

**Setting Good Footprints:  
Reconstructing Wholistic Success of Indigenous Students in Higher Education**

by  
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## Abstract

Currently, the rates of success of Aboriginal students remain far below mainstream students. According to 2006 census data, 7.3% of Aboriginal peoples have a university education compared to 20.8% in the non-Aboriginal population (Usher, 2009, p. 7). The study explores why some Indigenous students succeed in higher learning despite the challenges they face and to what extent, if any, was their wholistic success impacted by the efficacy of wholistic learner supports. Through Indigenous Wholism that integrates the Circle Teaching (Rice, 2005, p. xi) and *Mino-Pimatisiwin* (The Good Life) approach to helping defined by Hart (2002), this study explored the experiences of seven graduated and present post-secondary Indigenous students on how their wholistic success, as defined by the students, was impacted or shaped by wholistic learner supports. Special attention was focussed on strengths and challenges students brought with them into the learning environment.

The primary data collection methods consisted of Sharing Circles that provided group learning interaction; and semi-structured interviews that provided personal space for in-depth conversations. The factors that affect and promote wholistic success were grouped under three main areas: systemic and structural, social and cultural, and personal. The factors are also viewed as external to the student or factors that are internal. The findings indicate six areas affecting wholistic success: (1) colonial relationships; (2) financial barriers; (3) fear of failure; (4) disempowerment; (5) sense of belonging; and (6) identity. The main factors promoting wholistic success are relational that include engaging interactions in safe learning spaces.

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## Prologue

### **Ancestral Anishinaabe Greeting and Situating Self**

*Boozhoo, Aaniin, Ahnungoonhs nindizhinikaanigoo, Mikinaak doodem, Anishinaabe kwe niin, Minegoziibiing doonjii.* My spirit name is Little Star of the Turtle Clan. My Nation is Ojibway of the Anishinaabe peoples. I originated from the Pine Creek Settlement that later became known as Camperville, Manitoba, and I am a citizen of the Sandy Bay First Nation.

From Indigenous axiology, the cultural protocol is to begin by honouring the peoples and their traditional territory (Sewell, 2001, p. 96). I acknowledge the Anishinaabek (Ojibway), the Inninew (Cree), Dakota, and the Métis whose traditional territory we are on here at the University of Manitoba. Indigenous ontology also calls for establishing the connection of bloodline and family back to one's territory as connecting the peoples to the land is foundational to our way of being (Moore, Peters, Jojola, & Lacy, 2007; Smith, 1999).

Spirit names signify distinctive characters. Spirit names are granted, earned, or taken, and might change if the circumstances of the person changed. A very strong sense of personal identity is necessary in order for a name to be changed (Moore, Peters, Jojola, & Lacy, 2007, p. 156). Our spirit names provide us with a sense of meaning and belonging (Wane, 2006, p. 89) and in adulthood, seeking my spirit name and clan were central to reclaiming my *Anishinaabe kwe* (Ojibway woman) identity. The significance of the clan system was given to the Anishinaabe as a framework of government to give them strength, equal justice, voice, law and order (Gaywish, 2008; Benton-Banai, 1988). The turtle is one of the guides on our inward journey who not only teaches us to go

within, but also grants the gift of perseverance to those who learn the ways (Bopp, Bopp, Brown, & Lane Jr., 1985, p. 54).

Locating ourselves upfront (Absolon, 2008; Cole, 2000; Hill, 1995; Lavallee, 2009; Marsden, 2005; Montes, 2006) through our lived experiences and anchoring our stories in the present, represents a process in decolonization. That is to say, remembering and re-storying our family and history, reconnecting to the land and ancestral roots, reclamation of the past (Fitznor, 2002; Royal Commission on Aboriginal People, 1999; Sefa Dei, 2006; Smith, 1999), and reclamation of our spirits by means of our spirit name and clan (Absolon, 2008; RCAP, 1996; Smith, 1999). Through beginning my research with my ancestral *Anishinaabemowin* greeting, followed by English translation means returning to traditions to chart the future and “represents a rethinking of the way forward” (Sefa Dei, 2006, p. 5). Whenever I am in a sacred circle I begin by identifying my spirit name, clan and territory to inform those I meet who I am. I then give notice of my family and who they are, my role, and the territory that I am from (Moore, Peters, Jojola, & Lacy, 2007, p. 72). In this way, as *Anishinaabe kwe* (Ojibway woman) on *Mikinaakominising*, Turtle Island, I am honouring my relations and acknowledging another way of interpreting the world (Little Bear, 2000, p. 77). For Indigenous peoples, Turtle Island is North America.

Going back to my ancestral roots (Wane, 2006, p. 89) means keeping traditions alive, and knowing who I am and where I come from leads me in my learning journey within the academy to know where I am going in my search for truth and knowledge (Fitznor, 2002, p. 20). Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) identifies this process as envisioning, or dreaming a new dream, or setting a new vision—Indigenous peoples have survived

and have resisted assimilation and will continue to move forward by taking up our responsibility to learn about who we are as Indigenous peoples and to set a new course (p. 153) with our cultural identity whole.

### **Locating Self through Relational Genealogy and Accountability**

Reclaiming my *Anishinaabe kwe* (Ojibway woman) identity was about discovering the space that I occupy in the present through my ancestors, all my relations, and performing culture as I am writing it (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 4). In the video, *Nametwaawin*, Fitznor asserts, “You have to know who is walking in your body” (Gaywish, Richard, & Rocke, 2008) and who I am is located within my blood memory, my cultural DNA (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). Indigenous cultures believe that we carry the memories of our ancestors in our physical being (Fontaine, 2001; Willett, 2007). In the research process, Wilson (2008) affirms Indigenous axiology and methodology of relational accountability calls for a detailed explanation of the researcher’s background in order to situate self up front in the research process (p. 10). Similarly, in her study, Fitznor (2002) tells her personal story and through family history, she is situating and locating “self” in the research (p. 20) as positionality and restoring ourselves is primary (Absolon, 2008; Willett, 2007). In the same way, our relationship with the land plays a central role in our search for knowledge (Absolon, 2008, p. 3). In effect, the integration of my life experience is as important as the methodologies I employ as the two are interdependent (Absolon, 2008, p. 1) and my research is an extension of myself (Wilson, 2008, p. 88). This process reaffirms the reclaiming,

remembering, re-storying, and re-searching our Indigenous heritage (Absolon & Willett, 2004, p. 6).

My parents are George and Grace Richard (nee Beauchamp). I am the fourth eldest of eight children. I have two sisters, Alma (Konrad) and Brenda (Lyle); and five brothers, Ron (Karen), Donald, Garry (Pat), Harry, and Hnat. I deeply miss my Mom and Dad and two of my brothers, Donald and Harry, who have gone on into the Spirit world; and now, I especially wish for Mom's home cooked meals that would bring us altogether at home. My Mother was the "heart" of my family. I recall Mom's unconditional love and she said, "as long as I have a floor, there is always room in my home for family to sleep." Ningewance (2007) notes this rule of behaviour provided us with the necessary social insulation (p. xviii) that is typical of Indigenous families. My Mom made sure that we all pitched in and helped out around the home. We worked hard and this taught me and my siblings to have a strong work ethic, to be responsible, to conduct ourselves in a good way, and to have respect for our relatives. But, my family also experienced many struggles when I was growing up like poverty and alcoholism. Nonetheless, life seemed to be more natural and I recall my feelings of being more in touch with the natural environment.

My paternal grandma or Kokum is Angele Richard Lavesseur (nee Henry) from Roseau River First Nation. My grandma Angele attended St. Boniface Industrial School and she was later moved to the Pine Creek Residential School. Dad's father, my grandpa or Mishomis, is Joseph Richard Sr. from St. Laurent, Manitoba. Grandma Angele was given to my Grandpa Joe in marriage by the priest and there was no courtship involved in their matrimony. My great-grandfather is Norbert Henry and my great-grandmother was

Elize Descoteaux Martin also from Rosseau River First Nation. My paternal great-grandma was Angélique Roulette Mettwaywenin, from Sandy Bay First Nation and my paternal great-grandpa was Theophile Richard from Pine Creek First Nation.

My maternal grandma or Koko was Martha Beauchamp (nee Chartrand) and was raised in Duck Bay, Manitoba. Growing up, I spent a lot of time at my Koko's home giving her a helping hand. This was a common practice in our families for the grandchildren to help their Koko and Mishoom's as they were getting on in their years. My great grandfather is Camille Chartrand, however, I never knew him as he had passed on early in his life. I recall that my great grandmother Isabelle Campbell missed her husband Camille a lot until she passed on. They were both from Camperville, Manitoba. My Mother's father, my grandfather or Papa, was Harry Beauchamp. His mother, my great grandma was Philomene Klyne from Dauphin River Indian reservation. We were told the story about how she was struck and killed by an oncoming vehicle saving the life of a child whom she had pushed out of harm's way of the vehicle. My great grandpa was Jean Beauchamp from Duck Bay, Manitoba.

For the first fifteen years of my life, I was raised in Camperville, Manitoba, a small community of mixed Métis, non-Status and Status heritage. As was widely the case for many Indigenous and Métis communities across Turtle Island, Camperville was dominated by Christianity and was named after Father Camper, who was an Oblate priest. My Mom and Koko would take us children to church on Sundays. I regret that attending traditional ceremonies was not a part of my upbringing and childhood experience. However, stories were told of ceremonies being held far off in the bush by the people. Growing up on the land in my early years, I recall it was not uncommon for

me and my siblings to be playing out all day long and unfortunately this was not the experience of my younger siblings as a result of our move to the city.

I remember the people back home still living off the land for the most part. As a young child, I have memorable experiences of the bountifulness of the land. I recall picking wild berries with my Mom and Koko which they would preserve for the winter months. One experience which was vivid in my memory was of my Papa hitching his team of horses to a wagon filled with supplies and we, my extended family, would go off to the blueberry patch for the summer months where we lived in tents. My Papa and uncles also fished and trapped. I recall my Papa stretching his furs over the frames to be dried; Mom and Koko smoking fish, plucking ducks and keeping the feathers to make blankets and pillows for the cold winter months. Wild meat was a staple food in my family. My Mom made the best fish patties! I feel fortunate today that I was able to experience this relationship with the land. Today, I believe many Indigenous students have not had this opportunity to link their identity back to the land. This relationship to the land and ceremony are vital to me whenever I am seeking centeredness today in my being.

I attended Christ the King missionary school in Camperville from Grades 1 to 7 and we were taught by the Oblate Nuns who would ensure that catechism and prayers were a part of our regular routine in school every day. As well, we would attend confession and communion on a regular basis. We were told this would ensure that we would go to heaven; and as a small child, I recall being very fearful that I did not want to go to hell and burn for eternity. The assimilative Euro-western education I received in my community did not include teaching me about my people, culture, history, or

language. We were nonexistent as Anishinaabe people at school and in the school curriculum.

In my community, high school education was not provided. This meant that every day we were bussed 66 miles, round trip, to the neighbouring non-Aboriginal community to be integrated and to attend Grades 8 to 12. Attending school away from home was my first inkling and feeling that somehow I was different from the rest of the students at school. I could not quite explain it at the time as I had always excelled in school in my own community. I experienced feelings of inferiority at school away from home and looking back now I am able to recognize this was accomplished mostly by my exclusion, isolation, alienation, and racism. I recall the students from my community mostly “hung around” together. In another example, in my Social Studies class, I recall being quite ashamed of an image, stamped in my mind, of a picture in the textbook--an Indian man with a raised tomahawk behind some bushes getting ready to assault some innocent settlers. I believe many Indigenous students have experienced similar situations.

In high school, the teachers did not explain to the Aboriginal students from my community about the importance of taking university entrance courses and instead streamlined us to lower educational tracks (L. Chippeway, personal communication, June 21, 2011). All I knew from other students was that the general stream was easier than the university entrance stream. Well, I thought that it would be very foolish of me to choose the more difficult stream! Once again, I had no knowledge about university or why university was important for me, my family, or the Anishinaabe peoples. My parents did not discuss the possibility of attending university with me or with my brothers and sisters,

and I believe it was because they did not know about the importance of a university education either. I had no knowledge of university or that there was any kind of formal learning beyond high school. Nevertheless, my mother was a strong advocate of me and my siblings completing Grade 12.

In 1972, my Mother and four of my youngest siblings, including me, moved to the north end of Winnipeg. My mother, now a single parent, was living on social assistance. In those days, living in an urban centre was very difficult for me and especially in my new high school where I recall a sea of faces in the hallways and my feeling of not belonging—I wanted to go back home to Camperville to be with my relatives and friends and familiar surroundings.

My younger sister, Brenda, was the first in my family to attend university and to obtain a degree! My sister obtained her Bachelor of Education degree and then went on to complete her Master of Education in 2000. My family celebrated her accomplishments! I did not believe that I was capable of achieving success in university so instead I attended college for two years and completed a secretarial diploma program. However, since education was my passion, I mustered up the courage and applied to the University of Manitoba. I completed the First Nation Community Wellness Diploma which was a supported cohort where I was able to hone my academic skills and the program assisted me in focusing my area of study. I went on to pursue an undergraduate degree in the Faculty of Social Work as I wanted to learn more about why people do the things they do to hurt other human beings. After attaining my Bachelor of Social Work degree and since I worked in the education field, I applied to the Master of Education program. I chose the thesis route, although it was a struggle for me, as I wanted to take

up the challenge and responsibility of writing our stories for future generations. As Indigenous students, we need to continually challenge ourselves. My story was not unique in that for many Indigenous peoples, the opportunity for higher learning was still not accessible nor within reach. Still today, in my understanding, many Indigenous families do not have anyone from their family who has attended university, or who may be first or second generation to attend university. Now, some families have third generation, the grandchildren, who are attending higher learning educational institutions.

Within Indigenous research, Graham Smith (cited in Kovach, 2009) introduced the use of a prologue (Lavallee, 2009; Willett, 2007) to connect my story, and who I am, by sharing enough about me to prepare the readers about my work (Kovach, 2009, p. 4). Beginning my work in this way, about my family genealogy and my family life history, was intentional as it demonstrates that I, as an Indigenous researcher, am expressing an Indigenous worldview, and am interpreting the world through my family, my relations, and the land. These relationships are central to my worldview and my collective identity. Each of our personal stories and memories are powerful mechanisms that breathe new life into organizing a common and collective history (Absolon, 2008, p. 273). Absolon and Willett (2004) concisely sum up this point “Remembering and talking about my experience as an Anishinaabe woman is Indigenous re-search. Through the telling and re-telling of my story, I am able to revise and rename my history so that I come to a new understanding about it.” (p. 7)

In traditional collective societies, everyone maintained a role that contributed to sustaining the nation. Through my work, I am picking up my responsibility to make a contribution to the peoples’ forward movement through education, and to aid in

meaningful learning experiences and “wholistic success” (Pidgeon, 2009, p. 254) of Indigenous students in higher learning “with good hearts and an open mind” (Wilson, 2008, p. 11). Antone, Gamlin, and Provost-Turchetti (2003) state that:

Wholistic describes the Indigenous philosophy in which ‘everything is related’ by virtue of shared origins and in which, by extension, the human being is considered an entire whole; that is, mentally, physically, spiritually and emotionally as an individual, with one’s family and extended family, one’s people, and with the cosmos in sacred relationships (p. 9).

The common spelling is ‘holistic’; however, I chose to use a *w* as in ‘wholistic’ “to reflect an Indigenous understanding of the interconnection of the student experiences (Pidgeon, 2009, p. 3) and working with the ‘whole’ person is more appropriate in an Indigenous framework. In his book *Seeking Mino-Pimatisiwin*, Hart (2002) talks about the good life or to live our life in the best way (pp. 32-33) and in essence was central to the work that I undertake with students.

### **The Seventh Generation**

I am a mother, grandmother, daughter, sister, auntie, cousin, and friend. *Kitchi Manitou*, Great Mystery or Creator (Benton-Banai, 1988, p. 2) has blessed me with daughters, Rhiannon (Cory) and Ashleigh; son, Ben; and grandson, Cameron. The work that I do within the realm of education is for my children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, and children of the Seventh Generation so that they, too, may experience the passion for lifelong learning and education. A common belief held among Indigenous peoples of North America is that we must continually regard the children of the Seventh

Generation so that they, too, may continue to enjoy the beauty, abundance, and prosperity of Mother Earth. *Gakina ndinawemaaganag* (All my relations).

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

*The destiny of a people is intricately bound to the way its children are educated. Education is the transmission of cultural DNA from one generation to the next. It shapes the language and pathways of things, the contours of character and values, the social skills and creative potential of the individual...and creative potential of a people. (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996)*

Today, the rates of success at the post-secondary level for Indigenous students remain far below that of mainstream students. Research has demonstrated that despite increased participation rates of Indigenous students in higher learning over the past 40 years since the 1970's, the numbers who graduate continue to remain significantly below mainstream Canadian population demonstrating the ongoing failure of educational institutions to address their educational needs (Helin & Snow, 2010; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; Longclaws, 2000; Mendelson, 2006; Piquemal & Kouritzin, 2003; Statistics Canada, 2009; Stonechild, 2004; Willett, 2007). According to 2006 census data, 7.3% of Aboriginal peoples aged 25 and over have university education compared to 20.8% in the non-Aboriginal population (Usher, 2009, p. 7). This percentage highlights a huge gap in post-secondary attainment between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. Not only is there a gap in success rates, but in preparedness such as courses in math and science limiting career choices. From what I understand, many Indigenous families still have only first, second, or third generation family members who have attended university.

In her study, Weir (2003) found that in Canadian mainstream post-secondary institutions the most significant factor for the marginal success rate of Indigenous students was the lack of Indigenous education, and structurally, the “institutions were not well equipped to meet the learning needs of Aboriginal students” and this was compounded by distinct Indigenous cultures, oppression and racism (p. 102). Structurally, there is no denying that post-secondary institutions are ill-prepared to deal with Indigenous students presenting with the roots of colonial forces and the ensuing intergenerational impacts (Hart, 2002; Wilson, 2008) which create challenges for them unlike those faced by other students in Canadian society. Indeed, there was the continued common misunderstanding “of [I]ndigenous peoples as the problem” (Smith, 1999, p. 92) rather than recognizing the need for transformation in mainstream institutions and Canadian society’s status quo.

Still today, upon embarking on post-secondary studies, Indigenous students have very little, if any, knowledge about the complexities of the macro structural forces at play, such as white privilege (Schick & St. Denis, 2005) and gatekeepers (Abbott Mihesuah, 2004) embedded within the power structures, that are beyond the students’ control, but yet are impacting on their daily ability to succeed (Weir, 2003; Willett, 2007). To a large degree, Indigenous students have difficulty articulating the origination of the micro, multilayered issues unravelling internally and manifesting in ways that include fragmentation or the incapacity for wholism (Ermine, 1995; Smith, 1999), expressions of self-doubt and low confidence, feelings of isolation and not belonging; or externally through academic under preparedness, abandonment of responsibilities, voices that have been silenced rather than emerging as critical thinkers (Cajete, 1994, p. 216),

loss of cultural identity or disconnection “from who we are as a people, [and] from the sources of our strength” (Alfred, 2009, p. 5). These are symptoms of larger systemic and structural root causes that include political, social, economic and academic issues that get in the way of wholistic success for Indigenous students. At a personal level, some Indigenous students who come to university will learn for the first time about authentic Indigenous history and cultural identity. Fitznor (2002) sums, they will learn about “Aboriginal issues and needs and aspirations” (p. 31).

A brief overview of demographics is relevant in demonstrating the diversity of the Indigenous populations in Canada as well as the fact that Indigenous populations are the youngest and fastest growing demographic. The reality is that if the Indigenous population continues to remain undereducated and unemployed, not only do they suffer, but so does Canadian society (Mendelson, 2006, p. 2). Research has shown that demographics are one of the main drivers of educational policies and the policies in turn impact educational success (Mendelson, 2006). According to Statistics Canada (2006), the Aboriginal population in Canada is at 1,172,790 with an increase of 45% between 1996 and 2006 nearly six times faster than the 8% rate of increase for the non-Aboriginal population (Statistics Canada, 2009). The median age of Aboriginal peoples in Canada is 27 years, while for the non-Aboriginal people it is 40 years (Statistics Canada, 2009).

In Manitoba, there are 63 First Nations reserves and approximately 140 community-based Métis Locals represented by the Manitoba Métis Federation (Government of Manitoba, 2010, p. 4). The Nations include Anishinaabe (Ojibway), Inninew (Cree), Dakota, Oji-Cree, Dene, Métis, and Inuit. The total Aboriginal population in 2006 is at 175,395 and represents 14% of the total population in the

province up from 11.7 % in 1996 (Statistics Canada, 2006). The median age is 23.9 years. At this rate, it is estimated that the total Aboriginal population will represent 28% of the province's total population by 2026. Approximately 10% of the Aboriginal population in Manitoba lives north of the 53<sup>rd</sup> parallel, and in this area they make up the majority of the population at 57%. Winnipeg is the largest city in Manitoba and has a total Aboriginal population of 68,385 making it home to the largest Aboriginal population of a census metropolitan area in Canada with a growth rate of 22.4 % between 2001 to 2006 (Statistics Canada, 2006). These numbers establish the large Aboriginal population both in the Province of Manitoba and City of Winnipeg who are becoming eligible for post-secondary education in the not too distant future.

