so the stories they told would not benefit from reflective hindsight. People who had been out of school for too long would have a harder time remembering the events that mattered to them with sufficient detail to offer the context necessary for understanding them. To find participants who had the right balance of hindsight and recent memories I set out to find participants in the age range of 18-24 years old.

Participant recruitment was guided by connections I had made in the community previous to beginning my academic career. As an inner-city teacher I knew of a few community leaders who could offer me advice about practical and culturally appropriate steps to locate participants. Each community leader I spoke to suggested approaching the same community organization. The organization is run according to principles of Indigenous governance and has long-standing and deep roots in the North End of the city. It provides educational and peer support for junior and

senior high school students as well as some employment opportunities. It is a hub for young people in the neighbourhood and seemed a promising place to make inquiries.

My community contacts connected me to people to speak to at the organization. Using email, I contacted them to explain the basic outline of my research intent and the storytelling process I wanted to follow and ask for their input. An in-person meeting followed where I met with leaders from the organization who expressed a desire to support the research. Following the meeting I provided more information on the research plan that they then presented to the Indigenous advisory group in the organization. In the meantime I consulted with the human research ethics board at the University of Manitoba for advice on how to proceed to recruiting participants associated with the organization without them feeling influenced to do so because the leaders of the organization supported the work.

After receiving approval from the Indigenous advisors at the organization and receiving guidance from the human ethics board, I began recruiting participants. I delivered an invitation to participate to the organization which was posted in its main building. The invitation indicated a date and time in the future when I would be at the building to speak to interested individuals.

When I arrived at the building at the time indicated on the invitation, I met with 7 individuals who were interested in the research. I outlined the process for them and gave them informed consent forms. I also invited them to invite friends who they thought might be interested. I set up a date with them to meet for a first session, explaining that if they didn’t want to participate they didn’t have to and that I would collect the informed consent forms the next time we met to give them time to go over them. When I returned for the first storytelling session, I was pleased to find that all 7 individuals were there along with one other individual who had heard about the session from a friend. I redistributed new copies of the informed consent forms

as some had not brought theirs and gave them time alone to review them. Finally, I collected the signed forms, and we began the first research session. The group of 8 individuals became the group of participants who met with me for the rest of the research process.

### *Biographies*

The participants in this research study require an introduction. I have included some brief biographical notes about each person below. The names I use are pseudonyms. I have been careful to ensure that the notes I have included preserve their anonymity while also providing enough background to contextual their contributions to the chapters that follow.

***Jon.*** Jon was one of the oldest participants in the research. He had graduated from university shortly before the study began. Jon was the first in his family to graduate from university and one of few who graduated high school. His family dealt with cycles of addiction and the criminal justice system. Jon's academic success was greatly aided by his athletic abilities. He received scholarship support so he could attend a school outside of his neighbourhood. However, challenges with his family led Jon to move out on his own and become a ward of the state. Jon drew strength from his athletic teammates, remarkable teacher mentors, and from his partner. That strength led him to graduation and to eventually begin the process of reconciling with his family. He is a community leader, using his athletic background and first-hand experience to motivate and support kids in the neighbourhood where he grew up.

***Jordin.*** Jordin graduated high school the year before the research began. She lives with her toddler in student housing while she attends a post-secondary training program. Jordin grew

up and attended school in the heart of the inner city. Her mom was frequently in prison. Although she maintained a connection to her mom, Jordin's grandparents were her legal guardians. She lived with them until their relationship broke down, at which point Jordin lived in foster care. Jordin returned to the city and her grandparents after living in care for roughly a year. She completed school and found the spot where she currently lives.

***Silver.*** Silver had just completed a year of university when the research project began. She is also an intern at a national business, a position she earned through her academic work and longstanding work history. Silver attended numerous inner-city schools as she grew up, eventually earning a scholarship to attend a small private high school. She encountered numerous challenges in her home life – particularly due to cycles of addiction. Silver lives independently and maintains a relationship with her mom but is most closely connected to her network of friends.

***Derwin.*** Derwin graduated from high school just before the research study began. He attended numerous schools across the inner city. He lived in blended family in substandard conditions that were, nevertheless, characterized by close connections. Derwin's family was dealt a devastating tragedy when he was young. They have stayed strongly connected in recuperating from their loss. Derwin left high school in tenth grade. He returned to school after close to a year of being away. He attended two other high schools before graduating. He is currently attending university with plans to become a teacher.

***Sage.*** Sage is a university student and community leader. She mentors young people with experiences similar to her own Sage grew up and attended school in the inner city. She was always a strong student but was pushed out of high school for a semester because of discrimination that she faced. She and her siblings are the first in their family to graduate high school. Sage is close to her family, and they have provided essential guidance and role modelling for her. She is deeply engaged with her cultural identity and her community and her university path continues to connect her to both.

***Summer.*** Summer graduated high school a few years before this research began. She lived and attended school in the inner city until she entered high school. At that point, problems related to addiction that had existed in her family became untenable and she moved in with her father in a suburban neighbourhood. Significantly, Summer chose to continue attending her inner-city high school and graduated from there. Summer is embedded in her culture. She teaches drumming to youth in care and is part of numerous groups and networks that practice and sustain Anishinaabe practices. She is attending university with plans to work in cultural revitalization professionally.

***Meghin.*** Meghin graduated high school two years before the research study began. She grew up and attended school in two places. Part of her life she lived on her reserve and part of her life she lived in the inner city. Although Meghin's family faced challenges related to poverty, she was and remains a strong student. Meghin attended a selective program within her inner-city high school where she engaged with both high level science and community service. She is

currently enrolled in university and works in numerous jobs related to community education in the inner city.

***Misty.*** Misty was one of the older participants in the study. She attended and graduated from high school in the inner city. Her pathway to graduation was challenged by numerous setbacks related to the poverty and addiction that her family dealt with. She is currently a university student and works as a community education liaison, supporting inner-city youth and families. Misty is the sole non-Indigenous participant in the study. She is however, deeply embedded in the Indigenous community. Her experience mentoring Indigenous youth along with her experience as an inner-city youth in poverty gave her the background to offer crucial insights in this research. Along with working and attending university, Misty supports her parents and sibling the best she can.

I hesitated to include the preceding biographical sketches because they do little to communicate the nuance or texture of the stories that they summarize. However, these brief biographical sketches are not intended to capture or explore the life stories of the participants. Rather, they are offered as a reference point for the findings in the chapters that follow. Those chapters dig deeply into the experience and insight of each participant. These sketches should serve to help readers ground the stories they read within the overall arc of each participant's narrative. Hopefully, they also communicate something of how remarkable the young leaders I was able to work with are.

**Data Analysis**

Analyzing the data produced by the storytelling circles and the one-on-one interviews was far from straightforward, although the process began in a straightforward manner. Immediately after every circle and immediately after each interview I wrote extensive notes about my immediate impression of what had transpired. Within twenty-four hours of each circle or interview I transcribed the audio tapes that were produced. After participants had all had a chance to review the transcripts of the research sessions, I made any necessary changes. Following that I transferred the files into the qualitative data management software NVIVO.

The initial analysis plan was to read through the transcripts repeatedly to identify codes that connected participants' responses followed by condensing those codes into representative themes. I did so. NVIVO software was very helpful in this process. After multiple readings and multiple coding sessions I was able to break down the initial transcripts into separate documents corresponding to themes that emerged across storytelling circles and individual interviews. I reviewed these documents extensively to prepare the central findings for this research. This was a frustrating experience. The categories I created were accurate representations of what I had heard from the participants. However, when I laid them out they did not communicate the texture of the experiences the participants reported or the emotion and depth of insight that the storytelling circles generated. It was at this point that I began to develop a visceral understanding of what Cole (2006) meant when he spoke of "the importance of groping in darkness" to the process of knowledge generation (p.30).

I returned to the raw transcripts of the storytelling circles and interviews. This time I tried to capture more of the experience of being in the 'now' of the experience of the research process (Kovach, 2009). I re-read the storytelling circle transcripts to pay attention to how one story led

to another. As I did the spaces around and in between the stories re-emerged[4]. As I read words, the sounds and smells of the place where we gathered to tell stories came back. I recalled Meghin looking out the window of the room where we met and providing a colour commentary about the things going on in the neighbourhood as we waited for everyone to gather. I remembered everyone's laughter at my panic when Jordin's toddler tried to chew on my voice recorder. I also remembered how Jon would always jump up to distribute plates and cutlery as soon as the food we would share would be brought into the room. As the stories I was reading brought the memories of how they were shared back to mind, the darkness began to dissipate.

The spaces between stories took on prominence in my analysis. I recalled moments of interaction where participants jumped into each other's stories with affirmation, questions, or expressions like, "me too!" I re-read the one-on-one interviews to identify areas where participants worked to clarify or restate a moment from the circles. I also paid close attention to moments when I recalled participants expressing emotion about a story they were telling or hearing. This re-reading pointed me to the importance of two things that were happening at the same time. One was the articulation of each teller's own challenging journey to the present. The other was the expression of the connections between the participants and the place where we were gathered. In some cases, these connections came from the pre-existing relationships that had been developed between participants. In others, the connections emerged as participants heard stories that resonated with their own. These were the things that my initial coding failed to capture.

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[4] There is an important but necessary gap in the findings chapters that follow this chapter. Some contextual information that informed my analysis of the data could not be included explicitly in my report of the findings. This is because the specific place where we gathered to tell stories and events in the neighbourhood, local schools, and the city that did influence what stories were being told and their meaning would immediately reveal identifying details about the participants. Following ethical protocols meant that some information that might demonstrate how storytelling emanates from a synergy of content and context (Archibald, 2008) had to be excluded.

I began to re-analyze the data in response to my re-reading of the transcripts. I created a stack of index cards for each participant. On each card I noted a story, salient quotation, or detail from what they had shared. After creating these stacks of cards, I created a large map for each participant. I drew a timeline on each map representing the biography that emerged in the transcripts for each participant. The timeline showed significant moments in school, at home, and in the community that they had shared. Around the timeline I wrote quotes from the index cards. This process helped me order the narrative that came from the storytelling sessions and interviews. The map gave me a visual reference that allowed me to see the 'big picture' of what each participant was sharing. As that big picture emerged, I made notes on the map of key themes that expressed that picture.

Once I had a map for every participant completed, I put them all on a large wall and spent a very, very long time looking at them together. I let the maps remind me of the experience of being in the storytelling circles and interviews. As that experience re-entered my mental space, I was able to see connections between the stories, quotes, and timelines that were recorded on the maps. I noted the connections and returned to the index cards. Each connection became the heading for a key theme. I sorted through the index cards and placed them under each heading that they illustrated. The headings became the categories, and the index cards became the supporting data for the findings that follow this chapter.

In effect, the original plan for data analysis succumbed to the force of the stories that were told, the personality of the individual tellers, and the character of the group that developed around them. As the original plan faded, the richness of the data began to emerge. By acknowledging the complexity of the data rather than trying to order it, multiple methods for understanding it became clear. Multiple close readings informed by contextual memories, lead to

crafting biographies and mapping connections. In the end, I am confident that the analysis I performed has created a thorough accounting of what happened in the data gathering process. More importantly, I am hopeful that the analysis has produced results that show the trust the participants offered me was well-founded.

One of the tests that I used to ensure myself that I was writing in a way that lived up to my participants' trust was to keep in mind cautions offered by Indigenous authors (Tuck, 2011; Tuck & Yang, 2014). Chief among those cautions was one offered by Alicia Elliot (2019). She asks a powerful question of people like me who are writing about Indigenous experience:

> If you can't write about us with a love for who we are as a people, what we've survived, what we've accomplished despite all attempts to keep us from doing so; if you can't look at us as we are and feel your pupils go wide, rendering all stereotypes a sham, a poor copy, a disgrace – then why are you writing about us at all? (2019, p. 31)

I experienced many moments throughout the research process when my eyes went wide. The multiple methods of data analysis recorded here were my attempt to communicate the same sense of respect and appreciation for the stereotype shattering individuals who shared their stories with me.

### *The Research Data: Limitations and Possibilities*

The data produced by this research process is a collection of eight people's stories. It illuminates their experiences and responds well to my overarching research question about what the stories of Indigenous inner-city youth can tell us about their time in school. However, there are limitations on what it can tell us that should be noted. Most of those limitations have to do

with the fact that only a small number of people were involved in the study. But there are also limitations based on the storytelling method I used to generate data.

Because the study focuses on eight people's stories the data is deep but not broad. It is entirely reasonable to read their stories for evidence of what happened to them and what that experience was like. It is not reasonable to extend their stories to represent the lives of all Indigenous young people or all inner-city students. Likewise, the data is rooted in their particular experience. One of the findings that came from the research was about the importance of community-based organizations. Because all of the participants had connections to the community-based organization where recruitment took place, it is important to note that this finding is very accurate for the participants but that it can't be assumed that other inner-city youth have the same perspective on local organizations that the participants did.

The data in this study was gathered through multiple iterations of storytelling events. Stories are personal accounts. As such, the events recounted in the data are told from the perspective of the participants. They are partial and coloured by memories, emotions, and interpretations. The point of this research was not to surface objective accounts of incidents in the lives of the participants and so this is not a problem for the coherence or validity of the research. However, it is important to note that there are likely other interpretations of the events included in the stories the participants told. They should be read as individual experiences, as the intent of this research was to see the world through the participants' eyes as much as possible.

The same factors that set some limitations for the use of this data also created possibilities. Stories are not aggregated distillations of responses to questions, they are not observations of phenomena, and they are not surveys of indicators, or results of experiments. Stories are testimonies of individual experience. As such, they do not produce broadly

generalizable results, especially when they are drawn from a small group of people, but they do produce deep results. Each story is rich with context, texture, and nuance. Because of this, story data can account for questions that other forms of research cannot. Quantitative or mixed method studies can produce impressive and useful accounts of the number and frequency of events but they struggle to communicate how those events feel or what they mean to people. These are the questions that storytelling research excels at.

The importance of the kind of data created by research like this is due to the way storytelling communicates experience. Nussbaum explains:

> the insides of stars, like the insides of humans, are not open to view. They must be wondered about. And the conclusion that this set of limbs in front of me has emotions and feelings and thoughts of the sort that I attribute to myself will not be reached without the training of the imagination that storytelling promotes. (Nussbaum, 2008, p. 148)

Nussbaum argues that a central effect of storytelling is the stimulation of wonder. Indigenous youth in Manitoba graduate at roughly half the rate of other students (Government of Manitoba, n.d.-b, 2018a). Inner-city youth face the prospect of growing up in neighbourhoods where life expectancy is ten years less than it is in other parts of Winnipeg (Bronwell et al., 2015). It is a gross understatement to say these people are underserved. The facts I just noted are readily available to anyone with an internet browser and the desire to find them. Perhaps the problem is not that the facts of the inequity in Winnipeg has not been identified. Perhaps the problem has more to do with a lack of wonder. If I have done justice to the stories that the participants shared in this research, they may offer a corrective to that lack. Hopefully through sharing them, a larger measure of empathy and wonder can be stimulated and steps toward purposeful action will be easier to take.

# Chapter Five: The System

During the storytelling sessions the words, "the system" were used often. The words referred to interactions the participants, their families, and their friends had with various provincial or municipal institutions. Even though the various institutions were separate entities, the experience of interacting with them intersected, creating a web of confusing and threatening entanglements and navigational dilemmas. These interactions figured prominently in the lives of the participants as they made their way through school. In fact, a primary feature of their experiences outside of school was navigating interactions with the institutions that they called the system. The stories they tell about the system reveal that their engagement with it was unavoidable, that it exerted undue influence in their lives, and that the supports it offered were necessary but incoherently organized. The sole coherent feature of the system was the overall effect of creating a sense of constant surveillance and threat in the minds of the participants.

## Defining the System

In the stories of participants, the things that make up the system share two common traits. First, they are institutions or agencies of the government and second, the participants are compelled, sometimes by need but often by law, to navigate them. The system is an inevitable presence, one which they exist in opposition to. In their stories, the following entities have been referred to as parts of the system: The Winnipeg Police Service, Child and Family Services (CFS), Manitoba Health, Manitoba Housing, Manitoba Justice (including the legal and the carceral departments), and the Welfare and Employment Insurance programs. When you consider the components that the participants include within the system the reason for the opposition becomes clear. Each wields the power to offer or withhold essential supports for a

good life. As their stories will reveal, the participants have more experience with the latter than the former.

### *Early and Frequent Exposure*

As they grew up, the participants had frequent engagements with multiple aspects of the system. The list of their various engagements is long. Jon reported his experiences involved criminal justice and corrections, the police, housing authorities, and CFS. Silver dealt with CFS, welfare authorities, the police, and housing authorities. Derwin has had encounters with the police, housing authorities, and the welfare authorities. Misty is familiar with welfare authorities, the police, and CFS. Meghin and Sage both had encounters with police and justice officials. Finally, Jordin has ongoing active engagements with housing, CFS, welfare authorities, the police, justice officials, and the corrections system. Their experience is deep and broad. Taken together, their stories offer necessary context for understanding what it feels like to be a young person living in the inner city. Growing up with the system appears to be a common feature of inner-city life and yet it is one that may not be readily apparent to those living outside of it.

Perhaps the most important thing to remember when looking at life with the system is that the participants' engagements with the system were not voluntary. The level of need that the participants faced growing up created them. In the same vein, the interactions they had with the web of governmental agencies set up to respond to people in need were not something they chose. For the participants, dealing with the system felt like a compulsory aspect of their lives. The compulsory nature of the engagements is important to understand. It lies at the root of the sense of a lack freedom and agency that comes through in the stories shared here.

Because they are the two aspects of the system that are referred to most often in the stories told to me, I will explore The Police and Child and Family Services in depth in the pages that follow. After dealing with the actions and effects of these two aspects of the system separately, I will explore stories that show how the Police, CFS, and other components of the system operate in an interconnected and incoherent fashion. Finally, I will consider the stories that participants told about the people and spaces that have allowed them to preserve their freedom and agency while living with the system.

## The Police

After referring to some of her experiences with them, I asked Jordin how she felt towards the police. She said, "At the moment, I guess, no trust, and just snakes." Her response was echoed in the feelings of many of the other participants. While the police are supposed to be dedicated to ensuring the safety of citizens, the participants did not feel safe around them. Summer explained that, "I just don't trust them. They would not be the first place I would go if I was in danger." The lack of trust that participants report feeling is well-founded. Their experience tells them that the police are dangerous. Participants do point to some respected individuals within the police system but in general, police have acted in duplicitous, terrifying, and manipulative ways that extended across all aspects of the participants' lives. Their scope includes home, community, school, and work environments.

### *Duplicity*

The idea of duplicity is clear in Misty's explanation of aspects of her interactions with the police. She explained that:

> All of the interactions I've had with the cops were not good ones in my personal life, and they were never because of me, but because of my family. But because of it being the situation that it was, they never, ever treated me or anybody else in the situation with respect. Regardless of whether or not I gave them respect. So, in my personal life, not good. I've seen some shady cops do some shady things and cover their badge.

The addiction and poverty that plagued Misty's homelife provided a filter for police to see her through, and they acted in correspondingly negative ways towards her. However, in her work supporting inner-city students their interactions were very different:

> at work, absolutely, nothing but respectful, and helpful, other than them taking forever to like, respond. Nothing but helpful, so it just depends on what side they're playing.

Misty didn't find evidence of duplicity only in the contrast between police behaviour toward her at home compared to when she was at work. She noted that even how she dressed could prompt a difference:

> Even just what you're wearing, how you talk. Me and my brother can be standing next to each other talking to a cop, and they will speak to him differently than they'll speak to me. But that's just perception and how people view us, I guess?

Misty's story communicates an understanding shared amongst participants that police behaviour was inconsistent and could change based on context and the individual whims of officers. As a logical result, their stories were tinged with a general tone of wariness.

***Terrifying***

In some cases, wariness is too mild a term for the tone of the stories. Some of the experiences participants had were simply terrifying. Derwin recalls an arrest he watched from his bedroom window:

> Derwin: Yeah, one of my older sisters, she used to be kind of running around with a gang and so I remember they took her from the house and they grabbed her and took her from the house and put her in the squad car and then I was just looking outside my window and I just see her kicking outside, trying to kick over the door.
>
> Marc: So, you watched that?
>
> Derwin: Yeah.
>
> Marc: How old were you?
>
> Derwin: I was probably 10, 11.
>
> Marc: Wow. How did it feel?
>
> Derwin: Honestly it was kind of weird. I'm like, 'What the hell?' I'm like, 'Whoa!'

Derwin's experience with witnessing his sister's violent arrest cemented the fact that the police were capable of violence in his mind. His sister may have been associating with gang members but up until that moment he had never witnessed her in a violent altercation. The presence of the police created his first experience with that.

Sage also witnessed violent incidents involving the police. She recalls spending time with "the wrong friends" and being in a house where drugs were being sold when the police broke down the door in riot gear. There was one positive outcome from that experience. Sage explained it provided her with, "a turning point – I just knew that I needed to get away from them [meaning her group of friends]." However, along with the turning point the moment also gave her a

tangible and clear message about the capacity for the police to use violence. Sage has not been friends with that group for over five years, but she still shares the same neighbourhood and keeps in touch with the girl within the group with whom she was closest. Shaking her head, Sage told me that she found out what had happened to her former friend, “her brother, last year, or two years ago, was shot and killed by police.” The potential for lethal violence is ever present in Sage’s mind when she interacts with the police.

***Extensive Scope***

The potential danger the police represent is intensified by the fact that they may enact it in a wide range of contexts, often with dubious justification. Participants shared numerous stories about problematic encounters with police on the street. Derwin had numerous stories about street encounters with police. A representative story occurred when he was in elementary school:

> Yeah. In my past, yeah, I did have some bullshit with the cops because back when I was a kid, I was hanging out with a group of my friends and this cop car pulls up and asks if we're the people who had hit this old lady over the head with a big piece of ice and we're like, "What? No!" And my friend spoke up, he was all like, "What are you guys even doing?" And then the cop told him to shut up. So yeah.

Being questioned or detained without a rationale was common in Derwin’s stories. He felt that being an Indigenous inner-city youth in the company of other Indigenous inner-city youth put a target on his back for harassment.

In other stories, the police did offer a rationale for detaining people. However, upon scrutiny, the rationale offered was suspect. Jon introduced me to this sort of encounter with the

words, “I always see cops pulling over people on bikes when I’m travelling around the inner city. All the time.” Misty also had experience with this:

> Misty: I've had many, many of my brother's friends on bikes pulled over for no apparent reason and gotten into some big trouble—
>
> Marc: Just because they're biking around?
>
> Misty: And because they don't know their rights. They don't know what they're allowed to say yes and no to and sometimes if they do know their rights, well, something is going to happen either way.

Misty’s mention of rights is related to the reason police offer for detaining people on bikes. In Winnipeg there is a law against riding a bike on a sidewalk if the bike’s tires are wider than 16 inches in diameter. Only small children’s bikes have tires smaller than that. Thus, anyone riding a bike on a sidewalk is liable to be charged with committing a crime. It is a confusing law, and participants’ stories show it was used when people who know they are not allowed to be arbitrarily detained by the police refuse police instructions. This is what Misty means when she says that even when you know your rights, it doesn’t mean they will be respected.

The reason why I say that the law is confusing is two-fold. I asked my participants if any of them had seen anyone outside the inner city ever being pulled over for biking on the sidewalk. None had. Yet they all had either been pulled over for doing so or knew someone personally who had been. The other reason the law does not make sense is apparent in Jon’s story about being pulled over. In it, he refers to the roads in the inner city. Laws are supposed to keep people safe yet, inner-city roads lack safe bike lanes and are narrower than other city streets because they were built long before contemporary municipal building codes were in place. Jon explained how this connects to his experience:

Jon: Inner city, yep. My brother got ticketed. My brother's like, "What about those guys, the white kids riding on the bike, with double disc brakes, jumping all over in and out of traffic on the sidewalk?" And they're like, "Nope, nope, nope." And then they gave him a $150 ticket. My brother doesn't work, doesn't have an education. He's like, "How can I pay for this ticket?"

Marc: Did they do anything else when they gave him the ticket?

Jon: Yeah. They searched him—and I was standing there too, right? And they, yeah, they were all on bikes too. And I was on roller blades, real gangster, right? Gangster on roller blades!

Jon explained that his brother and his friends were taking turns pulling him on his roller blades behind their bikes. It was fun and way safer than doing the same thing on the road:

Jon: I was like, "Pull me, bros." So, yeah. All my friends got stopped, "Hey!" And then there were two [police] units just, "Grrr!" And it's just hardcore man, just "Get off the bikes! Empty your pockets!", everything. I was like, "What about me?" And they go, "You can go, you're on roller blades, you're not threatening."

Marc: So, they're using the bike thing as a reason to stop and search?

Jon: Search, yeah. Which is ridiculous, right? Because you can bike on the street in other parts of the city and you don't get hit – but not around here!

Marc: Mm-hmm. Yeah, oh no, it's crazy. The inner city is the worst place for biking — especially the North End.

Jon: Yeah, one of our kids got hit on the Salter Bridge there one time, coming to homework club.

Marc: Oh, you're kidding!

Jon: And then that's what I mean, right? There's supposed to be bike lanes, but you don't see them taken care of, you don't see them painted. And you don't see them protected.

Marc: Yeah, no, according to the city [a street in the neighbourhood] is a bike route. I don't think it's a bike path.

Jon: It does not look like a bike path!

If you are on a bike in the inner city, you face a tough choice. If you bike on the street you risk being hit, injured, or killed. If you bike on the sidewalk you risk being detained, accused, searched, and fined. Especially if you are Indigenous – because an important point in Jon's story is that while he and his friends were being detained, white people were biking freely all over the same sidewalks.

Police presence in the lives of the participants extended beyond the streets and into their homes. Earlier, I recounted Derwin's experience of having his sister taken from his home by police. Jon told a story that highlighted the extent of their presence as well as offering more reinforcement of Misty's perspective on how little people's actual rights matter:

Jon: When I was growing up the CFS watching our house and us growing up right? Lots of kids like us. So, they knew there was partying in the house, they knew there was kids in the house, this stuff, but no one ever came. But anyways… And then yeah, so even the police knew the house, right? Because they would always be calling for disturbances, whatever. So, CFS and police definitely knew our house. And then, yeah, just even the cops too. There was a few times where my brother, he knew his rights. He said, "You can't come into my house without a warrant." And then [the cop] just put on

some black gloves and just choked the shit out of my brother and grabbed him by the neck and threw him on the couch and just choked him.

The invasion of Jon's house by this officer is terrifying and made more so considering that the thing that prompted it, in Jon's view, was his brother standing up for the sanctity of it as a private space.

Without a warrant, with life-threatening violence, and after taking steps to conceal evidence of his action, this police officer did more than endanger Jon's brother's life. He also sent Jon a message that has lasted. It's a message that shattered the positive image he had previously been developing. Our conversation about it was right after I expressed shock at the story he told about the police officer choking his brother:

> Marc: You're kidding!
>
> Jon: No. That was when I was six years old. That was my first experience. When I used to see cops in school too, I was like, "Oh, I love you guys, you guys are awesome. I want to be like you." Right? And then just to see that in grade one?
>
> Marc: God.
>
> Jon: And my brother too, right. He was freaking out. The cop was a young white guy, eh? Tattooed up. I think he had a, I don't know, I think it was a Stony tattoo [A tattoo depicting Stony Mountain Institution – Manitoba's federal prison].
>
> Marc: Really? On his arm?
>
> Jon: I think so.
>
> Marc: You're kidding.

> Jon: But it looked like a pretty shady cop, right? Tattooed up. Just tatted up and just choking on some guy, choking on my brother because he said, "You don't have a warrant, you can't be in my house."

Jon told me that his kindergarten class had regular visits with a school-based police officer. These officers are supposed to build positive relationships within the community. It was working for Jon. He loved the visits. That is, until he saw a cop choke his brother with a tattoo of the province's federal prison on his arm. The symbolism wasn't lost on him then and the threat the police pose remains clear in his mind now.

### *"They'll Do Anything."*

There is an irony in the experience of participants with the police. The stories related above communicate the clear sense of threat that the police created in their lives. Yet, when at work or at school, places where the police also had a presence, the sense of threat shifted. As Misty said, when at work the police treat her with respect. Likewise, Jon organized a basketball tournament for inner-city youth and the police entered a team. He said that the game he played against them went well, although he can be forgiven for admitting, "It went good, might wanted to jab some of them though!" Jon reports that he has a good relationship with the police right now even though their track record of behaviour in the city is apparent:

> I have a good relationship with them now. Growing up, not so much. At the same time, they can fucking suck, man. There are some really horrible police officers. Drinking and driving! What are they doing? But on the other hand, there's some young cops that really want to do some good. Its just like – you got to balance out the good from the bad.

For Derwin, it is also necessary to decide whether he is dealing with a good or bad police officer. Even after watching his sister hauled away and enduring routine street harassment by police he maintains a balance saying, “I mean, I don't really like them. But I also don't hate them.” I asked him why he has that perspective:

> Well, because I'm not that close-minded person, like, "Oh yeah, I've seen a few bad cops. Yeah, they're all bad." I remember in grade eight I got an award from the school that a cop presented to me and nothing really that's affected me badly. Because I'm just not that type of person who took this personally. See something and willing to go and label like "Oh yeah, they all do that."
>
> Marc: Right. A lot of people are like that.
>
> Derwin: Yeah.
>
> Marc: Why aren't you?
>
> Derwin: I don't know. I just try to look for the positive. It's like, because I know there's good everywhere.

Derwin’s willingness to look for the good despite having personal evidence of the bad in police is remarkable. Perhaps it is the fact that he has been labelled rather than seen as an individual that allows him this perspective. Knowing how it felt to be assumed to be guilty of a crime when walking down the street he does not want to subject others, even those who did it to him, to feeling that injustice.

A similarly balanced sense can be found in Jon’s assessment of the police:

> But I met some of those police officers too, they're just passionate, they want change in our city, they want to clean up this meth crisis. They just don't want to just sit around and just bag and peg people, right? They want to do something. I think that's the unfortunate

> thing too, right? Because I wanted to go into law enforcement, because I saw this system. I was just like, "I don't like this system." So I did Criminal Justice [at university] for two years, and I almost did, but I was just like, "Nah, it's okay."

Jon's decided to change from studying Criminal Justice and pursuing a career as a police office to studying Urban and Inner-City issues and the pursuit of a career in community development. This choice was based on an informed assessment of the possibilities of making a positive difference in law enforcement. Based on his personal experience and his academic study of the system he saw that, even though there were a few good individuals, on balance the chances for improvement within it were slim. Given the multiple experiences and study that have informed his perspective on the police, his decision is more than a career choice – it is an indictment.