In 2010, approximately 26,000 students were registered at the University of Manitoba. Of these, 1912 students self-declared their Aboriginal identity. The majority identified as Métis at 1028, First Nation at 868, Inuit at 8, and Other Aboriginal peoples at 8 (University of Manitoba, 2010). However, this is an under-representation for the reason that in the same year, there were 1,000 Band funded First Nations students (K. Storm, personal communication, September 22, 2011). An interesting trend is that 70% or 1290 are Aboriginal woman. Moreover, these statistics highlight the need to address structural and systemic limitations in educational systems. Moreover, Indigenous students combat statistical odds on a daily basis: First, to make it through high school; second, to go on to higher learning; and third, once there, the challenge for them is to remain and to achieve wholistic success. Mendelson (2006) warns that everyone loses in Canadian society if Aboriginal students do not succeed (p. 35) changing who we are and the kind of society we live in if we do not address this fundamental situation (p. 24).

## Purpose of the Study

As a response to the identified shortcomings of the mainstream system, approaches are explored that promote wholistic success of Indigenous learners. These approaches are framed within Indigenous Wholism that integrates the Circle Teaching and *Mino-Pimatisiwin* that serve to address the failures of past practices. The Circle Teaching and *Mini-Pimatisiwin* approaches are wholistic and are those that consider the “whole picture” (Absolon, 2008; Brown, 2004; Cajete, 1999; Smith, 1999). When the whole picture is considered, it is a method of working with students that take into account all of their strengths and challenges that the students bring with them into the learning environment. Wholistic approaches are the means by which culturally-based methods are engaged as the foundation for the helping relationship between “guide” (Cajete, 1999, p. 128) and student. These wholistic approaches are meaningful and relevant to students as they are based on a “collective cultural code” that contains a “shared philosophy” (Little Bear, 2000, p. 77). Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) lend further clarity to this philosophy in relation to the Indigenous student:

The need for a... educational system that *respects* them for who they are, that is *relevant* to their view of the world, that offers *reciprocity* in their relationships with others, and that helps them exercise *responsibility* over their own lives (p. 1).

Indigenous Wholism provides the framework into our “traditional understandings” (Graveline, 1998, p. 75) or *Anishinaabe Gikendaasowin* contained within the Circle Teaching and *Mino-Pimatisiwin* (The Good Life). Hart’s (2002) *Mino-Pimatisiwin* approach situates the emphasis on the relationship as the locus for the change process and nurturance of the relationship between helper and the person being helped (p.

54). In the Circle Teaching, the emphasis lies in the interrelationship process of the learner's nature: the spiritual or learning spirit, the heart or emotional learner, the body or physical learner, and the mind or intellectual learner and the developmental aspects on the learners' volition or will to succeed. Indigenous Wholism serves to guide Indigenous students in learning how to learn, to cultivate access to their real selves and self knowledge, and to internalize their capacity for self reliance and self-determination. In essence, the students' educational experience is "humanized" (Cajete, 1999, p. 157).

The purpose of this study was to explore why some Indigenous students succeed in higher learning despite the challenges they face and to what extent, if any, was their wholistic success impacted by the efficacy of wholistic learner supports? Through Indigenous Wholism that integrates the Circle Teaching (Rice, 2005, p. xi) and *Mino-Pimatisiwin* approach to helping defined by Hart (2002), this study explored the experiences of post-secondary Indigenous students on how their wholistic success, as defined by the students, was impacted or shaped by wholistic learner supports. Special attention focussed on the strengths and challenges the students brought with them into the learning environment. In particular, the Circle Teaching focussed on the four aspects of the student's nature and *Mino-Pimatisiwin* on the relationship between student and self, student and helper, and student and educational institution. In the Access Programs, the Academic Counsellors and the Personal Counsellors work as a team to guide the students. I use the term 'guider' to refer to myself and the way I engage with students and as a respectful term to describe the reciprocal work I undertake in my role as Academic Counsellor.

The Access Programs at the University of Manitoba offer learner supports that are holistic to students enrolled in its programs. In order for students to succeed, there is common understanding that not only is the intellectual aspect essential to holistic success, but so is emotional, physical and spiritual well-being. In relation to emotional well-being, Degen (1992) found that with students from Access Programs at the University of Manitoba, the quality of their social interactions affect their academic success (pp. ii-iii). These significant social relationships include Access staff, professors, peers, parents/family, and friends. One student elaborates:

The Access Program has helped me a lot. If it hadn't of been for them, I probably wouldn't have come this far, because every time I have a problem with school, I can either talk to [names two staff members], or if I have problems with an essay, the [names a staff member] would sit down with me to help me (Degen, 1992, p. 142).

This quote illustrates the nature and range of supports that is offered to students within the Access Programs. The Access Programs are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.

### **Research Questions**

The study explored the experiences of seven, present and graduated Indigenous students and their perceptions based on the following research questions:

- 1) What does holistic success mean to students and what practices do they perceive influence their making meaning of holistic success?
- 2) With special attention to strengths and challenges, what is the relationship between the efficacies of holistic learner supports and holistic success?

- 3) What does this tell us about the determinants of wholistic success that can serve as a guide for transformative practice?

### **Significance of the Study**

One of the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) was to increase the post-secondary “participation, retention and graduation of Aboriginal students” calling for improved “support services with Aboriginal counsellors for academic and personal counselling” (p. 649). This dynamic relationship between counsellor as teacher and student was one in which both individuals learn and grow together in the helping or guiding process. Cajete (1999) states that:

The teacher is placed in a unique relationship with students as a co-learner, and acts as guide only in the learning of both the students and him or herself. This removes the sometimes stifling personification of the teacher as the authority and allows for a more intimate and dynamic relationship between teacher and student (p. 178).

Counsellors or teachers as guiders in the helping relationship are continually being called upon to rethink the way in which the work with students is carried out. As guiders or teachers, we must continually redefine our responsiveness in building more comprehensive and dynamic relationships between student and self, student and teacher or guider, and student and institution, to one that fosters “learning, relationship and understanding [to] become the focus of the interaction” (Cajete, 1999, p. 178).

Current research on Indigenous education points out that from the learners’ perspective, through inclusion of their voices, their invisibility and alienation are being

reversed ensuring they “speak and articulate their own understandings of domination” (Sefa Dei, 2003, p. 250). By recording and understanding students’ stories, their experiences are validated within the academy. In addition to greater participation, retention, and graduation, students’ wholistic success, experience, knowledge and skills contribute to the Indigenous and non-Indigenous community as a form of reciprocity (Wilson, 2008, p. 130). Also from this vantage, they join the circle of Indigenous peoples who are committed to the continuance of our Indigenous identity and cultural ways (Absolon, 2008, p. 9).

As an Indigenous researcher, I am performing culture as I am writing (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 4), and rooting education in the experiences of the peoples, addressing Indigenous audiences, and including my own voice as *Anishinaabe kwe* (Ojibway woman) by writing in the first person “I” or “we” as well as “our” or “my” people (Absolon, 2008; Wilson, 2008).

Beginning in the 1980’s, more and more Indigenous researchers and scholars including Absolon, 2008; Alfred, 2009; Battiste, 2000; Cajete, 1994; Ermine, 2007; Fitznor, 2002; Gaywish, 2008; LaRoque, 2000, Longclaws, 2000; McCabe, 2004; Rice, 2005; Smith, 1999 have published or have completed masters or doctoral theses that honour Indigenous voices paving the way for us who are following within the academy. This study contributes to the current knowledge and literature in the field by citing Indigenous scholars, wherever possible, and reinforcing their validity and visibility as critical to our history and issues that count (Smith, 1999). Through this study, my hope is to make a contribution to institutional transformation through greater access of supports

that are more wholistic for students that promote excellence and meaningful educational experiences and achievement for Indigenous students.

### **Organization of the Study**

My thesis consists of a prologue and six chapters. The prologue clearly situates me, the researcher, and provides transparency. Chapter 1 serves to address the purpose of the study, and the research questions and significance are outlined. Chapter 2 discusses the context and delineates an Indigenous research paradigm that includes Indigenous ontology, Indigenous epistemology, Indigenous axiology, and Indigenous methodology. Indigenous Wholism integrates the Circle Teaching and *Mino-Pimatisiwin* (The Good Life) approaches serving as the theoretical framework. Chapter 3 contains the literature review that examines the systemic and structural factors, the social and cultural factors, and the personal factors that promote or inhibit wholistic success of Indigenous students. Chapter 4 discusses the research methodology and conceptual framework from a strengths-based approach that focuses more on what is working rather than from a deficit approach and what is not working. The data collection methods are Sharing Circles, and semi-structured interviews, with the inclusion of debriefing emails. The data analysis and implications are considered. Chapter 5 will provide a discussion on the findings. Chapter 6 concludes with a discussion of the study and envisioning new dreams.

### **Terminology**

Language is critical to sustaining the peoples. In my language, *Anishinaabe* translates to “original people” or “human being.” Indigenous societies all over the world

have named, the people, original people, human beings, or being human, in their own language (Absolon, 2008; Wilson, 2008). A return to our roots requires self-definition as a new way of doing (Sefa Dei, 2006, p. 3). According to Warry (2007), more Indigenous peoples are going back and reclaiming our own community names in our languages, and although it may be difficult to master the pronunciation of names, this is essential to free our minds from definitions imposed by Europeans and to respect Indigenous cultures. In fact, Warry (2007) goes on to say that more conservative writers refuse to capitalize the terms Aboriginal [and Indigenous] as are other racial or ethnic names such as French, English, African, Chinese, Greek, German, or Philipino to name a few. Some simply do not want to acknowledge the distinct political status of Indigenous peoples as do the adjectives Canadian and American (Warry, 2007, pp. 10-11). This omission is just one example of the Eurocentric framework embedded in Western education and society in general. Throughout my thesis, 'Indigenous' and 'Aboriginal' are used interchangeably to refer to the original inhabitants of Canada. My preference is to use 'Indigenous' as for me it relates more to my Anishinaabe experience in my territory and homeland on Turtle Island. In particular, my early life experience of living on the land and being more in touch with the natural environment.

**Aboriginal peoples.** The Canadian Constitution of 1982 recognizes three groups of Aboriginal peoples – Status and Non-Status Indians, Métis, and Inuit. They are the descendants of the original inhabitants of North America and are peoples with unique heritages, languages, cultural practices and spiritual beliefs (Canada, Indian and Northern Affairs, 2009). Within these diverse Aboriginal cultures, First Nations, Métis, and Inuit, there are different groupings of the peoples (Weir, 2003). According to Warry (2007):

The use of the plural Aboriginal peoples is important because it signals political orientation... although Aboriginal people can be grammatically correct in specific contexts, this characterization homogenizes; it turns all Aboriginal persons into a “type,” a generalized category. The use of Aboriginal *peoples* immediately recognizes the diversity of Aboriginal cultures—as there are many, many distinct Aboriginal cultures in Canada (pp. 10-11).

**First Nation.** First Nation is a term that came into common usage in the 1970’s to replace the misnomer “Indian,” which some people found offensive. Although the term “Indian” is legally designated, there is no legal definition of the term “First Nation,” although it is widely used. Among its uses, the term “First Nations peoples” refers to First Peoples or the Indigenous peoples in Canada, both Status and non-Status. Many Indigenous peoples have adopted the term “First Nation” to replace the word “Band” in the name of their community (Canada, Indian and Northern Affairs, 2009). First Nation is also an Aboriginal governing body, organized and established by an Aboriginal community, or the Aboriginal community itself (Weir, 2003).

**Indigenous.** Indigenous peoples are “Born of the land” (Wilson, 2008, p. 88). Battiste (2008) cites the International Labour Organization (ILO), “Tribal peoples in independent countries whose social, cultural and economic conditions distinguish them from other sections of the national community, and whose status is regarded wholly or partially by their own customs or traditions or by special laws or regulations” (p. 499). Smith (1999) explains further:

‘Indigenous peoples’ is a relatively recent term which emerged in the 1970s out of the struggles primarily of the American Indian Movement (AIM), and the

Canadian Indian Brotherhood. It is a term that internationalizes the experiences, the issues and the struggles of some of the world's colonized peoples. The final 's' in '[I]ndigenous peoples' has been argued for quite vigorously by [I]ndigenous activists because of the right of peoples to self-determination. It is also used as a way of recognizing that there are real differences between different [I]ndigenous peoples. The term has enabled the collective voices of colonized people to be expressed strategically in the international arena. It has also been an umbrella enabling communities and peoples to come together, transcending their own colonized contexts and experiences, in order to learn, share, plan, organize and struggle collectively for self-determination on the global and local stages. (p. 7)

**Inuit.** Inuit are Aboriginal people in Northern Canada, who live predominantly in Nunavut, Northwest Territories, Northern Quebec and Northern Labrador. The word Inuit means "people" in the Inuit language – Inuktitut (Canada, Indian and Northern Affairs, 2009).

**Métis.** The Métis are peoples of mixed First Nations and European ancestry who identify themselves as Métis, as distinct from First Nations peoples, Inuit or non-Aboriginal peoples. The Métis have a unique culture that draws on their diverse ancestral origins, such as Anishinaabe (Ojibway), Inninew (Cree), Scottish, and French, (Canada, Indian and Northern Affairs, 2009).

## CHAPTER 2: CONTEXT OF STUDY & THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

*For those seeking to support Indigenous scholarship, there is a responsibility to avoid the Edward S. Curtis lens. This means reconceptualising the relationship with Indigenous communities from that of a studied, exotic 'other' to that of a partnering relationship. (Kovach, 2009, p. 170)*

### Introduction

Using an Indigenous Wholistic theoretical framework, this thesis aims to explore the experiences of Indigenous students about their wholistic success, as defined by the students in higher learning at university. My thesis is informed by Indigenous Wholism that integrates the Circle Teaching and *Mino-Pimatisiwin* approaches. These conceptual frameworks are constructed by the peoples to discern and make more clear Indigenous knowledges or *Anishinaabe Gikendaasowin* (Absolon, 2008; Ermine, 1995; Hart, 2002). The Circle Teaching and *Mino-Pimatisiwin* are located as a part of the larger whole of Indigenous Wholism that serve not to separate, but to connect the past, present, and future. The Access Programs at the University of Manitoba are an example of programs that promote the use of Indigenous wholistic approaches to learner supports and wholistic student success. The Access Programs are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.

“European scientists were and are the producers of Eurocentric knowledge, relegating Indigenous peoples to the margins of theory” (Hall, 2006, p. 17). Nowhere was the hierarchy of the “privileged” and “powerless” more evident than in research (Smith, 1999). The West has extracted and claimed ownership of Indigenous ways of knowing, imagery and cultural products while at the same time rejecting the people who

created the ideas (Smith, 1999, p. 61). As I began my work, I was distinctly aware of the limited existence of “Indigenous theory” (Simpson, 2009, p. 143) in my research literature or that it was not referred to as such. By Indigenous theory, I am not suggesting a pan-Indigenous theory or one that relates to all Indigenous peoples, but rather about the commonality of understandings or universal values that are shared among Indigenous peoples existing throughout the world in the past and present (Rice, 2005, p. 83). Hall (2006) contends, “Pan-Indigenous theories are not sufficient in themselves, but rather when they are reinforced with specific cultural understandings of our own nations, they are then infused with life, with meaning, and with true revolutionary potential” (p. 31). Further, where it exists, “Indigenous theorizing was still struggling to find full validity and legitimacy in academia amongst non-Indigenous researchers” (Montes, 2006, p. 64).

Whilst conducting my research, I struggled to find a theory that would fit with my Indigenous worldview. However, I found myself questioning whether the attitudes that theories--such as Ecological Theory or Feminist Theory--are only for an elite class and generally disseminated to less developed thinkers (Moore, Peters, Jojola, & Lacy, 2007, p. 58), as opposed to the “Other” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 15) being a part of the discourse? Or, was the attitude that theorizing was done to and for the Indigenous “Other?” Was the reason for this controversy in theory due to continuance of inequities, euro centrism, imperialism, and colonialism within the academy? What was the distinction when Indigenous theory was characterized as grassroots or traditional approaches rather than as Indigenous theory? Moore et al (2007) identify assumptions of Western philosophers, “that non-Western peoples are a less complex form of being, less developed than the Westerner, and secondly, that [I]ndigenous peoples are incapable of

engaging in philosophical discussions” (p. 58). Still today, this is the context that many of us, as Indigenous researchers, find ourselves.

### **Context of the Study**

Despite intense efforts since contact in 1492 by European governments, military, religious, and educational institutions to eradicate worldviews that were alien to the West, Indigenous peoples continue to resist cultural extinction (Moore, Peters, Jojola, & Lacy, 2007, p. 68). The policies rooted in European colonialism included extermination, protection, civilization, assimilation, and integration justifying political hegemony and economic exploitation of the Americas (Smith, 1999; RCAP, 1996). Among the policies, Euro western education has been one of the most effective in oppressing Indigenous peoples (Hart, 2002, p. 28). Education was perceived as the primary force in the civilization of the Indian race (Department of Indian Affairs Annual Report of 1876 as cited in Barman, Hebert & McCaskill, 1992, p. 5) and served as a “tool for assimilation” (Stonechild, 2004, p. 13) meaning the adoption of dominant society’s cultural patterns as privileged and superior.

In her study, Cote-Meek (2010) explored, “how Aboriginal students confront narratives of colonial violence in the postsecondary classroom while at the same time living and experiencing colonial violence on a daily basis” (p. ii). She found that the legacy of “ongoing colonial violence” (p. ii) continues to weigh heavily on the hearts and minds of Indigenous students today. She also talks about the strategies they employ “to resist ongoing colonialism and racism” (p. iii) and in mitigating the impacts felt in mixed postsecondary classrooms such as “developing a critical consciousness while at the same

time challenges existing racial hierarchies” (p. 307). Now, we have come full circle in that education is viewed by many Indigenous peoples as a way to move forward. Shawn A-in-chut Atleo, National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations states, “Our agenda was about building strong First Nations that will see Canada fulfill its economic potential. The centre of this agenda is education” (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 2010). Thus, wholistic success of Indigenous students in higher learning is key to the future and to self-determining Indigenous peoples and nations.

### **Indigenous Research Paradigm**

In my study, an essential phase for me was to identify an Indigenous research paradigm (Wilson, 2008, p. 35) that would guide me in how I would go about searching for the answers to my questions. One pre-eminent goal was for my search to be “conducted according to... [an] Indigenous worldview” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 92). According to Moore, et al (2007):

All peoples... have described the world... [and] have a ‘worldview.’ This view, or description, consists of... a description of the world, a description of what it is to be human in that world, and a description of the role of humans in that world. The description... [was] based on the observation and experience of the group in a specific location and under circumstances specific to that location (p. 61).

This was consistent with Battiste’s (2008) assertion when she spoke in the video *Nametwaawin* about the way we as Indigenous peoples make sense of the world:

Every place we come to be part of, we develop a relationship with that place, with that ecology, with all the relationships of people in that place, as well as, with the

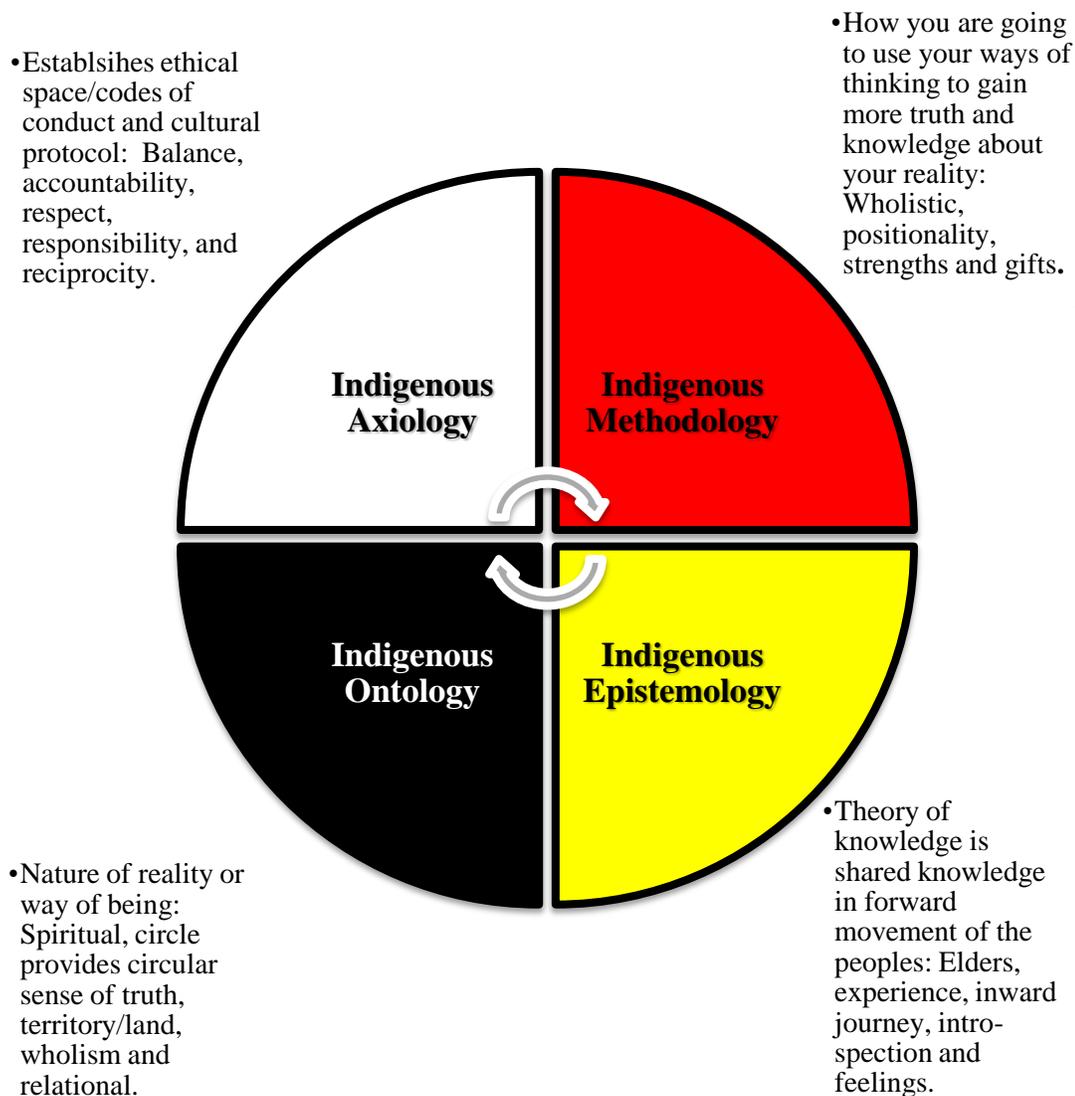
spirit that exists within that particular place. It is in that relationship with that place, we then develop a relationship and a pattern of renewal of those relationships (Gaywish, Richard, & Rocke, 2008).

To be sure, our worldview as Indigenous peoples “frames the way we see the world, the way we organize ourselves in it, the questions we ask, and the solutions we seek” (Smith, 1999, p. 230). Hart (2008) points out that, “While there is no one Indigenous world view, there are many similarities and overlaps between Indigenous world views from different societies to the extent that there appear to be more commonalities than differences among Indigenous world views” (p. 132).

Wilson (2008), author of the book, *Research is Ceremony*, articulates four components that make up an Indigenous research paradigm: (1) ontology consists of what you believe is real in the world, the nature of reality or way of being; (2) epistemology is the way in which you think about reality or distinguish what is true or false knowledge; (3) axiology establishes a set of morals, ethics, and values; and, (4) methodology is how you are going to use your ways of thinking or epistemology to gain more knowledge about your reality (pp. 33-34). Similarly to Graveline (1998), Wilson (2008) uses the circle to frame the four components in an Indigenous research paradigm and he explains:

Putting ideas in a circle... indicates that they are interrelated and that each blends into the next... the ideas flow from one to the next in a cyclical fashion. A change in one affects the others, which in turn effects new change in the original. All parts of the circle are equal; no part can claim superiority over, or even exist

without, the rest of the circle... Its entities are inseparable and blend from one into the next. The whole of the paradigm was greater than the sum of its parts (p. 70).



**Figure 1: Indigenous Research Paradigm**

According to Simpson (2009), “Indigenous theorists position their work within Indigenous ontologies, epistemologies, and axiologies and adhere to the protocols, procedures and methodologies inherent within Indigenous intellectual traditions” (p.

143). Thus, my Indigenous lens or *Anishinaabe Gikendaasowin* (Absolon, 2008, p. 17) was most aligned with my Indigenous worldview, philosophy, theory and methodology.

### **Indigenous Epistemology**

Indigenous epistemology, the theory of knowledge, is shared knowledge and is not knowledge for power, but it is knowledge for the betterment of the people (K. Absolon, Keynote Presentation at *Shawane Dagoiwin*, 2011). As I indicated earlier, Indigenous and Aboriginal are interchangeable in my worldview. In this instance I used ‘Indigenous’ and Ermine (1995) used ‘Aboriginal’ in his explanation. Ermine stated that it is the “inner space... that universe of being within each person that is synonymous with the soul, the spirit, the self, or the being” (p.103). In order to make sense of the external world requires introspection and to begin internally from inner self knowledge wherein our wholistic strengths are situated. Rice (2000) explains:

This inner reality and the quest to connect with the truths from this inner space alters consciousness and transforms the person into a ‘human.’ In essence, this inner life can teach each person much about his/her own strengths and weaknesses and offer direction and focus in life...It is translated into the everyday behaviour of the people—into their world view and culture (p. 82).

In her study, Fitznor (2002) identified “feelings” as one of the four dynamics outlined by Pam Colorado used in her research methodology and entailed “focussing on the expressed emotions and feelings of the participants” (p. 62). Absolon and Willett (2004) add that introspection and inner self knowledge interpret our collective knowledge and way of “being, living, and doing” (p. 10).

### **Indigenous Ontology**

Our understanding about the world locates spirituality and wholism at the centre of our discourse (Absolon, 2008; Ermine, 1995; Fitznor, 1998; Hart, 2008; Rice, 2005). The nature of reality or way of being through Indigenous ontology provides a circular sense of truth through the circle, a symbol that is all encompassing, and is the reason why circular patterns are represented in our ceremonies (Rice, 2005, p. 4). Indigenous ontology is the belief that multiple realities exist as in the constructivist research paradigm assuming reality is fluid and organic and that there is not only one reality (Wilson, 2008, p. 73). It should also be acknowledged that reality is socially constructed. A shared mutual reality and common meaning is created and found through the natural world (Rice, 2005) and cultural patterns (Ireland, 2009, p. 18). Humanity is a part of, and not above, the natural world and there are many different realities specific to the peoples and the place or locations that hold them (Gaywish, Richard, & Roche, 2008) or the peoples' territory. Indigenous reality consists of relationships or different sets of relationships as well as a process of relationships (Wilson, 2008, p. 73). Hence, my work is rooted in an Indigenous ontology that situates significance on relationships (Wilson 2008, Hart 2005) and establishing the connection of family bloodline back to one's territory and to the necessity of connecting the peoples to the land. Relating to my study, the circle provides the wholistic framework to organize my search and the aspects of one's nature including the spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical (Graveline, 1998; Hart, 2002), and the outer concentric circles consisting of family, community, nation, and environment.

### **Indigenous Axiology**

One of the teachings, respect, was especially meaningful (Hart, 2002; Rice, 2005) to acknowledging the unique strengths that exist amongst Indigenous peoples. Values like respect reveal our accountability and responsibility and how we are to conduct ourselves in relationship with others in the learning process (Wilson, 2008, p. 79). Indigenous axiology consists of morals, ethics, and values that guide a person and society's moral conduct, right and wrong, describing how people resolve issues that may disrupt the harmony of the community (Wilson, 2008; Sefa Dei, 2006). According to Nichols, cited in Cajete (1999) states that, "the highest value [in Indigenous axiology] lies in the balance of relations between humans, other beings and spirits of past, present, and future" (p. 141).

My study also adheres to the ethic of honouring and acknowledging the people whose territory it is (Sewell, 2001, p. 96). This ethic also guides me to attend to honouring and acknowledging my ancestors and to building respectful and reciprocal relationships with researcher participants. I agree with Wilson (2008) that if we work collectively, we will all grow together. Indigenous axiology means that I seek to benefit the peoples and calls for the need to go back to community principles (K. Abosolon, Keynote Presentation at *Shawane Dagoiwin*, 2011).

### **Indigenous Methodology**

Indigenous methodology is defined "as research by and for Indigenous peoples, using techniques and methods drawn from the traditions and knowledges of those peoples" (Evans, Hole, Berg, Hutchinson & Sookraj cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p.

x). Many scholars agree that Indigenous methodologies and wholistic approaches are critical to the protection of our own ways of knowing in the pursuit of knowledge (Absolon, 2008; Carpenter, 2009; Fitznor, 1998; Hermes, 1998; Lavallee, 2009; Marsden, 2005; Montes, 2006; Nabigon & Mawhiney, 1996; Pidgeon, 2009; Piquemal & Allen, 2008; Smith, 1999) and to develop “counterhegemonic forms of discourse and praxis... [and] theories of resistance that presume historicity of knowledge” (Darder Baltodano, & Torres cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 8).

In my study, I utilize Indigenous methodologies and wholistic approaches (Absolon, 2008; Hart, 2002; Lavallee, 2009; Pidgeon, 2009; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Williams, 2000) that “privilege [I]ndigenous knowledges, voices, and experiences” (Smith cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 3). In particular, Indigenous Wholism that frames the Circle Teaching and *Mino-Pimatisiwin* (The Good Life).

### **Indigenous Wholism**

In his book, *Seeing the World with Aboriginal Eyes*, Rice (2005) shares a traditional teaching by Jim Dumont of the *Midewiwin* Lodge about the four directions encompassing the circle of life. Two of the primary epistemological beliefs shared by diverse Indigenous cultures are spiritual and wholeness of being (p. xii) and are integral to self, family, community, and environment (Absolon cited in Graveline, 1998, p. 76). According to Cajete (1999), the “feeling for the whole, ‘the People,’... is the basis for the traditional codes of ethics, political and socio-[spiritual] organization and activities” (p. 161). Traditional societies of Indigenous peoples live their lives respecting the land and

the natural environment in which we live. Indigenous Wholism is centered on relationships (Absolon & Willett, 2004; Graveline, 1998; Rice, 2005; Wilson, 2008) that are at the heart of balance, interrelatedness and interconnectedness of all creation (Hart, 2002). A foundation for existence is represented in relation to learning as a lifelong process connected to all stages of human experience. Through a lifetime of learning, the knowledge acquired is transmitted to learners in a process that repeats itself with successive generations (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007). The Circle Teaching and *Mino-Pimatisiwin* approach draw on Indigenous Wholism that serves as the knowledge framework fostering the progress of growth, balance, and relevancy.

### **Circle Teaching**

The Circle Teaching as an Indigenous methodology can be applied to conceptualizing and facilitating the organization of data (Absolon, 2008, p. 12), and was the most appropriate methodology for my research. Rice (2005) refers to the Circle Teaching as the “sacred circle and relationships within the circle” (p. xi) of the four quadrants to illustrate the progressive growth of self through a cyclical learning journey. According to Piquemal and Allen (2008), the circularity of life reflects a continuum and change cannot occur in one part of life without affecting another part (p. 138). “The learning spirit needs interaction with the natural world and there are four components—heart, mind, body and spirit—that must be valued for the learning spirit to be nourished” (Ireland, 2009, p. 11). Pigeon (2009) echoes my understanding in that, “The wholistic framework... resonated with... [my] intuitive understanding of how I envision

universities and the student experience—interconnected and interrelated to all four realms” (p. 254). In the following sections, I discuss the elements of each aspect.

***Spiritual learner or spirit.*** Wane (2006) locates spirituality discourse in the quest for greater meaning in life (p. 89). “Learning is spiritually oriented and is central to an Indigenous worldview and is the pre-eminence of spiritual development that derives from a reverence for life and affirmation of the interconnectedness of all beings” (Report on Learning in Canada, 2007). James Sakej Henderson referring to the learning spirit within each of us asks, “How do we awaken and sustain the learning spirit?” (Nelson, 2008, p. 5). Being a spiritual learner involves “an understanding of the personhood, a synergy of the body, mind, and soul and an accompanying awareness and respect for the wholeness of being” (Sefa Dei, 2006). Congruent with this belief is that the natural world is not apart from us, but rather is an extension of our being (Nabigon & Mawhiney, 1996, p. 19). Spirituality is central to education as it pervades all aspects of life (Absolon, 2008; Hampton, 1995; Hart, 2008; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Wilson, 2008) and heightens learning to occur that is more balanced compelling us to continually develop Indigenous epistemology that is attuned with wholism (Wane, 2006, p. 103). Ceremony, inward journey, and introspection, encompass open heartedness and nurturance of inner spirit and prepares us to be participants in a lifelong learning process.

***Intellectual learner or mind.*** Each student arrives with knowledge and lived experiences that are organic. Through the colonization process, creativity and critical thinking processes have been interfered with or obstructed in some way.

Freire (1993), author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, argues for the need to develop conscientization or critical consciousness. Not only the ability to analyze

context and various components to reach new levels of awareness but for the students to reach a more in depth understanding of the world around them (p. 104) and the ability to transform their reality through informed reflection and action or praxis (p. 125). He explains that oppressed peoples require a “critical understanding of their reality” (p. 104) and not to merely have access to fragmentary information. Freire argues that developing a critical consciousness is crucial for oppressed peoples as the existing power structures will simply allow “the facts... [are] those which the powers... recognize to be helpful to the prevailing political objectivity” (Poole, 1972, p. 45) and maintenance of the status quo. According to Sefa Dei (2006):

What is required is critical educational praxis that is anchored in anti-colonial thought to challenge and subvert the ‘Western cultural and capital overkill,’ and the insulting idea that others know and understand us [the colonized subject] better than we understand ourselves (p. 4).

Continually developing our own consciousness about the various circumstances we find ourselves in today is required or how these circumstances mutate to serve the needs of the dominant forces.

*Emotional learner or heart.* The development of our emotions in relation to the intellect is a critical connection in an Indigenous paradigm that entails speaking from the heart, from the traditions of the people, and from the knowledges of the land (Hart, 2002; Wilson, 2008) or *Anishinaabe Gikendaasowin*. Myra Laramée affirms one of the contemporary challenges for Indigenous students, “My father told me that the hardest journey that I would ever have to make is from my head to my heart” (Gaywish, Richard, & Rocke, 2008). Researchers have demonstrated the resulting internal colonial impacts

on the Indigenous psyche for many have been learning not to feel, not to talk, and not to think for themselves. In the Western educational experience, the tendency is to neglect development of the emotional aspect and instead focus more on the intellectual component that is individualistic and competitive in nature.

According to Brown (2004), emotional development is essential to Indigenous learning and “success[es]...thinking and feeling are not only connected but that emotion plays the major role in the functioning of mind and memory” (p. ii). Goleman (1995) contends through development of the emotional aspect, the student learns about self-control, persistence, and ability to motivate one’s self (p. xii). He argues that at best, IQ or intellect contributes to approximately 20 percent of the factors determining life success, which leaves 80 percent to other forces (p. 34). He states that those who are emotionally mature are:

Aware of their moods as they are having them... Their clarity about emotions may undergird other personality traits: they are autonomous and sure of their own boundaries, are in good psychological health and tend to have a positive outlook on life. When they get into a bad mood, they don’t ruminate and obsess about it, and are able to get out of it sooner. In short, their mindfulness helps them manage their emotions. (p. 54)

Thus, emotional self-awareness is a building block of emotional intelligence and it is the heart that determines one’s sense of well-being (Brown, 2004; Goleman, 1995).

In traditional Indigenous societies, “the classroom” entailed the natural environment and other learning processes such as clan gatherings and grandmothers’ councils. The peoples did not need to sit behind the desk in order to experience or

participate in learning. This view is still held today by many who felt knowledge or that “education should also help you find your heart, which is the passionate sense of self that motivates you and moves you along in life” (Cajete, 2000, p. 11). Through this statement, Cajete is confirming that education is not of the head or intellect alone, but is also of the heart or the emotions.

***Physical learner or body.*** Benton-Benai (1988) teaches that “in order for the people to be completely healthy they must seek to develop... a balance between the physical and the spiritual worlds” (p. 66). In university, Carriere (2005) identifies an essential component to building a community on campus for students is one that provides a physical space that is a “safe place” within the learning environment. One goal of the Access Programs’ orientation is to nurture a “sense of community.” Another is to establish a “strong sense of belonging” through building relationships among peers and staff (Carriere, 2005, pp. 30-31). Additionally, the physical space in which the Access Programs is located at the University of Manitoba, *Migizii Agamik*, Bald Eagle Lodge is where students gather to meet peers with similar life experiences and cultural backgrounds. This adds to their familiarity and sense of comfort on campus among a community of learners. In this physical space, the students come to study and to form connections with other students. In this supportive space, they develop more of an understanding about their rights as students and develop a more effective means of healthy growth and resistance (Sefa Dei, 2006, p. 6).

### ***Mino-Pimatisiwin* (The Good Life)**

Hart (2002), the author of *Seeking Mino-Pimatisiwin: An Aboriginal approach to helping*, explains about what is *Mino-Pimatisiwin*:

*Mino-Pimatisiwin* is the good life or life in the fullest, healthiest sense. *Mino-Pimatisiwin* is the goal of growth and healing and includes efforts by individuals, families, communities and people in general, in fact, all living forms, including the more than human world. (pp. 134-135)

Hart (2008) elaborates further that *Mino-Pimatisiwin* is based upon:

Indigenous relational worldviews and philosophies, particularly the Medicine Wheel and the understandings of respectful individualism and communitism. It holds spirituality as a central pillar and has several key concepts: wholeness, balance, relationships, harmony, growth, healing and *Mino-Pimatisiwin*. It also highlights the values of respect and sharing. The approach has particular views of people and of the helping approach. (p. 35)

*Mino-Pimatisiwin* approach highlights the relationships that are created as the primary focus (Hart, 2002; Wilson, 2008). These relationships extend beyond the student and include the family; community; nation; *Gidakiiminaan* (Mother Earth); and *Kitchi Manitou* (Creator). Additionally, the relationship between the student and self, student and teacher as guider, and student and institution are key considerations. This wholistic framework aids in the restoration of balance and harmony to the well-being of the student.

The student's personal autonomy and interdependence prevails in the helping relationship and means taking "a non-directive approach" (Hart, 2002, p. 55) in which the

student maintains responsibility for personal growth and what he/she brings to the reciprocal relationship. In other words, the student holds primary responsibility for setting her own goals and directing her own actions towards achieving these goals in relationship with the teacher as guider. In this approach, the teacher as guider must also maintain her own centeredness since she is the one in relationship with the student. The teacher as guider plays a vital role in this process and it is through introspection and speaking from the heart that she is able to reach others (Hart, 2002, pp. 55-56). In fact, it can be said that the teacher as guider and the student “are involved in a shared experience of learning and growing” (Hart, 2002, p. 56).

### CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Introduction: Defining Wholistic Success**

*Success for Aboriginal peoples is based on self-mastery and learning about one's special gifts and competencies. ... The 'learning spirit' ... is the entity within each of us that guides our search for purpose and vision. The learning spirit knows its journey and finds itself attracted to the certain learning experiences that will build those gifts. Those gifts require a learning environment that will sustain and challenge learners.*

(Anuik, Battiste, & George, 2010, p. 67)

Degen's (1992) research demonstrates "the 'successful' students had different patterns of interactions from the 'unsuccessful' students" (p. ii). In his study on social interactions and academic success of Aboriginal university students from Northern Manitoba, parents and family supports emerged as the most significant factors to student success. Alternatively, Degen contrasts family issues as detrimental to success (pp. 18-19).

Ramp and Smith (2004) found that to Aboriginal peoples, attainment of degrees, diplomas or certificates was not something they "had to have" for economic or social achievement, but rather something to aspire to as a means of a more general sense of betterment for the peoples such as self-sufficiency, happiness, and enhanced connections to family, and a way of becoming more able to provide for family. Success was not so much in attaining the end result, but sought more as a means of breaking and resisting

destructive cycles such as poverty and addictions. The goal was not to go to university to invest in oneself, but more necessary in terms of self-development, self-respect, and self-motivation. In addition, a successful person was someone that people looked up to, they were a role model for others to follow, and they were happy and kind to others. The ability to maintain one's Indigenous identity and to develop one's self was tied more to a larger goal and the knowledge gained was viewed as needed to help the collective survive into the future, that is, not to assimilate into mainstream society (pp. 72-73). Support for these views was echoed by Hampton (1995) who states, "Education is to serve the people. Its purpose is not individual advancement or status" (p. 21). The goal was to be whole and self-determining peoples living in whole and vibrant communities. Williams (2000) asserts:

Education is the most powerful institution in any society, and teachers are its most powerful agents. As Aboriginal people we know this very intimately. Education has been a force for destruction. It is also a powerful force for construction, and it can produce citizens who are capable of determining their own future (p. 145).

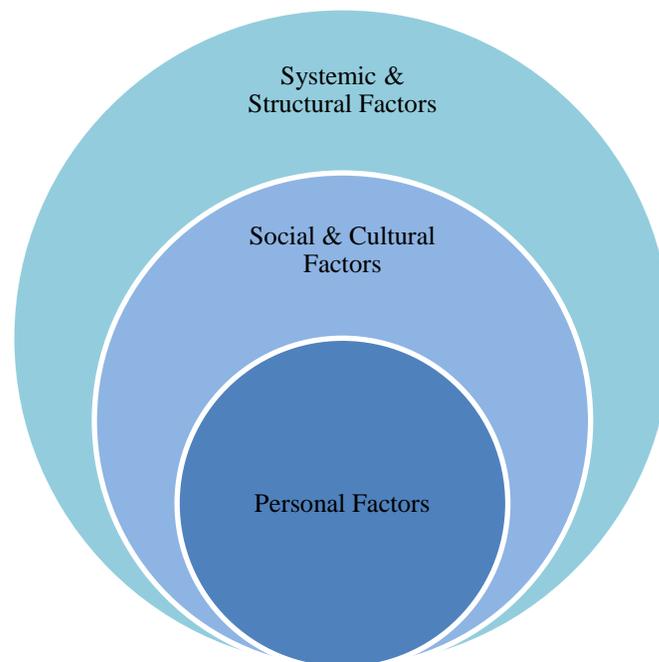
Without a doubt, in a positive, supportive, relevant, and stimulating learning environment, the student's learning spirit is nourished and fulfillment gained from the road travelled and having experienced a more meaningful learning journey. According to Pidgeon (2009):

A wholistic approach to success would ensure that the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual needs of Aboriginal peoples are being met while, at the same time, facilitate relationship building... and assist Aboriginal students and faculty to maintain their unique cultural integrity (p. 254).