The stories the participants tell reveal that the police have exerted a heavy influence over their lives. No aspect of their lives has been free from the presence of the police. They encounter police at home, on the street, at school, and at work. Regardless of whether their interactions have been positive or negative, the scope is exhaustive. The stories show that interactions could sometimes be positive but that they have been, on the whole, negative and tinged with threat and direct violence. In a sense, the mixed nature of the interactions may be worse than if all the interactions were negative. When you know who your enemy is by a pattern of consistent actions, you can mentally prepare yourself for future interactions. You know who you are dealing with. But the participants don't have that luxury. They have to decide whether they are dealing with someone who will ticket them capriciously or play basketball with them. Navigating interactions with police requires a constant assessment of individual motivations and demeanors. The potential for this to frustrate people is clear in Jordin's blunt explanation of why she calls the police snakes, "they'll do anything, they'll do anything."

## Child and Family Services

Child and Family Services is a large presence in the stories the participants tell about growing up. CFS is a branch of the provincial government charged with the oversight of family life. It is a massive department with many functions, but the function of CFS that features most prominently in the stories of the participants is the power to investigate families and remove their children. Three of the participants in this study have spent time as wards of CFS and every participant knows someone who has either been removed from their family or whose family has been investigated by CFS. The power and presence of CFS has shaped their actions, constrained their freedom, and dramatically coloured their view of themselves in relation to society. Somewhat paradoxically, some participants have also found ways to use the CFS system to suit their purposes. These situations have usually involved the intercedence of advocates, creative navigational skills, or the presence of unique individuals within the system. Even with the exceptional situations where the system has been used for good considered, the overall experience of participants with it has been characterized by fear and disruption.

### *A Difficult Balance*

Before outlining the stories that explain the threatening nature of CFS it is important to note that there are exceptions. Most of them have to do with individuals within the system who work to maintain humanity. These advocates, social workers, and foster parents are admirable. They helped Jon become a ward of the system to gain independence from his family when they could not support him. Jordin has ongoing relationships with the social worker assigned to her by CFS and with the woman who cared for her when she was in foster care. Both Jon and Jordin are deeply grateful for those who helped them. Their gratitude and the good that has come from the

system are part of the complexity of CFS. It is such a common aspect of the stories the participants told that it is almost best understood as the weather in Winnipeg – always a factor to be aware of, usually severe and often unpredictable, sometimes offering fleeting moments of peace. The stories of success within the system will be explored later on in some detail but before delving into the dark side of the participants' experiences with CFS it is important to note that it is a complex structure.

Derwin's assessment of the system does a good job of introducing this exploration of stories about CFS:

> CFS? I feel like they're trying to do good, but they kind of do it in a bad way maybe. Because I know there are some positives. Like I've heard people's positivity of it, heard negatives of it, like positive and just like, yeah, going to like a actual loving family and they get why that they're in there, but there's also negatives of them just coming in and taking the kid from the hospital.

Derwin, in his characteristically balanced approach to life, sets helpful parameters for understanding CFS. On one hand, CFS responds to real need and there are stories of people finding a safe and caring place. On the other hand, CFS has immense power that can operate in truly harsh ways. Derwin's reference to the highly publicized removal of newborn babies from their mothers in Winnipeg hospital maternity wards demonstrates this. Understanding CFS through the eyes of the participants requires holding the potential for good with the potential for bad in balance and never forgetting the immensity of the power it wields.

***Loss of Culture***

Summer was clear about one of the negative aspects of the CFS system in the following exchange that links it to the history of how governments have treated Indigenous people:

> Summer: I feel like CFS is just another way to oppress Indigenous people.
>
> Marc: Yeah?
>
> Summer: Especially our kids.
>
> Marc: Yeah.
>
> Summer: Because when they go into care, it's like they lose part of their identity. It's kind of like residential school. They lose their identity. They don't have that culture in their life.

The connection Summer makes between the residential school system and CFS is vitally important. Just like the residential school system did, CFS removes children from Indigenous families at a staggering rate. By making the connection between the system of residential schooling and CFS, Summer shows that she sees a systemic rather than episodic danger. This is not a matter of individual cases of removal posing a problem. The extent of the removals and the potential loss of cultural identity that they create are bright red flags marking the continuance of state interference in Indigenous lives.

***Fear, Surveillance, Apprehension***

One of Jon's recollections about growing up which I quoted in part earlier highlights another pernicious effect of CFS on inner city families:

> When I was growing up the CFS was watching our house and us growing up right? Lots of the kids. So, they knew there was partying in the house, they knew there was kids in

> the house, this stuff, but no one ever came. But anyways. And then yeah, so even the police knew the house, right? Because they would always be calling for disturbances, whatever. So, CFS and police definitely knew our house.

Two things emerge from Jon's story. The first is the sense of being watched. According to the stories that participants related, it is common to be surveilled by CFS. Whether for justifiable reasons or not, the idea that a very powerful entity is watching and judging your family has a destabilizing emotional effect. The other feature of Jon's story is the link between CFS and the police. The two systems intersect, adding additional surveillance and increasing the level of threat that participants reported feeling in their homes.

The threat that Jon's story highlights is well-justified. Misty has extensive professional and personal experience with CFS. I asked her for her perspective on it and she highlighted the unease that inner-city students feel towards the system and some reasons for it:

> Misty: Regardless of the situation at home, students do not want to be in CFS. They know that the situation is unsafe, and CFS doesn't seem like the better option ever. Just simply because you are then away from family, away from friends, and ripped from everything that you do know and that you do have a little bit of control over.
>
> Marc: Is it common for kids who are apprehended by CFS to stay in the same school that they were going to?
>
> Misty: No. Most of the time no. Well, they... likely that they will start or try, but then it almost never actually happens.
>
> Marc: Why?

Misty: Because they have to go wherever they're placed. They don't get to choose. There’s never a choice of where you get to stay and what school you get to, whether or not you're even in the system to begin with.

Marc: So is the process of apprehension they go to a temporary placement and then the case is assessed?

Misty: It's always different based on the situation, of course. Whether or not, what's determined, but yeah, if it's unsafe [at home], there are temporary CFS places somewhere else, and then you’re probably moved again, and if that doesn't work out, then moved again and just on and on.

Consider the profundity of a child losing family, friends, school routines, books and supplies kept at school, familiar neighbourhood spots. Misty’s use of the violent imagery, “ripped from everything” clearly communicates the sense of threat that CFS creates in the lives of inner-city youth.

Misty has first-hand experience with being apprehended by CFS that shows how it can arrive in a child’s life with no warning and effect immediate and lasting change:

> It was quite a while ago. I think it was before we ended up down towards this side of the North End. I guess the school had gotten a phone call about fighting in the home and so we were apprehended at the school in the middle of the day. My parents had no idea what was going on until we were already gone. All I remember was being at a strange person’s house for over a month with like eight other kids and the food being so bland and gross that it was just—that was my entire life for the entre month, just bland, grey. That’s all I remember it being.

The greyness of Misty's memory is striking. It is hard to imagine how a child might feel in such a situation, but Misty's image of all the colour draining out of her life helps.

Misty is clear that things in her home were not good before her apprehension. She is equally clear that the CFS intervention did nothing to improve them:

> My parents did what they had to do and they hid what they needed to hide in order to get me and my brother back and then they went back to what they had always been—just in a more secretive manner.

Misty's comment about secrecy highlights a common effect of living under the gaze of CFS on participants. Facing a powerful, unpredictable, and often unjust system creates a sense of distrust and fear and leads to taking risks and concealment. Misty makes this clear in her reflection on what she learned from being placed in care of CFS:

> Misty: But from that experience I knew – I'm going to choose to couch surf and do whatever I need to do in order to be where I want to be rather than be somewhere where someone says I have to be because they say it's better for me. So yeah, I chose not to tell the school anything and I just figured it out on my own. Do I wish it would have been more accessible for me to be, "Hey it's not safe for me at home, I'm under 18, I would like to be somewhere else"? Absolutely, but that is not an option. You have to be 18 or you have to be in the CFS system. There is no other alternative.
>
> Me: so that means…
>
> Misty: Pick your poison.

Finding an empty spot on a couch in a friend's house and taking the risk of being kicked out or mistreated while there versus giving up the choice of where to live and the possibility of going

back home? Which poison will do more harm? It is an unfair choice. It is also painfully ironic when you consider that the ostensible purpose of the system that creates it is to care for children.

***Constant Threat and Continuing Entanglements***

The stories participants told made it clear that being engaged with CFS is best understood as a process rather than an event. It is an engagement that, once begun, is very hard to end. One of the most common ways the process starts is through a call from a teacher to CFS indicating concern about a child's welfare. Misty explained how this simple, likely well-intentioned action can have long-term consequences:

> Once the process starts, even though it seems like a very simple phone call of, "I'm unsure that something's going on," then starts years of process with that family. That just because somebody said something out of anger, you've now started something that can take years, and if something is out of place in the home when they come to see it, that could cause something to happen so that all of the young ones are taken away. For a misunderstanding. For an angry comment.

Once entangled in the system, families are subjected to regular supervision by social workers. Deep consequences hang in the balance of that supervision.

Should a family have their children removed by CFS the process of getting them back is very complex. It is so common and so complex that one inner-city neighbourhood has developed a grassroots advocacy group to help. Summer explained its genesis and function:

> Summer: Yeah. So, Fearless R2W, it's to support and advocate for the parents who have lost their kids to the system and are trying to get them back. Because a lot of the time they won't really have good reasons for taking them away.

Marc: Right.

Summer: It's just ... Yeah. It's, it's stupid.

Marc: And once they're gone, is it hard to get them back?

Summer: It could be a simple little thing that gets them apprehended. And then to get them back, everything needs to be perfect. Right?

The fact that the community has mobilized to create supports for getting lost children back can be interpreted in two ways. On one hand it offers encouraging evidence of the vitality and cohesion in the inner city. On the other, it points to just how big a problem the removal of children is. I can only imagine the frustration of trying to make your house fit someone else's definition of perfect while my children are in a stranger's house. From the stories told by the participants, there are many families for whom the thing I can't imagine is their everyday, long-term reality.

**Intersections and Incoherence**

The police and CFS feature most prominently in the stories of participants but it is essential to understand that they refer to the system rather than individual components for a reason. In the experience of participants, the police and CFS are the public face of an intertwined and incoherent system that includes courts, jails, housing authorities, and financial assistance. The system is intertwined in that interactions with one component can create consequences within other components and every interaction with one component increases the likelihood of dealing with another. The system is incoherent because the intersections between the components occur outside of the view of those interacting with it. If there is a logic to the way the different components interact it is not apparent to those being 'served,' surveilled, or

otherwise subjected to it. Two stories from Jordin demonstrate the system's intertwined and incoherent nature.

Jordin lives in an apartment with her toddler. Sometimes she shares the apartment with her boyfriend, the father of her child. He has worked off and on out of the province. His out of province work could lead to a financially rewarding future with job security but he finds it very hard to be away. He also finds it hard to provide the emotional and practical support Jordin and their toddler need. Most, if not all, of the childcare responsibilities have fallen to her. Still, as tentative as things are, they are trying to build something together. Jordin recently helped him find a job locally, but their relationship is still tentative. He relies on living with her rent-free while he tries to re-establish himself in the city. It is a difficult situation which, ironically, is made more difficult by Jordin's interactions with the system.

Jordin's description of her current homelife occurred in the context of a conversation about the system. Jordin became a ward of CFS in her mid-teens. When she reached the age of 18 she applied for an extension of care from CFS which would help pay for childcare, post-secondary, and housing costs. That extension was granted, but it was not clear to her at the time what the term would be. It was a process that confused Jordin. I asked her about how the length was determined and she replied, "I guess depending on how I'm doing. There's a lot of things changing now, so they're cutting a lot of people off from extensions, so I only got one year." Jordin explained that it was unclear how they made these decisions. She was being monitored and did not know whether the end of the extension of care was due to her doing well in the eyes of the monitors, doing poorly in their eyes, or simply because of government funding cutbacks. Regardless, she had learned her extension was set to expire the same month that we were talking.

To continue attending school and pay her rent, Jordin applied for Employment Insurance (EI). There are a variety of categories that EI has for applicants based on level of need and living situation. Jordin applied as a single parent. Her intake meeting with EI was scheduled for the day following my one-on-one interview with her. She was clearly nervous about it. I wanted to encourage her and so I told her that if they saw the same resourceful, intelligent, and caring mom in her that I did she had nothing to worry about. She said they hoped they would too. The rest of our exchange was as follows:

Marc: Right. Well, speak your truth when you go to that intake meeting.

Jordin: I can't.

Marc: You can't?

Jordin: No.

Marc: What happens?

Jordin: Because I applied for single parent.

Marc: Oh, but you are. It's just that he's-

Jordin: If they know that he's living here while I'm applying, Plus I have to say... because they'll want to get me to get child support. But I'll be like, well he's homeless and he has no paying job or anything.

Marc: Right. And then... oh my God.

Jordin: Yeah.

Marc: Sorry, Jordin this is such complicated stuff.

The reason I said, “Oh my God” was because the anxiety etched on Jordin’s face as she described her situation made the stakes of her dilemma powerfully clear.

If Jordin told the truth about her boyfriend living with her the risk was two-fold. First, she would be under suspicion for lying at the time of her application. In which case, her entry may be delayed while the situation was investigated, her status as a single mother applicant would be altered to a category that provided less support, or her application might be denied altogether. There would be consequences for her boyfriend as well. He would be expected to begin paying child support so Jordin would have the funds to care for their child. That seems to make sense, but sharing financial obligations was also the goal that Jordin and her boyfriend were working toward by having him live with her while he began a new job. If Jordin followed the system's process to ensure that he contributed and her boyfriend missed a payment, he would be entered into a different part of the system, the criminal justice part. It was a situation with no clear path to resolution. Lying to the EI folks carried its own risks. If caught cohabiting with her boyfriend she would lose her benefits and homelessness would be the next challenge to navigate.

As all of this dawned on me, I began to understand something about the cumulative effect of living with the system. It was very hard for me to reconcile the Jordin I had gotten to know through the storytelling sessions with the person she fears she may be seen as by the people at EI. During the storytelling sessions she was part of, her toddler was always present. She and I took turns entertaining and feeding snacks to the child as we told and listened to stories. Jordin's attentive focus on every aspect of this little life and building a world around it was clear. I saw her as a young mom who had overcome tremendous odds and challenges. She was in the process of building up a well-structured life for her child and working on the rudiments of a caring relationship with her boyfriend. Things were very much in process.

Everyone who has been in a relationship while raising an infant knows that there is no such thing as predictability or reliability and yet, there is no category in the EI bureaucracy for

'in process.' Even Facebook has a box for 'it's complicated' for describing relationships! It was frustrating to see Jordin puzzling through the ethics of lying in order to get what she needed to support her family from a system that is supposed to be set up to do just that. What are you supposed to do when your reality does not fit the definitions other people offer? I wanted to go to the meeting with Jordin and help out. It seemed to me that any reasonable person who heard Jordin's story would bend whatever rules they needed to bend to help her succeed. But I didn't grow up with the system. I still have an indwelling, and it would seem incorrect, belief about the trustworthiness of social structures and those who work within them.

Jordin's deliberation about lying in her EI intake meeting is based on extensive experience with the system. That experience has taught her that telling the truth is no guarantee of fair treatment. In fact, the opposite has been her truth. Recall, she is the one who called the police "snakes" and told me, "they'll do anything." That observation came from a story she told about the way her family was being treated as a result of her brother being charged with a crime:

> Jordin: My little brother is in jail.
>
> Marc: Okay.
>
> Jordin: And he's not talking about nothing, so the police are trying to charge everyone who lives with my grandparents, even my 13-year-old brother.
>
> Marc: What?
>
> Jordin: Mm-hmm. Just to get him to say something.
>
> Marc: So, they're trying to coerce a confession or information by threatening to?
>
> Jordin: Charge everyone.

The threat to Jordin's family that this posed went far beyond merely being charged with a crime. As is common with inner-city families, they had multiple intersecting engagements with the

system that would be called into play if the police proceeded with charges. Jordin made this clear:

> Marc: Does your family have legal help in this?
>
> Jordin: Mm-hmm, everyone got lawyers the same day that they found out.
>
> Marc: Okay. How do you even go and get a lawyer?
>
> Jordin: I'm not sure. But even CFS is involved now. We had to let them know what's happening just in case cops do come.
>
> Marc: Because your Grandma and Grandpa are foster parents too, right?
>
> Jordin: Mm-hmm.
>
> Marc: So they work for CFS.
>
> Jordin: Yeah, so then my grandparents, CFS, and CFS's lawyers were all in a meeting last week.
>
> Marc: I mean if they faced a charge that would challenge their, what do you call it? I mean, that's how they make a living, right?
>
> Jordin: Mm-hmm.

To be foster parents, Jordin's grandparents are required to have clear criminal record checks. They act as foster parents for many of their grandchildren and were Jordin's foster parents for a time when she was younger. By threatening them with a criminal charge the police threaten their livelihood and the unity of their family.

As Jordin's stories reveal, the system is an interconnected web. However, the connections are not laid out in a logical or transparent fashion. Jordin's extended care arrangement with CFS connected with her housing arrangements and the EI system and she knew that her situation was being monitored. However, she did not know what exactly she was being monitored for or what

the repercussions of specific actions might be. Likewise, her brother's actions created a domino effect of connections running throughout the system – encompassing CFS, the police, and the courts. Each of the dominoes required discernment and protective action on her family's part and none of them followed a transparent or open process. While the connections between the various aspects of the system may be coherent enough to be manipulated by police officers or officers of the courts, they are an incoherent and fraught jumble of relations from Jordin's perspective. In fact, threat seems to be the only coherent factor connecting the system for her.

Jordin's stories about the intersections within the system offer a really important lens for understanding the other stories the participants tell. Looking through that lens the individual variability of their interactions lessens and a recognizable form takes shape. Rather than seemingly random street harassments, home surveillance, or investigations and removals, the actions of the system, taken together, share key characteristics. These three key characteristics all have to do with the operation of power and its effects. First, the system operates through surveillance. Second, the system operates through a cycle of promises and threats. Third, the system is incoherent yet interconnected. These three characteristics created suspicion, fear, confusion, and stress in the lives of the participants and their families.

The nature and effect of the system is a deeply frustrating finding to make. The agencies that make up the system are supposed to offer support and protection. Instead, they offer the opposite. This might only rise to the level of irony rather than frustration except for one blatantly obvious fact – the need that the participants experienced as they grew up was profound. All of them lived in crowded and often insecure housing, all of them spent nights hungry, all of them faced the stigma and privations of poverty. Rather than finding resolution for these problems in the system they found surveillance and threat. Given the oppressive nature of the system in the

lives of the participants, the examples they offer of success through or within it are even more remarkable.

**Caring Individuals and The Next Generation**

As I stated earlier, there are exceptions to the rule when it comes to the system. Jon's liberation from his parents was the first step in a family renaissance. It was his work that allowed him to graduate high school and university. It was his dedication to his family that has allowed him to mentor his brothers into new, productive paths. But it was CFS that provided the program that he needed to take that first step. There is no doubt that support is needed and the cases where that support was effective are important to consider. As the person with the most extensive experience with CFS, it is not surprising that Jordin offered one such example.

In her mid-teens, after a fractious period living with her Grandparents because her mother was in jail, Jordin was moved to a group home. Two individuals were essential in the success she has enjoyed because of the move. The first was the social worker who was assigned to her. Jordin explained that her worker was also a foster mother and used that experience to inform how she approached her job. When her worker came into her life Jordin was in bad shape. She explained that her mom's jail term was part of the problem saying, "the same year she got locked up was the same time when my mental health went down and I was depressed and all that." During that period her behaviour became erratic, "I had a boyfriend and I would leave all the time – and they [my grandparents] kicked me out." This could have prompted further crisis if not for the caring intercedence of Jordin's worker.

Jordin explained that her worker used her own web of connections to find the right person to provide a foster home. Jordin explained:

> My worker, she knew this foster mom named Irene. She actually got a call about another girl and she declined then got the call about me the same day and she said yeah.

When Jordin told me this she paused and took a deep breath. I asked her why and she explained that it felt, “good to be chosen.” She went on to explain the importance of Irene. First, Irene is Indigenous, and lived in a lakeside rural community with lots of other Indigenous people. That was part of what gave Jordin what she described as, “peace of mind.” Second, Irene provided lessons Jordin needed. By her own admission, Jordin was trying to fill her needs in unhealthy ways. For instance, the boyfriend she described was, “crazy! oh yeah! I didn’t know, it was my first relationship and he was a bit older and I needed someone at that time.” With Irene, Jordin was able to learn about those needs:

> She helped me grow, like mature a lot. She taught me so much about relationships and myself. What’s right and wrong and how somebody should really treat you and how you don’t have to put yourself through that and you don’t even need a relationship.

Embedded in Irene’s home, Jordin developed a newfound sense of herself, developed an understanding of how important a routine is to her mental health, and other things that have stayed with her until today.

Jordin’s worker helped her re-establish herself in the city after her time with Irene. She connected her to a counselling service free to wards of CFS. Initially Jordin moved back in with her Grandparents but was able to use her newly developed skills and self-knowledge to get into an independent living suite. The turn around was remarkable. Jordin is clear in her appreciation for her worker and Irene. She explained that in Irene she didn’t just find a foster mom but a lasting connection to an extended family. In her words, “I still see them all the time.”

Jordin's positive experience must be understood within the context of her larger story. She is still entangled in many aspects of the system. Her success with her worker and Irene is remarkable but they have not led to complete emancipation from its effects. That said, it is likely she would not be doing as well as she is without them. The intercedence of a social worker who is competent and caring along with a culturally appropriate placement in the home of a caring foster mom are both examples of what good can come of the CFS system.

CFS is a particularly interesting part of the system. Within many participants' families and friend networks CFS provides employment opportunities. The mom of one Derwin's friends growing up was a CFS social worker. Another friend of his had a mom who was a foster mom. Likewise, Jordin's grandparents are able to get support for caring for their extended family by being foster parents to them. This creates a complex situation. Looked at through the most positive lens it may promise the potential for more caring individuals like Irene to do good work within the system by creating culturally appropriate and caring spaces. Through a different lens, one informed by the stories of threat and removal told by participants, it may just be a testament to the extent of the power of CFS to control the lives of people in the inner city.

CFS' role as both community threat and community employer doesn't seem to be a reality that is fading. Both Sage and Jordin have siblings who have found gainful employment within the system. Beginning as a cleaner in a CFS group home, Jordin's sister has become a house manager. Sage and Jordin both look up to their siblings as success stories and important influences. If they have inspired their little sisters maybe there is good reason to see them as agents of positive change within the system. Likewise, many of the participants in this research are actively engaged in advocating for Indigenous and inner-city youth. The stories they told me show that they have deep knowledge of the paths that young people face dealing with the system.

The spirit of resistance and determination that each of them embodies, coupled with their knowledge of the system, definitely offers a reason for optimism that their advocacy will pay dividends.

In summary, the participants' stories reveal that their lives have been and continue to be deeply impacted by the presence of a system of state power. That power takes the shape of a variety of institutions, the most impactful of which are the Winnipeg Police Service and Child and Family Services. The system is a compulsory part of their lives. It offers necessary but incoherently organized supports. Furthermore, it operates through a cycle of promise and threat and creates a web of surveillance over the lives of people like my participants. Significantly, the stories shared with me show that the system shares some key characteristics with another state compulsory part of the state's apparatus – schooling.

**The System vs. The School System**

As I listened to the stories about school that the participants told, the similarities between their experience in the school system and their experience with the system jumped out. At times, the two systems seemed indistinguishable. I wondered if what they were telling me was that the school was simply an extension of the system. And yet, there were important stories that showed distinctions. Also, the participants often smiled and laughed about some of their memories – expressions that never crossed their faces when they discussed their interactions with other parts of the system.

I asked a direct question to participants during the one-on-one conversations that we had together because I was perplexed by the similarities and the differences between their stories of the system and their stories of school. I framed the question to try and find out where school fit

from their perspective. I asked each participant to imagine two boxes. One box held institutions described in the system like Child and Family Services, the Winnipeg Police Service, and Manitoba Housing. The other box held places and programs that reflected the vitality and the cultural fabric of the North End community they call home. These places, which will be explored in the final findings chapter, tended to be community run programs that supported cultural, academic, and employment development. Having set up the two imaginary boxes, I asked each participant which one I should put school into. None of the participants would place school squarely in either of the boxes. Each of them chose to locate school somewhere on a continuum between the two boxes. Where they placed them, and why they placed them there illuminates the relationship between schooling and the system. This is important context for beginning to see school through their eyes.

Of all the participants, Meghin located school nearest to the things in her community that she enjoyed and the furthest from the institutions young people like her encounter in the inner city. She was careful not to generalize though, saying:

> I think it's different for everybody because for me, I really loved school. I was that kid who would go to school and then stay after school, and I was always in the afterschool programs. But for other people, since they have so many other things going on at home, school just seems like a burden, and they feel like they're forced to go, which you are forced to go as a student and as a kid.

Meghin captures two key points the participants made in explaining where they located school on the continuum between the system and their community. The first is that, like the system, schools compel participation through the force of the state. The second, is that, like the system, schools are insensitive to the texture and complexity of inner-city students' lives.

Summer was very clear about what she thought. For her, schooling was very much like the system because, “It’s not built for us, like, it doesn’t accommodate people’s cultures or mental health.” A similar sentiment was expressed by Jon who saw little space between schooling and the system. He stated:

> I felt ashamed of being Indigenous growing up in elementary and middle school. And no representation, no nothing, right? So, it was just like, it’s tough. It’s tough to try to balance these worlds when you don't know them.

Jon expressed frustration with how schools, like other state systems, failed to recognize the value of Indigenous people or even the truth of Canadian history. He referenced the calls to action made by Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation commission and the need for Indigenous youth to learn about themselves in schools, saying:

> It's just like, it's brutal. Kids need to learn this stuff. If we want to—it's just as simple as to pay attention to the calls to action. Education. Implement one thing, and that could go a long way. And our kids won't feel so discouraged.

It is not surprising that participants connect schools to the system seeing as they report facing inflexibility and ignorance of their reality within them.

Relevance was also a factor that participants used to decide whether schools were the same as the system or not. Derwin, having attended four different high schools, has some expertise on the matter. In his experience, as schools got bigger, they became impersonal and more like the system. Smaller schools offered the chance to get instruction that had practical relevance for his life. Misty, like Derwin, identified a mismatch between the stuff of school and the interests and needs of students like her, saying, “Schools are needed, there are absolutely still skills students need in order to do well later  However, they're not relevant to how life is right

now." I asked Misty whether she meant the content of instruction when she said that school was irrelevant. She made it clear that she meant something bigger that curriculum. She pointed to the level of unmet needs children have in the inner city and said, "kids need schools, they need that social factor, they need everything." For her, relevance would mean recognizing and responding to all of the needs students have, rather than only the academic ones.

Misty's comment recalled Jon's use of the term 'two worlds' to describe the gap between life in school and life in the community. A relevant school experience would require a successful bridging of that gap – such that students like the participants could find purpose in it. His experience was that school was not relevant:

> because it is surface based and there's no, they don't put meaning behind it so, it's just kind of, we're learning this, this, and this everyday but it doesn't really make a connection with you.

Meghin explained how going to a school that isn't relevant to you felt:

> it can feel like a burden to attend – especially growing up and seeing people who have made it by without that education, sometimes it just seems like, "Then why do I need it?"

Overall, the sentiments participants associated with schools included feeling burdened, unrecognized, and purposeless.

Importantly, the bleak feelings the participants associated with school were not the only feelings they had about them. There were redeeming experiences and based on those they see a difference between schools and the system. The smiles and laughter that were interspersed with participants' grim assessments of schooling came from recollections of the relationships they developed during it. Some of those relationships were with fellow students. But influential other relationships were developed with teachers. It seems from the testimony of the participants that

these relationships are a key factor for why schools remain different from the system. Misty bluntly assessed the importance of the teachers who fostered relationships with, “Well, if you take out the teachers in the equation, and take out the nice teachers, then yeah, school probably goes in the box where CFS and police would go.” Derwin talked about the importance of relationships to the feeling of comfort in the small school where he succeeded with, “They had people who cared, they talked to you, they interact with you. If you said ‘Hi’ to them, you can say ‘Hi’ to them, strike up a conversation and walk in the hall with them.” These caring relationships went a long way to move schools away from the system in the minds of the participants.

Some participants also hold out hope for what schools might be able to do. In their eyes, schools promise potential that other parts of the system don’t. Summer remarked that even though the school system ignores cultural identities and mental health challenges common in the inner city, the school she graduated from was different. In her words, “I feel like it tries to be its own kind of thing.” The ability for individual schools to be responsive holds promise. Likewise, the work of individual teachers offers hope. Jon’s work supporting students in some of the same schools he attended has given him hope. He remarked on the experience of working in schools using the word he chose to describe them—institutions:

> I did not want to be part of an institution. I want to make change. But sometimes to make change in an institution is to work in the institution. So, there's individuals in the institutions that are just amazing. And it's unfortunate, right? And but the good thing is that some of these teachers are aware. And they are like, "You've got to try to do something about this."

The participants did indicate that their school experience was, in general, similar to their experience with the rest of the system. But important exceptions to the rule exist. The stories that the participants told about school illustrate a stark picture of what school can feel like for Indigenous inner-city youth. Although they are built to educate children, the participants often succeeded in spite of schools, with the crucial support of caring and exceptional teachers and the supportive strength offered by culture. Illuminating that picture is the purpose of the next two chapters.

# Chapter Six: The School System

This chapter and the one that follows represent the participants' experiences with school. In this chapter the focus is on the negative aspects of schooling. It covers the ways that the structure and operation of school created situations that made them feel they were held in suspicion, misunderstood, and discriminated against. The chapter following considers how human and cultural factors created rare but essential supportive spaces and moments within the school system. To appreciate the importance of those rarities it is necessary to recognize just how alienating a place school could be for the participants. In the pages following, the participants' stories will reveal that reality.

## Seeing Through Different Eyes: School as a Game

During one storytelling session Jordin described her time in junior high. I am relating it here in depth for two reasons. First, because it is a powerful example of something that was a common element of all the participants' experiences during school. At times, school was a profoundly alienating and absurd place. Second, because hearing Jordin's experiences vividly recalled my own time teaching in an inner-city school. As Jordin related hallway interactions with teachers, I was struck by how very similar they were to my own hallway interactions with junior high students. Yet, her explanation of those interactions, why they happened, and what they meant to her are worlds away from how I saw them when I was a teacher. The space between what she was experiencing as a student and how I interpreted the actions and motivations of students like her, lies at the heart of this study. The truth of the participants' experiences cannot be argued with. It was their reality. The fact that their reality was so deeply misunderstood by teachers like me is a central finding in this research. I offer this story as a

bridge for readers to use to cross over the space between the school life of teachers into the school life of the participants – students like Jordin.