Certainly for many Indigenous students, one way to attain these goals and visions was through nourishing their learning spirit and wholistic success in higher education.

### **The Learning Spirit: Challenges that Affect Wholistic Success**

Battiste (2009) states that nourishing the learning spirit and “encouraging students to take risks in learning and developing their unique gifts is a constructive way to support students” (p. 3). In relation to the learning spirit, the factors that affect and promote wholistic success are grouped under three main areas: systemic and structural factors, social and cultural factors, and personal factors.



**Figure 2: Micro & Macro Level Illustration**

These factors are also viewed as external to the student or factors that are internal or within the students themselves.

There are multidimensional and multifaceted structural and systemic, cultural and social causes at the root impacting on the personal. These root causes have existed prior to Indigenous students entering institutions of higher learning. Once there, they continue to impact them particularly if they are not supported holistically. Although the following areas are not mutually exclusive, some of the systemic and structural factors or root causes that hinder holistic success include: “isms”: imperialism, colonialism, euro centrism, and racism. Additionally, barriers that impact negatively on student success are the exclusion or inequitable inclusion of Indigenous history in the curriculum; cultural capital; white privilege; economic disparity; and oppression. The social and cultural factors include walking in two worlds: biculturalism versus cultural discontinuity. The personal factors include cognitive dissonance and multigenerational impacts, and culture of silence, marginalization, alienation and isolation.

### **Systemic and Structural Factors**

*We had courses for self-esteem building but nothing seemed to work because we were dealing with the symptoms of the problem and not the root cause.*

(St. Denis, Silver, Ireland, George, & Bouvier, 2009, p. 23)

This quote reveals deeply rooted causes of systemic and structural factors impacting on Indigenous students. These factors blend into one another and each impact on the other. Take for example, macro assumptions of deficit thinking permeating educational institutions that it is the fault of Indigenous students for their under-preparedness or low academic performance (Yosso, 2005, p. 75), rather than attributing

the failure to wide-spread ignorance (Ponting, 1998, p. 281) and structural deficits of educational systems (Pidgeon, 2009). Leonardo (2004) asserts that a critical analysis was necessary that “begins from the objective experiences of the oppressed in order to understand the dynamics of structural power relations” (p. 141) that clearly impact on students’ subjective realities and educational experiences.

### **Isms: Imperialism, Colonialism, Euro centrism, and Racism**

Indigenous peoples must constantly re-work our understanding and omnipresence of imperialism, colonialism, euro centrism, and racism. A brief summary of each of the ‘isms’ follow, although of importance to note is that the brevity in no way is meant to minimize their far-reaching impacts over successive generations.

*Imperialism.* According to Smith (1999), imperialism is “tied to a chronology of events related to ‘discovery,’ conquest, exploitation, distribution and appropriation” (p. 21). The concept of *terra nullius* or doctrine of discovery implied Turtle Island was empty and the land was free for the taking by explorers like Christopher Columbus who landed on its shores in 1492. In fact a conservative estimate of the Indigenous peoples is 500,000 who were living on the territories of what was to become Canada (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). The primary concept of imperialism was economic expansion or capitalism, and the second was exploitation of Indigenous peoples (p. 21). Most notably, imperialism consists of the elevation of human beings above all others on Mother Earth that included the reduction of nature, and celebration of possession and materialism all in the name of progress (Graveline, 1998, pp. 25-26). Additionally, Battiste (2000) defined cognitive imperialism as “the imposition of one

worldview on a people who have an alternative worldview, with the implication that the imposed worldview is superior to the alternative worldview” (p. 193). In essence, Indigenous peoples’ worldviews have been superimposed by unrealistic versions of reality (Hall, 2006, p. 29). Loomba cited in Sefa Dei (2006) denotes imperialism as the ideology that governs the occupation of lands while colonialism as “signifying ‘territorial ownership’ of a place/space by an imperial power” (p. 3).

***Colonialism.*** In fact colonialism (Absolon, 2008; Hart, 2009; Sewell, 2001) is closely tied to imperialism in that it “facilitated... expansion by ensuring that there was European control... securing and subjugating the [I]ndigenous populations” (Smith, 1999, p. 21). The colonization of Canada and Indigenous peoples is dependent on the ideology of a ‘master race’ and an inferior race (Ireland, 2009; St. Denis, et al, 2009) and these sites of differences were constructed around “race, gender, class, age, disability, culture, and nation” (Sefa Dei, 2006, p. 4). According to Gandhi (1998), colonialism marked the historical process whereby the ‘West’ attempted to systematically cancel or negate the cultural difference and value of the ‘non-West’ (p. 16). An Aboriginal author, Gloria Cranmer Webster, poignantly conveys, “It was as if by thinking of our people in the worst possible terms, the white people could justify attempting to take complete control of our lands and our lives without reference to their own concept of justice” (cited in Graveline, 1998, p. 25). Moreover, colonialism “scripts and violates the colonized as the violent ‘other’, while, in contrast, the colonizer is pitted as an innocent, benevolent and [imperial] saviour” (Sefa Dei, 2006, p. 3).

***Euro centrism.*** According to Battiste and Youngblood Henderson, Euro centrism perpetuates “the belief in the superiority of European people over non-European

(Indigenous) peoples and extends to the lack of recognition (or ignorance) of Indigenous knowledge systems, ways of knowing and doing” (cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 91). The notion of “one’s own cultural values and practices... viewed as natural, normal and necessary... [and] preferable... cultural ‘standards’ as a frame of reference for interpreting and evaluating the behavior of other groups” (James, 1999, p. 132).

According to Ireland (2009), still today euro centrism exerts a strong influence on the behaviour of people who work within the institutions and organizations and their everyday behaviour (p. 19). Euro centrism goes hand in hand with racism.

***Racism.*** There are different dimensions of racism--structural, institutional, and individual--and essentially was the intolerance of diversity in society “typically identified by physical features” (James, 1999, pp. 133-134). Racism is a:

Set of beliefs about the alleged inferiority of individuals... which “justify” the treatment of individuals from that group as inferior. In particular, it is used to justify allocating those individuals to particular economic positions and excluding them from certain economic rewards and political rights... [This] ideology rationalizes, legitimizes, and sustains patterns of inequality. (Ponting & Voyajeur, 2001, p. 270)

In accordance, Sefa Dei (2006) maintained that by assigning social values such as lazy, unintelligent, inferior, or different, in effect rationalized the denial of rewards and benefits. Sefa Dei (2006) states:

Blaming and pathologizing ... our perceived lack of certain basic qualities, for not understanding our own problems, for lacking the ability to think through our own solutions to problems and for neither fitting in nor are

being capable of doing our jobs... [In] Education... We can also tell in terms of whose and what knowledge and experiences are validated and delegitimized (p. 9).

Dr. St. Denis, et al, (2009) revealed the covert nature of racism in that, “Far too many Aboriginal youth and adults have had to learn how to live in and with racism, often without support in naming this ‘Elephant in the room’” commonly utilized to justify their inequality, exclusion, and oppression (pp. 14-16). This was consistent with Schick and St. Denis’ (2005) observations:

In which an anti-racist course is a requirement of the teacher-education program, the course is perceived by students as an infringement on their liberty even before they enter the class. A requirement to learn of the ‘other’ challenges students’ self images as ones who are already knowledgeable and sympathetic to difference.

That the course is compulsory is taken by some as an indication of a moral lack on their part, a suggestion that is an affront to their self-perceptions as supportive liberal-minded citizens. Alternately, some see it as undemocratic because it privileges the point of view of First Nations people. Furthermore, some students resist because they do not imagine themselves as teachers of Aboriginal students because they do not plan to accept teaching positions where Aboriginal students are enrolled. A final point of resistance to this anti-racist course is that students are concerned they will be made uncomfortable over the extent to which white privilege has enhanced their life chances. (pp. 309-310)

Rather than learning about how racism has become normalized, some non-Aboriginal people would rather ignore it and blame the “other.” What are some non-Aboriginal

people afraid to know as allowing yourself to learn can help you to move through your resistance (Schick & St. Denis, 2005, pp. 311-312).

Racism often goes unchallenged in Canada and happens out there only in other nations such as, “apartheid in South Africa, the Holocaust in Germany, and slavery in United States” (Schick & St. Denis, 2005, p. 304). The treatment of Aboriginal peoples in Canada was not part of the discourse, thus, racism was not an issue and instead Canada was portrayed as a safe haven and tolerance was celebrated as multiculturalism (p. 304). Multiculturalism was seen by many as Canada’s response to racism, the maintenance of cultures, and acceptance of different cultures. However, the distinct cultures of Aboriginal peoples extend beyond multiculturalism (James, 1999, p. 205) as the sovereignty and inherent rights of Aboriginal peoples in Canada are recognized in the 1763 Royal Proclamation (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996).

The ‘isms’ conscious and unconscious effects are internalized and are perhaps some of the most multicomplexed and multilayered challenges facing Indigenous students. Gandhi (1998) reveals it as the colonial conquest and occupation of the Indigenous psyche (p. 15). Hazlehurst (1994) views the internalization that becomes assimilated into the persona of the student as a diminished sense of self-worth and powerlessness. Thus, it was feelings like these, in addition to anger and hurt that students need help to face up to and to process. In essence, the students are confronted and challenged with their own decolonization.

## **Exclusion or Inequitable Inclusion of Indigenous History in the Curriculum**

*“Indian education cannot be understood apart from an historical analysis.”*

(Hampton, 1995, p. 15)

As stated by Elder Charlie Nelson, “In the past, the drums were louder” (Personal communication, December 18, 2009). This statement conveys two messages: The first demonstrates how intricately woven our past is to the present; and the second, the drum beat is the heart of the nation and it signifies how our culture shapes who we are, what we do now, and in the future. If we listen to the drum, we know where we have been, we know where we are, and we know where we are going. Little Bear (2000) contends that while our cultural DNA is embedded in our past, at the same time, it evolves to meet the changing needs and aspirations of a nation moving forward. Thus, a critical understanding of our historical roots and colonial history are significant since the experiences of Indigenous students in the present are entrenched in them (Frideres & Gadacz, 2005, p. 1).

Yet, upon arrival to post-secondary educational institutions, the majority of Indigenous students have not been taught successfully in the secondary classrooms about their history in North America as Indigenous peoples. According to Cote-Meek (2010):

For many, it is the first time they have heard and read historical narratives of the violence, brutalities and multiple abuses that Aboriginal children experienced attending residential schools as well as the loss of generations of children to the child welfare system. (p. 1)

Another example includes the colonialism of Canada's Indigenous peoples that is not discussed in secondary school. Consequently, it was not until I attended a post-secondary institution that I learned in my Native Studies courses about the impacts of colonialism. Other examples include learning about the treaties, Indigenous contributions in Canadian society, historical events and heroes that are either missing, taught selectively, or "white" washed (Fitznor cited in Gaywish, Richard, & Rocke, 2008). Through the missing information, our critical understanding of history has been seriously compromised, and as Indigenous peoples, we are weakened (Alfred, 2009, p. 5) collectively and individually by these factual omissions and exclusions.

Take for instance, the omission in school of the genocidal history of Indigenous peoples in Canada (Schick & St. Denis, 2005, p. 303), or that it was not presented in that way, as cultural genocide and damage done to children's psyche in the residential schools (Miller, 2003, p. 9). On June 11, 2008, Prime Minister Steven Harper made his historic apology to the Aboriginal peoples of Canada for the Indian Residential School System and referred to the treatment of children in the schools as a sad chapter in the history of Canada. He said, "We apologize for failing to protect you" in which the aim of the 132 federally controlled residential schools over 100 years, beginning in the 1870's, was "to kill the Indian in the child" by taking and isolating the children from their family, community, language, and culture. Prime Minister Harper falls short of acknowledging these conditions manifested by cultural genocide for the 150,000 Aboriginal children who were removed from their families and communities. As stated in Milloy (1999), "Fifty percent of the children who passed through these schools did not live to benefit from the education which they had received therein" (p. 51). In these schools, the

children suffered from disease, and were neglected and abused spiritually, emotionally, intellectually, physically, and sexually.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was set up by Canada “as part of an overall [w]holistic and comprehensive response to the Indian Residential School legacy... a sincere indication and acknowledgement of the injustices and harms experienced by Aboriginal people” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2010). In his address to the Assembly of First Nations annual general meeting in Calgary, July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2009, The Honourable Justice Murray Sinclair declared we, the commissioners of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission:

Will ensure that the whole world hears... the truth about residential schools, so that future generations of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians will be able to hold to the statement that resonates with all of us: This must never happen again (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2009).

The reality is that upon entering institutions of higher learning, many Indigenous students learn for the first time about their history and the colonial injustices. In her book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Smith (1999) contends we need to “re-right” history and indeed the legacy of this era underscoring that through exclusion of authentic Indigenous history in Eurocentric curriculum means that many Indigenous students are not aware of the broader colonial systems and policies that have impacted on them rather than inherent deficits.

Young (1997) reveals, “I hated sitting in the classroom when my teachers presented anything that had to do with Aboriginal people because it was always negative”... for the most part, being proud of our Indigenous heritage and identity has not

been a part of our educational experience. We have been erased from history by the colonizers (pp. 17-18). Through exclusion of true Indigenous history, the people remain “invisible to the majority of Canadians” (Sewell, 2001) as well as to themselves. Both Indigenous and Canadian peoples alike are negatively impacted by keeping alive the mass ignorance plaguing our society, so much so that Indigenous peoples sometimes feel like foreigners in their own homeland (Kempf, 2006, p. 130).

In her study, Absolon (2008) highlights more and more Aboriginal scholars are asserting their own validity of Aboriginal truths (p. 48) for those who care, those who do not care, and those who do not know. Through re-writing of our history, we move towards essential knowledge of our past and our place in creation (Cuthand cited in Sewell, 2001, p. 96) and to develop a critical consciousness about our colonial history (Absolon, 2008, p. 11). Ramp and Smith (2004) argue the right kind of education, one which gave a contextual awareness of the present circumstances of First Nations people, in particular, their own history, was intimately bound up with "healing, identity and culture, and that the knowledge gained in such an education was essential" (p. 74) to self-determining peoples and communities.

### **Cultural Capital**

Pierre Bourdieu “argued that the knowledges of the upper and middle classes are considered capital valuable to a hierarchical society (cited in Yosso, 2005, p. 70). Bourdieu and Passeron defined the concept of cultural capital as “the exhibition of personal refinement, literacy and verbal skills, knowledge of manners and cultural conventions, and personal autonomy... [placing them] in a particular social class” (cited

in Ramp & Smith, 2004, p. 72). Similarly, Lamont and Lareau (1988) define “cultural capital as institutionalized [and that these] widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviours, goods, and credentials) [are] used for social and cultural exclusion” (p. 156). The experiences of upper class are reflected in educational institutions, while the lower classes must acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to negotiate their educational experience (Lamont & Lareau, 1988). As a result, the power imbalance embedded in the learning environment does not afford equal participation for Indigenous students as the power imbalance is tilted against them (Arkwright-Alivisatos, 1995, p. 21). The power imbalance was correlated to the hierarchy of class structure and class differences and was linked to race and cultural differences.

Exclusion was one of the most pervasive forms of power legitimating the claim that dominant cultural norms and practices are superior (Lamont & Lareau, 1988, p. 159). Kingston (2001) identifies the exclusionary character to include gatekeepers who reward cultural capital to advance the careers of the socially dominant group and set up barriers for the less privileged. Cultural capital becomes the property of the elite class and access to resources is not available as a general resource to the less influential (p. 89). The institutionalized practices include unequal treatment, restriction or exclusion, excessive or punitive measures and over-application of rules and procedures (Mellor, 2004; St. Denis, Silver, Ireland, George, & Bouvier, 2009). Indigenous students require assistance to manoeuvre through the power and privilege embedded in the system. One student described his experience of exclusion: He felt like a drifting log, floating around between classes, but managing to stay afloat.

### **White Privilege**

According to McIntosh (1989), the concept of white privilege is expressed as invisible dominance (p. 1) whereby the dominant white class are “affirmed in history, literature, and civilization in general” (cited in Leonardo, 2004, p. 137). The category ‘white’: it “is not anything really, not an identity, not a particularizing quality, because it is everything” (Dyer cited in Schick & St. Denis, 2005, pp. 299-300)—it is the norm—and produced because there is the “other” (p. 301). Schick and St. Denis (2005) expose the access to “white skin privilege -- greatly improves one’s chances of avoiding systemic discrimination and overcoming disadvantage” and to not acknowledge race privilege means the effects of colonialism continue to be perpetuated (p. 296).

McIntosh (1989) helps us to understand the construction of whiteness by comparing white privilege with male privilege in which “whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege, as males are taught not to recognize male privilege” (p. 1). In her article, McIntosh lists fifty privileges enjoyed by whites on a daily basis, both at an individual and institutionalized level, and many are oblivious to the “invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day... permission to dominate... unearned race advantage... [and] unsought racial dominance” (p. 1). She goes on to say:

My schooling gave me no training in seeing myself as an oppressor, as an unfairly advantaged person... [where] whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal, so that when we work to benefit others, this is seen as work that will allow “them” to be more like “us” (McIntosh, 1989, p. 1).

The oppressive treatment of Indigenous peoples is a benchmark of white privilege in Canada. The attitude is that Indigenous peoples should be grateful for what has been done ‘for them,’ rather than distinguishing what really has been done ‘to them,’ like the expropriation of nearly all of their lands in Canada (Schick & St. Denis, 2005, p. 303). Construction of white skin advantage incites this type of conscious and unconscious domination and oppression where physical and social attributes play a key role in determining one’s “social interaction and involvement within the society.” (James, 1999, p. 54)

Graveline (1998) adds yet another layer as white hegemony and “to one’s cultural location within White-privileged culture... [that] while many can feel sorry for Aboriginal [peoples]... they cannot see how they themselves are responsible or what they could do” (p. 108). She goes on to reveal that while some are able to distinguish historical and present day abuses and inequities, they are unable to discern the relevance for themselves nor to see how they have a “role in the change process personally and politically” (p. 108). This statement highlights the responsibility for those who perpetuate white privilege to understand how it impacts them and puts them in a vantage to transform their attitudes and behaviours against less privileged peoples.

### **Oppression**

Oppression is overwhelming control of thinking and action limiting creative power (Freire, 1993, p. 77). Hyland and Heuschkel (2009) state that, “All forms of oppression serve to undermine the goals of a true democracy in which all people and groups are full participants” (p. 821). Oppression is “a system, supported by discourse,

ideology, and everyday practice that privileges certain groups and disenfranchises other groups based on race, class, gender, language, religion, ability, and sexual preference (p. 822). The authors add that institutional oppression consists of “Institutional discrimination [that] generally refers to how people are excluded or deprived of rights or opportunities as a result of the normal operations of the institution (Nieto cited in Hyland & Heuschkel, 2010, p. 822). Hyland and Heuschkel conclude that many are blind to the oppressive policies and practices that advantage some people and marginalize others in ways that go unnoticed. Institutional oppressions is complex and includes elitism and classism (p.822). In addition, oppression is situated at different levels that include cultural and personal. Cultural oppression affects people who have been historically marginalized such as inequality and socioeconomics (p. 821). At the personal level, there are biases, prejudiced behaviors, and mistreatment that often go unchallenged or unquestioned such as low expectations and deficit ideology (p. 827).

Oliver (2004) explains the effects of oppression include “depression, shame, anger, and alienation” (p. 87). In fact, he points out that it is the colonization of the mind space in the form of exclusion and then of silencing. The result on individuals and groups who are affected is prevention of their acceptance as fully rational and self-sufficient human beings. If they attempt to articulate their experiences of oppression, for example, they are seen as irrational, overreacting or angry (pp. 87-88). The author holds that shame results from feelings of inferiority or defectiveness that “attacks at the core of identity and self-esteem” (p. 90) and furthermore, some are “forced to carry the shame of the culture” (p. 93). Oliver states:

Those excluded and disowned by dominant values are not forgiven; they are shamed, ridiculed, abjected, and abused for their difference. They are not allowed to become individuals who belong to the community. Rather, they are excluded as inferior beings who do not belong or belong only as abjected beings who serve the need of others (pp. 92-93).

Hyland and Heuschkel (2010) concur with Bishop (2002) that class structure is a critical factor in the perpetuation of oppression. According to Bishop:

The basic common denominator among different forms of oppression is power and hierarchy; that is, class. One group of people believes they are superior over another and can back it up with 'power-over.' The 'power-over' can come from physical strength, weapons, greater wealth, resources, or information, or greater control of the decision-making and communication mechanisms of the society. These means allow the oppressor group to control the oppressed group and help themselves to the less powerful group's resources. They can also effectively spread the idea that the less powerful group is inferior. Both groups internalize this hierarchical thing and begin to act it out... Power-over and hierarchy are fundamental components to all oppressions (p. 84).

These are barriers to hope, opportunity, and full participation. These are reasons for the frustrations among Indigenous students. The frustrations may present in lateral violence, against society or themselves and include self-defeating behaviours and giving in to their fear of failing or fear of succeeding. Unless the students have a vision of their own future, they may remain defeated and vulnerable to self-oppression and oppression by others (Hazlehurst, 1996, p. 5).

According to Freire (as cited in Banks, 2002) students “must acquire higher levels of knowledge, understand the relationship between knowledge and action, develop a commitment to act to improve the world, and acquire the skills needed to participate” (pp. 87-88). Freire (1993) also maintained that developing a consciousness about their own oppression and taking action or praxis to change their legacy was key to oppressed peoples’ emancipation. The students’ wholistic success leads them toward acquiring the knowledge required for action.

### **Economic Disparity**

*Poverty correlates strongly with lowered educational outcomes... lowered educational outcomes often lead to more poverty... a vicious cycle that feeds on itself.* (Jim Silver cited in St. Denis, et al, 2009)

Schick and St. Denis (2005) assert, “Poverty is not an innate cultural trait” (p. 304), and in regards to education, Stonechild (2004) found, “that there exists a fundamental policy disagreement between First Nations and federal governments over whether higher education is a treaty and Aboriginal right obtained in return for sharing the lands” (p. ii). The Post-Secondary Education Assistance Program (PSEAP) was created by the federal government in 1977 to respond to the growing number of status Indians enrolling in higher learning (Stonechild, 2004, p. 106). In 1989, the PSEAP was renamed Post-secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP) (Stonechild, 2004, p. 138). According to Stonechild (2004):

The issue of access to higher education rights became a controversial policy issue by 1987 when the federal government denied that higher education was an Indian right and attempted to cap higher education funding as part of a general initiative to cut government expenses (p. 117).

In 1996, the federal government capped the funding at 2% with no input from Aboriginal peoples (Battiste & Barman, 1995, p. xiii). Under PSSSP, the funding for First Nations has stayed the same for the past fifteen years, while at the same time, more and more First Nations students have become eligible to apply for financial assistance. In addition, educational costs have risen by more than inflation. This means that either the level of funding for students has been reduced or fewer students are being sponsored, or a combination of both (Usher, 2009, p. 12). The Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (2010) report that:

Canada's Auditor General cited lack of federal funding as the reason 9,500 First Nations people were prevented from pursuing a postsecondary education in 2000. The Assembly of First Nations estimates that between 2001 and 2006, more than 10,000 Aboriginal Canadians were denied funding from the federal government's major financial aid program; an additional 2,858 were denied aid in 2007-2008. Even though more Aboriginal youth are qualifying to attend universities and colleges, in the face of rising costs, fewer students can be supported with the limited financial aid available. (para. 11)

The number of students on the waitlists continues to grow. Even under these dismal statistics, 27,000 Status learners were funded in 2009 and would have been higher were it not for the 2% cap (Four Arrows, 2010, p. 6). For Métis and non-status students, the

situation was bleaker and they are also in dire need as they do not qualify for PSSSP educational dollars marginalizing them at a greater disadvantage since the majority of Métis and non-status peoples also live in poverty.

Major sources of funding for First Nations and Aboriginal students come from band funding/PSSSP, student loans, scholarships, awards, and bursaries, underscoring the dependence of students on public funds (Sloane-Seale, Wallace, & Levin, 2000, p. 361). According to Williams (2000), the fact is that for some public funding, eligibility for Aboriginal peoples is based on disability, deficiency, and deprivation. Unfortunately, making a case for funding is usually about “highlighting and amplifying the negative aspects of First Nations students thus further entrenching the negative stereotypes” (p. 144).

## **Social and Cultural Factors**

### **Walking in Two Worlds: Biculturalism versus Cultural Discontinuity**

Biculturalism consists of the ability to retain one’s own cultural identity while establishing aspects necessary to succeed in dominant society, to live successfully and the ability to navigate back and forth with ease between two cultural worlds (Fitznor, 2006; Graveline, 1998)--Indigenous and Western. On the other hand, cultural discontinuity occurs for Indigenous students when the dominant group’s “knowledge, experience, culture, and language” are established as the universal norm (Battiste & Youngblood Henderson, 2000, p. 134) and internal conflict arises as a result of “competing values and aspirations” (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991):

In relation to education, Tyler et al (2008) argue cultural discontinuity as a school-based behavioral process where the cultural value-based learning preferences and practices of many ethnic minority students—those typically originating from home or parental socialization activities—are discontinued at school. (p. 281)

In a similar vein, Indigenous students who are educated predominately in Euro western dominant cultural values and norms are akin to Freire's (1993) notion of having a "culturally schizophrenic" existence. Freire argues that students are "present and yet not visible... visible and yet not present" (p. 11). This conflicting encounter causes incongruence--one way of being at home and another way in the classroom. In the classroom, the values that dominate are individualism and competition (Tyler, et al., 2008, p. 284), while at home the values are synonymous with the family, and connections with extended family and community. When confronted with such confusion, the less likely are Indigenous students to succeed "or to gain the appropriate life skills required to survive in a complex world" (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, pp. V. 3, Ch. 2). The cultural discontinuity correlates with adverse effects on student academic performance and emotional well-being (Tyler, et al., 2008, pp. 289-290).

According to Ermine, in his keynote address at the Indigenous Scholars' Conference, hosted by the University of Alberta's Department of Educational Policy Studies, referring to Indigenous students, he stated:

The story of the [W]est is what our children are getting. The danger is that there is a mono-cultural point of view about how humans are supposed to be, and this does not create an optimal condition...the grand institution of [W]estern learning

as a place where students become entrapped in one world view...It's a gift to walk in two worlds, but also a responsibility. (Ford, 2006)

At *Shawane Dagoiwin* (Being respectful, caring and passionate about Aboriginal research) Aboriginal Education Research Forum in 2009, in another keynote address, Ermine described the process of walking in two worlds as one's ability to bridge the two ways of knowing and of interpreting the world. Connecting this divide is the challenge faced by many students. There is a critical distinction that is highlighted by Longclaws (2000), that the Indigenous peoples:

Have not embraced the multicultural paradigm, however, because they do not view themselves as 'immigrants,' 'visible minorities,' or classified as a part of 'ethnic Canada.' Rather, First Nations recognize that they are the original peoples of the land called Canada with inalienable rights to a land base through [A]boriginal and treaty rights. (p. 29)

I indicated earlier that the sovereignty and inherent rights of Indigenous peoples are recognized in Canada's Royal Proclamation of 1763. In the Treaties, our ancestors also included the educational clause as they had envisioned the need to be proficient in two worlds. Their vision was not to assimilate, or to disenfranchise, or to be deprived of our rights as Indigenous citizens, but to gain bicultural expertise and to experience educational opportunities that support the peoples to sustain rich and vibrant cultural heritages that fit within their communities as well as to develop the skills and knowledge that provided them with the same opportunities that all mainstream students receive in Canadian society (Montes, 2006, p. 2). Similar to present day, our ancestors viewed

education as the path into the future for the peoples (Absolon, 2008; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996).

## **Personal Factors**

### **Cognitive Dissonance and Intergenerational Impacts**

Cognitive dissonance is “the discomfort one feels when the knowledge one has conflicts with new knowledge” (Gordon, Habley, & Grites and Associates, 2008, p. 25). Many students may be unable to articulate the origin of what they are feeling or to name it (Alfred, 2009). Young (1997) confides, “I felt uncomfortable within it but I could not identify, nor could I name, what it was that I was encountering. I passively resisted the discomfort” (p. 12). This discomfort may be due to “fragmentation” (Smith, 1999, p. 97) or to “intergenerational impacts of historic pain” (Gaywish, Richard, & Rocke, 2008) and trauma:

It becomes clear when considering these various sources of trauma that the eventual impact of trauma originating from outside Aboriginal communities was to generate a wide range of dysfunctional and hurtful behaviors... which began to be recycled generation after generation inside communities. What this has meant is that as many as three to five generations removed from externally induced trauma, the great, great grandchildren of those who were originally traumatized by past historical events are now being traumatized by patterns that continue to be recycled in the families and communities of today. (Lane, Bopp, Bopp and Norris cited in Brown F. L., 2004, p. 186)

This historic intergenerational pain identifies what educational institutions are ill-prepared to address and Diane Hill elaborates in the video *Nametwaawin*, “The hard part will be people won’t want to deal with feelings, it’s too messy” (Gaywish, Richard, & Roche, 2008). Instead, the students may continue to internalize and to carry the feelings as if it was their responsibility and perhaps even believe they are true (Young, 1997, pp. 51-52). Another aspect lies in the stance taken by some non-Aboriginal peoples, that it is in the past and “I” had nothing to do with it. They fail to see that each one of us has a responsibility to ensure that we all live in a just and equal society where all voices are included in decisions that matter. In order “To ensure the equality of educational opportunities and outcomes in our diverse society, education curricula must address inequalities within the education system as well as society as a whole” (James, 1999, p. 216).

### **Cultures of Silence, Marginalization, Alienation and Isolation**

Cultures of silence, marginalization, alienation, and isolation result from Eurocentric attitudes, behaviours, and practices. According to Freire (1993), a culture of silence is a product of:

Economic, social, and political domination—and paternalism...Rather than being encouraged and equipped to know and respond...[the poor] were kept ‘submerged’ in a situation in which...critical awareness and response were practically impossible. (p. 30)

Often in mainstream society, this reality may be seen as ‘shyness’ in the student, when in fact it may be the external manifestation of domination, oppression, and paternalism.

In his study, Stonechild (2004) elaborated on the underlying assumptions of Eurocentric attitudes:

A prevailing ideology among the Canadian elite at the time of Confederation was Social Darwinism, a pseudo-scientific belief that Aboriginals were inherently defective in biological composition, as well as intellectual and emotional capacity. This thinking also held that Aboriginal culture was not viable in terms of changing social and cultural challenges posed by the arrival of Europeans. (p. 21)

In fact, these Eurocentric attitudes create stereotypes about Indigenous peoples in literature, such as dumb Indians, victims, lazy, drunks, promiscuous, welfare bums, dependent on government handouts, uneducated, unambitious, and unmotivated (Ponting, 1998). The Indians were the problem and it was best to assimilate them and to eradicate their languages, cultures, beliefs and values. Historically, the belief was that they would remain in isolation on the reserves, consequently, there was no need to educate them in a way that would “prepare them for successful careers in modern Canadian society” (Frideres & Gadacz, 2005, p. 109). Often Indigenous peoples and mainstream society believe in these Eurocentric attitudes and preconceived ideas triggering judgment and mistrust in relationships between Aboriginal peoples and non-Aboriginal peoples.

The actions and practices of some instructors in educational institutions originate at unconscious or conscious levels in that they may not expect much from Indigenous students, therefore, they do not bother to teach them. Even before the instructors know the students, they often prejudge them. Instructors holding negative stereotypes about Indigenous peoples cannot imagine that the students would ever be successful (St. Denis, Silver, Ireland, George, & Bouvier, 2009, pp. 25-26). As stated by Grande (2008),

Indigenous students are among the “most often to be categorized and treated as remedial students and hindered by low teacher expectations—all of which lead to extreme alienation” (p. 235). The students may buy into these attitudes and misconceptions leading them into social marginalization, and alienation causing them to feel as if they do not belong in places of learning (St. Denis, et al, 2009, p. 25). According to Poonwassie (1992), high drop rates are attributable to the alien environment, “university bureaucracy and an indifferent urban population” (p. 119) that Indigenous students find themselves at school and urban centers. Students are systematically disempowered by institutionalized attitudes and practices affecting and limiting choices they perceive are available to them and are also among the reasons for high-dropout rates.

### **The Learning Spirit: Strengths that Promote Wholistic Success**

When Indigenous students pursue higher education, there are a number of factors that positively impact on their wholistic success within the realm of systemic and structural, social and cultural, and personal factors. The systemic and structural factors include cultural competence. As a helper, you have to know who your students are; you have to engage in a wholistic approach; you have to be acutely aware of the social and cultural factors that include modern Indigenous resistance. Indigenous peoples see themselves as working towards common ground which will result in a better life for their family and their people. They desire to gain personal satisfaction which will include a higher self-esteem, a sense of belonging, and an understanding of their Indigenous languages and identity.

## **Systemic and Structural Factors**

### **Cultural Competence: You Have to Know Who Your Students Are**

In the video entitled *Nametwaawin – Making a Presence: Integrating Indigenous Knowledge into Curriculum and Teaching Methodologies*, Cajete asserts, “You have to know who your students are” (Gaywish, Richard, & Rocke, 2008). Indigenous students who come to university generally come from prior assimilative education and from the margins of society. Life experiences are more likely to be that of a cycle of oppression, poverty, inequality, low education, low income, unemployment, or income assistance. Indigenous peoples are more likely than other Canadians to return to school at an older age (Tait, 1999, p. 9) and they may have been out of school for some time.

There are many who are still first generation to attend university or have few or no other family members who have attended university to show them ‘the ropes’ in university; some may have had to leave their home community to access higher education in urban centers; some students may come with invisible disabilities; foster care experiences; incarceration or pending charges; single parents whose lives include caring for children while attending classes (Presidential Task Force on Aboriginal Initiatives, 2009). Others may be caring for elderly relatives or other family members. Too many have been impacted by sexual abuse, family violence, addiction, suicide and historic trauma that continue to plague Indigenous communities as part of the legacy of oppression and violence experienced in residential schools. These experiences may include issues such as cultural, language, and identity loss. Some students may be feeling the effects of racism, discrimination, stereotyping, isolation, and alienation. Their geographic re-location may be from rural or fly-in northern communities; or they may

have lived exclusively in an urban center. Some students' cultural experiences vary in degree from traditional, assimilated, acculturated, and Christianized or a combination of these experiences.

However, those who work with Indigenous students must also remember that within Manitoba, students come from vibrant, rich, and distinct cultural backgrounds, traditions, and languages that include Anishinaabe (Ojibway), Inninew (Cree), Oji-Cree, Dakota, Dene, Métis, and Inuit. These unique characteristics and student demographics provide "contextual information for guiders or those who are working with Indigenous students with a rich foundation from which to begin their work" (Cajete cited in Gaywish, Richard, & Rocke, 2008). According to Williams (2000), you have "to learn more about the student apart from the usual negative issues" (p. 134). Indigenous students are capable, responsible, resourceful, and resilient and come to educational institutions with much strength and perseverance (Willett, 2007). Mahkwa succinctly sums up the importance of getting to know who the students are:

I always think it's important that they understand where I come from so that people can really understand where I am today, so that they can really appreciate who I am...instead of discriminated against for whatever reasons that people...discriminate, so yeah, I just keep moving forward. That's who I am.  
(Personal communication, February 22, 2011)

The strength and resiliency of Mahkwa is clearly identifiable in this quote. I am struck by the many layers of positive and negative experiences that are making up who he is today—a proud father and an honours student.

### **A Wholistic Approach: Access Programs**

A wholistic approach fosters empowerment of Indigenous students and addressing needs and aspirations. It means knowing the students' strengths and histories, and where they come from (Sefa Dei & Kempf, 2006, pp. 309-311). In this way, the students are more equipped to express voice and undertake informed action. The students are supported daily toward a more meaningful learning journey.

When students apply to Access Programs, they must demonstrate a need in order to be eligible for entry into the program. This requirement is based on the student's academic, economic, social, and/or cultural need. Preference is given to Aboriginal peoples, residents of Northern Manitoba, and low income earners. The problem with this is that the students may face more negative stereotypes and labelling based on their choosing to pursue their education through programs like Access Programs. This is a barrier to Aboriginal students because, unfortunately, the dominant view is negative, but in reality these students have concrete supports in place to have a more meaningful and quality education through their participation in the Access Programs. (D. Demas, personal communication, April 7, 2011)

The Access Programs was created to level the playing field for those who would ordinarily have been excluded from higher education (Alcorn & Levin, 1998; Degen, 1992) and were disadvantaged academically, economically, socially, and culturally as a result of the systemic and structural barriers manifested through attitudes, behaviours, and practices. On the one hand, the graduation numbers demonstrate that the playing field has been levelled to an extent as many students have succeeded as a result of the resources and supports they receive in the Access Programs (D. Demas, personal

communication, April 7, 2011). For the most part, students have a positive experience but there are aspects of the university system that are not without biases and stereotypes towards students who chose to participate in education through Access Programs.

Since its inception in 1975, the Access Programs has played a vital role in the increased success rates of Aboriginal and non-traditional students at the University of Manitoba. According to Degen (1992), the success rate of the Access Programs in 1990 was 37% (p. 3). Carriere (2005) reported the success rates of the Access Programs in 1994 at 41.8% and in 2003 at 50.7% (p. 50). The Access Programs are based on a wholistic view that if academic, social, cultural, personal, and financial barriers are addressed, disadvantaged groups for whom education would not be a viable option is enhanced. The view that mere access is not enough, but must be accompanied by the kinds of supports that give students who are motivated, but under prepared and under-resourced, a realistic opportunity to succeed (Sloane-Seale, Wallace, & Levin, 2000, p. 348). The comprehensive supports are student-centered oriented that assist the students who find the university too vast to navigate without assistance (Presidential Task Force on Aboriginal Initiatives, 2009, p. 17).

According to Antone (2009) “in order to be well you have to be whole” (p. 10) and one aim of Access Programs is to work with the whole student.

The Access program continues to focus on a two-year intensive model, which consists of intensive wholistic program supports in the first two years of study, with a major emphasis on transition. During the last few years of study, the emphasis is on empowerment and academic success; thus, increasing retention rates. (B. Lafreniere, personal communication, December 19, 2011)

For example, the students begin with an orientation to campus in August before classes begin. The approach has been that staff, including the Academic Counsellors and Personal Counsellors, takes a team approach in the first two years. They work more intensely with the student and meet on a more regular basis such as every two weeks to work on strengthening the emotional aspect, academic planning, and career planning for example. The instructor teaches two courses in the first year that facilitates a supportive cohort; content and writing tutors are made available; and a financial officer provides key financial assistance and information such as on bursaries and scholarships. In the third and fourth years with the Access Program, the students are considered to be more senior students who may chose not to meet with the Counsellors as often since they have become more familiar with the processes of the educational institution and about being a student at the university. Thus, in these final years, Access students are more empowered and independent learners. The students may also speak to the resident Elder at *Migisii Agamic*, Bald Eagle Lodge in which Access Programs are located. This wholistic support enhances and builds-up the students' internal and external capacities to make necessary adaptations that promote achieving their educational goals.

In most institutions that have established Indigenous programs, there is recognition of the need for “pro-vention” (Kani Kanichihk, 2010) meaning proactive and prevention approaches that respond rather than react to situations such as to enhance success rates of Indigenous students. These comprehensive approaches create a supportive environment that welcome and advance attainment (Presidential Task Force on Aboriginal Initiatives, 2009; Degen, 1992) and promote building allied relationships

with those who are working proactively alongside on campus. St. Denis' (2008) personal reflection highlights her success as a result of programs like Access:

I would not be at the university, doing what I do, if it were not for Aboriginal educational programming and Aboriginal institutions that provided the space and mandate. I, like many Aboriginal people, could not count solely on my meritorious performance in school to pave my way to post-secondary education. To enable my participation in higher learning, programs promoting... education equity, were necessary interventions for the doors to open to me. (p. 15)

Studies on Aboriginal success have shown that support and advocacy work provided by staff during the academic year enable achievement (Arnault-Pelletier, Brown, Desjarlais, & McBeth, 2006, p. 23). One student summarizes her personal experience on supportive wholistic learning environments:

Students...need never feel alone...[counsellors or guiders] are always there to help students out, providing non-judgmental, flexible, relevant support on a whole range of issues that relate to success in school. And let's face it, when you're a student, everything affects success. (Arnault-Pelletier et al, 2006, pp. 25-26)

According to Williams (2000), the student must always be at the core of programs and services while the strategies employed are flexible and multifaceted (p. 131). Williams (2000) asserts that the strengths that enrich student success are having the ability to deliver wholistic programs and autonomy and to maintain flexibility in addressing the needs of the student (p. 134). Through university programs like Access Programs, students are empowered to become more self-sufficient and contributing learners and citizens (Carriere, 2005, p. 51) to their nations and society.

In her doctoral dissertation, Pidgeon (2009) discusses similar helpful and hindering factors of three British Columbia universities' supporting Indigenous students' wholistic success. Overall, they "were focussed more on the intellectual realm, somewhat on the physical realm, and significantly less on the spiritual and emotional realms." For example, Pidgeon notes that in the intellectual realm, Indigenous knowledges or *Anishinaabe Gikendaasowin* play a key role in facilitating student success (p. 175). She describes one place where *Anishinaabe Gikendaasowin* was present in universities was in Aboriginal student services (p. 4). Others argue that Aboriginal programs provide the "ethical space" (Ermine, 2007) for students to stay in touch with their cultural identity while helping them to succeed in their educational goals and to access more meaningful educational experiences.

## **Social and Cultural Factors**

### **Indigenous Resistance: We Want to See Ourselves**

Over the past 500 years, Indigenous resistance has always been necessary for the struggle and survival of the people (Fitznor, 2006; Graveline, 1998; Smith, 1999) on Turtle Island. The resistance of Indigenous peoples to westernized education has to do in part with what Battiste asserted in the video, *Nametwaawin*, "We want to see ourselves as whole human beings in our curriculum, in our schools, and the institutions that we go to" (Gaywish, Richard, & Rocke, 2008). For example, it was the "fighting spirit" within Young (1997) that motivated her to continue no matter what the odds were, and she states, "There was no way I was going to give up" (p. 55). Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) add yet another dimension to the struggle and contend, "survival often requires the

acquisition and acceptance of a new form of consciousness that not only displaces, but often devalues... indigenous consciousness, and for many, this is a greater sacrifice than they are willing to make” (p. 5); hence, some will drop out of school rather than to deny who they are in the process. The reality for Aboriginal peoples was that if we lose our cultural identities and languages in Canada, there was no going back to a mother land to retrieve what is lost. Hence, many Indigenous peoples pick up responsibility to the Seventh Generation through resistance of assimilation.