Junior high was a very active experience for Jordin. She describes her school routine as being anything but routine. She stated that, "I'd fight all the time, even stupid stuff" would get her into conflict. At first, I understood her to mean that she was in physical fights regularly but, although she did engage in fist fights, she also used to word 'fight' to express being in persistent conflict with the school. This conflict enveloped the school building, including classrooms, hallways, bathrooms, the school office.

In Jordin's stories the hallways figure prominently. Between the classroom and the office, they functioned as an in between space that she navigated with expertise. Constantly in transit to avoid being seen, detained, or harassed for not being in class, Jordin found spaces to be and routines to follow that afforded her furtive moments of freedom within the school. Bathrooms were a common hiding place – and a place where she could find company, if not community:

> I started hiding with my friends – hiding in the school. We would always just go into the bathroom and hide there until class was over, lunch time, or we would like leave class just to go hide somewhere.

Another place Jordin's cohort would hide was a place she described as, "just like an exit – called the elevator room." From the outside it would appear they were close friends, but their time together wasn't positive. As Jordin explained:

> We just sat there and hanged out there and talked and sometimes it got really dark and I don't feel like talking about that because we were in grade eight and my friends, they were really toxic with each other.

Jordin explained that during this period in her life she was plagued by a lack of confidence and anxiety. These feelings, which at a low level are not uncommon for teenagers, were pronounced for Jordin. She said:

> I felt like I didn't fit in at school, or even at home and how bad my mental health was, that was the worst part of my life, so far.

Her mental health challenges were exacerbated by the fact that there was no place in the school, whether with her classmates or her teachers, where she felt comfortable.

Jordin didn't spend all her time in the hallway. In fact, she said that for the most part she would be caught in the hallway and sent back to class. But Jordin's descriptions of time inside classrooms illustrate why she felt more comfortable in the hallways:

> There was one time, grade eight, it was my first day of class, and I asked the teacher what class this was because I wasn't sure. He just kicked me out. Everyone was laughing. I guess he was like, "is there any questions?" and I was like, "What class it this?" I think it was English class. He was like, "Get out."

In another classroom story, she sustained a cut while joking around with tape and scissors working on a project with a classmate. She asked to get a Band-Aid and the teacher refused to let her. After telling this story, Sidney showed the scar from the cut to me. Jordin explained that these interactions led her to develop a general approach to dealing with teachers. When not in direct conflict she explained, "I didn't talk to them. I would shut everyone out all the time." Whether being kicked out or forced to stay, classroom life for Jordin in junior high was about conflict and avoidance rather than academic progress. In fact, Jordin couldn't recall a time of significant academic achievement for the duration of junior high.

Inevitably, the classroom and hallway conflict led to interventions by the school administration. Jordin recalls frequent meetings with the school counselor and the principal:

> Sometimes they would call my Papa and sometimes we would have meetings and talk about it and I would like pretend that I'm gonna not do something again and then when they leave, I start doing it again.

As Jordin described the pattern of bouncing from classroom conflict to hallway conflict to office conflict, her use of the words, "pretend that I'm gonna not do something again" stood out to me. She had been through the pattern of conflict and consequence within the school so many times that she learned that the consequences weren't truly consequential. By learning and saying the words she needed to say, she could ensure nothing would change. Moreover, her teachers and the school administration were involved in the same cycle. The whole thing struck me as absurd. Nobody, it seemed, was engaging with each other on any real level – they were all playing a role. It was as if everyone involved was playing a game and the game was called school. This idea, of school as a game, became clear within a final story Jordin told about junior high.

In this story, the plot is similar to others Jordin told. She and her classmates were being loud and the teacher was trying to get their attention. Jordin was having none of it. Conflict ensues. The following excerpt from our storytelling session details what happened:

> Jordin: This one harsh teacher – she got mad at me and I just got up and started calling her names in class… [Jordin smiles and hesitates]
>
> Marc: You can say the word
>
> Jordin I called her a bitch and then, she stopped talking, and just sat down. I was scared because if it was anyone else it would have been the office right away but [pause] I feel

like she did know that I was struggling a lot. She just stopped talking and just sat down – she's a really harsh teacher too so, I'm still scared [laughing]!

Marc: So she just sat down – that's it? What did you do?

Jordin: That was it – I apologized to her eventually like three years later – she was really happy to see me!

Marc: What does that tell you?

Jordin: I think that if you know them at their worst it is easier to talk to them.

This story was remarkably different than the others Jordin told. Rather than a tale of escalating conflict leading to the same pattern of being sent into the hallway or down to the office, the teacher sat down. As Jordin told the story I expected her to tell me that the teacher started crying but that was not what happened. In fact, nothing actually happened. Yet, Jordin's interpretation of the moment shows that something significant did. Somehow, in the act of sitting down, Jordin felt recognized. It scared her. The teacher did not follow the well-rehearsed script. Rather than an absurd storyline playing out once again, Jordin and the teacher remained in the room – together. The happiness that the teacher displayed when Jordin returned years later speaks to me of the veracity of Jordin's interpretation of the moment. So too does the fact that such a relatively small conflict looms so large in Jordin's memories of a very tumultuous school career. For that moment, school was no longer a game. She and the teacher stopped playing their roles.

As I mentioned earlier, Jordin's stories about school brought me back to moments from my own experience. Most of the stories she told were from her junior high years. Her school was big, with lots of teachers she did not have classes with working in it. I taught grades 10-12 in a school that contains grades 7-12. So, like in Jordin's school, there were lots of students who

attended that I didn't know. Just as in Jordin's school, in the school where I worked there was a cohort of junior high students who spent a lot of time in the halls.

My classroom was in the school's main hallway. It was a major transportation route for the school. The cafeteria was on one end, the stairs to the junior high were on the other end. There were student bathrooms in between. The main doors to the school were located on the same hallway and through them was the school's field and the closest coffee shop. When I was assigned to hallway duty – which meant spending a class walking the halls to make sure nothing untoward was happening – this was the hallway where I spent most of my time. During my times on duty I encountered the same group of girls from the junior high multiple times. As they walked back and forth from the cafeteria to the stairs, I would approach them with the same lines that every other teacher on duty had been coached on using, "Hi girls, where are you supposed to be?" or a familiar variant, "Hi girls, aren't you are supposed to be in class?"

The response from the girls was predictable. Usually, they would ignore my words and keep on walking without acknowledging me. If I was behind them and called out to them, they would increase their pace and take the nearest stairs or exit. If I was in their path, they would reverse course. If I happened to be close enough to them so that our eyes would meet and they couldn't ignore me, they would split up and run off in different directions. My responses to them were equally predictable. I would follow them. I would ask who they were. Sometimes I would run. In nearly every case, it became a game of cat and mouse – one which they would invariably win. It was not that I was a poor player in the game. I did my best. On one occasion I went to the vice-principal in charge of the junior high and figured out the names of the girls. I then printed off their timetables and posted them on the door of my classroom so I could tell them what class they were supposed to be in rather than ask them to tell me. The next day each of the timetables

had been torn down. Thankfully, they won the game every time we played. I say thankfully because if I had caught them, I have to admit that I would have had no idea what I was supposed to do.

In the light of Jordin's stories, I have put a lot of energy into rethinking the time I spent following those girls in the hallway. I have investigated the assumptions that led me to spend so much time and effort into what was, in retrospect, a pretty absurd process. I know that I had assumptions about the girls. I assumed that they were in the hallway having fun with friends rather than attending classes. I had assumptions about their classes. I assumed that they were necessary and relevant, not to mention the whole reason for being in school. I also had assumptions about myself. I was a teacher and, as far as I was concerned, it was my job to teach classes. As I saw it, the presence of students skipping classes in the hallway flew in the face of my purpose for being there. I also have to admit that I took their refusal to acknowledge me personally and, looking back, I'm pretty sure those girls could read my frustration in my words and actions.

Jordin's stories, along with those of the other participants, have alerted me to the disconnection between my assumptions and the reality of school for them. Jordin's experience in classrooms was neither relevant nor necessary. From the stories she told it was clear that the content of the classes was secondary to the conflict within them. Furthermore, Jordin's time in the hallways wasn't about having fun with friends. Rather, it was about avoiding the confusion and conflict within the classroom. The people she was with, although she called them friends, were definitely not the source of fun. As for taking things personally – through Jordin's eyes I can see that running away from teachers had nothing to do with the individual character of any of them. The only place where my assumptions matched Jordin's was when it came to the role of

people like me, the teachers. She saw us as the people trying to get her to go places and do things she didn’t want to do. I suppose that’s what I saw myself as doing too.

If I had thought things through back then I might have realized that my interpretations of what those girls were doing, thinking, and feeling were not based on any understanding of their reality. The stories the participants told about school have gone a long way to show what that reality likely was. Every one of the participants coped with varying degrees of disruption at home and troublesome entanglements with the system. Each of them, despite being children, was very independent. They had to make decisions and take actions for themselves. When they got to school, that independence became a problem. The same independence and self-direction that helped them navigate challenges at home, in the neighbourhood, and with institutions became misconstrued as defiance and opposition within school. Misty, who experienced similar kinds of conflict as Jordin when she was in school, made this point clearly:

> That is part of what got me into trouble, yeah. Because I, again, I knew what I needed. I knew, I had to makes choices for myself for a long time, and when you go to school, and you have somebody saying, “Do it this way or not at all,” and “No, you're not allowed to do this,” and “No, you're not allowed to explain yourself because it doesn't matter,” well, I'm going to have issues with that. Sorry. I am. When I'm forced to make my own choices that I don't want to make in my daily life every day, I should be able to make choices at school when I have to be here every day.

Misty’s logic is hard to argue with when you see things from her perspective. When she, and Jordin, and the other participants walked through the halls at their schools they were walking in a world that was simultaneously the same and different from the world of many of her teachers. It

is through the words of their stories, considered in the pages that follow, that I hope to bring that world into view.

## Characteristics of School

The stories participants told about their time in school reveal key themes that were common to their experience. Overall, their experiences show that although they felt they were always being watched in school, they were rarely truly seen. Participants experienced schools as places that operated according to policies that didn't allow space for them to be treated as individual people. Two major aspects of the participants' lives were either ignored, misunderstood, or treated as a problem. Those two aspects were their Indigenous identity and the neighbourhood reality they lived in. As a result of their experiences, participants concealed aspects of their identity and experience to avoid discrimination and hopefully find success. In the participants' view, a big reason for the way they were viewed and treated at school was based on a bias against them and where they were from within the minds of the people working in the schools. Mental health challenges were common to many of the participants and, based on their stories, it is reasonable to see school as a contributing factor to those challenges. Finally, the participants, all of whom have graduated from high school and some of whom have gone on to post-secondary study, report a lingering lack of confidence in their academic abilities.

### *Being Watched Without Being Seen*

For all but one of the participants in this study, spending time in school meant spending time feeling watched. Mutual suspicion, them for the school and the school for them, was a characteristic feature of being in school. Jordin's story about being routinely followed

throughout the school was a common story amongst participants. The effect of those experiences was clear in Summer's comment that overall, school, "feels like it takes away your freedom." In a similar vein, Misty expressed that there was undue and insincere interest in her life from school staff. She said that for this reason, a trait common to her and her friends was that, "you learn to be a good liar."

Misty lied to hide her reality from teachers for two reasons. One was to avoid their judgement. She didn't trust that the challenges emerging from her homelife would be understood and she spoke from experience:

> All it takes is one adult. All it takes is feeling embarrassed or ashamed once to never, ever want to do that again, or put yourself in that situation again, absolutely.

Beyond avoiding judgement, another reason she lied was to avoid the real consequences of the school reporting her situation to CFS:

> no matter how bad my situation got at home, I didn't want to be in the CFS system. You just end up getting really good at problem solving so that it looks like you have things that you don't, and lying, and just making it seem like everything is okay.

It is clear from their stories of being surveilled at school and from the efforts participants put into hiding their reality from school that they could not safely be seen as their true selves when they were students.

### *Policies Before People*

Part of the reason for the suspicion participants felt for school was a result of their interactions with its system of policies and procedures. A predominant sense of being subject to unclear and inflexible rules and expectations came across in stories that I heard. A particularly

frustrating and illustrative example of this was offered by Derwin. Having finished elementary and junior high in a neighbourhood school, Derwin was registered in one of his school division's larger high schools. He didn't recall having any input into the choice of school or the courses he enrolled in. From the beginning of the school year he could tell that something was off about where he had been placed. He remembered:

> I knew I was put in like, a lower class. We were all in the same class and I'm like. Mmm… okay, I know what class I'm in. Because, I dunno just like the teachers and that. The two teachers, the English and math teachers were just like awful. I remember my friend Travis, he, isn't really good at math so like they called on him and he was like, 'I don't know.' And they were like, 'how come you don't know?' So, of course the English teacher had to jump in to and put her two cents in and was like, 'Come on Travis, it's easy, hurry up.' And I was like, what's wrong with these people? Like, just how they interact with students wasn't proper.

I asked Derwin whether it was just the manner of the teachers that told him he was in a 'lower class.' He elaborated:

> Well, in the morning we would be in our English class, like we would move from class to class like normal, but we were all together. That's how I started to get the feeling that like, this isn't a normal class.

Derwin also noted that everyone in his class was Indigenous while most of the students in other classes were Asian. This apparent segregation added to his sense that something wasn't right.

Derwin's experience with the class was dismal. His memories of the content of the classes and the manner of his teacher illustrate this:

> Honestly, I thought she was just there getting her paycheck. Like she was just there to teach. After the lesson she'd just go back and sit on her desk. She'd just assign normal English, reading studies and that, I forget the book. She was just, so much attitude came from her. I remember one time I started dozing off in class and she was like, if you don't want to come here and learn why don't you just go get a job… I'm like, get out of here!

Facing teachers who embarrassed him and assignments that bored him at school, Derwin was also going through a very difficult period at home. On the heels of the death of a close family member, Derwin's mom was drinking heavily and his home environment was too disruptive for him to sleep regular hours. Derwin explained that the result at school was, "my absences were horrible, I got kicked out of all my classes because of that." The school policy was that after missing 16 classes, students were automatically withdrawn.

Derwin knew that he had missed a lot of class due to the situation at home. However, he returned to school after Spring Break to try and make a fresh start. He wanted to find a different setting within the school, one where he could succeed. Derwin took the bus to school to ask for a new timetable:

> I went in because I didn't have a timetable and went into guidance and asked for a schedule and they were like, uh… you aren't scheduled for any classes. You gotta go see uh, [the school division] like in the other building. The administration building.

When Derwin told me this I was confused. I know the school that he was talking about. It has a large guidance department. I have also worked in a high school and had never, up to the moment Derwin told his story, heard of a student being told to go to the school division office to obtain a timetable. I asked for clarification, he responded, "They just said go to the school division. I just bussed back home." I have been in the school division administration building he was referred

to. When you enter you have to speak to a clerk, indicate who you have an appointment with, and be buzzed through a security door after the person you are seeing confirms that they wish to see you. I wasn't the only one who was astonished by Derwin's experience. When he clarified what they had asked him to do, Summer, who was also in the storytelling session, shook her head and said, "It's like they set him up to fail."

Sadly, Derwin's experience of discovering he was no longer a student and the absolute lack of interest or help in trying to help him become one again was not isolated. In fact, Derwin said:

> Everyone from [my elementary school] who went to that high school didn't graduate from there. Like, my group of friends there – none of us graduated from there. We all just said, nah.

Sage shared a similar story of her time at a different high school where she was told her absences would prevent her from succeeding and so she should not continue. Misty also faced a similar situation at yet another high school. Like Derwin and Sage, she was on her own in trying to find success within the school's rules and regulations. She was lucky to find the support of a community agency that provided in-school advocacy for kids living with poverty. Her reflection on what that meant to her is illustrative of the relationship between school policy and individual student reality:

> Teachers did not like me advocating for myself. I had to get somebody bigger than me in order to have my voice heard, and that is why [the agency] was so important to me. It had, it got my voice heard, I could yell, I could scream, I could talk, I could do whatever I wanted, it wasn't going to be heard until somebody else said it.

Misty's use of the words, "someone bigger than me" speak volumes about the feeling the participants expressed when they described interacting with school policies. They faced a system where they felt too small to be seen, heard, or trusted.

Remarkably, Misty's advocate was able to work out a plan with the school that led to her eventual success. It was based on a recognition of her worth and her challenges. She explained:

> They just, yeah, it took having an adult standing there with me and say for me, "I understand you want me to be a perfect student, be here at 9:00 am every day, but my reality is, I'm not going to bed till 5:00, and you expect me to be up here and walk to school and be here for 9:00 every day. I'm sorry, I can't do that every single day of the week. We need to problem solve and figure out how I can get here most of the time. Can I start a little bit later?"

In Misty's opinion, that moment of recognition of her reality and intent to succeed is a key reason why she is a high school graduate and university student today.

Misty referred to the attendance policy she dealt with to explain how policy-based approaches in schools limit the chances for success of students in similar situations to hers:

> Attendance policies stop a lot of conversation from happening. But if there was a conversation, then there's the ability to work together. But if there's a policy put in place then it limits people from being able to have those positive, constructive conversations to benefit both sides.

She suggested an alternative approach that would be based on what is going on in the lives of students:

> The plan should involve, "What do you think you can do, and how are you going to make this work?" Not, "Here's your plan, follow it." Because no, if you're going to give me a

> plan, chances are I'm not going to be able to follow it because you don't know what I'm going through and what I have to work around to follow your plan.

Misty's suggestion of structuring school around the realities of individual students may seem hard to imagine happening. However, the fact that their schools operated based on policies that didn't recognize the realities of the participants in this study created equally unimaginable situations. As they walked into school, many aspects of their identities were either ignored or misunderstood.

### *"Pretend To Just Put On My White Skin"*

All but one of the participants in this study are Indigenous. For each of them, being Indigenous was a central aspect of their school experience. Importantly, four of the participants attended all or part of their time in high school at a school centred on Indigenous culture and education. For those students, during those years, their cultural identity was acknowledged, welcomed, and incorporated positively into their education. However, those years and that school were the exception to the rule. The rule was that students felt judged negatively for being Indigenous while they were in school and that neither their history or culture found a place in curriculum or pedagogy.

Through their stories of both the system and the school, the participants were clear that they were very aware of the negative stereotypes held by people in the city about Indigenous people. When I asked how they felt they were seen by school, perceptions of Indigeneity featured prominently in their responses. Jordin expressed this clearly when she was talking about how she would conceal aspects of her life from the school. I asked her what she feared the school would think if she revealed some of the challenges her family was facing with the criminal

justice system. She hesitated, said, "I don't know but I can have my assumptions." Then she started to cry and said, "just another Native family, just their normal judgement." It should go without saying that there is nothing inherently criminal about being Indigenous. And yet Jordin understood the danger of revealing that her family was involved with the justice system to the school. That revelation could very well cast layers of deficit laden assumptions about Indigenous families over her individuality, concealing her abilities and characteristics from their view.

The judgement that Jordin feared was clearly on display in a story Sage told about the high school she dropped out of. Sage did very well academically while in junior high. Because of this she was able to attend a high school outside of her neighbourhood that offered Advanced Placement classes. However, when she was in the school, she did not feel she was accepted. I asked her about the composition of the class. She laughed, hesitated, and said, "Can I just say, white?" There was one other Indigenous student in her classes and very few other Indigenous students in the school. Sage explained the feeling of not belonging in the school, stopping periodically to wipe away tears as she did:

> I feel like they thought, um, that I had somehow gotten into the school or these classes—even though I did really well in grade nine because you had to be accepted—I think they thought there was some sort of number that they had to reach I guess for Indigenous students in those classes and that I didn't necessarily know what was going on I suppose. I did really try. I did get a good mark at the end of the year, but I didn't stay.

Even with her grades offering objective evidence that she deserved to be in the class, Sage felt the perception of her Indigenous identity prevented the school from believing she did.

Sage's feeling of being held in suspicion because of her identity was well-founded. Months after starting at the school an event occurred that confirmed it. The conversation between us about that event went as follows:

> Sage: Yeah, there was one instance where—there's not a lot of Indigenous students in that school, I would say, like if you walk the hallways you don't see a lot of familiar faces. But I remember there was this one day I was in French and I guess apparently one student got into a fight earlier in the day and my French teacher pulled me out and said, 'I thought you got into a fight this morning and you were sent home.' And I said, 'that wasn't me!'
>
> Me: Who was in the fight?
>
> Sage: Another Indigenous student with somebody walking by.
>
> Me: So, did that Indigenous student look like you? Was she in the same grade?
>
> Sage: Not really, no. I think she was in grade 11 and I was in grade 10. We both kind of had long black hair, both a little bit tan.
>
> Me: Had you been in that teacher's class for a little bit?
>
> Sage: A little bit, quite a few weeks actually.

The bias Sage sensed in her teacher eroded her sense of belonging and comfort. That had a lasting consequence:

> I stuck until the second semester and just, um, til January time came and I didn't go back. They had a really strict attendance policy so that I knew that if I just stayed home they would just kick me out.

In an interesting echo of Derwin's story, Sage used the school's own policy to let it express to her what she already knew to be true, she wasn't wanted there.

Sage's story is about how an action communicated to her that being Indigenous marked her for negative attention within the school. However, actions were not necessarily required to communicate that message. Jon's words about his time in high school express this well:

> Yeah – there was like no representation of me, my culture, nothing, and it was like I wasn't comfortable there you know – just pretend to just put on my white skin and be like let's go and get this done, right? But that's how it was you know, I couldn't feel like I could take pride in who I was and I just had to be another number and just get it done. Yeah.

Jon wasn't alone in feeling he needed to conceal his Indigenous identity in order to succeed. Other participants reported feeling the same need.

Sage explained clearly that Indigenous students' sense of well-being is connected to the way Indigenous topics are represented in school:

> We have to give up a little bit of our ego, our self-esteem because in school when they do talk about Native studies or Indigenous studies and they bring it up in history or other classes a lot of the time its mostly negative feedback from other students and then the teacher will say, 'oh, it's okay, it's just a short chapter—we'll get through it.' And it just kind of buries it down deep where we are very—we struggle with who we are even more and get ashamed of who we are because nobody cares and add to that the racial profiling and being embarrassed or pointed out more.

Sage's comment makes it clear that Indigenous youth make a clear connection between the exclusion of Indigenous experience in the school curriculum and the forms of exclusion and suspicion they feel outside of school.

The participants were clear that the negative ways their cultural identity and experience were treated in school did nothing to extinguish their desire to be recognized and have their identity valorized. That fact was clear in how deeply they valued the Indigenous teachers they had in school. Jon remembered changing schools late in his elementary schooling and, "I remember I saw two Indigenous people working I think when I was at [my new school]. I was like, 'Wow!'" Jon went on to share the names of every Indigenous teacher he had in school and as soon as he was done the other two participants listed the ones they had. It was an important moment for two reasons. First, the list was short. There were very few Indigenous teachers in the lives of the participants. Second, each name mentioned brought a smile to their faces. Each of the teachers was well-remembered and remembered well. The importance of Indigenous teachers to the participants' experience is an important topic and will be profiled in more depth later. I have chosen to touch on it here as well to show that while the presence of Indigenous educators in schools made a huge positive difference the absence of them had the opposite effect.

The participants told stories that expose the representation and lack of representation of Indigenous history and reality in school. One of those stories came from a storytelling session with Sage and Misty about Sage's work mentoring Indigenous youth from her neighbourhood. She heard about one of her mentee's frustrations and decided to go to the school to see if she could help:

> Sage: They have one Native Studies section in history classes and I knew a student who was taking it and was getting really angry and frustrated at what it said in the history books. She's very connected to her culture and knew a lot about it because her grandparents brought her up that way and when she read about the settlers coming to Canada and the fur trade and everything it angered her to the point where she wanted to

drop out of class. And the teachers weren't listening to her. I went to the school and talked to the history teacher and said, is there a way that we can kind of flip this assignment to something different so she could write about her own culture from what she has learned from her grandparents and perhaps she could…um…

Misty: compare and contrast

Sage: Yeah, compare and contrast—and present it to her peers because that's what she wanted to do—she said, 'This is making me so angry that nobody else knows this and they are just going about their business and they aren't angry—like why isn't everybody else angry?' So, the history teacher was saying no, no, no. I went to the vice-principal and said we have to change this in some way or let her do this because she will drop out and she will not attend anymore and I fear that it'll stop her from graduating. Eventually they let her do the assignment but didn't let her do the presentation. But it was—there was a lot of outrage and when I went to that classroom there wasn't a single Indigenous person in there.

Marc: So did the teacher have any arguments about why?

Sage: He had to follow the curriculum as it was—if he gave her special treatment he would have to give everyone else special treatment. Special treatment! By letting her tell her story or change the assignment in a way that would let her do it.

Marc: did he have a copy of the curriculum?

Sage: I don't think so, well, he didn't show me it anyway.

Even within the section of the history course designed to present Indigenous stories and even with Sage's intercedence, those stories couldn't be provided a space. Importantly, Sage's interest in helping the student was only partially based on getting Indigenous stories heard. What really

resonated with her, and what is essential for understanding the consequences of misrepresenting Indigenous experience, was that the student wanted to drop out of school. She feared that, just as she did when she was in high school, this student might reasonably choose to exclude herself from a place that excluded her story.

Another frustration that participants expressed had to do less with their own feelings of being excluded and more to do with their desire for a better educated public. Jon picked up on the issue of history in schools with his own thoughts about what stories are excluded:

> I think in history we do learn about a lot, right, like the holocaust, other history, lots of cultures it's just that we don't learn about our history—our history is wiped out and not told through our perspective and it's important to learn who we are and not from the European perspective either but from ours, like from our elders. Our elders have these stories that are mind blowing that history books don't ever say and will never say.

I asked Jon what he meant by the European perspective and he connected it to our first storytelling session. In that session we all shared a bit about our family histories and how they influenced who we were today. I talked about the Ukrainian side of my family and the immigration and farming stories I had grown up with. Jon recalled that story and then explained what he fears happens when Indigenous history is eclipsed by the story of European immigration:

> What I think is that, like you know some students come from immigrant families so some of them are like, 'my grandfather came here, made a living on the land—why can't others?' But they don't know that their grandfather had rights to land, equipment and other rights that Indigenous people didn't have—and you can make a living if the government is trying to support you rather than control your rations, so you know there's

> —they compare, how come my family can make a living out of nothing here and Indigenous people can't?

As Jon pointed out – excluding Indigenous history from history class had personal consequences for Indigenous students like him but also perpetuates societal biases he and his friends deal with everyday.

Those biases were evident in another one of Jon's reflections on school. When I asked him whether he felt that he was alone in having to 'put on his white skin' he explained that other Indigenous students:

> do have to give up their identity a little bit—you don't see kids speaking their language—the ones that do speak fluent Cree or Ojibway—they don't speak it at school. They don't allow smudging in some schools. I remember some of my friends who were very traditional smudging at my old high school and teachers saying, "Why are you smoking weed?" Stuff like that—its ridiculous.

The image Jon shared, of an Indigenous student coming to class after smudging, a practice used in part as a cleansing and purifying process, only to face accusations of drug use from a teacher, provides an apt summary of the overall themes in the stories told about being Indigenous in school. Participants' cultural identities were ignored except when they were misunderstood or deemed suspicious. As a result, to succeed in school they often had to choose whether to conceal the very things about themselves – history, traditions, beliefs, language, family connections – that most people use as a source of pride and strength.

***Unrecognized Neighbourhood Reality***

"Have you ever had to wonder where your food is going to come from?" This question was what Misty offered when I asked her what questions she would ask a group of teachers new to inner-city teaching. She elaborated:

> When you were 16 did you have to worry about bedbugs? Were you going to eat breakfast that day? Because I've definitely had months where you're not sleeping at night because you have problems that you can't do anything about. You can't change your life situation. If they haven't experienced that, they're not going to understand. They can try, but they're not going to, and that's sad.

The reality of living in one of the poorest neighbourhoods in the country is visceral.

As outlined in the context for this study – everything from health outcomes to employment opportunities are lower than anywhere else in the city. The privations are immediate and obvious to those experiencing it but, as the participants' stories show, they seem to be lost on their schools. It is, as Misty, says, a sad situation. In response to the insensitivity, participants reported feeing alienation and frustration. The alienation came from how much of their real lives were unseen by school. The effort they put to fit in and succeed at school was likewise unseen. The frustration came from the fact that because schools did not see their efforts, schools set up expectations that added to their troubles.

Misty explained how coming to school while living in poverty created a host of concerns for her that upend common assumptions about the things children look forward to:

> When you come back to school in September and after the breaks those are the hardest times. The beginning of the year is exciting for most students because you get to go back and see your friends and you had a great summer of like, doing whatever you did with

> your family, camping, all those fun things, you have all your new school supplies for the year – you remember that good feeling of having that good stuff? You don't get that when you have the family that I did. So, you are going into school wearing the same stuff you did last year. Or like, with a few mismatched things or in things that you threw in the closet and it looks new but it's not new. And you don't have school supplies. So, all of your friends are showing off all of the cool stuff…like, we went on vacation, or we spent the whole month at the cabin and like, uh, I biked to Kildonan Park and scrounged up enough change to go swimming. My summers were never that special and then especially Christmas, going after Christmas, there was no Christmas. Well, there was a Christmas dinner, absolutely. My Family, after they stopped trying to do presents and birthdays, they stuck with doing dinner. But when everyone is coming back with their new iPods and 'I got a PS4' and it's like, I got 80 bucks from a family friend for a Christmas present and my parents borrowed it. So, it's like you don't have anything to talk about so you either make things up or you just don't talk to anybody. And I did both.

Misty's lengthy recollection of returning to school in September and after Christmas underscores just how uniquely children living with poverty see things. Beginning every July, stores roll out massive advertising campaigns to sell back to school "essentials." Likewise, as soon as Halloween is over, radio, television, and internet sites are festooned with ads pushing the latest must-have Christmas gifts. At school, the excitement builds as Christmas concert songs are rehearsed and students imagine what delights the holiday might bring. Meanwhile, Misty, and students like her, receive regular reminders that they don't live like everyone else at school.

It is important to note a point in Misty's story that will be touched on here but explored in more depth later on. Misty's family insisted on marking important moments like Christmas and

birthdays with shared special meals. This is an important reminder that the difference between her family and those of her peers and her teachers at school is material, not rooted in some sort of indwelling character difference. It is this fact, that beneath the material markers of normalcy, there is a rich area of commonality between those facing poverty and those who aren't, that adds to Misty's frustration.

If schools recognized that there were moments that could be focused on that would bring everyone together rather than distance them, the alienation of students in poverty could be reduced. Misty focused on gym classes to illustrate this issue. She asked:

> I mean, how many pairs of shoes do you need? They require you to have indoor shoes and outdoor shoes. I had one pair of shoes. I'm not going to admit that to you or anybody else ever. That is a pride thing that is something that you can't easily go tell somebody.