**Vibrant Nations: A Better Life for My Family and My People.**

*Education is to serve the people... group success through individual achievement.* (Hampton, 1995, p. 21)

Although there are many reasons why university education is seen as important to Indigenous peoples, one of the reasons most often cited is the desire to advance themselves to help their community and people (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; Ponting & Voyajeur, 2001). In a study conducted by Sloane-Seale, Wallace, and Levin (2000), they found that for the Aboriginal respondents, returning to help their community appeared to be as important as pursuing their educational programs and to obtain work/career (p. 371). On many occasions, in my own work and through conversations with students, I have heard similar assertions such as, “I had my family, my brothers and sisters and their children to think about. This was not just about me!” (Young, 1997, p. 55).

However, one of the researcher participants cautioned that as far as she was concerned, she was led to believe that when she graduated, she could go out and change the world in order to make a difference and a better life for her family and the people:

I really believed that I was going to go and change the world, and you know what, I got into a lot of trouble. I turned a lot of people off. I found myself in so many sticky situations because of that idea they planted in my head. Rather they should've said you know what this is the way the world is and you have to manoeuvre yourself through that. Some situations are not going to be good. Why? Because we live in a conservative society that likes to maintain the status quo and you alone cannot change that. That's the message they should've given me. Not like, oh, you are the one that's going to make a change in the world, and you go out there and do what you need to do... you are putting people at risk when you give them that kind of advice (*laughs*) how many times did I get kicked out or lost my job and so on.

She came to understand this was not the most advantageous way to go about making positive changes. Now, through many years of community service, she has gained a respected voice. Those in administration now come to her because she has a proven track record in the community that she works in and is involved. Without a doubt, there continues to be “an urgent need for First Nations people to assume roles as teachers, doctors, lawyers, administrators, comptrollers, architects, historians, etc.,” (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991) in the communities, but with the awareness that professionals in many areas are needed to make necessary change. According to Poonwassie (1993) who states, “Education plays an important role in the development of leaders with post-secondary

educations to understand the complex political and bureaucratic structures of the dominant society” (p. 114).

### **Indigenous Languages and Identity**

A strong sense of identity is maintained through Aboriginal languages. Atleo and Fitznor (2010) stated that, “successful Aboriginal students are associated with early-life experiences of themselves in languages and cultural contexts” (p. 13). The loss of Aboriginal languages means that Aboriginal identities are stripped away to varying degrees and is a prime factor in cultural loss. Atleo and Fitznor (2010) further suggested that, “successful Aboriginal students seem to conserve their early life experiences in languages and cultural contexts that provide ground for a narrative of lifelong personal development that facilitates formal educational achievement despite continued prevailing adverse conditions” (p. 14). Antone (2009) agrees that literacy in Aboriginal languages is central to the maintenance of our cultural identities and averting assimilation (p. 9).

Similarly, Frideres and Gadacz (2005) assert that “Languages are an expression of collective identity” (p. 93) and since contact, governmental policies like the Indian Act have contributed to the loss of cultures and languages. For example, the Indian Act defined Aboriginal peoples as “status,” “non-status,” “treaty,” or “Bill C31” (Fitznor, 2006) and in doing so it divided a nation. Moreover, through the residential school system, the government attempted to eradicate Indigenous identity (Fitznor, 2006, p. 56) by abolishing the Indigenous languages. In fact in the residential schools in addition to not being allowed to speak their languages, students were pressured into feeling ashamed of their relatives back home who spoke the languages (Young, 1997, p. 12). Ningewance

(2007) notes that “Today we know that it’s healthy for us to want to speak our ancestral language and to feel the feelings and think the thoughts that come with that language” (p. xxiii). We know that our languages construct a strong Indigenous identity.

Young (1997) shares her experience at residential school:

When I left home, I did not anticipate that I would have difficulty with my identity, my cultural background, nor did I think I was going to allow myself to feel ashamed of my family, [or to] experience the shame of being an ‘Indian.’ (p. 12)

Overtime she realized that, “I was not just an ‘Indian’, but I was (am) Anishinabe. Being Anishinabe encompasses all of me; it is a self-identity I can give to myself without someone telling me who I am” (p. 42). Essentially, Cardinal (2005) notes that:

Students need to be able to identify with their Aboriginal... background in order to meet the challenges of post-secondary education. Once the students make the effort to identify with their Aboriginal heritage, they are more able to focus their full attention on their academic studies and not be afraid of someone revealing Aboriginal identity (p. iii).

In fact, Indigenous students should not be hooked into feeling that in order to be accepted in the western educational system, they must adopt an assimilative strategy (Abotossaway, 2006).

Williams (2000) asserts our responsibility for the Seventh Generation and what Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples ought to continue to work towards:

A future in which Aboriginal children take pride in their heritage...A firmly established First Nations identity will aid them in reaching out for the

opportunities available in the city without having to feel that in order to belong in Canada, to participate as citizens in this country, they must divest themselves of their identity. I continue to work for the day when every Canadian, new immigrant or old, will be knowledgeable about First Nations and will accept the fact that First Nations history, values, and traditions are intricately woven into the fabric of Canadian identity. (p. 145)

Research has shown that retaining our languages is fundamental to retaining our identity and culture as Indigenous peoples (Atleo & Fitznor, 2010; Young, 1997).

## **Personal Factor**

### **Sense of Belonging**

Degen (1992) found that Aboriginal students' feelings of not belonging at university contributed to their sense of social discomfort on campus and led to their avoidance of being there as well as sabotaging their self-confidence (p. 136). In fact today, many Aboriginal students continue to experience feelings of exclusion and separation in educational institutions even though they want to belong; they want to fit in; they want to be accepted; and they want to be connected (Young, 1997, pp. 41-42).

Having a sense of belonging in fact was a factor in students' emotional well-being. In other words they may be encouraged to "hang in there" through periods of difficulty if they are bounded by supportive staff and peers in a place they feel connected.

Young (1997) provides more clarity of the value to students of having a sense of belonging and not feeling alone. She recalls feeling:

Surprised and overwhelmed by the ‘sense of belonging’ I felt and the transformation I experienced was absolutely ‘liberating.’ It was there and at that moment I was conscious of the fact that I could talk freely and not feel intimidated. I had a voice, I could express how I felt and it was satisfying to know that someone was listening. (p. 40)

Antone (2009) supports this idea that our voices contribute immensely to “shaping and reclaiming of Aboriginality” (p. 12).

One sure thing in life is that we experience challenges and students learn how to work through these feelings in a healthier versus maladaptive way through a sense of belonging and support. If a student is helped to get through a difficult period, he or she is stronger for having gone through it in a good way when the ebb and flow of life’s challenges subside. Wilson (2008) articulates this process as helping the student to reach a state of mind that will allow for the extraordinary to take place (p. 69). For some, this emotional and personal transformation may be supported through access to spiritual teachings (Vickers, 2002, p. 253), for instance, from the Elder in Residence who helps to facilitate the “sense of belonging” that students are seeking.

## CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

*My commitment was to honour Indigenous researchers, knowledge and ways of knowledge production... from an Anishinaabek perspective with a goal of 'lifting up' Indigenous ways of coming to know in the academy. (Absolon, 2008, p. ii)*

### Conceptual Framework

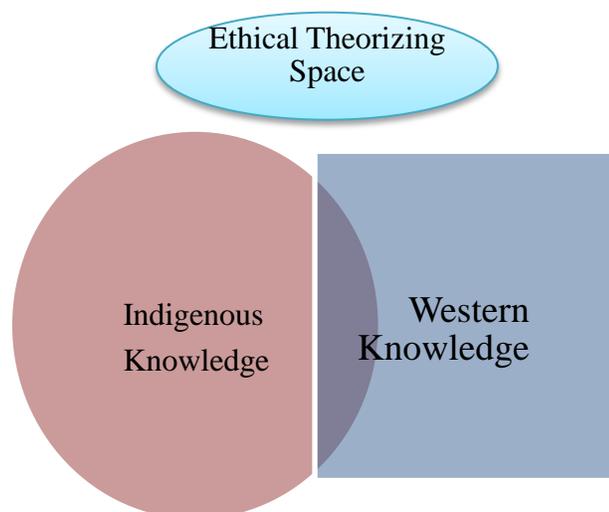
My study follows a qualitative methodology and an Indigenous methodology. An Indigenous methodology is demonstrated through the use of Sharing Circles while the semi-structured in depth interviews and literature review are tools of Western methodology. The study is informed by phenomenology in which the students' reality is intrinsic to their perceptions and emphasizes the importance of students' experiences (Glatthorn & Joyner, 2005, p. 40). According to Poole (1972), phenomenology is the process "to understand the totality of the subjective from *the inside*, using only the analytic devices of description...trying to get...[at] what really matters" (p. 68). The methodological framework is consistent with my roots within an Indigenous research paradigm. Smith (1999) emphasized the methodology or "process is far more important than the outcome" (p. 128) and "influence[s] how...relationships develop" (Wilson, 2008, p. 119) as well as to have an understanding of the students' lived experiences in the broad context they are located. This is consistent with Piquemal and Allen (2008) who assert that Indigenous methodology complements qualitative inquiry (p. 142).

### **Researcher's Positionality and Ethical Space**

Since 1990, my work has been in supporting Aboriginal and non-traditional students in various capacities within a mainstream post-secondary institution. Non-traditional students are those who have limited access to the resources as do regular or traditional students. My research interest grew out of my experience within the academy and wanting to know more about how to support Indigenous students to achieve wholistic success in their post-secondary studies. As maintained by many Indigenous peoples, educational success is one way out of cycles such as poverty and oppression, and advancing forward movement.

In the research process, I am positioned in a theorizing space that requires me to make meaning of the cultural divide in which I am situated. This theorizing space intersects with Indigenous knowledge and Western ways of knowing and “By bringing in our own approaches and methodologies, we transform that theorizing space” (Anzaldua cited in Yosso, 2005, p. 69). First, I am an *Anishinaabe kwe* (Ojibway woman), and secondly, a researcher. Like Weber-Pillax (2004), in my search, my positionality intersects with the way I will carry out my work and through the use of Indigenous methodologies.

Ermine (2007) refers to the space between the Indigenous and Western spheres of knowledge and cultures as ethical space. This concept was relevant to the research process in which I am engaging. Fitznor (2006) refers to this space as a third world where both cross-cultural bridging and conflict can occur (p. 53). According to Poole (1972) there are “two sorts of space...because there are two sorts of intentions. The intentions structure the space in two different ways [and] when the two sets of



**Figure 3: Ethical Theorizing Space**

intentions...confront each other... then ethical space is set up instantaneously” (p. 7). The two sets of intentions stem from the Indigenous and Western cultural spheres.

Ermine (2007) develops the concept of ethical space further when he explains that Indigenous and Western peoples each claim “their own distinct and autonomous view of the world” (pp. 193-195) and each in the midst of disparate worldviews or differing accounts of what they are seeing across the cultural divide. It is within this space where Indigenous knowledge, *Anishinaabe Gikendaasowin*, converges with Western knowledge. Within this space, we can begin to understand one another's knowledge systems and to navigate back and forth between the worldviews and research cultures. Without a doubt, ethical interpretation is critical for a more in depth understanding of this complicated encounter (pp. 193-195). Through ethical interpretation, a “symbiosis” takes place (Poole, 1972, p. 143) or an interaction ensues between the two worlds that is advantageous to both.

How I made sense of this ethical theorizing space in the context of my study consisted of a process that allowed me to go back and forth, taking what fit, in tandem with supporting me to maintain my Indigenous identity in a contemporary world; such as my ability to use Indigenous wholism theory and methodology in my search for truth and knowledge. In essence, my search is shaped by my living story and experiences. My ethical theorizing space consisted of looking through my Indigenous lens at the Western world in which I am positioned and synthesizing these two experiences in my research.

### **Strengths-Focused Approach**

*The freedom and strength of the individual is the strength of the group.*

(Hampton, 1995, p. 21)

Fundamentally, focusing on the strengths of students will level the power relationship and mobilize competencies, and increase the potential for liberation (Saleebey, 2002, p. 111). According to Saleebey (2002):

Practicing from a strengths orientation means...helping to discover and embellish, explore...strengths and resources...assisting them [students] to achieve their goals, realize their dreams, and shed the irons of their own inhibitions and misgivings, and society's domination...relying heavily on the ingenuity and creativity, the courage and common sense...It is a collaborative process...an approach honoring the innate wisdom of the human spirit, the inherent capacity for transformation...you can expect exciting changes...[and] demands a different way of seeing [students]...their environments, and their current situation. Rather than focusing exclusively or dominantly on problems, your eye turns toward

possibility...The formula is... Mobilize...strengths (talents, knowledge, capacities, [and] resources) in the service of achieving their goals and visions and...a better quality of life on their terms. (pp. 1-2)

From an Indigenous lens, this approach is consistent with Hampton's (1995) assertion that the emphasis must lie within the strengths of the peoples and their cultures (p. 35). Similarly, Cote-Meek (2010) emphasizes that we build on strengths and focus "on the positive aspects of Aboriginal people's resistance to colonization" (p. 2). This approach relates to the concept of Hart's (2002) seeking *Mino-Pimatisiwin*. The similarity lies in that the "people mobilize themselves to reach their full potential...[and] is about personal growth, development, and quality of life" (Heinonen & Spearman, 2010, p. 227). As Anishinaabe peoples we must continually focus on the positive rather than on the negative; on strengths rather than on weaknesses; and on what is working rather than on what is wrong.

Many studies in social science have been conducted on Indigenous peoples that focus on the negative aspects of life, the problem or the illness rather than on well-being (Wilson, 2008, pp. 16-17). Often, students' awareness about their own weaknesses is greater than their awareness about their strengths. According to Poole (1972), this dilemma encountered by students' replicates the notion that, "knowledge is always of weaknesses (determinisms) and never of strengths (freedoms to react spontaneously)" (p. 56). Without a doubt, the developmental aspect and growth are key than on utilizing a deficit approach and unequal power relations that focus on weaknesses, limitations (Heinonen & Spearman, 2010, pp. 226-227), dysfunction, or on what is wrong, and fixating on the students as the problem rather than on the structural inequities.

A vision of building on the students' strengths is significant to reversing their "internalized colonialism" (Abbott Mihesuah, 2004, p. 41), "colonial oppression" (Hart, 2008, p. 129), and historic trauma. Thus, central to the teacher as guider role is to raise the consciousness of the students in a way that allows them to re-focus on the positive in their lives—their strengths, gifts, resilience, achievements, and successes—in this wholistic sense, growth becomes more apparent (Wilson, 2008, p. 109).

The strengths approach works in tandem with an Indigenous worldview. From an Indigenous perspective, it is our life work to search out our gifts and strengths, and in effect, was to search for meaning and purpose in life through identification of our unique gifts and strengths and building upon them. This is consistent with the strengths approach in which students are "personally empowered when they are learning new ways to accommodate experiences of oppression" (Saleebey, 2002, p. 109). The focus is on the students' capacity, vitality, ability, talent, courage, and power to reach their goals. Their sources of strength result from their "sense of humor, caring, creativity, loyalty, insight, independence, spirituality, moral imagination, and patience to name a few" (Wolin & Wolin cited in Saleebey, 2002, p. 85). The availability of choices and "fortifying opportunities to achieve success for self and others...[and] gaining personal and social power help to create a more socially just environment in which to live" (Saleebey, 2002, p. 109). Thus, the strengths-focused methodology resonates for me as it fit with my *Anishinaabe Kwe* (Ojibway woman) philosophy and was foundational when working with students. My *Anishinaabe Kwe* philosophy is explained in more detail in the following section.

### **Researcher's Cultural Ethics and Cultural Protocols**

According to Wilson (2008), Indigenous axiology calls for proper protocol to be observed (p. 77) and governs our relationships with each other (Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008). Marlene Brant Castellano (2003) adds that these, “ethics, the rules of right behaviour, are intimately related to who you are, the deep values you subscribe to, and your understanding of your place in the spiritual order of reality” (p. 103). The “cultural ethics or [I]ndigenous codes of conduct” (Smith, 1999, p. 119) work in tandem with “Cultural protocols... [that are] an integral part of methodology” (Smith, 1999, p. 15). “Protocols that Indigenist researchers abide by are the fundamental mechanism for ensuring Indigenous Knowledge is not appropriated, mis-interpreted or exploited” (Simpson, 2009, p. 149). For these reasons, the following protocols guided my respectful relationships and responsibility with researcher participants and community.

*Spiritual.* One fundamental philosophy underlying an Indigenous worldview is the spiritual aspect (Hart, 2002; Longclaws, 2000). Pray first to the Creator, *Kitchi Manitou*, the “Great Mystery” (Benton-Banai, 1988; Ermine, 1995) whom we look to for guidance and through our observance of the relative protocols, the “spirit” of our work is acknowledged (Absolon, 2008, p. 99). Through prayer and ceremony and by placing *asemaa* (tobacco), we give thanks to *Kitchi Manitou* for our learning and search for truth and wisdom.

Research is ceremony (Wilson, 2008) and “culturally appropriate protocols [are] initiated with conscious preparation” (Absolon, 2008, p. 219). These preparations account for beginning my search by offering *asemaa* (tobacco) at the Sundance Ceremony, one of the most sacred ceremonies of The Peoples of North America

(Doerksen, 2009, p. 125). The spiritual energy of *asemaa* (tobacco) was petitioned to guide me to those who will help me in answering the questions. I smoked my Woman's Pipe in the Women's Circle. The significance of the *Apwaagan* (Pipe) was that it "is a symbol of peace and goodwill among all peoples and nations for all time" (Benton-Banai, 1988, p. 50). The Pipe represents the sacredness of the work. Through traditional spiritual ways, Fasting and Sweatlodge ceremonies, space was created in me to receive new truth and knowledge, and through Smudging and prayer, I asked for guidance. To Indigenous peoples of North America, *asemaa* (tobacco) is one of the four sacred medicines and is offered in exchange for stories and ways of pursuing knowledge and truth (Lavallee, 2009; Michell, 1999). The Creator gave us these sacred symbols and processes emerge when we begin our work with prayer and the spirit of the work is invoked (K. Absolon, Keynote at *Shawane Dagoiwin*, 2011).

***Elders and Traditional Teachers.*** In seeking centeredness, Elders are sought out to help us. They are viewed as the ones who understand themselves in relation to the universe and who have been able to centre themselves on the most consistent basis. They are the retainers of traditional and sacred knowledge and are highly regarded as they are considered the key transmitters of the culture (Hart, 2002, p. 58) and *Anishinaabe Gikendaasowin* (The Peoples' knowledge). This is consistent with Absolon's (2008) assertion that "Acknowledging our teachers and where our knowledge comes from is another common tendency of Indigenous searchers" (p. 219).

***Accountability.*** My location is clear and visible and establishes my validity. From an Indigenous perspective, I am compelled to ask myself, "How can I make my research accountable to my relations?" (Wilson, 2008, p. 100). As such, the protocols I

observe will hold me accountable and place the well-being of the people and students at the center (Cote-Meek, 2010; Hall, 2006; Weber-Pillwax, 2004). I align myself with the people by addressing them in my writing (Pidgeon, 2009; Smith, 1999) as much as possible.

***Distinct Cultures.*** Although there are common threads or cultural practices shared by Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island, they are expressed in culturally distinctive ways by each culture (Rice, 2005, p. 3). For me, one of my obligations as a researcher was to observe the appropriate protocols, practices, and to portray and represent the diversity of the peoples that are key considerations to our understandings (Fitznor, 2006; The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 2006).

***Responsibility.*** As an Indigenous researcher, I accept the responsibility to use the knowledge responsibly (Sefa Dei, 2006, p. 1) in how I carry out my work (Weber-Pillwax, 2004, p. 79). These responsibilities as protocols guide my research. The research participants were informed of their rights and were supported in exercising their responsibilities (Brant Castellano, 2003, p. 108).

***Respect.*** The principle of ‘respect’ was used to underscore the significance of reciprocal relationships (Smith, 1999, p. 120). Respect the people; present yourself to the people face to face; look, listen ... speak; share and host people, be generous; be cautious (Smith, 1999, p. 120). When I spoke with the research participants, I was careful not to direct the discussion, nor to interrupt them when they were speaking. From an Indigenous perspective, there was a “need to see knowledge as available to people yet not to be claimed by individuals” (Piquemal & Allen, 2008, p. 136), and as such, the research findings are collective property.

***Reciprocity.*** Reciprocity was an essential component in my working relationships with research participants and considers what tangible benefits can be given back to them, to the community, and carried toward future generations. By observing the traditional cultural protocols or ways of doing reinforces the ethic of reciprocity (Michell, 1999) and “sharing our work so that it can assist others” (Kovach, 2009, p. 11). In addition, “Indigenous peoples [need] to retrieve and examine data that concern them and their communities (p. 145) as too often this is not the case.

### **Data Collection**

Prior to beginning data collection, and upon my advising committee reviewing and approving my proposal, an application was submitted to the Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board (ENREB). The methods of data collection that were used integrated both Indigenous and Western methods. These primary methods of data collection complemented one another and consisted of Sharing Circles and semi-structured in-depth interviews. The secondary method of data collection consisted of debriefing emails from research participants. A more in-depth and detailed discussion of the data collection methods are discussed on pages 96 to 106.