Schools regularly require students to change shoes and clothes for gym class. This seemingly innocent requirement creates a huge challenge for kids living in poverty. With no extra clothes to change into they face conflict with teachers and having to wear their sweaty clothes for the rest of the day. Misty, illustrating how schools could make changes to help lessen the gap between those who have and those don't suggested:

> I'd also suggest never to have gym first period in the morning. First of all, you don't shower in schools anymore. Why are you subjecting a self-conscious teenager to walk around all sweaty for all day? It does not clearly make sense to me. But I guess someone said it was a good idea.

From the stories the participants shared I think it is more reasonable to conclude that whoever thought it was a good idea never talked to students like Misty.

If it were up to Misty, schools would focus on removing rather than enforcing policies that create barriers and highlight inequality. She explained how this might begin:

> Misty: You stick them [inner-city students] in a room, put them in a circle, and they'll tell you what they need. And they'll tell you what's wrong. And it's not, they're not huge things that need to change in order for students to feel comfortable in school. There are so many things that just teachers within classrooms can change.
>
> Marc: Give me a for instance.
>
> Misty: ... I don't know. I've even had teachers halfway through class say, "Hey, it looks like everyone's really tired and not listening to me anyway. Let's go for a walk. Let's get up, shake it off, we'll go enjoy the nice weather and come back and we'll finish." Just not, just being open, just not being sort of, "This is school and you're here to work." I just feel like there were so many of my teachers like that, and it made it that much harder. Or even just starting later…
>
> Marc: Like starting at 11:00? Going 11:00-5:00 instead of 9:00-3:00?
>
> Misty: Even 11:00 is a bit too late. You could probably even do 10:30.
>
> Marc: Yeah?
>
> Misty: Yeah. Eleven would be ideal just because you have had time to have coffee and roll out of bed slowly and then make your way. Wouldn't it be such an interesting thing to see if a couple of schools started at 11:00 and see what the difference is? It would be cool.

Misty's ideas for changing schools are intriguing for two reasons. First, because they are based in her own personal and work experience. Secondly, because they speak of an approach to

schooling that is centred on student input and is experimental and flexible. Neither seeking the input of students nor altering things in response are characteristics she currently sees.

Misty, Sage, and Jon are support workers for inner-city students. Helping students succeed means that they try to bridge the gap between home and school. This work has allowed them to see that their experiences of alienation from school were not unique to them. They regularly coach students who are in similar situations to theirs. In one storytelling session with the three of them, Jon described the work he put in finding sports programs he could bring one of his students to so she could earn the physical education credits she needed to graduate:

> Jon: I helped one of my students. She um, needed two credits for gym or else she wouldn't graduate so she came to baseball, she came to recplex, I made her come to everything, right? And then when she graduated she gave me a rose and she was like, 'thank you' and she was like, 'I wouldn't have graduated without that gym credit' and I was like, gym? are you kidding me!? Like here's this amazing, smart, person right, someone—just gym was holding her back from graduation. It took lots, it was hard, to be like 'come on, come on'—she was very self conscious, not very social, had lots of insecurities so it was hard to help get someone like that engaged—she had to complete over a hundred hours.
>
> Marc: How were you getting her there?
>
> Jon: Well, Phoenix, she is her cousin, she's more social and she was like, 'LET'S GO!' She would like probably physically grab her! But it was everyone—it was her sister, her cousin, her mom like you know—I was connecting with those people and they were like, 'she is going to come.' So, if she said no, I was going to other people and I'd be like,

> get her out, right? It was awesome you know—she graduated—like she needed grade 10-12 gym and that was it.

When Jon told the story, Sage and Misty were nodding along. They teared up along with Jon when he recalled the rose at graduation. And they laughed along with him as he became animated, remembering all the work it took him to mobilize a network of supports for his student. When he finished, they could tell I was astonished by the magnitude of their investment. Misty looked at me and said, matter of factly, "It takes an army."

Misty's analogy struck me. I was familiar with the expression, it takes a village to raise a child. In fact, in later storytelling sessions Sage and Summer would both talk about seeing their neighbourhood as a village. This felt different. I asked Misty, "So, it doesn't take a village?" She shook her head, pointed at her friends in the session and said, "Here we have an army." In our one-on-one session I returned to the expression with Misty to get clarification. Her answer further illustrates the divide between school expectations and inner-city reality and explains why she chooses to think of her work as a battle:

> Marc: You said, "It doesn't take a village, it takes an army." How is that different? What does that mean?
>
> Misty: I know that you can't expect schools to fit everyone's needs. They're not going to be able to do everything for everyone. They can do what they can do, and that's it. It takes so much more than just a school and just parents to get somebody through high school and through all of the other things going on in life. You need programs like the one I'm at so that we can work outside, and just with families so that there is a resource and there is help available from basically when they wake up to when they go to bed. I mean, oh my God! If my job could just strictly be going knocking on doors, dragging them out of bed,

> and bringing them to school, then I would. Because that is a job that is needed just on its own. Because getting out of bed is the hardest thing.
>
> Marc: You do all this work, and everyone does all this work, to get them to school, do you think that... do you feel that the kids... do you feel that that work is respected by the schools that you know about?
>
> Misty: Not at the moment, no.
>
> Marc: No? Why do you think that is?
>
> Misty: I've been trying to figure that out myself because I have walked into classrooms offering my help, offering... I will be here... I have the freedom to be whatever it is you need me to be as a support for you and your students, and I've had quite a few teachers seem almost defensive like I'm trying to take those students or like I'm trying to make it seem like they're not doing a good job. And that's not at all what it is. It's more of share this huge thing that we need to do, which is get them to graduation. People don't like to share I guess. I don't know.

Misty is justified in her puzzlement at why her offers of support are met with defensiveness and suspicion. She and her co-workers put in gargantuan efforts to get students to school in what they reasonably think is part of shared effort to help them graduate. Given the opposition they face, it is clear why they see their work as a battle and the school as their combatant.

### *Hiding in Plain Sight*

The battle participants faced to succeed entailed more than the significant work of getting to school. It also involved a deep personal reckoning. The stories they told me show that they had to manage the gap between the perceptions and expectations of the school and the reality and

expectations of life at home. Doing so meant interpreting how they were viewed and how they might be viewed if aspects of their reality came to light. There were two things they needed to be careful about. One was their Indigenous identity. Some teachers and school cultures were simply biased against Indigenous people. The other thing that they had to be careful about were any engagements they or their families had with state institutions like CFS, the police, and the criminal justice system, which could expose them to being seen with suspicion or pity. Rather than dealing with those possibilities, the participants learned to conceal big parts of themselves.

Jon offered a powerful example of concealing things about himself. It came up as we were discussing how he had avoided the gang involvement that was a key part of his brother's and many of his peers' experiences. He explained that his brother's experiences left a deep impression on him at an early age – he began to cry as he remembered:

> Jon: I would go visit my brother in the youth centre. I remember that environment – just, seeing so much young Indigenous males in there and it just – it was tough you know. I got to see, he was in the streets, like carrying who knows what – saw some crazy stuff under the bed.
>
> Marc: And no one knew that was going on at [your elementary school]?
>
> Jon: Nope, I was just an innocent little boy. I would write him in jail. I just wrote him, and we wrote each other.

The combined effect of seeing his brother in jail and being stunned by the overrepresentation of Indigenous male youths formed perhaps the greatest motivating factor for Jon's success. It remains a significant part of who Jon is and what he does today. Yet, the decisions he made to keep himself away from gang life were hidden from school. So too were the questions he had about why so many Indigenous boys were locked up where his brother was.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that Jon should have shared the story of his brother's time in the gang or in jail at school. Doing so would have exposed him to judgement and potentially endangered his brother or led to a Child and Family Services investigation. Rather, I am pointing to the challenge of living two very different lives simultaneously – one at home and the other at school. Navigating that reality means that students like the participants are regularly asking themselves what parts of themselves they can and cannot reveal. Jordin offered a powerful example of the psychological gymnastics this compels.

After her tumultuous time in Junior High, Jordin went to a new school. In that school she found a teacher who saw how hard she was working to succeed. At the end of one school year the teacher nominated Jordin for an academic award which she won. In preparation for the speech she would have to give, Jordin sat down with her teacher and, "I kind of told her my life story and I mentioned my mom." One of the biggest secrets that Jordin kept from school was that her mom was in jail. She had been warned to keep it a secret by many people in her family but, "especially my grandma, she told me never to talk about – I felt like I should never talk to anyone about it." Feeling uncomfortable with having shared the story of her mom's incarceration, Jordin and her teacher crafted a speech that didn't mention her mom. At the awards ceremony Jordin's Grandma was in the audience as Jordin received her award and gave her speech. The moment left a big impression on Jordin. She had never received academic recognition up to this point. But the reason it left such a big impression wasn't because of the recognition, it was because of her Grandmother's response to her speech, "My grandma, she was upset with me. She got so mad." I didn't understand her Grandmother's anger. She explained, "My grandma was upset that I didn't acknowledge my mom. I've been judged so many times because I did open up to some people about it and it backfired on me." Jordin shared this last part

through tears. The tears spoke of the burden of walking in two worlds. What parts of your life can you be proud and open about where? What things need to be hidden and when, from whom? It is a burden that a child shouldn't have to face and yet, it was a burden common to the participants while they were in school.

The burden of deciding what to conceal and what to reveal could create a sense of deep isolation. Summer's family struggled through a very difficult period when her mother was caught in a cycle of addiction. In school she didn't have a person or space that felt safe where she could share her challenges. As a result, she said, "I didn't know anybody else was going through this stuff, I felt like I was alone. I felt like it was just me and my family were going through this." After graduating Summer learned that many of her friends were going through similar things.

According to Misty, the reason things were like that for Summer has to do with the structure of school itself:

> Eventually that kind of stuff comes up. Now that I'm not in high school anymore, and my life situation is different, all of my friends that I went to high school with, they know what I went through now, and they're just, "I had no idea. I never would have guessed." In hindsight, should I probably have said something, absolutely, probably, but you're never going to think about that when you're that young and going through all of it.

The stories shared here from Jon, Summer, and Jordon testify to the truth of Misty's last statement. School was not a place to share the experiences they were having. As a result, they did not only face their challenges alone, they had to hide the fact that they were facing them. Misty is clear that it doesn't have to be that way. Commenting on how much the school system requires inner-city students to hide she offered this useful conclusion, "That's why you just, you have to adjust the system around kids. Not make the kids adjust to the system."

***Hidden Biases***

In the participants' perspective, bias against where and how they live lies at the root of why schools ignore or fail to respond to their reality. As each of them reached graduation, and in their current work supporting students, they recognized that schools were guiding successful students out of their neighbourhood. To their minds, this indicates a basic assumption – that life is better elsewhere. They reacted strongly against this – speaking at length of the richness of their North End neighbourhood:

> Jon: When I started working around here too and hearing that North End kids don't like going over the bridge [to the wealthier neighbourhoods South of them] and I was like what? That doesn't make sense, right? But there is a sense of safety that some kids feel in this area—its not the safest per se, but there's so much community love in this neighbourhood. You know their friends are here, their families are here, there's community support here, there's everything - you know, the good, the bad, you know. They say that pressure makes diamonds so you know, our kids, our kids are little diamonds.
>
> Sage: I think a lot of the time it's teachers when they give these pep talks or guidance counsellors they say, don't you want to graduate, do this, get a good job to get out of the North End to make a better life for your family? But it's always the underlying thing that they didn't say you know. Maybe I love the North End , or um, of course I'm doing this university stuff but it doesn't mean that… oh, I forget what I was going to say… just because I'm doing this school stuff doesn't mean I see a better life somewhere else. I think that a lot of the counsellors assume that the families aren't well off or can't support themselves without having some degree or something to help them

Misty: The assumption is that if your graduate and get out of here you will do better; you will be better when that is not necessarily the case. You can do just as well in the North End. You can be happy working in the North End because you are surrounded by the people you grew up with.

Sage: Yes!

Misty: That's pretty much it. There's more supports in this neighbourhood than you will probably find anywhere else in the city and yet we are trying to tell our students to hurry up and get out and go contribute and yet the people who need their help are right here where they get it - you would be amazed how much of a difference it makes to have someone working with you who gets it - that was me a few years ago hearing 'you're good,' 'you got this.'

Marc: So, would you say it's fair to say that schools assume that being successful means being not the same person as when you came in?

Sage: Yes.

Jon: Yeah.

Sage: That's exactly what I was trying to say!

Jon: Well, like school expects you to graduate when you are 17, go directly into university, like buy a house, have a family, etc. The pressures of society but you know we don't really have that pressure—we just gotta try to survive day to day we don't have that kind of luxury of having our life all planned out—our kids don't graduate til they are like 25 sometimes.

It may be that teachers and guidance counsellors believe that their encouragements to inner-city students to stay on track to graduate 'on time,' go to university, and get out of the neighbourhood

is borne of noble intentions. There is no doubt that the inner city, especially when viewed through the eyes of an outsider, presents daunting challenges. What these teachers don't realize is that their encouragement carries with it an implicit judgement of the homes, friends, and families of their students.

***Mental Health and the Cost of Success.***

When participants discussed the things that they felt school didn't recognize about them a frequent topic was their mental health. Summer was the participant who led me the furthest and most directly into this terrain. Recall that when we discussed whether schools were more like the system or the community she said that until she attended the high school based in Indigenous cultural practices she graduated from she felt that schools didn't accommodate, "Different people's cultures or their mental health." She also said that in those schools what she wished teachers knew, "I wish they knew I was struggling with my mental health – especially anxiety." The story of Summer's journey with anxiety is tied up with the challenges she faced finding success in school. It demonstrates how school's failure to recognize and respond sensitively to her reality both failed to assist her on her journey and exacerbated the anxiety she was dealing with.

Summer's current understanding of and coping mechanisms for dealing with her mental health are recent. When she was in school:

> I didn't even know I had anxiety. I didn't know how to cope. I didn't know what was wrong with me. There was a lot of stuff going on at home. Like, with alcohol abuse so I think a lot of that triggered with me having problems with my mental health.

I asked Summer to tell me more about what she meant when she said that she wished that school understood she was dealing with anxiety:

> I can't really say because some teachers might not know how to deal with it? They might just say, 'okay, she has this, moving on.' Or something like, 'oh there's something wrong with her we need to help her or baby her.' So I'm not sure.

What she was sure of was that she was caught in between two situations, home and school, and neither offered relief from what she was feeling:

> Because of anxiety I couldn't even leave the house even though my own home wasn't even a safe place. It didn't feel like a safe place but it was a familiar place that I couldn't leave cuz I was scared to go – feeling anxiety I couldn't walk to school or into a classroom, if I was late I couldn't even go to school that day. If I missed a day, I couldn't go to school the next day because I missed that day and then they would just kind of pile up. And then, because I didn't tell, I didn't even know what was going on so I couldn't tell anyone, 'Oh I'm dealing with anxiety' or' I'm having trouble with my mental health.' So when I missed a lot of school and I went back I would be behind but I'd be too scared to ask for help because I wasn't there and I knew they were going to say, 'You should have been here—we went over this already.'

Summer ended up in a pattern of disengagement from school that was only partly based on her anxiety. It was also based on her previous experience of being judged rather than helped when she missed school.

In a storytelling session following her discussion of anxiety Summer responded to a story I told about a student from one of my classrooms that I still wondered about. Her response illuminated even more about the dynamic between mental health and school. My story was about

a student who came from a family background like hers and who was alternatively very oppositional or very withdrawn in class. Eventually he and I did connect, and he disclosed that he was having a hard time with his mental health. Summer used her own experience to comment on my story and her comments were augmented by Derwin and Silver, who were also in the session. The discussion began after I asked how I should have interacted with my student:

> Summer: Well, I knew that there was something going on with him at home when you started talking about him being a troublemaker in class. I knew there was a reason for that. He was not doing that just because he wants to.
>
> Derwin: I guess like, ask him, like, if he was doing alright. Just kinda like, do checkups.
>
> Silver: Probably yeah, be that person who's just like, 'hey, how are you?'
>
> Marc: If I knew something was up with him, do I send him to a counsellor?
>
> Summer: No. I think that he trusted you for a reason. And he didn't tell the counsellor. If you tell the counsellor, that isn't why he told you.
>
> Marc: Sounds like you are speaking from experience? Did a teacher refer you to a counsellor?
>
> Jon: Yeah, I never told the counsellor what was going on at home.

Summer explained that she did open up to a teacher she trusted about the anxiety she felt and a bit about the problems she was facing at home. In response the teacher referred her to the guidance counsellor:

> Summer: Uh well, [the teacher] just knew the surface – I told them I had problems with mental health. They first thought, hmm.. the guidance counsellor, they're meant for this. But it wasn't like that for me. I told them because I trusted them. And if I wanted to go to the counsellor I would have. The thing is, um, I can't speak for like, everyone, but,

maybe if that teacher asked me if I wanted to go to the guidance counsellor, or the teacher took me to the guidance counsellor or if I just wanted to talk to the teacher… instead of just assuming I should go to the guidance counsellor.

Marc: How did it feel to have someone you trusted to tell something to tell you to talk to someone else?

Summer: It wasn't really like, oh, I can't deal with you – it was more like, oh, ah, I'm not qualified for this. You can go talk to the guidance counsellor.

Marc: Okay – why didn't you talk to the guidance counsellor then?

Summer: Because I didn't have that relationship with her the same way I had with the teacher.

Summer's explanation of finally opening up to a trusted adult about what she was facing and having the teacher offer her a kind of help she didn't trust speaks to the disconnect between the perspective of students like my participants and the perspectives of school. Like Summer, I have understanding for the teacher who felt that she wasn't qualified to deal with Summer's needs. It is a norm within schools to separate the emotional and psychological needs from academic needs and to assign those needs to people with different training. But Summer operated and continues to operate through different norms. For her, finding someone to trust mattered more than finding someone with the right qualifications. In fact, for her, being trustworthy may have been the most important qualification.

As I stated earlier, Summer did eventually find a school that offered her an environment built on relationships, trust, and culturally grounded approaches. That experience and the importance of trust and relationships will be explored in greater depth shortly. Before doing so, it is important to take from Summer's story a resonant theme that emerges from the participants'

stories. They could not be their true selves in school. Worse, the parts of their experience and identity that was ignored, judged, or misunderstood formed a significant part of who they were. To succeed, they had to hide a big part of what made them who they were. Their words are clear. In reference to her need to hide problems she faced at home, Jordin said, "I felt like I didn't fit in at school." Misty indicated that lying was a primary survival skill if she didn't want to be judged because of her problems at home. Sage, referred to her need to hide both her homelife and her Indigeneity saying, "these institutions are very colonized, and we stick out like a sore thumb in some places and, these weren't meant for us."

Earlier I referred to the act of concealing parts of themselves in school as a form of psychological gymnastics that the participants performed in order to find acceptance and success. I bring the idea up again here to connect it to the theme of coping with one's mental health in school. Living in the inner city can often mean dealing with many factors that contribute to a decline in mental health. The list of these factors is long and as I detailed earlier, includes things like addiction, family trauma, over-policing, and inadequate housing. Each one of the things steals peace of mind and replaces it with fear, self-doubt, and anxiety. From the stories the participants told it is reasonable to add school to the list of things that can erode an inner-city student's mental health – particularly an Indigenous inner-city student's mental health. Jon made this point better than I could:

> I think just the hardest thing is just growing up and trying to balance two worlds, right? Your Indigenous identity and the European school system and every time it's just like this [Jon draws two separate lines in front of him with his hands] you know—just, there's nothing in the middle. You gotta choose one or the other.

Is there a more clear definition of a factor that would contribute to poor mental health? The culture of school not only didn't recognize or respond to mental health challenges, they exacerbated them by making them walk in a world that was not their own.

***Academic Doubts***

An intriguing aspect of the stories the participants told about school was how infrequently the topic of academic learning came up. This absence underlines their points about the lack of relevance and recognition in their classes and the distance between their lives and the life of the school. Still, all the participants graduated high school and many of them have earned post-secondary success. Given that they were academically successful, the things they did identify about learning are quite important. The section after this will pay close attention to the things that helped participants succeed, but it must be prefaced with an important proviso. Despite their success, the participants didn't leave school with a high degree of academic confidence.

A component of the lack of confidence comes from the experience of changing schools and recognizing the difference in expectation and rigour between their community schools and schools serving more affluent and less diverse communities. Jon and Silver both finished high school in a school associated with a local university – which they both went on to attend. Both of them reported a shock when they encountered the pace of instruction at the new school. Silver spoke about seeking out peer support but lacking the confidence to approach her teachers. Jon also used a network of peer supports and was only able to pass through the intercedence of teachers who went above and beyond to support him. Derwin also changed schools to graduate and qualify for university. The transition was difficult as his previous school provided limited academic stimulation. In his words, "in grade 11 we would just go and sit in there and write in

these booklets and a video would be playing or they would talk about something." Given the jarring difference that the participants experienced between what they thought was academic success and what was required of them to graduate, their apprehensions are understandable.

Misty, who is currently studying at university part-time, offers an illustrative example of the lingering lack of confidence that the uneven academic experience many of the participants experience created. Commenting on her difficulties in university she said, "I was angry at my high school for a very long time after I graduated. I feel like they failed me. I'm struggling through university, I'm not ready for university." Despite Misty's sense that she was struggling, she has accrued significant success at university. Over the six years since she graduated high school, she has almost completed a degree in a field directly related to her passion for helping her community. Yet, when asked if she felt confident about graduating, she said:

> Misty: No, I still don't feel confident. I honestly, very often question whether or not I am going to finish university. Everyone says that I'll do well and I show that I will do well. And even in this last class that I just had my life is completely falling apart again and I still managed to pull out a B. So I have the ability, I will never feel ready, I don't think. School did not get me ready.
>
> Marc: So, even though your marks at university now at least show that you are competent…
>
> Misty: My marks show that I am competent when I take one class at a time. When I take more than one my marks drop down to a B or a C.

At this point in the session, everyone involved began to laugh. Grades of B and C for a full-time student who lives on her own, supports her family, and works part time are no evidence of a lack of ability.

I asked Misty to explain her lack of confidence more deeply. She said, “I think it even just goes back before high school.” She went on to explain that when she was in elementary school, she had a poor teacher:

> I did not do math higher than a grade three level when I was in grade 6 and 7. She had me doing booklets of 2 plus 2—the most basic math. She didn’t have time to teach me or the other 3 or 4 struggling students.

Misty eventually caught up to other students after changing schools but her stories show that she has an internal narrative about not being prepared. After she talked about her elementary school experience I tried to reassure her that her university grades were nothing to be ashamed of:

> Marc: You know, a B or a C are good grades Misty!
>
> Misty: Well, I only got one D, I never got an F, all the others were C’s
>
> Marc: On the main campus at the big university?
>
> Misty: Yeah, while going full time, while working part time here.

I jumped into reassure her again, but Misty circled back to her time in high school. She wanted to reassure me that she didn’t harbour any lingering resentment:

> Don’t get me wrong. I don’t hold these things against people anymore. I did. I used to be a very angry person. I had a teacher in high school call me and [my best friend] Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum. You get over it.

One need only look at her marks to see that Misty has the skills to succeed academically. She has clearly overcome whatever gaps in learning or poor instruction she encountered in school. Yet, the sense of being less qualified than others definitely remains in her stories and in many of the stories that the other participants told. And even though Misty is clear that she got over it, being called Tweedle Dum likely has had some lasting effect. While the other participants may not

have endured demeaning name calling from their teachers they all, in the wide variety of ways laid out in this section, received the same message from school: who you are and where you are makes us suspect you aren't quite up for success here.

**Conclusion: The Same But Different**

In general school was not a place where the participants felt recognized, valorized, or, importantly, educated. Rather, owing to the perceptions of their cultural identity, neighbourhood, and economic status, the participants experienced school as a game to play, a task to accomplish, a problem to solve. As a result, they identified much of their experience there as similar in feeling to their interactions with other state institutions. Remarkably, each one of them found a way to graduate from high school. However, each faced difficult choices and mastered difficult tasks that had little to do with curriculum, to do so. Their success is a testament to their individual strengths. Additionally, they were able to draw strength from the things that did work for them and the people who took a vested interest in them within the school system. Those things are the focus of the next chapter.

# Chapter Seven: Human Factors

If the picture that the participants' stories paint of school is grim, it is not without significant highlights. The participants point to moments in school when Indigenous content and culture were integrated into school practice as influential in their success and growth. In a similar vein, approaches to schooling that fostered community and relationship building also created helpful spaces for the participants. However, the single most influential positive influence that participants reported on their path to success were individual teachers. Each participant told stories about a teacher who took caring action inside and outside of school on their behalf. This chapter reports on how these factors, and how their presence created human, safe, responsive, spaces of possibility within which the participants were able to find the path to success within the school system.

## Culture and Community

All the participants, including the sole non-Indigenous participant, stressed that the authentic presence of Indigenous content and cultural practices contributed to their success in school. The authenticity was measured by whether the school culture itself was influenced by Indigenous content and insights. This is important to note because many schools offered superficial acknowledgement of Indigenous history and culture. These efforts did nothing to change the culture of schooling and so, fell flat. Jon explained:

> It's unfortunate when institutions get to claim certain sayings, when they don't want to implement them. One school says, "we are all treaty people" but they don't want to do acknowledgements about treaty land. They don't want to acknowledge the history but they want to say, "we are all treaty people."

When schools did engage purposefully with Indigenous culture and communities, the effect was noticeable.

Derwin's family went through a hard journey with addiction to alcohol. It reached its peak while he was in his last years of elementary school. During these years, home was a tumultuous and loud environment. School provided a space away from that environment and through the incorporation of cultural activities that extended the school day, Derwin found a welcome reprieve:

> I did a bunch of stuff during elementary to keep myself occupied, I did pow wow dancing, I did drumming, I did jigging, then I did hoop dancing, then afterwards I ended up teaching dancing.

These activities attracted him in part because of the chance to get away from his home environment but also because they nurtured a sense of self and purpose that were rooted in his culture. He credits some of these activities with guiding him towards greater cultural knowledge, an enjoyment of physical exercise, and for his decision to pursue education and become an inner-city teacher.

One high school figured prominently in the stories of many of the participants about what worked to help them succeed. It is an Indigenous cultural school. It delivers the province's curriculum in accordance with Indigenous cultural guidelines. Many of the teachers in the school are Indigenous and the staff includes cultural advisors and elders that provide culturally based guidance and lead ceremonies as part of the school's regular schedule. Additionally, students were able to study Cree and Anishinaabe languages. Two topics from the stories told to me about this school stand out. The first is the importance of Indigenous culture and practice to the success of participants. The second is the importance of an overall school ambiance that stresses

relationships and community. The stories that participants told about what worked to help them succeed were notable. These two elements are treated somewhat separately here but it is important to note that they are connected – one feeding the other and vice versa.

Summer credits much of her success to this school and her stories about it exemplify the keys to its support of students. It is the school that she referred to as a place that, "tries to be its own thing." She began high school there. At the time, she lived within walking distance of the school. However, after grade nine she moved to her father's house in a neighbourhood on the other side of the city – where she still lives today. Continuing to go to the school meant taking an hour and a half long bus ride twice a day. Clearly, the school offered her something special. I asked her why she would go to such efforts to attend and she said, "well, if it wasn't a cultural school, it'd be a huge chunk of wasted time – it was the culture. That's why I stayed there. Also, it just being a small school." Both elements, the cultural milieu and the small size and what that size meant in terms of the sense of community in the school bear deeper explanation.

Ceremony was an important aspect of life for the participants who attended the school. Students and staff smudged daily and the school year was structured around Cree and Anishinaabe calendars. Summer explained, "they always had pipe ceremonies and feasts at the school. And they'd have teachings there monthly for each grade." Meghin spoke about ceremonies as well. For her, they created an important sense of continuity:

> I learned about my culture more at home being with my Grandpa during my time out on the rez – and all the ceremonies and stuff that they would do and the ceremonies they did have at the school, it was like a way for me to maintain what I had learned.

Summer expanded on this idea in saying:

> For me, the ceremony is where I feel most at home – it's like a little piece of home because I remember on my reserve we used to do ceremonies like that at home—and just to bring that into school!

For the participants, the ceremonies at school fostered a sense of safety that echoed their best memories of stable, culturally rooted home life.

Ceremony also addressed the mental health needs of students. It is important to note that when Summer started at the school, the prospect of ceremonies did not feel safe or supportive. Recall that Summer struggled with crippling anxiety while in junior high. When she attended her first ceremony at the high school that anxiety returned and then disappeared:

> With ceremony, I was so scared. I was so scared, but, it just felt, it just felt right. Yeah, like I was learning something new each time. Although I was scared, my heart would be pumping. Yeah. I just kind of had to let that go, because, overall, like afterwards I'd feel better.

The healing effect of ceremony can't be overstated. Summer is clear:

> I think that, that's the only reason why I kept going to school because if that wasn't part of the school I would have dropped out or stopped going altogether.

Within the school, ceremonies wrapped students in knowledge and practices that connected them to their ancestors and nurtured them on their contemporary paths.

Ceremonies were only one of the cultural elements that the students at the school benefited from. Summer described the women's drum group that she was part of at school, "the drum session would go during lunch time and whoever wanted to come would come." These voluntary sessions were small involving two teachers and a handful of students. They were informal and provided a special environment:

> We found a little comfortable space between us and we would just relax and talk and share about our day. Drumming was a part of it. We would learn songs and what they meant and how to sing words in the language.

Summer spoke about two of the songs that she learned during the drum sessions:

> I remember the Sabe[5] song and the Rainbow song. The Rainbow song I liked because it sounded pretty and the Sabe song, it was like, it was like, kind of, thank to the Sabe for watching over us and teaching the people to stand tall.

The image she describes, of a small group of adults and children, sharing food together, talking about their days, and singing and drumming together about beauty, gratitude, and confidence, is powerful. It goes a long way to explain why the school figures so prominently in stories participants told about what worked to support their success in school.

### *Connection*

The school clearly offered a strongly supportive community to students. The participants described an environment characterized by relational approaches similar to the one the drum group exemplified. As Summer said, "everyone knew each other, was familiar with each other. And the teachers are not very, 'call me by my last name.' They were fine with everything." Meghin expanded on this:

> At [the school] it was easier to create those connections at school but I feel like for a lot of other places because of the hierarchy of education and how the teachers put themselves at such a high, well, like, when you start school and they make you talk to them with their

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[5] Sabe is an Anishinaabe word for a creature that offers protection. It is one of seven animals referred to in the Anishinaabe sacred teachings (Benton-Benai, 2010)

> last name it's already like you guys aren't on the same level – obviously this is their job and they are focused – one of their main focuses isn't making those personal connections.

Meghin's comments reveal that the presence of strong relationships in the school wasn't an accident. The teachers in the school modeled a far less hierarchical approach to education wherein learning is built on relationship rather than role. This central element of Indigenous pedagogy was common in the cultural school but was also an element of the approach Indigenous educators in other schools employed.

Whether they worked in the cultural school or other schools, Indigenous teachers figure prominently in the positive school memories of participants. Silver recalls her two favorite teachers were both Indigenous:

> Silver: Those are the two main ones that I liked.
>
> Marc: They're both Indigenous teachers, too. Do you think that made a difference?
>
> Silver: Yeah. I mean, there's other great teachers too, but I just like... Those were my top favorite teachers.
>
> Marc: So what about them? What was it?
>
> Silver: I don't know. Like they were just really nice and they, well, even if I had a problem, I would tell them and then they would listen to me and yeah.

In Silver's stories about school she was always very careful about what she would reveal to teachers. It is not insignificant that the two who she allowed into her inner world were both Indigenous. Jon encountered his first Indigenous teacher in grade 7 and that teacher infused Indigenous content into the class – an experience Jon remembers well:

> I guess you got to learn about some traditional knowledge then so, then, he was like an older Indigenous guy too, so that was cool. And I think he was like, my first Indigenous teacher too, so he was my first Indigenous teacher so that was pretty cool.

The smile on Jon's face as he remembered his teacher underlined just how cool it was. When participants encountered Indigenous teachers, they felt more comfortable and reported having stronger relationships with those teachers.

The presence of strong relationships between students and teachers is important in the participants' stories about what worked in schools. For students who went to the cultural school it was a clear aspect of what helped them. It was also important to those who attended other schools. In fact, regardless of what school the stories come from, the most profoundly impactful positive element of school participants were individual teachers who made a difference.

**Teachers Who Made A Difference**

Some of the most emotionally charged stories that the participants told revolve around teachers who made a difference in their lives. The participants were often reticent to tell detailed stories about individual teachers who discriminated against them or failed to respond to their challenges or desires. However, they were eager to share detailed accounts of the rare few who stood with and for them in their journey through school. As the previous section showed, feeling known and supported within school was an uncommon experience for the participants and so the few teachers who were able to create that feeling occupy a significant space in their memories. Misty offered an illustrative reflection on how unknown she felt in school with the words, "I can honestly say that through grade 7 to 12, the entire time I was there, I had two teachers ever ask

me why I missed so much school." Like the other participants, the stories she shared about those two teachers make it clear how influential and appreciated their attention was.

Misty is not alone. Each participant identified a small number of teachers who made a huge difference and the effects of these teachers became a major focus of our storytelling sessions. For many of the participants these few teachers were the difference between staying in school and leaving school. For some, the actions their teachers took provided support that was truly life changing. The stories reveal a wide diversity of teacher personalities, teaching contexts, and teacher actions that made a difference for students. There is not a template for what to do to be a teacher who makes a difference. However, the individual stories of teachers who made a difference, when read as a whole, do reveal common effects created by the teachers as well as some characteristics that they hold in common. In this section I will explain the effect the teachers who made a difference had on their student and use the stories that were told to explore the characteristic of these remarkable educators.

Teachers who made a difference gave the participants a sense that they were known. The feeling of being known was the basis the participants used for deciding whether to trust a teacher or not. Trust was not immediately granted to the teachers who made a difference. Rather, it was earned through a wide variety of their actions. The actions of these teachers created two main effects. The first was to contribute tangibly to the success of their students. The second, and most profound, was the creation of a real, personal, and long-lasting relationship between them. These actions reveal that teachers who made a difference for students shared a professional orientation towards taking the side of students, even when this placed them in opposition to the school or social context.

***Being Known***

Every participant indicated that they felt known by the teachers who made a difference for them. Being known, in the stories told by the participants, meant that they sensed that teachers knew who they were and expressed positive regard towards them. In some cases, the sense of being known was created through individual attention. Summer explained that during junior high when her mental health and homelife were both in bad shape an Educational Assistant made her feel known:

> I feel like she knew there was something going but she didn't really, like ask questions because at the time I probably wouldn't even know how to answer it. So, but she was always there. She'd always have time for me when the teacher didn't, she'd always ask me about things I was interested in or how did this go the other day – kind of like remember me, what I told her, and just acknowledge me when I come to school.

Simple acts of acknowledgement told Summer that there was an educator in the school who she could trust to see her positively.

In other cases, the sense of being known wasn't generated by individual attention but more by a general sense that a teacher understood the challenges students faced in getting to school. Misty said that teachers who did understand these challenges approached students with acceptance and an understanding that inner-city students, "are probably going to have a lot more bad days than good days." She said that these teachers made her efforts to attend school feel like an accomplishment. In her words, these teachers' actions told them that they thought, "if they [the students] are in the room, that means something. Even if they're not working on something maybe that day, they're in the room."

Participants also felt known when teachers made the decision to draw a line between themselves and the things students got up to in class. Misty explained that in high school she and her friends did not always behave in productive ways. In one class, where Misty eventually excelled, she admitted that:

> I sat on my phone a lot, I didn't work the hardest, but [the teacher] knew that I was going to do the work and she respected that as much as my friends and stuff would talk in class it wasn't to disrespect her it was just that we were doing what we needed to do to get through the day and she would be understanding of that and not a lot of teachers were.

In other classes, such behaviours might be seen as a violation of a teacher's authority. In classes where students felt known, teachers chose not to take behaviour personally, by contextualizing them through their knowledge of the students and their varied realities.

The sense of being known could take a long time to generate, requiring patience, nuanced communication, and teaching choices. The teacher that Sage identified as "life-changing" came into her life, "about the time when I met him in grade 11—it was after I came back from when I took a year off and like, dropped out, I guess." Sage explained that because she was away from school for so long, she came to this new school lacking confidence, feeling lonely and isolated, in a state where she, "never trusted a teacher enough to open up or talk to them." Sage was withdrawn. She felt she "was a very different person" who "didn't have anything in common with the rest of the school so I just felt like sitting back and not socializing." Her trust took a long time to develop. She explained how her teacher developed it:

> He took an interest in me but in a way that seemed just like, 'Hey, are you okay? You're always quiet, you sit in the back, you don't talk or answer questions.' And I said, 'yeah, you know, when I feel like I can answer a question I will.' He was like, 'Okay, take your

> time.' And, like in that year it was sort of hard for me but I was going everyday and he noticed that.

Sage's teacher's noticing led to adaptations. He would offer her chances to do special assignments to raise her grade and confidence. For instance:

> Like, I love movies and he loves movies and we'd talk about movies and he's like, would you want to write a movie assignment or would you want to write an assignment about your favourite movies, your favourite directors, actors? Or write a screenplay? You know, show me what you are interested in, and I was like, 'Yeah! Awesome.' And that year I got my first 100% in school, like in high school. Because like, he was so invested into who I was and my background and what I was interested in that it made it so much more enjoyable.

Gradually, and with her teacher's careful effort, Sage developed a sense of being known and accepted and so, she accepted him.

The teachers who made a positive difference for my participants used a variety of means to do so. These included showing individual attention, adopting a manner of interacting with students that expressed appreciation for them, or personalizing pedagogical approaches that created a sense of being known and accepted. This sense of being known was the necessary precondition for participants to begin to trust their teachers. It may seem a simple matter for teachers to help students like those in this study feel known and accepted. However, the participants are clear that it was rare and that the process of deciding whether to trust a teacher required caution. There were many teachers who seemed to want to know students, but many were not trustworthy.

***Being careful about being known***

It was clear from the stories I heard that when they were students, the participants desired the feeling of being known by a teacher. However, they had experiences that made them wary of trusting teachers enough to share information. Misty said that she learned the hard way that, "you have to be careful about what you say to teachers because they could hear something out of context and things could go wrong." Not being careful could have consequences:

> I ended up in foster care at one point in my life because of things that were overheard. If you don't want to be put in the CFS system you have to watch what you say and who you say it to.

Jordin echoed this sentiment in talking about who to share with, "I know how some teachers are – they ask a lot of questions and like, they ask a lot of questions they don't even need to know." When Jordin sensed that a teacher was prying for information rather than expressing care, she had a simple response, "I would shut them out." Like Jordin, when a teacher's interest raised a red flag for participants, they would often choose to deny a relationship rather than become vulnerable to that teacher's judgements or actions.

Sage shared a story that showed how tricky it was to make judgements about teachers' trustworthiness. Through her job supporting students, Sage has done work in the high school she dropped out of. During one of her visits to the school to visit a student, she encountered one of her former teachers. Sage said of the teacher that, "she was one of those teachers where I wasn't sure if I could open up to this person and I tried, and I really thought that she understood me and where I was." But:

> Recently I saw her again and we were talking about grad and um, what did she say? She said, 'it's hard not to focus on the failures.' The failures! As in the students who failed,

> 'don't focus on that, just focus on the ones who succeed and get to where they are going.' And I thought that was very insensitive considering the good majority of that school comes from inner city or they are Indigenous, and I was one of those students who was a failure. So I just knew from that moment, I knew she wasn't the kind of person you could go to. And I had a good instinct when I was younger too.

Prying teachers weren't the only red flags for the participants when they were deciding whether they would open up or not. There were also teachers like Sage describes who only appeared to be trustworthy. How challenging it was for students to find someone trustworthy underscores the value of those who were.

***Earning Trust: Teacher Actions.***

Teachers are afforded a relatively high degree of trust in society. Teaching young people means spending as much or more time in close contact with and control of them as their parents do. However, for the participants in this study, trust was not immediately extended to the adults in front of their classrooms. It had to be earned. This is an idea that may seem strange to people like me. I grew up attending schools where most of my classmates were white like me, middle class like me, and, like me, children of educated parents. Our teachers were a lot like our parents and school was a place we were told was safe. The idea of not trusting teachers was completely foreign to me.

The first sense I had that all students weren't like me and that some didn't immediately grant trust to teachers came when I was an inner-city teacher myself. I was leading a group project with a class of high school students—many of whom lived in the same neighborhoods and shared similar backgrounds as the participants in this study. The project involved the

students telling each other stories of their backgrounds to discover commonalities and understand differences. It was very successful, and the students began to be invited to other schools to tell their stories there. As a result of the project's success, a documentarian approached us to ask if he might record what was happening. The students all said they were interested and those who were under 18 obtained the written permission of their parents to participate.

The first day that the film maker attended the students' storytelling sessions he set up his camera and I started the session the same way that we had always started. We sat in a circle and I told a story. In previous sessions, the person sitting next to me would respond to the story with one of their own. On this day the person sitting beside me was a young adult student named Machar. Machar was born in South Sudan and had lived in inner-city Winnipeg for the previous four years. He had always been an active participant in the previous sessions but when I finished and it was his turn, he was silent. I looked at him and saw that he was looking directly at the film maker. The silence became awkward for me and I sensed that the film maker felt the same way. He laid his camera on his lap and addressed Machar. He said, with a friendly tone and a smile on his face, "What's wrong, don't you trust me?" Machar responded with an assertive, "No."

The film maker looked at me with a confused look. I looked at Machar, apologized and told him that we would stop because he didn't trust the film maker. Machar looked at me in confusion and asked why we would stop. He explained that he didn't trust me either, but he still came to class. He went on to clarify that he was there because he was a student, and this was school. Trust had little to do with it. As the participants in this study described the teachers who made a difference for them, Machar's words came back to me. For the participants in this study trust is not the starting point for their relationship with teachers or with school. While young people are compelled to attend school by the law, there is no law that can compel them to trust

the people there. And for Indigenous students from the inner city it is reasonable that a building filled with people paid to be there by the state might not give them a deep sense of trust. It is important to remember this in considering the stories of the actions taken by the teachers who made a difference to the participants to earn trust.

The stories of teacher actions span the context of the school, the space between the school and the students' families, and the larger community. As noted earlier, actions within the school could be as simple as taking the time to notice and show positive regard to students. They could also extend to pedagogical choices. For instance, Misty describes a teacher who helped her get back on track to graduation after missing a significant amount of school. She explains:

> In my final year in grade 12 I almost didn't go to her class… We were across the street, in the park, hanging out. And as much as that was probably not okay she understood that if we are not going to go to class we are not going to go to class but if she gives us a project that is – go outside, take a photo, give your life quotes and just like all of these things then it helps everybody out. So, she would find ways so that you weren't sitting in her classroom for an hour hating life. So, she was creative in the way she taught us, and it made us want to try in her class.

It is significant that Misty uses the phrase, "hating life," to describe what being in class was feeling like for her. In the year leading up to grade 12 Misty had experienced homelessness and street violence. She had reasons to hate her life at that point that would reasonably undercut anyone's ability to stay focused in class. Her teacher earned her trust by recognizing that pain and acting to adapt how her class ran to allow for the space and time it took for Misty to reconnect with school.

Schools bridge the private world of the home and the public world. As such, interactions between the home and the school reflect and reinforce larger social patterns. In Canada it is hard to overstate just how problematic the relationship has been between Indigenous families and schools. Given this, it is not surprising that teachers who made a difference in participants' lives chose to act within this context as well. One example comes from Silver who, while in late elementary school, had done something bad – something that still bothers her enough that she didn't feel comfortable sharing it. She was, however, comfortable explaining the actions of her teacher. In her words:

> I remember I went to [the teacher] and I told her. And then she calmed me down and then she was understanding. And then she's like, 'Okay but we're going to have to tell your mom.' And then I got scared…. My mom was mad at me.

Silver had good reason to be scared. Her relationship with her mom at that point was characterized by tension and so was her mom's relationship with schools. Silver's mom had removed her from schools before because they had to move and for reasons Silver doesn't recall. Each removal precipitated disruption and the need to make new friends and learn new systems. A call home to her mom was scary, but one from a teacher who she had trusted was more than that. It seemed to me that it must have felt like a betrayal. I asked Silver why she shared this story as a response to my question about teachers who made a positive difference. She explained that this teacher didn't just call home – she made a connection with her mom, explained all the context involved, expressed her appreciation for Silver's honesty, waited through her mom's anger, and made sure that everything was going to be okay when Silver went home. These actions showed Silver that her teacher understood the dynamics within her home and between her home and the

school. Moreover, the teacher's actions navigated the dynamics in Silver's best interest and solidified rather than breaking the relationship between them.

Working in a child's best interest is a common teacher act that earned trust. Jon, by his own admission, was very fortunate to encounter quite a few teachers who earned his trust. However, they didn't enter his life until he was in high school. Before that he explained:

> Yeah, when I was thinking about it, like, I'm growing up in a low income, like very low-income household. There wasn't much food in the house so lots of times, school wasn't even a priority, like I would just wake up, go to school on my own, nobody was telling me to go to school. So it was pretty much up to me. Everyday I would just make my way to school, try my best, try to go to school. Yeah, seemed like teachers didn't know how I wasn't eating a lot, how I wasn't fully nutritioned through the day, you know, skipping breakfast, skipping lunch, I think some teachers kind of knew but some teachers didn't because they'd expect high, like lots of output from me in the classroom when you know I'm not eating, I'm not focused, distracted.

Jon began to disengage more and more from school as he found he didn't have the energy or focus to be able to succeed. That changed when a gym teacher who became his basketball coach entered his life:

> My basketball coach helped me with that in grade 10. He saw I was never eating anything, playing basketball at lunch, after school. So my basketball coach he got me in the lunch program at the school so every lunch, just went down to the caf, got a free lunch. So, like, that meant so much for me. I went to class more.

Jon didn't just go to class more. He also began to play on the basketball team, which would turn into a pathway to academic and career success. Significant in this story was the fact that the

school had a lunch program that Jon could have been in had any of his other teachers signed him up. The choice of his coach to take an interest and take action in his interest led Jon to open up more.

Jon had always kept his homelife a secret from school. With a brother in jail, and his dad out of work he was living in insecure housing in a neighbourhood with a high incidence of violence. He remembers a key moment when he knew he could trust his coach for good:

> Jon: And with my basketball coach, I thought I could trust him and I remember one time he picked me up at my mom's place just down the street where I lived on Main there – and it was just like, a really sketchy place. And it was so funny seeing like, he's not from around the North End right!
>
> Marc: Yeah, he's a big tall white guy!
>
> Jon: (Laughing) Yeah, huge! Totally suburban! He picked me up for basketball practice, came to my house, knocked on my door was just the most funniest thing ever. He looked terrified! He was like, 'is this where you live?' Like crazy!
>
> Marc: How did you feel, judged?
>
> Jon: Nah, he was kind of, I felt like he knew all that—but to see what I was in—like, damn! But, yeah, it was tough but you know he was there for me - so it was good.

Jon's coach had passed the test. He earned, and still has Jon's trust. The following year the coach changed schools and Jon did too—earning a scholarship to a private school where he ended up being the athlete of the year.

In his new school Jon also encountered teachers who earned his trust through acting to bridge home and school. Despite his scholarship and some support for a laptop and study space, the effect of being one of very few Indigenous or inner-city students within it was a challenge.

Jon said that, "all of these kids I was with, they're like honour roll kids, rich kids, paying like 800 dollars a class and, like, I just felt like had no business being there at times." A major stressor for Jon was the shift from the academic pace and expectations in the new school. He said that going into the school he thought, "that reading a book or two a year was like, wow! But at [the private school] I was writing five-page essays, two a month, and October exams, December exams." The increased academic pressure exacerbated Jon's feeling of being different and not belonging. He also had no connections to the teachers in the school until one teacher reached out. He explained:

> I think lots of these suburban teachers didn't come up to me—like—obviously I'm struggling with my grades, right? But one teacher, she came up to me—and she was a super cool teacher in English—and English was one of the courses where I was struggling the most and she came up to me and was like, oh, do you need some help? And she was so open, so cool. If it wasn't for that I would have probably failed math and English that grade 11 year. I think I passed with a 54 and she helped me so much.

When Jon shared this, I was surprised that this teacher stood out for him when it seemed to me that all she had done was take an interest in him and ask if he needed help. However, he went on to explain that coming up to him was much more important than I thought, "She was the first teacher who came up to me and because, like, I'm not going to go up to a teacher." One of the only Indigenous students in the school and one of the only inner-city students in the school, Jon already felt judgement significant enough to stop him from opening up about what he needed. That feeling seems to have been well founded as in his mind it was clear that he was struggling at the new school and yet only one teacher reached out to him. The simple act of engaging with him seems not to have been so simple.

Consider the range of actions that teachers took to earn the trust of students just profiled: Misty's teacher's classroom adaptations, Silver's teacher's commitment to see a fraught interaction with her mom, Jon's coach getting him food and picking him up for practice, and his teacher's willingness to cross the divide between him and the culture of the school to find a way to support him. Each one shows a teacher expressing their knowledge of and interest in their student through purposeful action. Together, they express how important teachers who act mindfully to make school work are to inner-city student success.

Actions taken outside of the school were also a key factor common to the teachers who the participants said made a difference. Meghin and Summer told me a story about a teacher, whose name I have changed to Kaitlyn, that demonstrates it. Both Meghin and Summer graduated from the same high school and were part of a program within the school that offered preparation for careers in the medical field. The program was designed specifically for Indigenous students to address the lack of Indigenous representation in medical professions. Along with embedded cultural connections and a small group approach to instruction, the program had a heavy focus on high level science and math. Their science and math teacher was Kaitlyn.

The story was about a field trip to a clinic where students would take on practicum placements working with medical staff. During the field trip the students, accompanied by Kaitlyn, were oriented to the site by one of the staff members. The students immediately felt judged by the staff member who was leading them through the clinic. Summer explained that she immediately got the feeling that, "there weren't high expectations for me" there. Meghin was more to the point, "the lady giving the tour was talking to us like we were – like we just didn't know anything." Feeling judged as suspicious or less than was not an unusual experience for

Meghin and Summer. As the stories about racial profiling shared earlier make clear, this was a situation they knew well and one they had strategies for dealing with. Meghin said they all wanted to point out that they had been preparing for this moment for two years, but Kaitlyn had prepped them on making first impressions, “so nobody said anything.”

As the tour went on the students continued to act in accordance with Kaitlyn’s instructions to show respect to the staff. Finally, the condescension exhibited by the staff member became too much – not for the students – for Kaitlyn. Meghin explained, “Kaitlyn was not having it.” Meghin went on to say that she pulled the person guiding them aside and, “Kaitlyn said something and got herself kicked out of the tour and uninvited back for the next year.” I asked what she said, and Summer explained, “she pointed out that we are not children, we know what is going on, we understand, and you don’t have to talk to us like we are babies.” Meghin contextualized this moment:

> In school we were expected to friggin’ shine but when we went to this new placement where they didn’t know that we were doing all the other things that the smarter kids would be doing in other schools they would look at us like we didn’t know anything.

After all their hard work the judgement stung. But the feeling of having their teacher stand up for them made up for a lot of that sting.

As Meghin and Summer told me this story it was clear it meant a lot to them. Their voices rose and their pace quickened with the telling. Meghin had a huge smile on her face when she said, “Kaitlyn was not having it.” I could feel their appreciation for their teacher. After telling the story they made it clear that the teacher’s actions were more than an instance of drama in their school lives. For once it was their teacher who was taking on the task of correcting discrimination and facing consequences for doing it instead of them. For Meghin and Summer

this meant that not only did Kaitlyn see them, she also saw how the rest of the city saw them and was willing to do something about it. Kaitlyn was always an accepting teacher. Meghin explained to me that, "Kaitlyn just kind of looks at everyone and she's like – yes!" But on this field trip Kaitlyn showed that she more than accepted her students, she identified herself with them and she was willing to stand with them.

Recognizing and responding to student reality was a trait shared by the teachers who made a difference and one that often extended beyond teaching acts. At times the recognition of student reality wasn't based on specific knowledge. Misty fondly recounted how the attention her grade 8 teacher paid to her showed his knowledge of her situation without needing to know the details. She told me that:

> He never really knew what was going on at home…But he figured it out because I was squinting at the board. He knew I needed glasses and I wasn't saying anything. When he figured that out, he offered to pay for them. He sat me down and said, 'I know something is up, you know' sat down with me and said, 'you know, you're not going to do very well if you don't talk to people.'

Misty paused after describing this scene and, with a tremble of emotion in her voice, repeated, "he offered to buy my first pair of glasses, grade 8." There was no way that her family could have afforded a pair of glasses and there was no way Misty was going to share what her homelife was like. The teacher bought the glasses and gave them to her privately. Through that action, Misty gained the ability to thrive in class, not only because of the glasses but because of the trust she felt in her teacher. It's a trust that led her to visit with him regularly in the years after she graduated high school.

Teachers acting in allegiance with students was not limited to situations related directly to school. Some of the most surprising and moving stories that I heard extended far beyond the walls of the classroom. Silver had a real challenge finding housing in high school. She had been working steadily since she turned 15 so she had the money needed to pay for an apartment but as a young, first time renter in a city with a very high occupancy rates, she faced rejection from most options she could find. The pressure to find a place of her own was significant as Silver's homelife was disrupted by her mother's addiction and her schoolwork was suffering as a result.

Silver describes herself as private by nature. She hadn't shared much of her homelife with her teachers. She received a scholarship to attend a school where she was one of few Indigenous students from the inner city. This also discouraged her from being very open about her situation. Despite valuing her privacy and feeling different from many of her classmates Silver did feel known by one teacher. She explained that, "he was really good. I would talk to him about certain stuff. Like, not go into detail, but he would be understandable and stuff." The trust that Silver felt for her teacher was well founded. I asked her about a time that showed why she trusted him and she offered the following:

> Probably when I was looking for a, like when I was looking to move into [an apartment], I was looking for someone to co-sign and he co-signed for me. Like he talked to his wife and he helped me out with that.

I asked what he needed to know from her to make this commitment. She said that all she had said was, "I told him there was family problems at home, so I didn't go into detail. I just said that, and he was like, 'Okay'." Misty still lives in the apartment for which her teacher co-signed. She has never failed to pay her rent.

Like Misty's teacher, others went far beyond the definition of teacher in acting in allegiance with students. Jon's current success is a result of numerous factors, not the least of which is his own remarkable energy and determination, but one of his teachers was also very significant. As mentioned earlier, Jon received scholarship support to attend a private school where the academic pressure was high. His English teacher was instrumental in helping him face the academic challenges at school but he had other challenges as well. At home, Jon's life was difficult because of the cumulative effects of family illness, family members with addictions, and family members involved in gangs and facing incarceration. Being the only person in his home pursuing an educational future, Jon had very little support. At times this meant an environment that was too loud and too crowded to do homework but at other times it meant opposition and ridicule from his family to the path he was on. Jon knew that he needed to leave the environment but, being a minor, he couldn't do much without his mother's permission:

> Well, I guess every time I would try to better my life, my parents, because they were my guardian, technically my guardian, I would have to get permission from them for anything. So, I wanted to move out, mom, "No." So that was huge thing, right? I told my mom that and I was like, "I can't live here, I can't go to school in this environment." And then she was like, "Nope, no, no."

Jon asked me, "you ever heard of the crabs in the bucket analogy? Yeah, so I'm trying to get out of this shitty situation, and they're like, 'Nope.' So, it was really tough." Jon was stuck. He was unable to thrive at school and thrive as a family member. Two of Jon's teachers worked together to transform the situation.

Jon's teachers understood the situation he was in and helped him do something remarkable and consequential. Jon explained that he turned to his teacher and asked her for help.

Through her knowledge of government and bureaucracy she helped Jon voluntarily enter the care of Child and Family Services and apply for Independent Living status. In effect, this process cut all legal familial ties between him and his family. The result was independence coupled with deep estrangement. Jon explained that he was truly alone, "When I moved out my mom's like, 'Don't ask me for nothing.'" Child and Family Services provided some financial support to Jon but he needed to find a place to stay and rental costs were far more than what the government provided. Again, his teachers stepped in. Jon explained:

> They knew my situation – and I was really close with them. So it just worked out, right? They were like, "Jon's in this situation, he needs out," and then they were like, "Okay, let's get him into residence." They put me into residence and they covered me for three months and [my teacher] was non-stop bothering CFS, every day. She was like, "we've got a student living here who needs support." So if I was waiting for CFS without them I probably would have, I don't know, been done.

Jon is connected to those two teachers who acted to provide navigational, financial, and emotional support to him, to this day. He is clear about the relationship that developed and his role in it, "it's a two-way relationship, right?" Jon lived up to his part in the relationship. He went on to graduate from both high school and university. Throughout his schooling, and up to the current day he has used the opportunities provided him by his teachers to assist inner-city students walking similar paths to the one he walked.

### *Resonant Relationships*

Jon's attention to and respect for the relationship that developed between him and his teachers was echoed in the feelings that other participants shared about the teachers who made a

difference in their school lives. One of the lasting effects of teachers who made a difference for the participants was an important and lasting relationship. Jordin has a list in her head of the teachers who helped her and she made the point of telling me that, "I still go see them." This was a common theme in the stories the students told about the things that the teachers did for them. Each of these teachers got to know their students and earned their trust which has created a relationship that, though forged in school, transcends it.

A sense of the gratitude and respect for these relationships can be found in a story Sage told that was introduced earlier. After explaining how her teacher had gotten her reconnected to school again through appealing to her interests Sage explained the immediate and lasting effects of their relationship – part of which was quoted earlier:

> That was the year that I got my first 100% in school, like in high school. Because like, he was so invested in who I was and my background and what I was interested in that it made it so much more enjoyable and when I graduated he was, I could, I was on the stage, oh my god, and he was in the back and he was standing up giving me a standing ovation.

Sage told this part of the story with tears in her eyes. After a deep breath she went on:

> I wrote a university paper about him. It was my, in my first year for academic writing or something. I think the topic was something about, oh right, I chose mentorship and community – my community and giving back. I called it the cycle or circle of mentorship. And I mentioned him. I sent him the paper when I was done. He's currently not working right now because he has cancer. When I sent him that he said, I just feel so much better now that you sent this to me. Turns out I sent him medicine.

Since our storytelling sessions Sage's teacher has recovered and started teaching again. In her story the sense of gratitude is clear but along with it is a sense of reciprocity. This was also a common thread in the stories told by participants. They understand that the work these few teachers did was unique, and they want their teachers to know that they know that.

***Oriented to Allegiance***

Hearing and reading these stories about teachers who made a difference I was taken by how the actions they took, like co-signing a lease or fighting with the child welfare system, represented truly remarkable and risky efforts. I mention risk purposefully as the actions taken by the teachers who made a difference often put them in opposition to the same systems the students deal with. Jon shared an illustrative story from early in his relationship with his coach that demonstrates that:

> Jon: My basketball coach who did so much for me – when I was in grade ten he caught me outside smoking some weed with my friends right. So, and he never judged me – after that he still got me in the lunch program, still pushed me for basketball. – everything.
>
> Marc: Wasn't he supposed to kick you off the team?
>
> Jon: He looked the other way and kind of just, [laughing] worked me hard in the gym!

This may not seem like a consequential story. Lots of students smoke weed and get away with it. But what is significant is that the coach didn't really look the other way. He took the risk that ignoring the violation of school rules (which at the time was also against the law) wouldn't get him into trouble and used the moment to connect with Jon in a way that made sense for them both – in the gym. Decisions like this earned the trust of students because the students knew that their teachers were taking their side – even if it put them at risk.

As I just stated, the teachers in these stories are unquestioningly remarkable. Some of their actions went well beyond the limits of their job descriptions. Not every teacher could reasonably be expected to buy glasses for students. But some of these actions seem utterly reasonable. Surely every teacher could be expected to adapt their work to the needs of students or sit through a fraught phone call to an angry mother until they were sure the child and parent and school were reconciled. I can understand why there were few teachers in the stories that made grand gestures like helping liberate a child from his parents. I don't understand why there were so few teachers in the participants' experience who did the other things, the simpler things like recognizing and responding to students' realities in the school hallways and classrooms. Why were so few of the teachers these students experienced inclined to do even these things? What was it about these teachers?

Determining the motivations of the teachers in the stories I heard falls well beyond the scope of my research questions. Moreover, my data consists of stories about them, which is far from being a sufficient source for determining their interior states. However, it is germane to my research purpose to ask what the difference was that these teachers made in the minds and hearts of the participants. That, at least is a discovery I can clearly draw from the stories I was told: Each of the teachers who made a difference made the students feel like they had someone on their side.

Whether it was an act of acknowledgement, adaptation, or advocacy, each of the teachers featured in the students' stories clearly aligned their professional purpose with the identity and experience of their students. Their actions reveal that who they were as teachers was inextricably and unfailingly aligned with who their students were and what they were facing. Feeling that orientation meant a lot to the participants. As their stories about the system made clear, the

participants are regularly at odds with powerful structures that are bigger than themselves. The onus is on them to navigate the systems and the consequences of failing to do so are severe. By orienting themselves with students, the teachers who made a difference did more than acting in a caring fashion. They witness the structural challenges faced by young people in the inner city and through assisting in the young peoples' creative responses to the system, they are giving credence to the fact that it, and its injustice, is real. The source of gratitude the participants expressed is for more than the individual actions the teachers took. It is also for the validation of their experience – one that is largely ignored in both schools and the larger community.

## Conclusion

As the previous chapter showed, school was very rarely a place that recognized and welcomed the participants. Their successful graduation from the school system is a testament to their determination and hard work. However, they were greatly aided and are appreciative of the responsive and sustaining cultural practices they were able to find within school. Likewise, they thrived when they were able to build connections that sustained them within school. The most influential connections they developed were with individual teachers. These teachers made the participants feel recognized and appreciated. This feeling resulted in a trust based on the work teachers did to show their allegiance with the participants, work which often fell outside of what would be considered normal teaching responsibilities. The presence of these human factors within the school system provided the essential supports for the participants to find a path to graduation.

# Chapter Eight: The Village

In one of the storytelling sessions when we were discussing the things that were not seen by the system and schools, Sage shared words that form the inspiration for this chapter:

> I think they say, our DNA has like—oh this is going to sound so dumb, but, our DNA has a memory and when I hear my grandparents talk or my great grandparents they always say that they had a village and I feel like we always need a village and I feel like that's how we operate in the best way that we can because we have people, supports from all ends, families, cousins I guess, who help. We have our own circles.

The participants participate in many circles, invisible to the system or schools, that bolster their strength within the inner-city villages they call home. Within these circles the participants find the strength of culture, neighbourhood organizations, and relationships. Their individual strength and success are impressive but as Sage points out, they have developed that through the presence of, "supports from all ends."

## Culture

Indigeneity figures prominently in the stories told by participants. The neighbourhoods where the participants grew up, attended school, and where many of them work today are the centre of Indigenous presence within Winnipeg. While Indigenous people live and work across the city, their population is most concentrated within the inner city. When Indigeneity was discussed by the participants the stories tended to fall into two categories – one dealing with the treatment of Indigenous people and the other with the emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and social aspects of having Indigenous heritage. Exploring both categories of story is essential to understanding the experience of the participants.

For me, exploring the experience of Indigeneity requires significant caution and forethought. The reason for my caution is two-fold. One has to do with the things that the participants experienced that I will never experience first-hand. I have the privilege of never having been judged negatively because of my heritage or appearance by anyone holding power over me. While I have studied Indigenous culture and experience and am lucky to have had many generous teachers in this area, I have also never experienced what it feels like or means to be Indigenous. The other reason has to do with the complexity of cultural identity itself. My own experience with defining what my cultural heritage means tells me that it is an area in which it is wise to tread carefully.

Growing up I knew I was a Ukrainian-Canadian. I knew that because my last name is a Ukrainian word and the stories that my Dad told me about his family began in the Ukraine. Perogies were my favorite food and no holiday meal was complete without cabbage rolls and beet borscht. For me, this is what it meant to be Ukrainian. It was not until I was well into adulthood that I discovered that there were other ways to be Ukrainian. I remember meeting a co-worker at a new teaching job who remarked on my last name, greeted me in Ukrainian, asked me which Ukrainian dance troupe I belonged to, and what church I went to as a kid. I did not speak the language, was not religious, and the idea of being a Ukrainian dancer had never crossed my mind. I told him as much and the judgement on his face told me that maybe I was not quite as Ukrainian as I had thought. A year later, a new student arrived in my classroom. He was born outside of Kiev, Ukraine. His family immigrated to Canada to escape poverty and political unrest. He did not go to church, spoke Russian more than Ukrainian and he did dance – to Justin Bieber songs.

Who among us was Ukrainian? Who among us was Canadian? To this day I am not completely sure what it means when someone says that they are Ukrainian-Canadian. I do know that that my heritage made sense to me completely until I met others who claimed the same identity but experienced and expressed it differently. Cultural identity is complex. What it means to be part of a culture is not universally understood, even for those within one. Therefore, it is very important for people like me, who are writing about other people's culture, to proceed with caution. This is particularly true for a white person writing about Indigenous culture. Every cultural identity is simultaneously personal and public. The cultural identity of Indigenous people in Canada has been alternatively denigrated, contested, fetishized, and held in suspicion by outsiders since the first explorers and missionaries arrived here. To be clear, I have not shared the story of my own confusion about my culture to compare being Ukrainian to being Indigenous. Rather, I am sharing it to express the fact that if I can't offer a conclusive answer to what my own heritage means, I certainly do not wish to claim to know what it means to be Indigenous.

I have approached the experiences that the participants shared that have to do with their cultural identity with the preceding ideas guiding my analysis. My interest in this research is to increase the understanding teachers like me have of Indigenous students living lives like those of my participants. It is not to define what it means to be or should mean to be Indigenous. My approach has been to take the stories participants told me about their Indigenous identity and analyze them with this question in mind – what is the role they are telling me Indigeneity plays in this story? What has resulted is not a definition of Indigeneity but an expression of the wide variety of things that the six Indigenous inner-city youth who shared their stories with me associate with being Indigenous.

A clear distinction exists within the stories that the participants shared between how being Indigenous is seen by others and how being Indigenous works in their lives. I will deal with these two kinds of stories separately. They are included beside each other in this section to highlight the dramatic difference between how being Indigenous feels for my participants versus how society tries to make them feel about being Indigenous.

### *Being Indigenous: Facing Stereotypes and Judgement*

Just as they knew that they were singled out because of being Indigenous when they were in school, participants were, and remain, aware of being singled out when they are in the larger community. Part of being Indigenous for the participants involves being stereotyped and discriminated against. Recall Jordin's attempts to hide her family's challenges from her teachers for fear that knowing about them would lead her teachers not to see her as an individual who is Indigenous but as, "just another Native kid." That fear was based on her experience with how common it is for Indigenous youth to be stereotyped and discriminated against because of their heritage. She, along with the other participants, understood that when representatives of the system and school staff saw them there was a reasonable chance they saw them through a stereotypical lens.

Participants' awareness of being stereotyped was also developed through their time in the larger community. Every participant referred to either having been followed or knowing someone who was followed by security and store staff when shopping. In one storytelling session with Derwin, Silver, Summer, and Meghin, some of those stories were told. We had been sharing stories about the experience of being Indigenous in Winnipeg:

Derwin: I guess like, just kind of walking around downtown and walking to the store. This happened at Dollarama on Portage. Me and my friends, there was five of us. We were just walking around Dollarama and of course, out of the corner of our eye we saw the security guard watching us.

Silver: Or that one time, me and Derwin went to Shopper's and then we were like walking down the aisles looking at stuff, we were by the chips and this security guy looked at Derwin, cuz I guess Derwin, had an arm movement and he thought that he was hiding something and then…

Derwin: Oh yeah, he was looking at me and I was like, what? I lifted up my shirt and said, "What?" Cuz I had my hand in my pocket and I walking and all of a sudden he keeps staring at me and I was like, "What? There's nothing in here!" Yeah, it kind of annoyed me cuz like, he was following us since the makeup section. Like if I was, honestly, I was thinking, what is this guy actually trying to do? I mean, I would bulldozer him if I was trying to steal.

Laughter erupted after Derwin suggested bulldozing the security guard. Everyone understood he was pointing out the absurdity of the situation, rather than laying out a shoplifting strategy.

After the laughter subsided Summer picked up on the thread of frustration that Derwin had laid down when he made everyone laugh:

Summer: Yeah, it upsets me too. I get angry whenever I like go to a store or something and someone like, especially like a security guard follows you or like, keeps looking at you just because you are Indigenous.

Marc: Do they say that's the reason?

Summer: No, but you can feel it.

Meghin shared her own experience with not being followed in stores as evidence of how Indigenous people are targeted:

> I feel like because I am mixed race, clearly, I don't look Indigenous so I don't get targeted like an Indigenous person but my mom is First Nations' so that is her look so I've seen it happen to her and seen it happen to my siblings but it isn't something that happens to me.

The experience of being followed in Winnipeg stores is a testament to the discriminatory culture of the city. It's a culture that the participants are keenly aware of.

The stereotyping, judgement, and suspicion that the participants face in Winnipeg has led them to draw conclusions about the city and their place in it. Jon expressed this very clearly:

> I am never going to move to the suburbs. I don't feel safe in the suburbs. I feel safe here where I grew up. Statistically we have a lot of crime, but this is where I feel safe.

Jon's preference for staying in the neighbourhood where he is among friends and family who are Indigenous like him rather than living in a part of the city where his skin will mark him for discrimination is utterly reasonable. He and the other participants shared lots of reasons for preferring to live in the inner city than in the suburbs. One of the biggest reasons is that in the inner city they are further away from the discrimination that they face from being the only Indigenous person in sight. Life in their neighbourhood is challenging. But within it, the negative judgements that come with being Indigenous aren't as widespread as outside of it and they are shared by family and friends. Within the neighbourhood, the positive things about being Indigenous are also shared.

***Being Indigenous: A Source of Personal Identity***

At the most basic level, in many of the stories told by participants being Indigenous provides the most essential aspect of their personal identity. For many of the participants, the answers to the fundamental questions of life, who am I and where do I come from, were tied to being Indigenous. Their answers to these questions communicated the importance of that identity and the strength they drew from it.

Two examples of the function of being Indigenous in defining identity came from discussions of ceremonies held at the culturally based high school. Summer indicated that the ceremonies gave her a "piece of home." It is a powerful statement because Summer's experience growing up wasn't directly connected to a specific Indigenous community or ceremonial practice. The ceremonies were transcendent – they brought her to a home that she had never seen or lived in. That home was profoundly important. She said that when she was 'there.' engaging in ceremony, she was, "not feeling that awful feeling anymore." That awful feeling, a result of deep mental health challenges, was taken away, and continues to be held at bay today, by the time Summer spent and spends rooted to the home provided by her Indigenous cultural identity.

Meghin did grow up in an Indigenous community. For her, the questions of who am I and where do I come from are inextricably linked to that place. Her culture was nurtured at home, "I learned about my culture more at home in being with my Grandpa in my time out on the rez. And all the ceremonies and stuff that they would do on the rez." Meghin's early experiences growing up in her cultural milieu was picked up in the city when she attended the Indigenous cultural high school. She explained, "the ceremonies that they did have at the school, it was like a way for me to maintain what I had learned." Ceremony and teachings at school connected her to her physical and cultural home.

Interestingly, while Summer expressed a sense of emotional and spiritual transcendence when discussing ceremony, Meghin was far more matter of fact about them. I asked her if the ceremonies at school deepened her understanding or relationship with her cultural identity. She responded:

> Not really, cuz at the beginning, when I first started out there in grade 10 going to, it was different being in a setting where at the school we would have the pipe ceremonies but then being like, obviously, fifteen – sixteen it stated to feel like an inconvenience to my day until grade 12 when I started to appreciate it more again.
>
> Marc: So there would be times when you would be like, 'damn, I have to go'?
>
> Meghin: Yeah, in the middle of my favorite class, be like, ugh, okay.

Everyone in the storytelling session, including Summer, started laughing when Meghin rolled her eyes describing preferring to be in class to going to ceremony.

The laughter Meghin's comment set off sent an important message to me. Nobody was offended by what she said. She was not disparaging the importance of ceremony with her words. Rather, she was expressing a key fact about cultural practices. Ceremonies may be codified but the experience of them is not. Individuals experience things in different ways at different times. This should not be surprising. Summer discovered ceremony as an adolescent and expressed reverence and transcendence about her experience with ceremony in school. Meghin grew up with ceremony and thus referred to it as being more commonplace. There was no conflict between their interpretations.

Although Meghin and Summer diverged in the way they related to their culture, each was an accurate expression of how their culture was working for and with them at that moment in their lives. I am stressing this point because it is exactly the point that stereotyped ideas about

cultures miss. It is also one of the key messages I think the participants were trying to send me. I began this section by saying that for many participants being Indigenous was the key component of their identity. That is true, but what it means for each individual varies. There is no orthodoxy at work. Being Indigenous is defined by Indigenous individuals themselves, on their own terms. Stereotypes erect a reified definition of cultural practices and beliefs and then subsume individual identities and variability within that definition. Summer's reverence and Meghin's eye roll fly in the face of that kind of thinking.

### ***Being Indigenous: Practices and Perspectives***

Indigenous cultural practices figured prominently in the stories shared by some participants. As mentioned earlier, Derwin grew up participating in Pow Wow and Hoop Dancing. Dancing provided him with a culturally grounded pursuit away from the struggles his family was facing at home. He credits that time with fostering his enjoyment of physical fitness and his interest in teaching. For other participants, the influence of cultural practices extends beyond personal interest and underpins a unique way of seeing the world and their relationship to it.

In one storytelling session Summer, Meghin, and Silver spoke about the challenge of practicing their culture within a society that does not understand it. The conversation began with Summer explaining that at a local Indigenous cultural festival where she was volunteering, she had to stop a white audience member from touching one of the dancers who was walking by. The audience member was hurt by Summer's intercedence. She said she just, "really liked the costume" and wanted to see what it was made of. In response, Summer took the audience member aside and explained that the dancer was wearing regalia, not a costume, and then went

on to explain the significance of regalia to dancers. It bothered her that she had to take so much time to explain why instead of having the audience member simply accept that it was a rule. Summer felt that if the audience member liked the cultural display she was watching so much she should have just accepted the rules instead of needing a personalized teaching to explain them.

The sentiments Summer expressed about the audience member were extended into a discussion of Sage harvesting which brought the lack of knowledge that non-Indigenous people have about the protocols around cultural practices into clearer view:

> Summer: Yeah, we couldn't pick Sage anymore at Birds Hill cuz, there was no Sage left – it was being over harvested by like, not only the Indigenous community but the non-Indigenous because they'd hear about oh – that's the place where you get sage
>
> Meghin: People go wild when they go Sage picking
>
> Summer: And like I heard a story about how they, um, this non-Indigneous person went there and like they like just ripped it out of the ground, roots and everything
>
> Silver: No Way!
>
> Summer: They didn't offer tobacco or anything cuz they didn't know – they just heard that is the place to go get Sage.

The frustration of the participants in this exchange was obvious. It was another instance of people interfering with the freedom of Indigenous people like themselves to practice their culture. As the exchange went on it became clear there was another reason for the frustration as well.

There was a pause after Summer said that no tobacco was offered when the Sage was picked. In that pause I asked about what should have been done:

Marc: So, what is the proper way to harvest Sage?

Summer: You're supposed to harvest the just pick the male Sage. There's male and female. The female Sage has the seeds on it and the male is just the Sage. And you are supposed to just like break it from the ground and not like, pull the roots out.

Silver: And then you offer tobacco.

Meghin: You are supposed to offer tobacco before you pick the Sage and you are supposed to take just what you need, no more than you need.

Marc: When do you harvest?

Silver: In the fall.

As Silver, Summer, and Meghin graciously filled in the gaps in my knowledge another source of their frustration became clear. It was not just that Sage was overharvested that was frustrating. It was the lack of respect for the relationship between people and the land that the improper harvesting showed. The practice of picking Sage was not a pastime or even preparation for ceremonies for these young women. It was an expression of their understanding of humans, the land, and the relationship between them. Cultural practices like picking Sage express and reinforce their perspective on who they are in relation to the world.

Among the participants, Summer spoke most often and in most depth about the importance of cultural practices and teachings to her identity and approach to life. Her time in high school as part of the school's girls' drum group was the beginning of a path that continues today. She returns to her old high school once a week to drum with her former teacher and the students who attend the school now. On Fridays, she spends her time co-leading a girls' drum group at a local school for criminally involved girls. She explained to me that this group was started by her drum sister who is, "teaching me to teach people." The school where they hold

their drum group is a locked facility and students who attend there are sometimes there as an alternative to jail. I asked Summer about behaviour issues and she looked at me with some confusion, saying, “There are no problems, No. It's mostly just three, four people that come. It's their choice, it's not like they have to come.” Just as when she explained Sage picking to me, Summer went on to explain that teaching drumming is not the same thing as school. It is a choice to participate and a practice that speaks to your whole being, rather than only your brain. Her explanation of the practice of drumming and her commitment to teaching it show that for Summer, cultural practice is an expression of a core part of who she is.

***Culture in Action — Social and Political Orientation***

For some participants, being Indigenous is connected to being in allegiance with other Indigenous people, Indigenous movements, and championing Indigenous rights and approaches. This connection is based on their presumption that Indigenous culture offers a way of structuring, ordering, and coordinating a just and inclusive society. This is evident in both the approaches they employ in their lives as well as in the critiques they offer of the societal status quo.

One clear example of the use of Indigenous approaches was offered in a discussion of a recent event held by the community organization where I met and interviewed the participants. The organization serves the entire community and within the community there is a large and increasing population of newcomer youth, largely from refugee backgrounds. Participants explained that this has led to conversations about representation and culture:

> Meghin: Some students kind of feel left out cuz when we do certain programming. It’s based around Indigenous cultures and stuff like that and we don’t really focus on too

much else so there have been sometimes students come forward and don't feel included in stuff we do.

Summer: Like they would ask questions like, 'why don't we have other cultures in here?'

Meghin: Yeah, because usually all the student gatherings are Indigenous based but this year they came up with a new plan – it was still based around Indigenous culture but used the Medicine Wheel and around the different cultures contained within it.

By incorporating the Medicine Wheel to include the newcomers, the primacy of Indigenous presence, both historically and demographically, in the neighbourhood was affirmed while the presence of non-Indigenous people was celebrated. It is a succinct and powerful affirmation of the premise the participants adopt when looking at the community issues – Indigenous culture has a way to approach this.

The cultural approaches that the participants favour contrast with existing social structures. Meghin is currently pursuing a teaching degree. However, she admits to some reticence about becoming a teacher due to the hierarchical nature of the school system, preferring one where relationship is of greater importance. Recall that Misty suggested the first thing schools should do to change is to sit the students in the circle and ask what they needed. Likewise, Silver brought up sitting in a circle when speaking about the alienation she felt in her private school. She recalled that the one time a teacher had the students sit in a circle, the result was that, "everyone engaged." This stood in contrast to the normal routine which was, "like, when everyone's sitting in rows and it's like, boring." In a circle, a key form within Indigenous pedagogy, the authority structure communicated by rows of desks facing the teacher is flattened, face-to-face communication occurs, deliberation is focused on the centre and on the things held

in common by everyone involved. Mentions of circles in the stories told speak to the rootedness of Indigenous values within the participants.

The sense the participants have of the importance of Indigeneity to society came forward in an interesting conversation about studying French in schools. Meghin was describing her early education while living at her reserve. The school was not on the reserve but served many of the students from it:

> Meghin: When I was living out on the rez and we had the option of taking French or Sauteaux and that kind of split up the kids because all of the Indigenous kids would take Sauteaux and the rest of the kids would go into French. The only difference was that the students in French had the opportunity to fundraise and go on trips, like going to Winnipeg to visit St. Boniface. But, I guess, cuz we were living on the rez, so, where were we going to go?

This irony in this story was apparent to the participants. Everyone laughed at the conundrum of studying your own language on your own land and yet being denied the chance to travel and fundraise because of it. That laughter prompted a further conversation about studying French in general. I started by commenting on the fact that it is government mandated course:

> Marc: So, in Canadian schools we have to teach basic French from grade 3 or 4 on. We have to, by law.
>
> Silver: Right, because there's French people.
>
> Derwin: It's supposed to be our second language.
>
> Marc: Yeah, I guess the story is that there are two founding nations, England and France, and so therefore the language must be preserved.

This comment prompted a riotous round of laughter among the participants. As I heard their laughter and saw the incredulity on their faces I laughed too. The conversation continued:

> Summer: That's kind of funny, cuz like, well, not to get into it,
>
> Marc: Why not?
>
> Summer: Um, like Indigenous people were here first.
>
> Silver: Yeah, like it should be Cree and Ojibway.
>
> Summer: Yeah, if they were to do that it should be English, um, like Ojibway, Cree, all these other languages and then French.
>
> Silver: Well, like maybe French!
>
> Meghin: Yeah, like, why is there such a focus on preserving French in Canada? Like, there's France!

Meghin's comment brought the conversation full circle. Her point was clear. If you want to learn French, go to France. If you live here, why aren't you speaking the languages born here?

The laughter that infected that conversation had a very important feeling to it. It was not uncomfortable laughter, born of talking about a potentially sensitive topic. It was uproarious laughter. It was the kind of laughter born of recognizing absurdity. In this case, it pointed out the absurdity of language politics in Canada when seen from the perspective of Indigenous people. Talk of founding nations and preserving languages that doesn't include Indigenous nations and languages is just that, absurdly funny. The participants' laughter communicates another important factor in the relationship between them and their culture. They see how it has been ignored and are clearheaded and unabashed about speaking up and out about it.

The participants made it clear that being Indigenous means many things to them. Their culture bolsters their sense of themselves at a deeply personal level. The practices they have

learned within their culture provide them with a perspective on the world and themselves in relation to it that they value deeply, even if the rest of the city does not understand or value it. Furthermore, being Indigenous provides a social and political orientation based on allegiance with others who share their experience. Importantly, being Indigenous is a matter defined, interpreted, pursued, and practiced at an individual level. What being Indigenous means is a matter for Indigenous people to decide.

## Community

This study set out to find out what the stories of a group of Indigenous youth in the inner city would reveal about their experience of going to school. Those stories revealed that the participants' experiences in school existed between two other sets of experiences. One set was composed of their interactions with, and the effects of, the system of state institutions on their lives. The other set had to do with their experiences in the web of relations that valorized them more completely than either the system or school. These are the experiences revealed in the stories the participants tell about their culture, their neighbourhood, their families, and their lives today. The following section looks at the neighbourhood and the chapter that follows it looks at their relations to their families and themselves. Along with the role of culture, this last group of findings expresses the strength, creativity, vitality, and resistance that the participants embody.

### *Neighbourhood Organizations*

The contradictions of life in the inner city come through in the stories told by the participants. There are multiple instances of violence and desperation in their experiences. Simultaneously, the stories speak to the connections that exist in the area as well as the strength

and acceptance those connections provide. Those connection flow through grassroots agencies, families, and networks of friends. However, the vitality of life in the neighbourhood is rarely seen by those outside of it. This is due to the stigma that the city heaps upon it – a fact that bothers the participants immensely.

The participants have an interesting perspective on the stigma that their neighbourhoods carry. One of their discussions about the neighbourhood brought that out:

> Silver: They kind of make jokes about it, hey?
>
> Jon: Yeah.
>
> Misty: Like about the 99 cent pizza and the drama that goes on in the neighbourhood—again, a lot of the people around here know that the North End isn't a great place but they still love it, they are still proud to be part of the North End—they won't take the words seriously a lot of the time because they know they will be said no matter what they do.

I asked Misty why she said they won't take the words seriously and she gave a lengthy, insightful response:

> We're feeling that us against them kind of thing. The North End has a reputation that everyone in this entire city knows it, and what do you do when you eventually have been told something enough times? You know it, so the people here, they know that no matter what they do, no matter how many buildings are painted in the neighborhood, and how many buildings are changed into nice spaces, it's still going to be the North End. So you just look after each other. Because you can't change anybody else's opinion on the outside of what they think and how they feel about this area. But you can make sure that you're good within it.

Her response illustrates three threads that connect the stories participants relate about the neighbourhoods. First, people in the inner city know what the rest of the city thinks about them. Second, that knowledge can create a motivational group identity. Third, despite the perception of others, there is care and connection in the neighbourhood.

The participants offered many examples of what Misty meant when she said, “people look after each other” and, “find ways to be good within” the inner city. Jon spoke at length about the emergence of community and political leaders who are bringing pride and recognition to the area. Additionally, there is a diverse web of organizations that the neighbourhood has grown in response to needs and interests. Summer’s description of the activities she gets up to in her spare time gave a glimpse of them. On Wednesdays she drums with mentors, friends, and high school students. On Fridays, after co-leading a drumming group, she participates in an anti-violence gathering that has been running for over a decade. Every second week she attends a community revitalization group that brings together people from all spectrums of society for meetings in different businesses around the neighbourhood. Some evenings, when time permits, she joins friends as part of a community walking patrol that gives out food to those in need and keeps an eye out for people in danger or dangerous situations. As I mentioned earlier, Summer participates once a month in a local organization dedicated to helping families involved with CFS. Each session is composed of, “learning circles, they talk about different programs for people in the neighbourhood.” She explained, “I really like it there.” Each of these organizations contributes to a growing sense of possibility and purpose for residents. As Misty said, people look after each other.

***NEW: A Grassroots Graduation***

From the frequency of their mention in participants' stories, it seems that neighbourhood organizations play a vital role in counter-balancing the effects of the system and responding to the challenges endemic to the inner city. Not surprisingly, mentions of the organization (NEW) where I met the participants feature most prominently in their stories. These mentions occurred whether the participants were discussing interactions with the system, with school, or with the neighbourhood. Five of the seven participants currently volunteer or work part-time with NEW in roles ranging from after-school tutor to student support worker. All of them attended the tutoring programs provided by the organization and received mentorship from NEW staff while they were in school. There is no doubt that a detailed analysis of the functions, structure, and history of NEW would yield valuable insights about community and cultural vitality. However, the focus of this study is on the lives of the participants. Therefore, the treatment of NEW within it extends only to the effect of NEW on their experiences. Even with that limited scope, NEW looms large.

The spirit and culture of NEW is one of the most resonant parts of the place for the participants. The feeling within NEW is unique and hard to summarize. It seems to embody the best of the spirit of the neighbourhood itself – a sort of rough-edged friendliness and an honesty that cuts through external veneers. That effect of that spirit came across to me most powerfully at NEW's grad, an event that the participants invited me to attend. The topic of the grad came up in a story Sage was telling about a student she was mentoring. The student had overcome a lot of challenges growing up and was still very much in the process of navigating them during the time Sage was working with her. It was not an easy relationship. The student was slow to trust people or let them into her inner circle. Sage wasn't certain if her student was going to attend NEW's

grad, even though she was going to graduate from her school. Sage explained a characteristic interaction with her:

> Yeah, my student Darcy, it was her twentieth birthday and she kinda said it was to me in passing, “It’s my birthday, I hate birthdays.” I was like, “Ok – what kind of cake do you want? And like, she just got all surprised and was like, “Cake? I don’t celebrate birthdays.” And I was like, “yeah, me neither, but I could get you a cake and we could share it together.” So, I made, or I got my sister to make um, her carrot cake which is like the best – I love it so much. And then, yeah, she came in, she was all surprised – she kissed me on the forehead and said, “I didn’t think you gave a fuck.” I was like, “what made you think that?” she’s like, “Cuz nobody does.”

At this point in the story Sage paused. She took a deep breath to calm her emotions – she was tearing up as she quoted Darcy’s words. Then she laughed and warned me that sometimes Darcy uses pretty offensive language before continuing:

> And then I said, “No Darcy, of course I do and everything we do here is because of you guys!” and then she, like I said, she has a way of expressing things, and she was like, “That’s so fucking gay!” But I knew what she meant. I could see her lip quivering and she had to go. Later she sent me a message, like a really long message, about how much it meant to her and that she’s so glad that she met me again.

I was reminded of this story when I attended the NEW grad later that week, an event that encapsulated the spirit and culture of the place.

The Grad was held in a local community centre gym. When I arrived, I saw Sage excitedly pinning a corsage to one of the grad’s shirts. Jon called out to me from the equipment room alongside one of the gym walls that was serving as a space from which to serve food. It

was hot, he wiped sweat from his forehead. I asked him if he had been working hard. He said he had but that it would be worth it. “You’ll see,” he said. The gym had long folding tables lined up perpendicular to a set of folding chairs set up for the grads. The chairs faced a podium with a giant helium balloon arch behind it. Families and friends of the grads were taking seats along the tables. I looked for a spot and noticed an old teaching colleague, now a principal in the inner city, and took a chair across from him. I asked him if this was his first NEW grad. He nodded. “Mine too,” I said.

I have attended many high school graduations. I have even helped plan and run them. I have never experienced a grad like this. The first difference was that this grad was not connected to a school. Rather, it was being held for students who attended the tutoring program run by the NEW. The grads came from six different inner-city high schools. The only connection between them was NEW. Yet, as we stood, and they filed down the centre of the long tables to take their spaces in the chairs facing the podium the connection between them was palpable. The feeling was added to by the shouts, smiles, laughter, high fives, and hugs amongst the family and friends in the audience who had gathered to mark the occasion. The whole endeavor felt more like a street parade in New Orleans (sans brass band) than a graduation ceremony. The excitement and joy were contagious. I could not contain my laughter, even though I didn’t know a single grad attending the ceremony.

The ceremony had many components. It included an elder blessing the ceremony, local dignitaries and politicians speaking, and a stew and bannock supper prepared by a local catering company. But what stood out most clearly were the speeches offered to honour each grad. As I said, I have helped prepare and run grads before. One of the tasks I took on was writing three-line speeches for dignitaries to read to introduce award winners from the school I worked at.

These grads only honoured those who won awards. NEW's grad could not have been more different. Every single grad was introduced to the audience, invited to stand beside the podium, and honoured by a personal tribute offered by one of the tutors or mentors in the program. There were roughly 25 grads and I don't know if there was a single speech that did not prompt both tears and laughter from either the grad or the tutor. Every speech ended with a hug and the passing of an envelope to the grad.

I asked my former teaching friend, now principal, if he knew what was in the envelope. He shook his head, no. One of the people sitting next to us worked at the NEW and she filled us in. Every year, every employee that wants to has a percentage of his or her wage deducted to support an employee scholarship fund. When grad comes around, that amount is totaled up and divided amongst the grads. I was amazed. Most of the people who work at NEW are part-time employees and the full-time employees make a living wage but not much more. It struck me that none of them would earn what a teacher does. I quietly asked my friend if he thought the teachers in his school would donate part of their pay to offer scholarships to students. He nearly spit out his mouthful of punch and, with wide eyes, shook his head, "no."

After the ceremony ended, I walked out of the gym to head home. At the door to the community centre I saw Sage hugging one of the grads. After their embrace ended, I walked over. Sage had tears running down her cheek and a smile from ear to ear. She saw me and waved me over. When I reached her she was wiping her eyes with a tissue. She pointed to the grad she was hugging, who was now talking to a group of other grads outside. "That's Darcy," she said.

In a storytelling session that followed the grad I asked about it. The contrast between the grads I had been part of and NEW's grad was fresh in my mind:

Marc: The thing that struck me about the grad, well, two things, many of the kids up there, most of the kids up there, will not be getting awards at their school grads. Every kid up there got something, and not only something, but a personalized statement about who they were.

Misty: And that's why we try so hard. We still haven't even perfected our grad. Next year's going to be even better because we thought of more ideas, but to have just that small like, “Hey we've been watching you from start to finish. We see the person that you started, and we see where you're ending,” and then they have a card in there that's going to make them cry some more because there are 30 staff here who have been keeping an eye on them and know that they did well.

Marc: Yeah... It was very emotional for me to be there. Because I could just see that these are students who are seen. There's this expression they call unconditional positive regard. Baseline is, “I look at you... I see you, and I see you positively.” That's the baseline. I don't see that in schools, especially at high school. It's a pretty powerful thing.

Misty: Well, that was I think, that's one thing that schools need to get better at. It’s regardless of the reason why they disappeared and stopped going to school, if they come back that should be the most important and the thing that's focused on, that they are coming back and trying again. And I'm glad we have an open-door policy here. No matter where you go, no matter how long you go for, you come back, and we're not even going to ask where you've been. We're going to say, “I'm glad you're back, let's do this.”

The unconditional acceptance, referred to by Misty as an “open-door policy” contrasts sharply with the school experience of the participants. So does the strength of the relationships and the

depth of the commitment of the people working to support students at NEW. Indeed, acceptance, relationships, and commitment are perhaps the best descriptors of the feeling in the place.

The source of the commitment of the people involved at NEW bears mentioning as well. It doesn't come from professional pride or from an abstract sense of pursuing a cause. It comes from experience. Misty explained her approach to mentoring students:

> I think it's based on my relationship with each student but I have always been open and honest with my students. I want them to know that they are not the only one living in the North End, having family issues, having to or feeling like they are on their own to do it. It was – that was part of the reason why I was able to get through it – just knowing that my life situation sucked but I'm not the only one dealing with it and I'm not the only there to help me through it either.

The participants were mentored by people like themselves – people who faced similar challenges and who were thus able to see through stigma and relate at a level of connection they rarely found when in school. The commitment participants experienced from their tutors and mentors at NEW, the same commitment that some of them now have for the students they are supporting, comes from knowing how much hard work it takes to find success.

The level of commitment has a cost. Part of the challenge for the participants who are now working with NEW is the same thing that makes them so committed. They know how hard it is and they get daily reminders of the odds stacked up against people in their neighbourhood. Misty explained:

> Misty: It's really hard to hear about these students' lives and to be able to see yourself in them, knowing that I was in that position years ago and I got through it and it was with the help from here at NEW that got me through. But there's situations where you know

you just can't do anything – you can give advice, you can be there, you can give support, you can give encouraging words, but there's really nothing you can do other than that. It leaves you feeling powerless even though I know I'm not. But it's just, it's just really hard. Like, I know how I can help you and I've been through this and I've done this but I can't do anything you have to do this on your own – with my support – I want to do it for you, I want to fix all of your problems and solve them and you can't necessarily do that and that makes it really tough in this job because we get to hear everything students don't – when you have that relationship they do not hold back, there's no filter, you hear everything. So it's just carrying that.

Marc: I think they call that emotional labour.

Misty: Yeah, and a lot of people don't get that. You are taking someone else's problems and you are listening to them and you are not necessarily able to do anything about it.

The participants know just how challenging it is to get through school and manage a life in the inner city. It's why they are effective as mentors at NEW. It's why their mentors were effective with them. But that effectiveness comes at a price. As Misty points out, the emotional lows of knowing the struggle people you care about are going through so viscerally are very low.

The support that mentors offered participants through NEW are remembered fondly. They speak about their mentors with appreciation bordering on reverence. Sage describes the relationship her mentor fostered with her when she was in school:

Sometimes I would just call her and like in high school I would call her and just talk about something because I had a really crappy boyfriend and he would always make a big deal out of going to school or going somewhere without him – and um and then one day I just kind of talked to Elaine about it and she was like, you know what, you just have to

> make a decision and then the next day, I was like, Bye! Yeah. she even gave me all these pots and pans and cutlery when I moved into my first place. It was pretty cool. I haven't seen her today. I have to give her a hug!

Sage credits her mentor with recognizing her real needs and giving her the support, both moral and material, to develop the self-respect and self-reliance that allowed her to re-enter and succeed in school.

Receiving such transformational support has led to continuing relationships. Misty spoke about how, even though she is now a mentor at NEW, she still connects with the woman who helped her graduate from high school:

> She is still somebody I can go to that if I am out of my own ideas and what I can do, then I can talk to her. I was in her office crying for an hour yesterday because I've tried everything I possibly can, and I needed her different mindset on it. And just like that, I was able to walk out of there with a plan, feeling better, and knowing what to do. Because she is just a lifelong person I feel like, "Hey, I have a problem I need help solving it."

Within the walls of NEW the burden of facing challenges is lightened greatly by the fact that they are shared by so many. Originally fostered around the goal of graduating high school, the relationships that allow those burdens to be shared, continue to thrive as new goals are pursued.

As pointed out earlier, there is an emotional burden involved with mentoring youth in the inner city. However, the testimony of the participants about their work points to the fact that there are tremendous benefits as well. Jon speaks about his work as being a privilege to take on, "I guess the wonderful is just getting to know these kids, right? Like we get to build these

relationships." Note that he speaks about 'getting' to build relationships rather than having to. One of the reasons for Jon's enthusiasm comes from the fact that he learns through the process:

> I like just the diversity too – there's like 70% Indigenous [youth] but we do have a lot of newcomers that are from around the world so you get to hear their – I was just a kid coming here stories – and you are like, 'do you remember back home?' So It's really cool to hear different parts around the world through my students.

Apart from learning about the world, Jon also values the opportunity to give back in ways that he benefited from:

> Yeah, I see myself in lots of these kids because especially most of these Indigenous kids, athletic, that was me, right? Don't really care, just show up whenever and just lots of sports right? I really connect with kids that are really sports related. I build really good relationships through basketball and recreational stuff so that was really nice to get to know kids through that and build really good relationships.

The commitment Jon feels is deeply personal, a fact he readily acknowledged when talking about the upcoming grad. It was going to be the first year that he would see a group of students he first met when they started attending NEW tutoring would graduate. He said with a laugh, "hopefully, I'm not going to be crying."

One final quotation from Misty summarizes the spirit of NEW and the importance of it and other organizations and relational networks to life in the neighbourhood. In it she tells the story of a women she went to school with as a girl:

> I had a student graduate who was supposed to graduate the same year I did—it took her six years after that. I was her support worker when she graduated! I got to watch that entire journey and I talked to her yesterday. After another year of her doing her own thing

> and doing what she needed to do, she's applying for college—something she never, ever, ever, said she was going to do and she's going to get her son back. She's been trying for 8 years to get her son back from CFS

At this point Misty was overcome with emotion. She apologized and explained why she was crying:

> It's that, NEW had a huge thing in that, we had a huge thing in that—she was able to do that because she was in the North End— if she was in some rich neighbourhood across the city, wouldn't have happened.

With this story Misty captures some of the magic of neighbourhood organizations like NEW. They may exist to respond to the inequality, violence, and need in the neighbourhood but within them more than response happens. Within them, there is a thriving sense of common cause and community that transcends connections fostered in suburban shopping malls and on sports fields. That community is an essential piece in the story of the participants' paths to school success.

# Chapter Nine: The Personal Dimension

This chapter focuses on the most personal of the participants' experiences and perspectives. It considers how they have transformed their relationships with their families and the attributes they have developed on their journey through school and into the larger community. These findings reveal what schools rarely recognized, the personal challenges participants faced, and the admirable characteristics that allowed them to overcome them. The stories here are a testament to the individual, relational, and cultural strength that each of the participants has drawn on.

The participants in this study are remarkably successful young people. They saw and experienced things as children that no child should. Yet they possess characteristics and perspectives that do not even hint at the scope or size of problems they have dealt with. This chapter touches on both the tough things that participants faced and the strength they currently possess. In doing so, I am careful not to draw a causal link between the two and conclude that it is the tragedy that has created these characteristics. The fact that the participants have endured the hardships they have and emerged with the insights they have is not proof of the aphorism, "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger." The problem of drawing that conclusion is dealt with at the end of the chapter.

## Relations: Reconciliation and Inheritance

A common theme in the stories that participants told about their time in school was the influence on it created by their homelife. Most participants grew up with the presence of addiction, the possibility of violence, the absence of one or both parents, and the privations of poverty. For some participants, these influences were predominant, preventing them from

experiencing the support that they might have otherwise and leading to a break-up of their home. For others, the challenges were significant, but their family and home remained cohesive, if turbulent. Both cases provide important insight into how the participants have come to understand themselves in relation to their families and the world.

The storytelling sessions for this research happened after the participants had graduated and left home. As a result, they told their stories with the benefit of time and increased experience existing between them and the troubles they faced. This is particularly evident in the stories told by the participants whose families fractured while they were in school. Because of the distance between now and then, these stories show how difficult things were and how much, owing to significant emotional labour, things have improved. In fact, from their present perspectives, many participants express gratitude towards many of their family members and view the times when they were hurt or disappointed by their parents with grace. This does not mean that they gloss over the seriousness of the problems that they faced. It does mean that they have placed those problems within a larger social and familial context.

A narrative trajectory is clear across the stories of the participants who had to leave their family while in school. It is a trajectory that covers a process of reconciliation and points towards the potential for the participants building a stronger familial fabric in their own futures. Jon recounts how when he was growing up the situation was, "horrible, drinking was out of control." When he attempted to pursue educational and athletic opportunities his family mocked his efforts – actively trying to hold him back. His mom resisted his efforts to become a ward of CFS in part because it would reduce the money the federal government sent to her to support her children. Jon explained that the situation tore at him:

> I think she was so upset just because she gets money from me, right? And then it was just horrible, right? Because she was just like, so mad, that's her drinking money. But at the same time I'm just like, "I can't be here."

After Jon emancipated himself from his family, they rejected him for a time. Jon does not bear ill will towards them despite the resistance they made him face and the need he experienced growing up.

Jon looks at the challenges he faced in his family home within a larger context. He explained his lack of anger towards them:

> But it was okay, right? My mom she didn't come from, well, my grandparents, right, they weren't the best influences. They worked hard, but they liked to drink, right?

He also understands that his ability to change his path from the one his family had been on was not simply a matter of individual strength. He said:

> So it was pretty hard to break that cycle. And so I'm just grateful the opportunities I had when I grew up. Because lots of my siblings didn't have those opportunities like I had.

Jon's words show that the ability to change was partly due to his own strength and partly to the doors that were opened to him through his athletic skill and through the help of others. Those things were not there for his siblings or his parents.

Part of the balanced and gracious perspective Jon has about his time growing up comes from the things that have happened within his family since he left home:

> Jon: Then after that pretty rough patch of three years my family slapped each other and saw me going. Just they were going this way, just so much down, and I'm just going totally the opposite way, right? So, my siblings started to try and get their GEDs, they're mature students. And then they did that. My sister, she had a baby, so she was like ...

didn't want drinking around the house, didn't want stuff like that. She went back to school and she just finished her health care aide and health care unit clerk too. So, she just graduated this year.

Marc: She'll be able to find work no problem!

Jon: Oh, yeah. And my brother he got a job at Transit. And my other siblings are still thinking. But I see that seeing me succeed, seeing them like, "Why can't I do it?" Right? So, they really, I don't know, they were just really just dwelling on their shit, right? For so much years. But once they finally realized. I'm so proud of my sister and my brother, like, "Holy!"

The turnaround amongst Jon’s siblings is remarkable. It gives Jon confidence that the cycle he referred to is being broken. Moreover, his family has reconciled, and he has taken on a new role within it:

Marc: Are they proud of you?

Jon: They still have some stuff ... oh yeah, for sure. It always comes up when they're drunk, right? They're like, "Love you man!" But then they tell me that when they’re sober too, right? But it's nice, they do like to tell me a lot.

Jon, the youngest in his family, has become a leader among his siblings. This is a role and a reconciliation that would have been hard to imagine when he was a 17-year-old struggling to get away from them.

Elements of Jon’s story are echoed in those told by Jordin, Misty, and Summer. Each of them is unique but, taken together, they create the same sense that surprising improvements can come to tumultuous and abusive relationships.

Jordin was in constant conflict with her grandparents as she grew up. She reported that her Grandfather used to use corporal punishment and other physical methods to control her and her siblings:

> I guess there was a lot of fighting and arguing growing up, between siblings or my grandparents. I have so many memories of my Grandpa, he'd walk in the house, there was little steps, and then you turn and the kitchen's right there. My Grandpa's right beside the entrance, and there was a little TV here. He would always sit in this spot so he could turn around, look in my bedroom, look in the bedrooms. That's his spot, and every time we would get up, oh crap. It was crazy. It was just for something so small he would scream in our faces. I remember just standing there, he was screaming in my face, and it was always like that. Sometimes I just don't know, after a while. Or we'd all have our corners and a spot if we got in trouble, and I remember nights, days, where we'd have to even kneel with our hands up. But he's changed.

The change has been welcome. Jordin has reconciled with her grandparents and says that, "when we are around each other constantly we do fight but I love our relationship now." Jordin credits some of her strength to things she has learned from them, including, "how to stick up for myself, respect."

Jordin has even reached a level of peace with her mother who spent most of Jordin's junior high and high school life in jail. Her mom is free now and Jordin stays connected to her. She admitted that her mom is trying hard but is not doing well as she adjusts to life outside of prison. Like Jon, she sees her mom's challenges in the larger context of her life history:

> I see how much she struggles and I hear about what she's been through and she was trying to go back [to school before I was born] but my dad would like keep her from going to school and so it got hard.

Jordin's ability to hold her mom's absence from her life within the context of the challenges she faced is an example of another characteristic of the perspective participants have on their families. They know how to create a productive distance between their own journeys and those of their parents.

Summer and her siblings left their mother's home when Summer was entering high school. The situation in her home was characterized by neglect. Her mother's addiction to alcohol would result in up to nine children being left alone in the house for days and sometimes weeks on end. Now fully established in another neighbourhood and living with their father, the siblings are taking steps they could not when they lived with their mom. Summer, like Jon, is part of a process of taking her family in a new direction. She is the youngest sibling and was the first in her family to graduate from high school. It seems to be a trend:

> Marc: Do you feel like through your success, your family is finding more success?
>
> Summer: Yeah. Slowly. My sister, she's the one that I've kind of really looked up to. She took care of us when my mom couldn't. And she just graduated on Friday with her Grade 12. She always worked so hard and she is still working so hard.

Summer takes a lot of inspiration from her sister:

> Yeah. Just seeing her. She has her own kids, her own family. She has her own vehicle. Her boyfriend's working. She has her own family and she finally got her diploma.

The mutual inspiration in the family is also leading one of Summer's other sisters and her brother to restart their educational journey.

Part of Summer's ability to forge a new path has to do with something she shares with Jordin. Summer, like Jordin, has been able to create a context and distance for understanding her mother. Summer explained:

> I feel like she's lied to me so many times and broke so many promises. I love her, but just, I cannot trust her anymore. I mean, I'm talking to my mom like I Facetime her every once and a while but I've kind of kept my distance right now, because she's still dealing with her stuff and I have my own stuff to deal with now. It feels like even now I have to be the adult I guess with my relationship with my mom.

Summer has created a distance between herself and her mom. From that distance Summer can remain connected but keep herself safe from the betrayals she experienced when living with her. Like Jordin and Jon, she contextualizes her mom's struggles within a space where she can see them but not be wrapped into them.

Misty's family story encapsulates much of the reconciliation and contextualization that exist in Jordin, Summer, and Jon's stories. She explained:

> My parents are wonderful people. When they are not doing drugs and they are not drinking they are wonderful people. They will give you the shirt off their back. Um, and I do not have a lot of respect for my parents, I don't but I will always love them.

Misty's ability to draw a line between love and respect has allowed her to stay connected to her family:

> To this day I still go over to their house. They're getting their food from food banks and they are still giving me food to take home. That's got to tell you something. I've just turned things into a me handing over money for them to buy drugs to I will go over there and I will buy you groceries and fill your fridge with milk and bread and things you need.

Misty's relationship with her parents gives her a safe space from which to work. She is connected, feels and appreciates their love, but understands the limitations involved.

The limitations that Misty has established are, like those set up by other participants, based on contextualizing their situation. The participants have put a lot of thought into understanding the challenges their families face. In a session where family challenges were coming up often Silver made an insightful comment, saying, "we need to talk about inter-generational trauma, because that's what this is." Her comment connected the fact that many of the participants' families have histories of being separated from each other by residential schooling. Knowing the reasons behind problems helps in coping with them. Silver sees her mom's walk with addiction as part of a historical pattern and uses that knowledge as personal instruction. She stays in contact with her mom but said, "I'm working on my own mental health now – I can't be around negative stuff." By keeping a distance she is not rejecting her mom, she is drawing a line between herself and the history that contributed to her mom's struggles.

Misty also sees her family's addictions as separate from their identities and understands the complexity of the path that led them to their situation. For her family, one key contributing factor was a lack of education. Misty indicated that, "no one in my family other than me has finished high school. I believe my parents made it to grade 7." The lack of education was exacerbated by injury:

> My dad, he hurt himself, he had a head injury. He was the main person for income in the family even though he was on disability. He still gets his disability but he can't communicate in full sentences anymore, he has no long-term memory so now my mom has to take on the responsibility of everything, finances, all of these things that my dad

> absolutely always did. My mom has always been someone to rely on my dad... My mom had never had to do anything for herself.

Understanding the reasons that have contributed to their addiction and struggle has helped Misty help her parents without becoming ensnared in the same cycle. As she puts it:

> I keep my distance from my family but I keep an eye on them – in order to not get sucked into the toxic environment you have to. My family doesn't understand that and there is absolutely a wall and a divide in my family because they are one way and I am another. I do not want to live my life paycheque to paycheque and I will do whatever I need to do to keep myself out of that and if that means that I have to keep a distance I will keep a distance.

Misty does more than keep an eye on her parents. She has established them in a safe and affordable apartment and has helped her mother develop the skills and resources to manage. But as she said, they do not always understand the line she has to draw. Still, she provides a consistent and dependable baseline of family connection for and with them. It is not dissimilar from how when she was in school her parents made sure that Christmas was celebrated, at least by a dinner, if not gifts.

The continued vitality of family for the participants who suffered neglect and privation while they were in school is remarkable. The ability to reconcile despite the potential for anger, resentment, and remorse speaks to the depth of basic familial love within each of the homes – despite the turmoil. The emotional work that the participants put in to draw lines that allow them to stay connected to their families without being hurt, and to distinguish between their parents' journeys and their own, speaks to the depth of their self-knowledge.

Sage and Derwin, whose families remained intact through their school years, offer important insights about the role of family as well. It is important to recognize that Sage and Derwin felt their homes and families were viewed negatively by the system and by school. Neither of them was under any illusions about the reality of the difficulties at home. Both discussed the crowding in their homes. Derwin remembered growing up with 12 other people in a four-bedroom subsidized housing space. He shared:

> I mean honestly, you kind of get used to it in a way, like me, I was already used to noise in the house, like funky stuff happening and I'm just falling asleep.

Not getting enough sleep was a major factor in Derwin's struggles to succeed at school. However, he was quick to point out that the number of people sharing the house had positives:

> I remember the meals – everyone around together. It's like, none of us were just held up in rooms grieving alone and just staying there, being miserable and all that.

While the crowding in his home created problems, it also provided him with community and belonging.

Sage also sees positives within the challenges her family faced. From the outside, her home may have seemed problematic but within it strong connections were fostered. Sage has always been very close with her father. She recalled preferring spending weekend nights with him rather than being out with friends. He has been a trusted advisor. From him, a high school drop out and former gang member, who has worked multiple jobs throughout her life to support the family, she has learned that someone can be educated and wise without having diplomas or degrees. She shared an example of the kind of parenting he offered her on weekend nights they spent together during her teenage years:

> And then when I would go out he would say, “Be safe, I know what happens at these things and stuff and just remember”—he said it in his way, I’ll probably butcher it – “just remember when you have your first drink you are” – how did he say it? Uh, “you’re inclined to like it too much.” He didn’t mean it in a bad way. He just said, “addiction runs through your family, your aunt, you see it all the time. Just be careful. Just watch how you’re doing.” Yeah. I love him.

Sage has internalized the guidance that her family offered her. For her, any outside perceptions of their deficits, or any of the privations they faced, are far outweighed by the values that they have embodied and nurtured within her.

**Touched by Tragedy**

I have organized the research findings for this study purposefully. They began with a consideration of the system and proceeded through a consideration of schools into a look at cultural, neighourhood, and family life. They begin furthest away from the individual thoughts, motivations, hopes, and fears of the participants. They conclude here, with the most intimate and individual aspects of the stories I was told. These are the stories of some deep tragedies and of the insights that the participants have drawn from encountering and surviving them. As with so many of their stories, they reveal the strength of the culture, community, and personalities of the participants in ways that the system and school never recognized.

The most tragic and sadly common topic that the participants spoke of in our sessions was suicide. Every participant had lost a friend or family member to suicide and some of them shared that they had contemplated or attempted suicide. From the evidence provided by the

storytelling sessions it would seem it is a topic of open discussion within the inner city. Misty was the first to bring it up with me:

Misty: Suicide is,

Marc: It's a big problem isn't it?

Misty: Mm-hmm. I had a good friend of mine whose photo is on the wall here, he killed himself a month before his birthday the year he was supposed to graduate. He didn't make it to graduation. So even that in itself. I go through grad every year, and I think, "What if he would have graduated?" Those things, they never go away.

It is one thing to see the statistical figures that indicate the high level of violence and death rates in the inner city and another to hear how those figures translate into the lived experience of its citizens. To understand the stories of the participants it is impossible to ignore the presence of absence and the grief of loss that have marked their journeys.

In an emotionally taxing storytelling session Derwin walked me through his experience. It was shortly after he had discussed the crowded but connected home he grew up in. He had made a comment about his sister and I followed up:

Marc: So, you said you wanted to tell me about your sister?

Derwin: She ended up hanging herself. Yeah.

Marc: Oh, I'm so sorry.

Derwin: Yeah.

Marc: How old were you again?

Derwin: 10? Sometime around that.

Marc: 10 years ago. Wow. How did you make sense of that?

Derwin: Well, at first I was at a sleepover with my friends and I was like, his sister came down and said, "Your mom wants you to go home now something happened to your sister." I'm like, "What?" and I wasn't believing it. Then I went home and then saw a bunch of cops, ambulance, portable hospital and I don't know, I was just angry. I saw it all.

Marc: Yeah. Yeah. Was she close in age to you?

Derwin: She was two years ahead of me. Yeah. Yeah. The funny thing is we are born on the same day.

Marc: Oh God.

Derwin: Yeah.

Marc: What were the effects in your family of that?

Derwin: My mom went through a long mourning period. Where she'd end up sometimes waking up, crying. So yeah. Then when the coffin went away, when we were going to go bury her, she wouldn't want to let go of the coffin. Yeah.

After sharing this Derwin broke down. The details he was sharing about the day his sister died and the funeral brought the events back to life between us. I turned off the recorder to check and see if he was alright. After a while he told me that he was ok but that the memory still hurts. I asked if we wanted to continue by telling me how he managed the grief. He said he did and I turned the recorder back on:

Marc: How do you think you were able to manage?

Derwin: Honestly, just surround myself with good people. That's what I did. Hung out with friends a lot. Just try not to think about death.

The loss of a sibling, particularly one born on the same day as you, particularly to suicide, is a loss that is hard to imagine. Importantly, Derwin found consolation for that loss in the arms of his friends. Recalling that these friends were the same people that the police routinely harassed should reinforce the degree to which the positive characteristics in the neighbourhood are unrecognized.

Summer's discussion of suicide reinforced how profound a presence it creates. And like Derwin's reliance on his friends for support, this story shows the resourcefulness of the participants in finding the supports they need to survive. Summer referred to her mental health challenges often in our storytelling sessions. In one of our last sessions she clarified the overall effect of them when she said:

> Summer: Yeah. It was, it was kind of weird. Grade seven, eight, nine, ten, that's kind of a weird part for me, because it was, because I didn't really think that I'd still be alive. No. I didn't think I'd see myself graduate.
>
> Marc: Did you think about suicide?
>
> Summer: Yeah.

Summer was matter of fact about the state of hopelessness she was existing in. Based on the evidence of multiple deaths in her extended family and the death by suicide of classmates, she saw her own early death as a logical eventuality.

Summer was equally matter of fact about how she overcame and worked through this period in her life:

> Summer: There was a point where I started to realize that it wasn't I didn't want to keep living, it was more like I don't want to feel this way anymore. And, the pain I was feeling, it wasn't going to go away. It was just going to be passed on to people around me.

Because I lost, I lost quite a bit of family. So, I knew what it felt like to lose someone that you loved dearly. So, I didn't want to put that onto the people I love, I loved and cared about.

Marc: Who helped you come to that realization?

Summer: There was, it was a Youtuber. Yeah. He was a motivational speaker. And I learned so much from him. Yeah, I still watch his videos. Also, I started to go to more ceremonies.

Summer's revival is a testament to her strength and creativity. She has blended the restorative potential of the digital age with the restorative potential of ancient custom to write a new chapter in her life story. Her overall story is equally sobering and hopeful. She spent much of her adolescence in the shadow of suicidal ideation and has used the tools unique to her generation and the practices of her culture to enact a wholesale transformation.

Summer's approach to life now is based on the realization of how close she came to not being here. She characterized her approach to each day as follows:

Summer: Yeah. It's so different the way I used to feel like. Now it's just, I'm so grateful I can just wake up every day. I'm alive. I can breathe. I can see. I can walk. I'm just, and the people in my life. The people I get to see every day.

Marc: Well, I need to learn to be more grateful for that. For sure.

Summer: Every, every time I wake up I try to make an effort. Just praying, give thanks for what I have. Like, seeing normal, breathing properly, being able to move. Like my house. I get to hear. I get to speak. The roof I have over my head, with food in my refrigerator. Clean water I get to drink. Yeah. And I like to pray for the water. Anytime I can. Almost every day. Yeah.

There are times when transcriptions simply cannot approximate the feeling of being in the room when conversations happen. This was one of them. Summer's words are powerful on their own but the presence she held as she spoke them doesn't come across on the page. Each word was considered and delivered with the quiet confidence of someone speaking from deep experience and knowledge.

It is far too easy to generalize life in the inner city as being tough or challenging. Those words do not do justice to the degree of tragedy and loss that families often face. The deaths that the participants spoke about underline that. However, I chose to include Summer's statement of gratitude along with the accounts of suicide for a purpose. While it is necessary to take an unblinking and honest look at the problems of inner-city life it is equally important to remember that these tragedies are part of a larger story. That larger story is about mourning and about recovery. Summer's words help to keep that fact in mind.

**A New Generation: Personal Attributes**

Summer approaches the world with a deep gratitude for all she experiences. Jon never let a chance to express his appreciation for the opportunities he has had go by. Sage and Misty spoke about the "getting" to build relationships with the young people they mentor. Appreciation and gratitude are key traits across the participants. They are not the only ones. The reflections that the participants offered on their life stories so far demonstrated other personal attributes and approaches. These findings would not be complete without considering them. The participants faced serious challenges to graduation and success. While they were greatly aided by caring individuals in and out of school, by their culture, and by their relationships, at the most basic level each participant was her or his own best resource. The participants' stories reveal them to

be impressive problem-solvers, deeply motivated, and hard-working. Above all, they possess a wisdom grounded in experience that is nothing short of inspiring. These attributes speak to what it has taken for each of the participants to be where they are today.

***Problem-Solving***

Misty made a statement in one of the early storytelling sessions that established a theme common in many of the sessions. She said, "we are ridiculous problems solvers." The statement was meaningful in two ways. First, the participants have faced ridiculous problems. I don't mean ridiculous in the sense of being worthy of ridicule but instead, problems so great in number and frequency that they create nearly unbelievable situations. Second, and most relevant here, the participants have found and continue to find ways to solve them. As Misty said, "I can handle any situation at this point with a straight face and just a calm demeanor about me." For her, the experience of solving so many problems has created a helpful level of confidence and sense of competence.

Problem solving skills were on display in many of the stories the participants shared. A good example came from Derwin, who described one of the most ridiculous problems that the participants faced – being followed in a store because of being Indigenous. Other examples of this problem have been identified earlier in this work but these stories show Derwin's approach to solving it. In one case he and his friends turned the problem into a game:

> I mean with the Dollarama story we kind of lost the guy – we played around with him. We saw him and we all went right and we all kind of stopped on kind of the thing at the end of the aisle and then went the other way and sort of lost him and saw him at the checkout and were like, hey!

In another case Derwin used humour to transform the situation:

> Derwin: This other story I have, it was like four of us this time. We went to the 7-Eleven, so they had their security guard there. Of course, we're looking around the chip aisle cuz we're having a few that night. Then, so we noticed that he was following us and then sure enough he's watching us the whole time down the aisles – we're like —I was either at the cashier or I was walking out and I was like, "Hey, I think your security guard likes me! He was checking me out the whole time I was here!"
>
> Marc: So, you used humour?
>
> Derwin: Yeah, kind of like to embarrass him.

Both of these situations show how Derwin was able to reframe a violation into a humorous situation, posit his dignity in the face of the discrimination he was facing, and resolve what would have otherwise been a situation that could lead to negative consequences.

A similar sort of ingenuity was on display in a story Misty told about resolving a problem she faced at school. In this case, she employed what the school didn't know about her to her own advantage. She explained with a story that made all the participants break out in laughter. It was about her high school trying to alert her parents about times she was absent:

> They have that automatic system that calls around 6 o'clock. I was always supposed to give them a phone number to give them – cuz they give you that card to fill out where you give them the number yourself for them to call – which is a terrible idea! But I did give them the right number. It's just that my parents had a pay as you go phone so she couldn't answer the phone til 8 pm. So they'd call but she wouldn't answer so she never knew.

The reason for the laughter was clear. Misty turned the tables on the school. For once the lack of attention that school paid to the reality of living with poverty worked to her advantage instead of against her.

***Motivation***

The participants' stories also revealed them to be deeply motivated. A regular question that I had for each of them came from my curiosity at what gave them the energy to continue forging new paths for themselves in school and life. Jon responded to one of my queries with two simple words, "just heart." He, and other participants also explained that they used the examples of addiction and incarceration around them as cautionary tales of what could happen if they didn't keep themselves going forward. Every one of the participants have exceeded the academic success of the generation before them and most have clear and fulfilling career paths laid out before them that promise the potential of economic security. Still, the degree of motivation, or as Jon would put it, heart, is significant. Misty explained her struggle:

> I'm somebody who's always self-reflecting about what can I do better because I don't want to get stuck. Something that teachers, I know, don't understand when it comes to students in school coming from poverty is that you have two sides of you. I have the side that grew up with my family that has seen that you can live just fine not going to school, not working hard at anything in life, not even working. And it is really hard to get up at 9 or 8 in the morning when the rest of your family is sleeping in until 12. I will always have that side of me that wants to sit at home, watch tv, and do nothing all day. Absolutely, I struggle with that. And then I have this side of me that society says I should have. That I want to do well and do great things and make money and do the right things. And I do

absolutely, but I always have to battle and really always be checking again like, hey, I noticed I've gone this entire week and haven't really done anything. I have to check myself, this isn't where I want to be or want to go and that is really hard and it is exhausting to do.

Forging a new path into classrooms and a community that don't see the struggle involved in hard work. As Misty explained, mustering the motivation requires a sustained level of significant effort.

The work the participants put in to break out of the cycles that their families have been caught up in is exhausting. Above and beyond the psychological and emotional effort described by Misty, the hours of tangible work are significant. Silver has been providing for herself since she started high school. We discussed what that has taken:

Marc: When's the last time that you weren't working?

Silver: Like that I was just...

Marc: Yeah, where it was like you had a week where you didn't have to go to work, didn't have to go anywhere?

Silver: Like I know I tried to book a few weeks off last year, but I can't remember the time where I just chilled. Probably grade 10, maybe?

Marc: But now, you've been working... How old are you now?

Silver: 19.

Marc: So you've been working four years basically full-time or double time.

Silver: Yeah.

Marc: And you got a week off when you were in grade 10.

Silver: Yeah. For the summer. I don't know. I haven't thought about that. I need a vacation.

Four years of working full or more than full time, plus the work involved in not falling into the patterns her mother continues to be caught up in, plus the work of completing school and starting university is an equation that equals exhaustion. A similar equation is at work in Jordin's life. The constant need to keep going has left her desperate for a break. She concluded one of our sessions with the words, "Yeah, I just want one whole day, I don't care if it's just me and my kid. I just want a day."

***A "Dark and Twisted" Optimism***

Hard-working, deeply motivated, and often exhausted by their efforts, the participants are impressive examples of success. Their own unique brand of optimism makes them all the more so. In another moment where I asked about what it took for the participants to keep going despite the challenges they faced, Misty said, "Well, we're dark and twisted!" Everyone laughed in agreement. She explained, "You can't see how good things are if you're not dark and twisted on the inside." This particular version of optimism came through in another discussion between Sage and Misty about how they currently approach some of the unexpected problems in their lives like needing to find a new place to live with no notice or having a friend arrested:

Sage: I know that if something bad happened I wouldn't fall on the floor crying hysterically.

Misty: I would just be like, okay, let's handle this situation

Sage: Yeah, we kind of have this.

Misty: With everything negative you just find a positive out of it eventually

Marc: Me – not everybody does that, right?

Misty: I would have drowned in depression a long time ago if I had done that.

When Misty says that she and her fellow participants are dark and twisted inside I believe that this is what she is referring to. They face challenges born of injustice, inequity, and discrimination regularly and overcome them, not with a Pollyanna naivety about everything eventually working out, but with a hard-won knowledge that while the scales are tilted against them, they always have been and yet, they are still here.

Summer offered an example of the kind of motivation this "dark and twisted" nature has given her.

> Summer: Um, well for me, like, when I like, want to excel in something like academically or occupation wise I'm like, for me its more like, like I want to beat you at your own system kind of thing.
>
> Meghin: Pure sass!
>
> Marc: When have you felt that way?
>
> Summer: I feel like since I have graduated high school that's kind of how I've felt. Cuz after high school I was like, I didn't want to go back to school at all I was like I am done with this for the rest of my life – I'm going to go live in the bush. Now I'm like, if I'm not part of the solution then I'm part of the problem kind of thing. So, I'm like, my mindset is like, well now I'm going to go through your system and I'm going to beat you in your own system.

Summer shows how the recognition of the injustices she has faced have become the source of her motivation. While Summer's words are powerful on their own they aren't complete without

Meghin's commentary that they represent, "pure sass!" Together they express both the determination to keep going and the spirit that accompanies it.

### *Wisdom*

The participants are clear about their capacity, have deeply rooted motivations and are under no illusion about the amount of effort it has taken and will continue to take for them to succeed. Success in Winnipeg means not only putting in the effort to graduate, find meaningful work, and build healthy relationships. It also means dealing with the persistent ignorance behind the biases they face. There is a lot of hope in the participants' ability to forge their own paths. Even if it comes from a "dark and twisted" place, the participants bring the wisdom of their experience with them. Its a wisdom that Jon, Misty, and Sage summarized powerfully when I asked what message they would give to people in the rest of the city:

> Jon: They have their heads up their butts! But you know, I get it right? You know, you earn a certain amount and you want to live a certain way, but it doesn't mean you have to be a jerk because you make a certain amount. You know, one bad thing and you are at the bottom, you know? You just, you gotta try to be humble.
>
> Sage: That's what they forget—one bad thing could change it all.
>
> Misty: Unless one bad thing has happened to them—that one bad thing that happened to my parents completely changed the course of their life and mine absolutely! I think my life would have turned out differently if my Dad hadn't almost passed away and had to stop working but you don't stop. You figure something else out. That is one thing that people who grow up in the inner city have— ridiculous problem-solving skills and they will pretty much be able to survive anything because of the hardships that come out of it.

The stories that the participants in this study told show just how easily one bad thing can come along and change everything. They have also shown remarkable grace. The bad things that they faced were not of their making and yet their reaction hasn't been to rage against the injustice or to let depression overcome their determination. Instead, they have worked, and continue to work to bring their voices up and out into the community that has ignored them.

The central purpose of this research was to explore the stories of students like the participants. The hope was that it would contribute to the improvement of schooling by surfacing the often hidden and often misunderstood experiences they had inside and outside of schools. It is, of course, the nature of qualitative research to shift as it unfolds. In the case of this research one shift was to represent something I hadn't anticipated to find. That thing is the way that the participants have turned the injustices they have faced into the basis of their current motivation and purpose. I hope that the findings that immediately preceded this have communicated that realization. More, I hope that they may help open the doors a little wider for the wisdom of the participants to be brought to bear on this city. It is wisdom that is both necessary and overdue.

## The Problem with Resiliency

I have a friend. She is the definition of resilient. She married just after high school and had two daughters with her husband. He was a bush pilot – a bona fide adventurer. He died in a crash and his body wasn't found for weeks. She raised those two daughters alone for years and had a third with a second husband. Her second husband was a legend in the town where I grew up. A friend to everyone – he was the first to volunteer to assist in community events or to help a neighbour in need. On a road trip to visit one of their daughters, my friend's second husband had a heart attack and died by the side of the highway while she waited for an ambulance. Two years

later she was diagnosed with breast cancer. She survived the cancer and lives today in a condo overlooking the river where she faces everyday with grace and strength that I don't have.

When I think of resiliency I think of my friend. I do not think of the participants in this study. I need to explain why. If anyone could have intervened to stop the plane crash that killed my friend's first husband, I am sure they would have. If anyone could have arranged for my friend's car to have been close to a hospital when the heart attack hit her second husband, I am sure they would have. If anyone could have halted the series of genetic chain reactions that grew cancer in my friend's breast—or even if they could have lessened the sickness, pain, and fear that the treatment of the cancer involved—I am sure they would have. Nobody did, of course. Because nobody could. The things my friend faced were out of anyone's hands. That is why I marvel at her today for her resilience. She faced things that were patently unfair – that no one could foresee or forestall – and has come out the other side still seeing some good in the world. She is scarred no doubt, but she has sustained herself. That is resilience.

The participants in this study share something with my friend. They have faced and survived things that were patently unfair. They have mourned the deaths of loved ones, spent days and nights in hunger, been fearful for their safety, and have been harassed for no reason. But this is where things differ. The unfairness they have suffered were not accidents or illnesses that nobody could have foreseen or forestalled. The death, hunger, fear, and harassment are all things that somebody could have done something about. It is true that the participants in this study, like my friend, have survived and sustained themselves through very difficult things. But I won't call them resilient.

I won't call the participants resilient because I worry that if I do people will take that finding in the wrong direction and focus on how to create and support resiliency instead of

preventing the need for it. If I call the participants resilient, I fear people will read their stories for evidence of the secret to resiliency. Remember, I am sure that if anyone could have stopped the tragedy visited on my friend they would have. They could not. The causes of her problems were beyond anyone's ability to resolve so the only option for a good life my friend had was to develop resiliency. I wonder if she would have developed that if she found out that someone could have prevented the tragedy in her life and decided not to?

The participants in this study have faced and survived utterly preventable tragedies. They may be resilient, but that is only one of the conclusions available from hearing their stories. Other, far more helpful conclusions could be drawn. Their stories do display their remarkable ability to make meaning of unfair challenges. However, rather than focus on their ability to overcome, why not focus on making a concerted effort to lessen the challenges they faced in the lives of others like them? There are students in school right now who are living stories close to the ones that the participants in this study told. Derwin stated that for him, school was, "basically, just another thing to get through." Rather than being part of the system that views them as suspicious and deficient, schools could be powerful allies of students like the participants. They could be spaces that foster the emerging generation of Indigenous and inner-city youth rather than spaces they must endure.

## Chapter Ten: Conclusions

Thomas King ends each chapter in his book, *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative,* the same way. He shares a story and then offers a version of the following words:

> It's yours. Do with it what you will. Tell it to friends. Turn it into a television movie. Forget it. But don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You've heard it now. (King, 2003, p. 29)

I am tempted to offer the exact same words instead of writing this conclusion.

I know that the stories the participants in this study shared have changed me. I now understand things about teaching, learning, and living in the inner city I never did before. Likewise, I have a changed understanding of how the world looks through some Indigenous eyes. That change is because of the content in the stories and the experience of being *in* them as they were told. In the findings chapters that came before this, I did my best to communicate both. If I did well, readers should be able to read those stories, let them do their work, and draw their own conclusions. Better yet, readers who are teachers like me could start listening for the stories about lives that they have responsibility for in their classrooms and let those stories work their own way into a renewed practice. Still, the stories I heard point to some clear conclusions. I share them in the hope that they encourage others to listen more sensitively for evidence of what Ayers (2004) calls, "the kaleidoscopic nature of reality" hiding in plain sight all around us (p. 14).

The conclusions I record in this chapter deal with two distinct areas of the research process. The first is the approach taken to conceiving of and conducting this research. The second is the insight generated by the content of the stories and the experience of hearing them.

**Seeing The World Through Stories**

This research employed a storytelling methodology. It proved an effective model for eliciting narratives from participants. It also proved to be an effective way of allowing the experience of receiving stories to guide the process of understanding them. The methodology used in this research owes much of its epistemological foundation to Indigenous perspectives. Seeing knowledge through those perspectives requires looking beyond linear approaches. As Leroy Little Bear (2014) explains:

> The idea of all things being in constant motion or flux leads to a holistic and cyclical view of the world. If everything is constantly moving and changing then one has to look at the whole to see the patterns. (p. 227)

Analysis of the stories that this research collected was an iterative and recursive process. I moved back and forth between the details of individual stories, the overall arc of the individual biographies I was coming to understand, connections between stories, relationships that the stories communicated, and the experience of the interviews as a whole to finally reach an accounting that felt like an honest representation of what I was being told. This process was lengthy and at times frustrating. Importantly, the frustration often arose from my own well-developed Western academic assumptions about the linear nature of data analysis. The frustration turned into fascination and insight when I let go of the need for themes to line up and trusted the principles of storytelling and storywork. (Archibald, 2008) Like a story, the knowledge generated by the process was not discovered, it emerged.

**Life in and out of Schools**

It is important to note that the small number of participants in this study means that the conclusions drawn from it cannot be interpreted to represent the experience of all inner-city or all Indigenous youth. That said, they absolutely are representative of the experiences of the participants, all of whom are inner-city residents and seven of whom are Indigenous. The conclusions that follow need to be understood as such. Two things about this are noteworthy. First, these stories can contribute to the pressing need to understand what school does feel like for Indigenous and inner-city students who are so poorly served by the education system. Second, the things the participants shared actually happened. That fact alone can provide the grounding for further research into the extent to which they are in fact representative of a larger body of experience.

A clear conclusion from the stories that the participants told is that there is a consistency to the nature of their experience with state institutions. A thread of similarity runs through their view of the police, the child family services system, public housing authorities, courts, and prisons. These institutions intersect each other and together create a system that perpetuates a persistent sense of surveillance and threat. Interacting with the system is unavoidable because access to necessary supports can only be obtained through engaging with it. The effect of the system is both material and psychological. A clear and well-founded sense of wariness about the intentions and trustworthiness of people associated with the state is evident in the stories that the participants shared. The sense of wariness that the system creates is important for understanding the school experience of the participants because schools share many of the same traits as the system.

Participants' stories about school showed important differences and important similarities between schools and the system. Schools, like the system, operate with opaque policies and practices that rarely recognized the material reality or cultural identities of the participants. When school did recognize them, it responded with suspicion and judgement. This reality created confusion and alienation and meant that the participants often had to adopt a resistant stance to make it through school.

Vital differences did exist between the system and schools. The participants' stories revealed that they saw things in schools that kept them engaged and convinced them to reduce their wariness. Athletics figured prominently for one. The presence and ability to be with peers for others. However, two factors connected all the participants' paths to success. First, participants told stories about the importance of being able to see their cultural identity reflected in the people and practices in schools. Second, all the participants had stories of caring individuals, most of them teachers, in schools who played pivotal roles in helping them succeed. From the stories that were told, it is clear the presence of human, cultural, relational moments and practices are what make schools different from the larger system.

The importance of individual teachers to the participants cannot be overstated. The teachers who recognized the needs and the potential of the participants in this study and decided to act to alleviate the former and nourish the latter are heroes. That is not my interpretation, it is the testimony of those they helped. Many of the most emotional moments in the storytelling sessions came when stories of how those teachers acted were recalled. This is a conclusion that is as troubling as it is inspirational. Schools presented an enormous, complex apparatus to the participants; they were not subjects in schooling, they were subjected to schooling. What marked the actions of the teachers who made a difference was not just that they acted on the part of the

participants but that to do so, they also had to act against the expectations, practices, and policies of school. This is an area that merits further study. The prospect that the pathway to success for marginalized youth runs through the intercedence of teachers who risk their jobs to do so is alarming, to say the least.

The participants point to the centrality of exceptional teachers for their success. That is only part of the story. There were three other factors that came out in the storytelling sessions. The first has to do with relations, the second with their community, and the third with their individual characters. Many of the participants have drawn significant strength from their family. This is true even of participants whose families have struggled with significant entanglements with addiction and illegal pursuits. A lesson I draw from this is that family is family regardless of the challenges within them. In stating this I am not making light of the neglect that some of the participants faced. Rather, I am pointing out that the participants have found ways to draw strength in spite of this – a sign of both the importance of family and the emotional sophistication of participants.

Another source of strength evident in the stories is the vitality the participants feel within their community. Importantly, no participant ignored the presence of crime, desperation, and need that exist in the inner city. The vitality they experience occurs simultaneously along with the endemic problems of the area. Participants found places and networks to explore, celebrate, affirm, and practice their culture and spirituality. Likewise, the neighourhood offers multiple formal and informal organizations that support educational and employment pursuits. There was a tangible sense of pride of place in the participants' stories about where they lived. Interestingly, part of this pride came from a recognition of just how harshly the area is judged by people in the rest of Winnipeg.

Each participant told stories that revealed admirable stores of inner strength and remarkable determination. We laughed more than we cried in the storytelling sessions. That laughter is significant given the frequency of stories they told about discrimination, anxiety, depression, neglect, and harassment. Misty said that they had to be “dark and twisted” to get through what they have. I take her at her word and I saw many examples of how participants laughed at the absurdity of some of the circumstances visited upon them to keep from crying about them. I take Misty at her word, but I need to add some of my own. The participants in this study are mature beyond their years and keenly discern who they can trust and who they cannot. Most remarkable to me is the degree to which each of them identifies a clear personal purpose. Whether it is to become a cultural teacher, a good mother, a community leader, or to reciprocate the help they received in the lives of others, each of them knows why they are here. That knowledge allows them to turn the judgements of others into fuel for their engines. Importantly, this ability does not remove the sting of those judgements.

Had schools recognized the multiple sources and deep reserves of strength that the participants drew on I think things would have been different. However, the stories the participants told about school shows that they were often seen and judged by their circumstances rather than by the content of their character. Without a doubt, many of the schoolteachers and school administrators would be surprised to see the success of the young leaders who were part of this study. This brings up an important reminder for people working in schools, particularly within inner-city schools. That reminder is that a person’s background is not a person’s destiny. Each of the participants are proof of this point and of so much more.

I began this section by speaking about the effect of being in the stories that were shared through the storytelling sessions and interviews. The strongest personal and professional

conclusion I have left this research with is about that. Much good can come from the simple act of listening to each other's stories. When that listening can happen across racial, economic, and social divisions more the better. Care and reflection are required to make sure that sharing is not exploitative, voyeuristic, or invasive. But the fact that it takes effort to create the conditions is not reason enough to not try. The most common sound that came from the sessions was laughter. But the sessions were difficult at times. At very difficult times, when stories that were hard to tell and hear entered the room, I wondered about whether the pain that was surfaced was worth the understanding we were developing. After a session that consumed most of a box of Kleenex I asked that question. Silver looked around the circle and then at me and said, "It's okay. Sometimes it's good to talk about these things."

**Epilogue: A message for teachers like me**

This research is about presenting the stories of the participants in their own words and according to themes that emerged from my them. Taking this approach has meant being careful about moments when my own experience as a teacher in schools like the ones the participants attended and with students with backgrounds similar to the participants entered the process. Whenever this happened, I was clear about how it related to what I was hearing. For instance, when Jordin shared her story about spending most of her junior high years in the hallways and bathrooms of her school and in steady conflict with teachers, I included my own experience of being a teacher like the ones that she had encountered. The process of telling a story when done well, naturally calls forth memories of stories from listeners. And when that process was at work it was important for me to be honest about it.

Still, I wanted to ensure that it was the participants' views, and not my own, that remained front and centre. The irony of a white teacher setting out to understand the experiences of Indigenous students and then reporting on his own is not lost on me. I avoided using my own autobiography throughout this work in part to avoid overshadowing the content of the participants' stories. I also avoided its use because of the way that autobiography has been used to impose resolution on unresolved issues. When I shared the story of my resistance to Mya asking to do a class presentation on residential schooling it was clear that I wouldn't act in the same way again. However, that does not mean that after that interaction the colonial assumptions I was born into and raised with were somehow magically erased from my unconscious. In settler-colonial states there are many ways for settlers to move to innocence (Schick & St. Denis, 2005; St. Denis, 2011) and autobiography's tendency to make heroes of its subjects is one of them. And yet, as narrative inquiry makes clear, autobiography is a promising pathway to self – discovery and change, particularly for teachers (Huber et al., 2013; Clandinin et al., 2006).

The dilemma of how to treat my own partiality, experience, and identity in this research was one of the reasons why I began this conclusion by expressing my temptation to simply leave the stories to speak for themselves. This is because I trust their educative potential more than my own interpretation. The participants expressed tangible moments of experience that I believe can generate understanding of the unique challenges and characteristics of what it means to be an Indigenous student in classrooms today. However, researchers bear the responsibility to balance the task of representing the complexity of their participants' experience on their own terms with the need to "work to create meaning through their interpretations." (Donald, 2012, p. 546) This is an important task for white researchers working within Indigenous communities like myself. Donald (2012) points to the need to give light to the colonial lie that Indigenous and non-

Indigeneous people live in separate worlds by examining, “the histories, logics, traditions, assumptions, and power dynamics at play” (p. 548) in the relationship between us.

The reality is that my teaching experience, my ethno-cultural identity, and the generosity and depth of storytelling the participants offered me provides an opportunity to contribute to this process. By doing so I hope, along with Donald, to help readers and listeners, particularly those white teachers who form the majority of the teaching force in my city, “to see themselves implicated in the stories told – and make critical connections to teaching, learning, and public policy issues today.” (p. 548) That hope is the basis for the two messages that follow.

The first message I want to share with teachers like me is about the content of this research. The second is about the process it took me through. Both are related directly to the Calls to Action offered by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Specifically they are related to Call to Action 63 which calls for maintain, “an annual commitment to Aboriginal education issues.” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015, p. 7) Two issues that are both clearly problematic and also well within the purview of individual teachers are the connection of schools to the system the participants described and the potential for settler-teachers to respond thoughtfully and productively to Indigenous youth.

The participants recounted stories that revealed a frustrating snarl of unjust and confusing entanglements with the system. Their stories about problems at school spoke to a similar level of frustration because of similar practices and assumptions within the school system. The participants experienced the same sense of surveillance — being watched but not seen — that they did when they were profiled in stores and followed by police as they did in school. School policies and rules were opaque and seemed set up to conflict with their reality. Worse, violation of those policies and rules did not only pose serious consequences to their academic progress but

also to their mental health. Systemic racism was evident in the curricular and organizational aspects of school and individual racism in some of the relationships amongst students and between students and teachers. To succeed, the participants had to constantly questions who they could trust with what parts of who they were.

For teachers like me, these similarities may well be surprising. I know they were when I heard them. Few teachers I know get into the profession to act as barriers to the success of students. Still, by virtue of being employed to work in a state-run educational system with a long history of underserving Indigenous people, teachers are part of a structure that extends well beyond what their individual good intentions might be. It may be that any hope for individual teachers to make a significant difference in overall societal forces like settler-colonialism are dim (Zembylas & Bekerman, 2013). However, the participants refused to group schools as being completely congruent with the system largely exactly because of the actions and care of individual teachers.

Being unable to overcome the system is not the same as being unable to make a difference in the life of individual students. Teachers will do well to see their classrooms as part of a school system that conspires against the interests of Indigenous youth. Likewise, they will do well to be the reflective work to understand how their own norms, values, and sensibilities are likely constructions that have served that system. That way, they can avoid the paralysis that often attends that discovery. Free of that, they can recognize that the reasons for the challenges Indigenous youth face in finding academic success stem from systemic flaws and move past guilt into finding spaces of solidarity and common cause. Just as importantly, they will not be surprised when their efforts to support Indigenous students puts them into conflict with the school system.

The second message I want to offer teachers like me as after conducting this research is about the process of moving forward. There were some stories that the participants told me that were foreign to me — stories for which I had no immediate repository of similar experience. But nearly every story they told about their life in school called to mind my own experiences as a teacher of Indigenous students in the inner city. As a direct result of the participants' stories, I understand those experiences differently now. They told stories about curriculum that did not represent their reality, about teachers who took their lateness as a personal affront, about teachers who told them they wanted them to succeed so they could leave the neighbourhood they called home. As I reflected on those stories, I heard a voice in the back of my head saying things like, "well, the curriculum isn't supposed to cater to you, it's supposed to prepare you for the 'real world'", or "your boss will fire you if you are late for work, why should school be any different?", or "don't you want to get away from all the crime around here?". I knew the voice well because I had used it to say similar words to my own students over the years.

I have found myself wondering how things might have gone for my former students and for me if I had known the stories then that I do now. Of course, I cannot know that. But I have a strong suspicion that things would have been different. I know Jo-Ann Archibald (2008) would agree. After all, she says:

> The strength of stories challenges me to think, to examine my emotional reactions in relation to plot and characters, to question and reflect on my behaviours and future actions, and to appreciate a story's connection to my spiritual nature. (p. 85)

The thing is, the kinds of stories I know now as a result of this research were likely just as available to me back when I was teaching students much like the ones who participated in the research. I just was not looking for or listening to them.

This is my second message to teachers like me. We come to inner-city classrooms peopled with students who have good reason to mistrust our intentions and actions. Our identity and our association with the school system means that students like those who took part in this research have stories to tell but because of their well-honed skills of self-preservation they will not be apparent. Read through what the participants said about the characteristics of the teachers who made a difference in their lives. They earned the right to be trusted and when they heard the stories of their students, they did not argue with them. Instead, they decided to act for and with their students. That is a path available to all teachers. We can earn the right to hear our students' stories and let those stories do their work on us.

In a different piece of writing I argued that teachers are deserve to be judged with a lot of grace because, "teachers face, as a daily reality, that however conflicted they might feel about the social, economic, historical, or political conditions that influence their work, they still must act, as best they can." (Kuly, 2020, p. 200) The perpetually frustrating and simultaneously practical, moral, and theoretical question every teacher faces every day is, what do I do now? To that question I offer this: Each student brings with them stories that, once you earn the right to hear them, will give you an answer that will not lead you far wrong. Sage said as much when she said of the teacher that made a difference in her life, "he just really got me."

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# Appendices

## Ethics Approval Letters

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Canada R3T 2N2
Phone +204-474-7122
Email: humanethics@umanitoba.ca

**PROTOCOL APPROVAL**

**TO:** **Marc Kuly** **(Advisor: Jessica Senehi)**
Principal Investigator

**FROM:** **Julia Witt, Chair**
Joint-Faculty Research Ethics Board (JFREB)

**Re:** **Protocol J2019:021 (HS22664)**
**"Walking between Worlds: Stories Inner City Young Adults Tell about School"**

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**Effective:** March 26, 2019 **Expiry:** March 26, 2020

**Joint-Faculty Research Ethics Board (JFREB)** has reviewed and approved the above research. JFREB is constituted and operates in accordance with the current *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans.*

This approval is subject to the following conditions:

1. Approval is granted for the research and purposes described in the application only.
2. Any modification to the research or research materials must be submitted to JFREB for approval before implementation.
3. Any deviations to the research or adverse events must be submitted to JFREB as soon as possible.
4. This approval is valid for one year only and a Renewal Request must be submitted and approved by the above expiry date.
5. A Study Closure form must be submitted to JFREB when the research is complete or terminated.
6. The University of Manitoba may request to review research documentation from this project to demonstrate compliance with this approved protocol and the University of Manitoba *Ethics of Research Involving Humans.*

**Funded Protocols:**
- **Please mail/e-mail a copy of this Approval, identifying the related UM Project Number, to the Research Grants Officer in ORS.**

**Research Ethics and Compliance is a part of the Office of the Vice-President (Research and International)**
**umanitoba.ca/research**

University of Manitoba | Research Ethics and Compliance

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**RENEWAL APPROVAL**

**Date: March 16, 2020** **New Expiry: March 26, 2021**

**TO:** **Marc Kuly** **(Advisor: Jessica Senehi)**
Principal Investigator

**FROM:** **Julia Witt, Chair**
Joint-Faculty Research Ethics Board (JFREB)

**Re:** **Protocol #J2019:021 (HS22664)**
**Walking between Worlds: Stories Inner City Young Adults Tell about School**

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**Joint-Faculty Research Ethics Board (JFREB)** has reviewed and renewed the above research. JFREB is constituted and operates in accordance with the current *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans.*

This approval is subject to the following conditions:

1. Any modification to the research must be submitted to JFREB for approval before implementation.
2. Any deviations to the research or adverse events must be submitted to JFREB as soon as possible.
3. This renewal is valid for one year only and a Renewal Request must be submitted and approved by the above expiry date.
4. A Study Closure form must be submitted to JFREB when the research is complete or terminated.

**Informed Consent Form**

*Research Project Title:*

**Walking between worlds: Stories inner city young adults tell about school**

*Principal Investigator:*

Marc Kuly, PhD Candidate,

Arthur V. Mauro Centre for Peace and Justice,

University of Manitoba

*Research Supervisor:*

Dr. Jessica Senehi, Associate Professor,

Arthur V. Mauro Centre for Peace and Justice,

University of Manitoba

This consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

**What is this research about?**

This research is about your experience with school and it is based on the stories you have to tell about it. I am interested in knowing this because students' experiences are one of the ways we can learn about the effects of the things that schools do. By learning your stories I hope to be able to help schools become places that pay attention to student experiences.

**How will this research involve me?**

If you agree to participate in this research, you will be asked to do two things. The first is to participate in four story sharing circles that will involve you and other young leaders. The second is a one-on-one interview. The story circles will last no longer than one hour and the interviews will last no longer than forty five minutes. The circles and interview will be set up to fit your schedule.

Both the circles and the interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed. You will be offered a chance to review typed transcripts of the story circles and your interview so you know exactly what has been recorded.

**Are there benefits or risks to participating in this research?**

I am hopeful that participating in this research will benefit you by providing a space to share your stories and hear stories from your peers about an important time in your life. There is no payment involved in participating in this research.

There is a potential risk involved in participating in this research. In the course of sharing you might hear stories from other students who have experienced traumatic experiences at school that could create unsettling emotions for you or remind you of uncomfortable experiences of your own. When we start our story circles I will ensure that people know that they should only share stories they feel comfortable with sharing. I will also ask that you and your fellow participants consider others' emotions when choosing what to share. Also, if there is ever a topic or moment that is uncomfortable for you in the story circles or interviews you will be free to leave. Finally, I will also make sure that if you feel you might want help with how you are feeling I will provide you with connections to solid, free, and confidential counseling services.

**Is this research confidential?**

There is a slight chance that someone might be able to identify you from words I quote in my writing. I will do everything I can to guard against this by changing names and identifying details but it may still be possible.

**What type of personal information will be collected?**

I will protect your privacy as much as possible by keeping your participation confidential. My advisor and I will be the only people who listen to recordings of the story circles and interviews. All records of the interviews and story circles will be saved on the password protected computer in my office at the University of Winnipeg and any written records will be kept in my locked filing cabinet inside my locked office at the University of Winnipeg. In any writing I do about this research I will change the names of people involved. I will also not use any information that could identify who participated in the research.

**What if I change my mind about participating?**

If at any time during the story circles or interview process you want to stop participating, you can. In that case, I will destroy all of the information you have provided and any record of your participation. There is no negative consequence for withdrawing from the research. If, after the circles and interview are complete, you want your participation to be removed from the writing I do you will need to let me know by November 1st, 2019. After that date I will not be able to remove the information you have shared.

**How will I learn about the results of this research and what will it be used for?**

When the story circles and interviews are all complete I will analyze what was said and prepare a summary of what I conclude about them. I will provide you with this summary via email by the

first week of September 2019. When I have completed my dissertation based on this research I would be pleased to share it with you by email if you would like to read it.

This research will be the basis for my future work as a professor. This means I will publish writing about it. I will also share this work with you and you may use it in your own work in the community or at university should you wish.

**Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate as a subject. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the researchers, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and/or refrain from answering any questions you prefer to omit, without prejudice or consequence. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.**

**The University of Manitoba may look at your research records to see that the research is being done in a safe and proper way.**

**This research has been approved by the Joint Research Ethics Board. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact any of the above-named persons or the Human Ethics Coordinator at 204-474-7122 or humanethics@umanitoba.ca . A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.**

Participant's Signature

___________________________________

Date:

Researcher Signature:

___________________________________

Date:

To receive a summary of this research please write down your email, or if you prefer regular mail, your address, in the space provided below:

________________________________________________________________________________