In accordance with a wholistic Indigenous worldview, the concept of “co-researcher” was used to reflect a respectful and relational term that referred to research participants and was more in line with an Indigenous framework and ethical space. As Indigenous researchers, we are moving away from terms that characterize the way that research has been done on our people and to reclaim our voices. From a wholistic approach, the co-researchers cannot be separated from the work of the researcher. That is

to say, working with the co-researchers was intrinsic to making meaning of data and thematic groupings (Kovach, 2009, p. 129). The co-researchers are supporting the researcher within the study through their input as data providers and their assistance in the interpretation of data through verifying preliminary findings. The co-researchers reviewed the preliminary findings in the second Sharing Circle and their feedback was sought about whether their experiences and themes had been accurately reflected by the researcher. As Piquemal (2001) asserts, their input added significantly to the reliability and credibility of the data analysis ( p. 75). In addition, the researcher is Anishinaabe, and from this vantage, it can be understood that personal experience contributed to a deeper understanding and accuracy of the Indigenous experience, thereby providing credibility and validity of the data from that view point. As explained above, there is tension with the word “co-researcher.” For this reason, it is important to clarify that the researcher takes responsibility for the write-up and ownership of this thesis. Power is distinguished from authority in that in terms of power everyone is positioned equally. In regards to authority, I have the authority to speak on behalf of the findings. This authority relates to my accountability for the results and protection of co-researchers and is relevant in that the researcher has gained authority from the interpretation.

In relation to the significance of the number seven to the Anishinaabe peoples, seven co-researchers were invited to participate in the study. Benton-Benai (1988) of the Midewiwin Lodge accounts to the Anishinaabe peoples about the significance of the number seven. Benton-Benai goes on to transmit that the number seven represents Seven Original teachings entrusted by Seven Grandfathers “who were given responsibility by the Creator to watch over the Earth’s people” (p. 60). In brief, these Seven Original

teachings encompass the following:

- (1) To cherish knowledge is to know **WISDOM**.
- (2) To know **LOVE** is to know peace.
- (3) To honour all of the Creation is to have **RESPECT**.
- (4) **COURAGE** is to face the foe with integrity.
- (5) **HONESTY** in facing a situation is to have courage.
- (6) **HUMILITY** is to know yourself as a sacred part of the Creation.
- (7) **TRUTH** is to know all of these things. (p. 64)

In traditional understandings, Grandfathers and Grandmothers are equally respected, and of significance to affirm is the central role that both the Grandmothers and Grandfathers hold within the balance of life. These Ojibway Elders tell us about seven prophets who presented the people with seven prophecies, also known as the Seven Fires, of what the future would bring (p. 89). It was said that “In the time of the Seventh Fire an Osh-ki-bi-ma-di-zeeg’ (New People) will emerge” (p. 91) and “There will be a rebirth of the Anishinabe nation and a rekindling of old flames” (p. 93). *Sha Sha Winibisie* (2008) also explains about:

The seven stages in life, and it is by knowing these stages, that we can figure out where we are and what we need to know or learn in order to go to the next stage...[There are] seven original Clans. Each Clan has a teaching, a role, and a responsibility that they bring into the circle for the strength of the community.  
(p. 7)

Thus, from an Anishinaabe cultural perspective, the sacredness of the number seven guides my methodology and was enacted through the seven co-researchers who

were invited to participate. The seven co-researchers consisted of past graduated and present Indigenous students who have been supported by Access Programs at the University of Manitoba. The Access Programs are identified as any one of the programs at the University of Manitoba that implement and deliver more wholistic learner supports as discussed in-depth in Chapter 5. The co-researchers were voluntary participants. According to Cajete (1999), they encompass as much as possible a diverse cross-section of socio-economic; language and cultural backgrounds; a relative level of traditional and contemporary experience; gender; age; nation; and urban and rural orientation (p. 19).

The researcher provided an explanation to the co-researchers about the nature of the study as well as what was expected of them before they agreed to participate. As was necessary from a Western perspective, written consent (See Appendix A) was obtained from all the co-researchers prior to the Sharing Circles and semi-structured interviews.

### **Co-Researcher Recruitment**

Of the seven co-researchers who were recruited for the study, four graduated students were known to the researcher. My methodology for identifying the four graduated students is purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2005, p. 204) and consisted of Aboriginal individuals who I knew through my insider involvement in the Aboriginal community and through my volunteer activity within urban Aboriginal organizations. The graduated students were intentionally selected as they were past students of access programs and they were viewed by the researcher as having the knowledge and experience of being supported more wholistically and having attained success in their educational and professional careers. Of importance to note was the source of contact

information was not through information available through my current position as Academic Counsellor, but through information available to me as member of the Indigenous community and as a graduate student.

My first contact was made either in person, by email, or by telephone. I described my project to each of the graduated students and that I was seeking their participation in the study. Upon confirmation of the graduated student's participation, I followed-up with a letter (See Appendix E). Four of the first five graduated students I approached accepted my invitation to participate in the study. Through adherence of traditional Anishinaabe protocol, I offered them *asemaa* (tobacco) prior to the beginning of the first Sharing Circle. By accepting the *asemaa* (tobacco), the co-researchers were reaffirming their participation. Also of importance to note was for some, *asemaa* (tobacco) may not have been necessary, but they were still willing to participate.

In my initial proposal, I had planned to approach graduated students intentionally selected and to end contact with them once four co-researchers had been recruited. However, given this unknown, I anticipated an alternative recruitment strategy that consisted of the snowball sampling, in which the individuals approached, would be asked to recommend others whom they knew (Creswell, 2005, p. 206) and who might be willing to participate.

The remaining three co-researchers were current students. A letter was sent to the Dean of Extended Education to request approval with respect to the recruitment of three current students (See Appendix B). Upon receipt of approval from the Dean of Extended Education, the researcher contacted the Director of the University of Manitoba Access Programs (UMAP), Health Careers Access Programs (HCAP), Education Access

Program (EAP), and Professional Health Program (PHP) and I requested the Director's assistance to informing current students about the study (See Appendix D). The students were invited by the Director to contact the researcher directly if they were interested in participating in the study (See Appendix C). Each of these programs was implemented at different times and since the inception of the original Access Program in 1975, other disciplines have implemented programs under the general umbrella of Access such as the Education Access Program.

### **Data Collection Methods**

Multiple data collection methods were implemented that included an integration of both Indigenous and Western methods that complemented each other. The primary data collection methods consisted of two Sharing Circles and semi-structured interviews. The secondary data collection method consisted of debriefing emails from co-researchers. The multiple data collection methods balanced each other and provided the consistency required for ethical theorizing space. In balancing each other, the Sharing Circles provided the shared space for group learning and interaction, while the semi-structured interviews provided the personal space for more in depth conversations to occur. The debriefing emails made available the opportunity for co-researchers to provide input soon after the Sharing Circles and interviews. If required, it also provided the opportunity for the researcher and the co-researchers to stay connected throughout the data collection process and outside of the organized data collection methods.

The data collection was conducted during the period February to August 2011. During this phase, two Sharing Circles were conducted—the first was conducted at the

beginning of the data collection and the second at the end of the data collection. The two Sharing Circles were conducted at *Migizii Agamik*, Bald Eagle Lodge, University of Manitoba, at a time convenient for the co-researchers. Subsequently, each of the interviews was held in a neutral and comfortable location at the convenience of each co-researcher and at a mutually agreed upon time.

With the permission of the co-researchers, the Sharing Circles and the interviews were audio-taped and transcribed by me, the researcher. One of the co-researchers also taped the first Sharing Circle as a back-up in the event that my audio recording failed. My recording was successful and the co-researcher erased the back-up tape.

The names of the co-researchers are known to the researcher. They are remaining anonymous and either Spirit names or pseudonyms are used in transcriptions, written notes, and in the final version of the thesis as well as throughout this study. Of the seven co-researchers, two did not have Spirit names. I requested permission from the remaining five co-researchers to use their Spirit Names in my thesis: Three gave their permission and two declined. The co-researchers that preferred not to use their Spirit names cited confidentiality as the reason.

The multiple data collection methods used throughout this process lent itself to greater cultivation of meaning made by co-researchers' about their perceptions and understandings of their lived educational experiences. For the researcher, the multiple data collection methods provided a greater sense of clarity for analysis and emergent themes.

### **Sharing Circles**

*Boozhoo Mishoomis. Grandfather, miigwetch, miigwetch, for the time that we are able to sit together here Grandfather. Grandfather that we come together to help our sister in the knowledge that she is looking for in order to help our people Grandfather. Grandfather I ask that us, too, that we might be able to be a part of that to do this in a good way to be able to put these good footprints Grandfather. Grandfather that we follow those good footprints from our Elders that have travelled before us. That us too, that we might be able to set those good footprints for those ones that are coming after us Grandfather. Grandfather the things and that that we might do today that might be able to help in that good way Grandfather. Miigwetch.*

(Sharing Circle Opening Prayer, Elder Garry Robson, *Sha Sha Winibisie*)

*Sha Sha Winibisie* opened our Sharing Circle with a Prayer to open up our hearts and minds to learning in a good way. A number of Aboriginal researchers have used and described in detail the Sharing Circle methodology (Absolon, 2008; Fitznor, 2002; Graveline, 1998; Hart, 2002; Weber-Pillwax, 2004). In keeping with an Indigenous research paradigm, the Sharing Circle methodology, or group learning, generates information sharing, builds connections, and seeks balance and wellness through talking. The talking in a Circle process utilized by Indigenous peoples allows group learning “to research and learn about and from each other” (Weber-Pillwax, 2004, p. 87). The Circle is a traditional form of communication that facilitates the remembering process of

individual experiences into collective knowing and consciousness. Hart cited in Fitznor (2002) describes the Sharing Circle methodology:

Sharing circle models ensure that everyone gets to listen and take a turn at talking. Participants listen to each other and share information without offering their opinions, comment, and judgements on what others have shared before them. At the same time, people can be reminded to share information because others have made certain points that might evoke memories for others. (p. 69)

Hart (2002) states, “The general purpose of circles is to create a safe environment for people to share their views and experiences with one another” (p. 61). Absolon (2011), in her keynote address at *Shawane Dagoiwin*, Aboriginal Education Research Forum, held at the Victoria Inn, Winnipeg, Manitoba, explained that “through going around the circle, the spirit is invoked... the male and female energy are balanced... [as well as] the balance of the nations.”

Two Sharing Circles were conducted and were held at *Migizii Agamik*, Bald Eagle Lodge, at the University of Manitoba. The first Sharing Circle was held on Tuesday evening, February 15, 2011, from 5:30 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. These hours included taking the time for sharing food and for a break midway through the Circle. The second Sharing Circle was held on August 17, 2011, from 5:00 to 8:00 p.m. In the second Sharing Circle, we began with a Feast and ended with gift-giving by the researcher.

As previously noted, the first Sharing Circle began with the Indigenous protocol of sharing food. In the final Sharing Circle, a Feast was arranged by the researcher. As well, the researcher gave the co-researchers a small gift to acknowledge and honour their involvement in the study. The significance of the exchange of food and gift-giving was a

method of “respectful adherence to protocols in establishing significant relationships... towards individual growth... [and] to ground the listeners and pull them together into a shared history” (Weber-Pillwax, 2004, p. 87). The protocol of taking the time to share food facilitates the co-researchers connection to the researcher and to each other at a more personal level. According to Fitznor (2002), it is a way of acknowledging the contributions that each of the co-researchers has made (p. 74). In the second Sharing Circle, the traditional Feast gives thanks to the Creator. *Sha Sha Winibisie* also explained it was to acknowledge all those who set the good footprints before us and what they left for us in order to do this work.

*Asemaa* (tobacco) is one of the four sacred plants “that has cultural and spiritual significance” (Fitznor, 2002, p. 73). Indigenous protocol calls for offering *asemaa* (tobacco) to the Elder, *Sha Sha Winibisie*, and the co-researchers. I met with *Sha Sha Winibisie* prior to the first Sharing Circle. I placed the pouch of tobacco down in front of *Sha Sha Winibisie* which provided the opportunity for him to not accept the *asemaa* (tobacco) if he felt that he could not fulfil what I was there to request of him. I let him know that I was requesting him to open and close the Sharing Circles with prayer as well as for him to share his knowledge and be involved in the Circle learning. *Sha Sha Winibisie* accepted the *asemaa* (tobacco). Later, before the beginning of the first Sharing Circle, the co-researchers also accepted the *asemaa* (tobacco) acknowledging their acceptance to be involved in the Circles and one-on-one conversations.

In the Circle, *Sha Sha Winibisie* explained *asemaa* (tobacco) is presented when we want to ask questions; and our acceptance of the *asemaa* (tobacco) symbolizes that we are going to honour what is being asked of us. Acceptance also symbolizes our ethical

obligations (Brant Castellano, 2003, p. 104). *Sha Sha Winibisie* had requested that I place a candle and water at the centre of our Circle. He explained the fire represents man and the water represents woman. The fire and water at the center of the Circle remind us to be conscious of the equality between men and women. The fire and water also reminded us to be conscious of the balance created between man and woman when they come together in life as in our Circle.

My role in the Sharing Circles was not only to facilitate, but also to participate and be a part of the learning that occurred. Being a part of the relationships that form in this shared space was essential to the process (Hart, 2002; Wilson, 2008). Out of respect for the process, I wore my long skirt in the Sharing Circle. I did not request the women to wear their skirts in the first Circle, but informed them that they could do so in the second Circle.

Although everyone was hearing each other's comments within the Circles, from an Indigenous worldview, by commencing with *asemaa* (tobacco), smudging, opening and closing prayer by *Sha Sha Winibisie*, a sense of sacredness and reverence for the process was created, thereby ensuring confidentiality was maintained within the Circle (Hart, 2002, p.94). In the Western paradigm, the process consisted of the co-researchers signing the consent forms which confirmed their wish to participate in the study. Additionally, by signing the consent forms, the co-researchers were consenting to keep confidential the identities of co-researchers and discussions in the Sharing Circles also from the Western paradigm.

The significance of the Smudge was explained by *Sha Sha Winibisie* at the onset of the Circle in respect of co-researchers who may not have had prior experience with

Smudging and beginning the Circle in a “good way.” Hart (2002) explains, “Smudging ‘opens the mind,’ so that co-researchers are in the Circle with a positive mind” (p. 77). *Sha Sha Winibisie* explained that, “If there are people who are not going to Smudge for whatever reason, we don’t say you have to do that because you are here, it’s up to the people themselves.” It should be noted that all the co-researchers took part in the Smudging. In her doctoral thesis, Fitznor (2002) elaborates:

When smudging is used, usually each person sitting in the circle will ‘bath’ themselves in the smoke metaphorically to clear the eyes, ears, hearts, and mind: getting rid of negative energy and to open themselves to positive energy. The act of ‘praying’ and smudging is primarily a thanksgiving acknowledgement to the Creator for all of the gifts for life. It is also a call for participants to work with open minds and hearts for the task at hand (p. 72).

Subsequently, the purpose of the study and the Sharing Circle protocols were reviewed and explained by the researcher. The Sharing Circle protocols were adapted from Hill (cited in Hart, 2002, p. 79). The following are the protocols that the researcher used to facilitate the Sharing Circles:

- Our first purpose is to make connection with each other
- A trusting and safe atmosphere is created for open discussion and learning
- *Asemaa* (tobacco) is offered to the Elder and co-researchers in exchange for our learning together and the acceptance of *asemaa* (tobacco) acknowledges our obligation of working together in a good way with open minds and hearts
- The Circle is made sacred through *asemaa* (tobacco), smudging, prayer, and everything discussed in the Circle is real and confidentiality is maintained

- We will listen to the person inside of each of us, and we will take ownership of our feelings
- What is true for you will be determined by what is within you, by what you feel and by what you find making sense within you. Also, the way in which you live inside yourself is important
- The decisions made within the Circle need everyone to take part in some way
- As the researcher, I am responsible for protecting each member's place within the Circle
- As the researcher, I will ensure that everyone in the Circle is provided with an opportunity to speak and will ensure that everyone is heard

The first round of the Sharing Circle consisted of the co-researchers introducing themselves and to talk about their positioning within the Circle. Five of the co-researchers introduced themselves using their Spirit Name, their Clan, personal history, family history, or life and educational experiences. One co-researcher could not attend the first Sharing Circle due to a family emergency.

One of the primary goals of the first Sharing Circle was to achieve a common understanding about the meaning of “wholistic success” and “wholistic learner supports.” The facilitator introduced the following questions, one at a time, at the beginning of each of the second and third rounds:

- 1) What does wholistic success mean to you?
- 2) How do you define wholistic learner supports?

A stone was used in the circle to signal that the person holding the stone had their turn to speak. When they were finished, the stone was passed on to the next speaker (Fitznor, 1998, p. 72). No time limitation was imposed.

Although in my initial proposal, I had identified five questions for discussion in the Circle, we completed a second and third round after the introduction round. The first Sharing Circle was approximately four and a half hours in length. The facilitator informed the co-researchers they were able to leave the Circle if they needed to leave; however, everyone chose to stay. The researcher / facilitator began the Circle and *Sha Sha Winibisie* sat immediately to the right which meant that he was the final speaker of each of the three Circle learning rounds.

Essentially, the closing Sharing Circle consisted of the researcher presenting the preliminary results to which the co-researchers had the opportunity to provide feedback. Prior to the closing Sharing Circle, the researcher emailed the biographies to each of the co-researchers for their review and feedback. Creswell (2005) explained that the feedback elicited from the co-researchers consisted of whether their experiences were accurately reflected in the findings (p. 231). One question was posed: Are your thoughts and feedback accurately reflected in the preliminary results? The closing Sharing Circle also facilitated the giving back of information to the co-researchers as a form of reciprocity. One co-researcher was unable to attend the closing Sharing Circle.

### **Semi-Structured Interviews**

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were carried out with each of the seven co-researchers. The co-researchers received a copy of the open-ended questions (see

Appendix G) prior to the interview as an attachment to their information letter. The interviews allowed for a more in-depth conversation with each of the co-researchers following shortly after the initial Sharing Circle. The conversation style interviews also allowed for more spontaneous probing of questions that required further clarification, as well as, elicited a deeper understanding of co-researcher responses. Although questions were prepared in advance to ensure relevant topics were covered, flexibility was maintained.

The locations for the interviews varied and were conducted in different locations at the convenience of the co-researchers and at a mutually agreed upon time. Three co-researchers elected to have their interviews held at *Migizii Agamik*, one at his home, one at her work, and two at my home. Initially, I had estimated the duration of the interview to be approximately one hour utilizing open-ended questions (See Appendix G). However, the interview times varied significantly: The duration of interview conversations for three of the co-researchers was approximately 1 ½ hours each; for two co-researchers, the interviews were approximately 2 hours each; and for two co-researchers, the interviews were approximately three hours each in length.

As stated, although questions were prepared in advance, the semi-structured interviews took on more the process of conversation and storytelling. From an Indigenous paradigm, storytelling is one way in which the knowledge is passed down and how successive generations are educated in the ways of the people. I was careful not to lead or direct the co-researchers' conversations, but ensured that all the topics had been covered.

The conversations did not necessarily follow any order except that at the beginning of the conversation, the co-researchers' positioning was shared as a way to get to know them and to build relationships. Fitznor (1998) conveys, the interview conversations consist of “empathetic mutual understanding of issues and themes and humour”, and tears also emerged. The co-researchers shared “what needed to be shared” (p. 67).

### **Debriefing Emails**

As a secondary methodology, debriefing emails were requested from the co-researchers soon after each of the Sharing Circles and interviews or throughout the process if they wished. This request afforded the opportunity to provide feedback outside of the organized methods. The feedback may have consisted of comments that resonated for co-researchers from the Sharing Circles or interview, or to provide them with an opportunity to raise points they may not have thought about in the Sharing Circles or interview. The number of debriefing emails requested was anywhere from zero to three. The co-researchers were informed that “All potentially identifying information (e.g., email address) will be automatically removed... before it is made available for analysis” (Lutfiyya, email communication, November 19, 2010) thereby ensuring confidentiality was maintained. The co-researchers were requested to send their emails to my University of Manitoba email account to ensure that information was received with as much security as possible, although I made them aware that email transmission was not fully secure. Five emails were received.

## Data Analysis

This thesis explores student experiences and perceptions about the efficacy of wholistic learner supports as a means to glean what is working for Indigenous students and enhancing their wholistic success in post-secondary education. The data analysis consisted of reviewing the transcriptions from the Sharing Circles or group learning as well as from the semi-structured interviews or one-on-one conversations with co-researchers to identify the themes that emerged from the data.

The Indigenous framework served as the analytical tool to reflect Indigenous understandings (Pidgeon, 2009, p. 254) about the common experiences identified by the co-researchers. According to Pidgeon (2009), epistemological and methodological tools centre Indigenous knowledge or *Anishinaabe Gikendaasowin* in the work (p. 254). The key themes identified in the study were a reflection of the “whole picture,” the significance of accountable and reciprocal relationships, and continued reliance on Indigenous Knowledge to live the good life (Stonechild, 2004; Hart, 2009). The final analyses are guided by Indigenous Wholism that encompassed the Circle Teaching, Hart’s (2002) *Mino-Pimatisiwin*, and the Strengths-Focused Approach.

## CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

*Presenting findings congruent with Indigenous inquiry holds much promise in bringing Indigenous epistemologies into Western sites of research. (Kovach, 2009, p. 140)*

### **Researcher's Positioning and Ethical Approach**

According to Indigenous axiology, my positioning as an Indigenous researcher calls for utilizing Indigenous ethical approaches in conducting my research. We opened and closed the Sharing Circles with prayer. Beginning in this way, a cultural ethical approach made certain that we began by acknowledging the spirit of our work and giving thanks to the Creator and asking for guidance in our search for truth and knowledge. *Sha Sha Winibisie*, began our Circle with Smudging to center us and to open our hearts and minds to trust. The Smudging created space in us to be present in the Circle.

I took care to be on an equal basis and to not position myself above or act as the expert since we were all in relationship on a shared learning journey. To create respectful relationships, I sat quietly and listened to hear what the co-researchers were saying, I did not interrupt, nor did I want to misinterpret their voices. In the three Circle rounds of the first Sharing Circle, the co-researchers took the time they needed to convey their thoughts and experiences, and there was no time limit assigned. Conducting myself in a respectful way within these relationships was an overarching ethical approach of the Sharing Circles and semi-structured interviews.

In maintaining accountability, I began the Circle by introducing myself and by talking about my position. I also reviewed the purpose of the study and protocols of the Sharing Circles. In the first Circle round, I requested the co-researchers and

*Sha Sha Winibisie* to share who they were and their positioning within the Circle. Beginning our Circle in a good way, that is, in a spiritual and safe environment, also created a trusting and ethical space to allow for open sharing. Our seating in the Circle allowed for the researcher to begin the round and *Sha Sha Winibisie* sat immediately to my right which allowed him to end the Circle round after all co-researchers had the opportunity to speak. The co-researchers sat where they were comfortable in the Circle. One message we all shared was that our sharing in the Circle was done in the spirit of giving back to the people and communities.

### **Co-Researcher Stories**

In accordance with “an Indigenous research paradigm” (Wilson, 2008, p. 62), developing respectful relationships was central to my research. In the following sections, the extended quotes of the co-researchers or student voices are italicized for emphasis. In addition, getting to know the co-researchers upfront was to gain insight and understanding about their diverse cultural and life experiences. These cultural approaches identify essential tenets of wholistic learner supports. Thus, to begin this section, I spent time getting to know the co-researchers who include past graduated students and current students of the Access Programs and to begin developing respectful relationships with each of them. Each has his/her own story and in getting to know the co-researchers, I have included their nation, community, family history, educational experiences, strengths or gifts, and a person(s) in their life who inspired them. Kitchi Anishinaabe defined the word ‘inspired,’ “People by their actions...you want to be better because of them, or they see something in you. They reflect back to you something

positive... they make you feel like you can be a better person.” The co-researchers’ stories were rich with personal experiences and are embedded with lessons to draw on when working with students. Each of the subsequent co-researcher’s personal narratives also increases the peoples’ collective learning. Their stories assist the reader to become closer with them and to develop a relationship. *Anishinaabemowin* names or Spirit Names are used to integrate the language into the work (K. Absolon, Keynote Presentation at *Shawane Dagoiwin*, 2011).

Getting to know the co-researchers through their brief stories highlight their strengths and reflect the experiences of non-traditional Aboriginal students who embark on educational journeys at a post-secondary institution. The co-researchers agreed that the supports they received from programs like the Access Programs made key contributions to their capacity to attain success as students.

### **Getting to Know Ma’iingan (Wolf)**

To accommodate Ma’iingan’s schedule, it was more convenient to hold the interview at his home. We drank tea and coffee in a relaxing atmosphere at his kitchen table. At the end of the interview, he prepared a delicious meal of deer sausage and salad for us! Ma’iingan is First Nations and he is from a small reserve community in Northern Manitoba.

Upon graduating from Grade 12 in 2003, Ma’iingan worked at what he described as various “dead end jobs here and there.” He also attended university for 6 months before leaving due to a compelling need to focus on religion and church at this point in his life’s journey. Ma’iingan attended Bible College in the United States (U.S.) for one

year. One of his strengths was his decision to “think out of the box” and move to the U.S. to attend Bible College. He said no one from his community had ever done anything like that before. With the help of his mom, they raised funds that allowed him to attend the U.S College. Due to finances, however, he was unable to complete the second year. Ma’iingan cites one of his greatest challenges at the time was leaving his family behind, but he went ahead and did it anyway. He says, being an only child, he wanted to develop his own independence.

Ma’iingan and three cousins are first generation members of his family to attend university. He made the decision to attend an off-campus university degree program after encountering “a whole new experience” in which he realized he did not have a voice. In addition, he had a desire to help the people in a more meaningful way instead of just maintaining the status quo. Ma’iingan has much strength. He said, “For me, helping other people is just natural... I don’t ask for anything back.” Being a natural helper was another one of Ma’iingan’s gifts. He has an innate gift to help those who have less than him and to not expect anything in return. He says his reward is the happiness that helping others provides him.

As an adult learner, he became interested in the field of social work and aspired to attain his degree for his own empowerment. However, Ma’iingan shared, “I didn’t initially apply on campus because I had no knowledge of the things that they offered on main campus. I felt like it was this great big world that I wouldn’t survive in it that I wouldn’t even make it.” He is currently completing his third year of studies at the University of Manitoba.

### **Getting to Know Aki Kwe (Earth Woman)**

I met with Aki Kwe (her spirit name) at her place of work. Her office was very comfortable and we talked over tea and shortbread cookies. Aki Kwe is a proud Métis woman from Vogar, a small Métis community in south central Manitoba. She is from a large family of 11 siblings. Her family moved to Winnipeg in the mid 60's when she was in elementary school.

Aki Kwe shared that even though they were raised in poverty, her father had a dream for his children and he encouraged them to attend university. She knew this would not have been possible were it not for programs like the Access Programs. Eight of her eleven siblings attended university—six through programs like Access. At that time, the Access Programs provided financial resources. Aki Kwe had applied to attend university at the age of 23, but she was not selected that year and had to wait until the following year before she could apply again. This time her application was successful and she began university at the age of 24. By this time, she was the mother of two children. While completing her degree program, her third child was born. Today, she is the proud mother of five children and acknowledges they are the inspiration in her life.

Aki Kwe's grandmother, a status woman from Kamsack, Saskatchewan, was also an inspiration in her early life and helped to ground her, "I could count on her, that she was always going to be there for me, and she always was." She described her grandmother as being very spiritual with a really good sense of humour, but at the same time, she was very strict. Other people who inspired her in her life was a friend who was, "very confident, and beautiful... she inspired me to... do well in life [and] to want to be the best that I could be in terms of education, and to raise my children" in the best way

that I could. A Grade 11 teacher also inspired her to feel proud of her cultural identity as an Anishinaabe woman. One teaching that has stayed with her over the years was from the traditional teacher, Tom Porter. He said, “the way Aboriginal people are going to become alive again is to be in touch with their identity, who they are, to become a proud people again.” This teaching was also confirmed by her friend, “Because she was very proud of her identity” as well as Aki Kwe’s mother.

One of Aki Kwe’s strengths was her desire to speak up on behalf of Aboriginal peoples. She said, “I wanted... to do so much for everybody.” Unfortunately, due to her speaking out, she lost a number of employment positions. Aki Kwe went out into the work world thinking that she could help change the legacy of Aboriginal peoples, only to find that many people were still not open to changing the status quo especially from a recent graduate and they would dismiss what she had to say. This oppression consisted of the belief that she was “just” another angry Aboriginal woman. Today, through her many years of experience in the field of education, she has earned a prominent voice and a successful career assisting students and families in the inner city of Winnipeg. Aki Kwe graduated with her Bachelor of Education degree, and later she achieved her Master of Education! In her family, she and her siblings are the first generation to attend university.

### **Getting to Know Mahkwa (Bear)**

Mahkwa’s interview took place in the small boardroom at *Migizii Agamik*, Bald Eagle Lodge, at the University of Manitoba’s main campus. Unfortunately, Mahkwa was not able to attend the first Sharing Circle due to a family emergency.

Mahkwa is a Métis man of Cree, French, and Irish ancestry. His mother's Cree roots are from the Easterville area, and his father, from the Bowsman area. Because of his Caucasian outward features and his Aboriginal roots, his identity has caused many struggles for him. In addition, Mahkwa's family moved around a lot in his younger years, and he lived in the provinces of Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario; however, his family settled down in a small town located in west central Manitoba where he was raised from age 3 to 16 years.

Mahkwa talked about how he did not value education early on in his life, and as a result, he got kicked out of high school. Later, his cousin, who was his best friend and like a father to him, helped him to get back into adult education where he graduated with his Grade 12 diploma. At the age of 22, Mahkwa found out that he was going to be a father. He began working, and moved back in with his parents, which allowed him to pay off his financial debts. He put some money away and then he applied to university. He says, "you know I screwed up my first time around... here is my second chance." His cousin, who was working at the University of Manitoba, suggested that he apply to the Access Programs. He recalls, "They made me write an essay about myself, and it was the first time I ever told my story." Mahkwa is the first from his nuclear family—his dad, mom, and sister—to attend university, but from his extended family, there are three cousins and one auntie who graduated from university.

He said that he was close to his late grandma. Mahkwa's mom and dad also inspired him. When he was overwhelmed with family and work responsibilities and wanted to quit, his mom motivated him to continue. His mom had breast cancer, and Mahkwa knew that she wanted to see him graduate. Other significant people in his life

were his cousin and uncle who helped to keep him on track and moving forward. They did not talk down to him, but they talked to him with respect; respect that would have to be earned by him, however. One of his uncle's remarks resonated for Mahkwa when he was getting into trouble, "You're better than that, you shouldn't be doing that crap." Mahkwa finally admitted to himself that, "it's not just about my social identities, it's about me making my own identity and being comfortable with that and being happy with who I am and being proud of all the parts."

Today, one of Mahkwa's proudest accomplishments is being a father. He lights up when he talks about his fiancé and their blended family—he loves to cook for them. Another proud accomplishment for Mahkwa is that he is in his final year of his degree program and has been on the Dean's honour list for three terms! He speaks about coming back one day to complete his Master's degree.

### **Getting to Know Maniso Ikwe (Island Woman)**

Maniso Ikwe (her Spirit name) and I met for our interview at *Migizii Agamik*, Bald Eagle Lodge, small boardroom, University of Manitoba. She is an Oji-Cree First Nations' woman who was born and raised in Winnipeg and is a citizen of Wabaseemong Independent Nation, Ontario. Her mother originated from One Man Lake, Ontario, however, due to the land being flooded, her mother's family relocated to Wabaseemong Independent Nation. One of Maniso Ikwe's strengths was the ease at which she identified herself as two-spirited in our Circle. She shared that she does not always share this in other places because of her fear of being judged and the negative impacts that may ensue. In her early life, she spoke about the many challenges she faced being raised in

poverty, and eventually becoming a ward of Child and Family Services. However, through these hardships, Maniso Ikwe developed much strength: She was the first of the girls in her family to obtain her driver's licence, she received a scholarship from the Winnipeg Art Gallery, and she received her Grade 12 diploma at a collegiate in Winnipeg where there were only a few Aboriginal students.

She applied to university as an adult learner. She related her two previous attempts at College: a graphic arts program and a mechanics program. She applied for funding from her Band; however, she was informed that they were unable to financially support her. When I asked how she decided to come to university, she replied that she "thought it was a fluke." She did not believe she could even "get into Urban Circle Training Centre" where she obtained her Health Care Aide/Health Unit Clerk Certificate. It was her experience there, at Urban Circle, that provided the internal strength for her to attend university and she completed the Health Careers Transition Year Program. Maniso Ikwe shared were it not for the encouragement of two instructors at Urban Circle who believed in her academic abilities, her decision might have been quite different. Most importantly, she wanted to make a difference for her community.

Maniso Ikwe is first generation in her family to attend university. One sister attempted to complete a degree, but unfortunately, was not successful. Maniso Ikwe was inspired by "Dr. Ferguson because of the way he nurtured his patients; he was very caring and concerned." Perhaps this is one of the reasons Maniso Ikwe is studying to become a doctor herself! She is currently completing her Bachelor of Science degree. She has the gift of perseverance and can be seen studying for many hours and meeting with her tutors. As an adult learner, she was challenged with developing her math, science, and

English academic skills. Today, she is blogging for the university, and she describes it as “being...being myself to the community.”

### **Getting to Know Gizhebi Omiimii (Morning Dove)**

Gizhebi Omiimii (her Spirit name) and I met for our interview at *Migizii Agamik*, Bald Eagle Lodge, small boardroom, University of Manitoba. She is a Métis woman from San Clara which is a small community in central Manitoba. Gizhebi Omiimii has much strength. One of her strengths was evident during our conversation and that was her laughter throughout our conversation. She stated that she has a “competitive nature.” She views her competitive nature as positive because it provides her with motivation and commitment. “When I start something I finish it.” As an adult learner, her life experiences and the fact that she knew what she wanted provided her with much strength, “I knew what I wanted and it was so different coming to school because I wanted to come to school.”

Gizhebi Omiimii came to university at the age of 29. She was a graduate of Grade 12 and had been out of school for 12 years. Gizhebi Omiimii is the second youngest of 15 siblings, but was the only one from her siblings to attend university. Her mother was so proud of her. Gizhebi Omiimii has many cousins; however, none of them have come to university to date.

Gizhebi Omiimii’s mom was both her role model and inspiration. Her mom has a calm strength and her family was always very important to her. Her mom encouraged her children that, “Sometimes life is hard you know, pick yourself up and you continue on and do the best you can... She always stressed the importance of education, although

we didn't have the money.” Like many kids in the community, “university was not even talked about because it was not something we thought we could ever achieve or do.”

Gizhebi Omiimii's mother was always there for her. For example, her mother accompanied Gizhebi Omiimii on her first day in the Access Programs. During one of the most challenging periods in her life was the loss of her son, and Gizhebi Omiimii's mom stayed by her side encouraging her not to quit—“she was always my rock.”

Gizhebi Omiimii recalls that her son had many gifts, and he was also her inspiration and she sought to provide him with a good life, “I needed to do something with my own life... [her son was] the stepping stone to get me here and motivated me to get started.” She went on to complete her Bachelor of Social Work, and later on, completed her Master of Education!

### **Getting to Know Mide Kwe (Heart Woman)**

Mide Kwe and I met at my home; we shared food and drank tea during our conversation. Mide Kwe is a Non-Status woman with both Cree and Ojibway ancestry. She was raised in a northern community till age seven. Other places she lived during these early years were Churchill, Flin Flon, The Pas, and Brandon before moving to Winnipeg to attend university.

Mide Kwe spoke about the difficulties she experienced growing up especially the poverty manifesting in alcoholism, addiction, and physical abuse. Her father attended residential school. In his family, there were ten siblings--nine boys and one girl--and they all went to various residential schools. As a result, Mide Kwe said, “When I was growing up, I didn't know my relatives, I was in my 20's before I met some of my

cousins.” One of Mide Kwe’s strengths was that she loved reading books, and often would go to the library to read. This was one of the ways she coped with her family’s struggles. Another one of her strengths was that she excelled in secondary school and as a result was exempted from writing exams in high school up to Grade Ten. This strength is further exemplified the year she graduated when she was the only Aboriginal student to graduate from Grade 12. When I asked her what had helped her to stay in school, she replied, “My sister... was one year ahead of me... and I could see her succeeding so I just kind of followed with that.” Another person who inspired Mide Kwe was her Grade 6 teacher, “He told me that I could do anything I wanted to.”

Mide Kwe attended Brandon University previously at the age of 22, but left there to go back home as a result of her pregnancy. Mide Kwe has three children. At age 30, she was accepted into the Access Programs at the University of Manitoba. At the time she was a single mom of two of her children ages six and eight. Mide Kwe’s strength is demonstrated by her accomplishment of being the first of her seven siblings and extended family to attend university. Since then, two of her sisters and one brother have also attended university. Another strength and accomplishment was her ability to complete her Bachelor of Social Work (B.S.W.) while working at night and attending school during the day; and to complete her Master of Social Work, she did the opposite and attended night classes while working during the day. Now, she is enrolled in her Ph.D. program and continues to work full-time!

### **Getting to Know Kitchi Anishinaabe (Ojibway Woman)**

Kitchi Anishinaabe and I met at my home; we shared food and drank tea while we talked. Kitchi Anishinaabe was a name given to her by her uncle. She is a First Nations' Ojibway woman and was raised to the age of 14 in a small Métis and non-status community located on the west shore of Lake Winnipegosis before moving to Winnipeg in the early 70's. She was the first in her immediate and extended family to attend university. She said:

*Mom always said, 'you have to finish Grade 12,' that was her expectation... and I did... no one ever talked to me, oh well, now you should go to university... nobody ever said that... the expectation after that was well you have to work, and that's what I did... those were the values that were taught to me.*

Kitchi Anishinaabe believed that university was not accessible due to the cost, “because back then... I didn't have my Bill C31 yet, so I couldn't go to school.” But when she was accepted into the Access Programs at age 21, university was suddenly a reality for her. The program paid for her tuition and student allowance for the first two years. She made the decision to leave university to move back to her husband's reserve community and she had also become a new mom. When she returned to finish her degree three years later, she received financial support from the Band. Today, she has three children and two grandchildren.

There were a number of people in Kitchi Anishinaabe's life who inspired her. She spoke of her Grade 2 teacher and she recalls:

*She made me a better student, saw something in me, pushed me up to the front, and maybe developed a little bit of my leadership because I use to be kind of*

*selected to do special jobs... and really made me realize that I could be a good student, so that was when I was very young... around seven then.*

Kitchi Anishinaabe spoke about her grandmas and neighbour who took special interest in her, “made her feel special... and to believe in myself more.” They took her to their homes where she would stay, and they would treat her well and pay attention to her, “because when you are in a large family, sometimes you don’t get that attention.” When she was older and living in Winnipeg, she recalls two teachers who inspired her, “they would talk to me, and give me praise, they would tell me I was doing a good job, and I really wanted to do well for them.” A friend and mentor also “took me under her wing” and inspired me to find out more about my “identity as an Aboriginal Ojibway [woman]... and took me... to my first Sweat... [and] she made me my first shawl.” Kitchi Anishinaabe’s husband inspired her because in his own life growing up, he had many challenges to overcome. Even though it was not easy for him, he did overcome them and today he is successful too. In addition, Kitchi Anishinaabe’s mom was a consistent presence in her life:

*My mom never gave up... even though she had a lot of rough things happen... she inspired me as a mother that you have to look after your children and the importance of being responsible... she was the best budgeter, I just can’t imagine how she made those dollars stretch like even though we were poor, I was never hungry... the house was homey, she always tried to make it good... she was strict, she had expectations... she was spiritual... she was open to traditional ways and never put them down... she never gave up on love... she was a brave woman... she left her whole community, her whole support system and came to a strange city*

*and... [and] made a good life... she was independent... and you know she didn't ask for too much... I give credit to her especially when it comes to being responsible as a parent, looking after your family, you know don't give up.*

Kitchi Anishinaabe has much strength; she is a strong and spiritual woman who is proud of her Ojibway heritage; she liked reading and she enjoyed university as she was a committed student and she loved learning.

### **Thematic Analysis**

The data for this study was collected through Sharing Circles and semi-structured interviews. The audio-taped group learning and individual conversations were transcribed by me, the researcher, to develop more fluency about the patterns of co-researchers' experiences. Themes began to emerge as a result of acquiring more intimate knowledge of the data through the transcription process and re-reading of transcripts. In the analysis and making sense of the data, direct quotes were used from co-researcher narratives to explain, describe, connect, or to offer context to various interconnecting themes or patterns of experiences; personal reflections were also conveyed (Creswell, 2005, pp. 249-250).

One aim of the Sharing Circles involved coming to a common understanding of what are wholistic success and wholistic learner supports. In the semi-structured interviews and individual conversations, we could then begin our dialogue from a common understanding. In the final Sharing Circle, the co-researchers provided feedback on whether their thoughts were accurately reflected.

### **Co-Researchers: Meaning Making of Wholistic Success**

Although there were a number of varying understandings about the meaning of wholistic success, a commonality shared among co-researchers was really about knowing we are as Indigenous peoples regardless of whether we are Ojibway, Cree, Métis, or any one of the diverse nations across Turtle Island. Rooted in this assertion was our freedom to identify who we are without concern of feeling judged, oppressed, confused, or lost about our identity, culture, or languages. Wholistic success results in our not being afraid or ashamed to identify as an Indigenous person. As Indigenous peoples, we have a responsibility and the right to identify who we are; it means that we as Indigenous peoples are self-determining and decide how we integrate and balance all aspects of our being. This affords us the space to grow personally and to succeed on campus spiritually, emotionally, physically, and intellectually, while honouring the diversity and commonality among our nations. It means being aware of the past and present valuable contributions and successes of Indigenous peoples in contemporary Canadian society and for Canadian society to also be aware and recognize these contributions.

The co-researchers identified wholistic success consisted of taking risks and not giving up. It is about achievement in whatever way that may mean for each student and in their own specific time. For the collective, it encompasses the right of entry to opportunities available in whatever educational career paths we chose, and to have the internal and external resources available in our pursuit of wholistic success. Through identification of our personal strengths and gifts, we understand self, in relation to the peoples, to the community, to the nations, and to society. It is the recognition of our wholeness of being as sacred and our awareness about the challenges, our unique gifts

and strengths, and resiliencies that are inherent within each of us and among us. For the students, it is about having access to traditional teachers, Elders, cultures, and languages in contemporary society. Wholistic success embraces the means and opportunities enjoyed by all in contemporary society to move toward a better life for Indigenous children, communities, and nations.

### **Co-Researchers: Meaning Making of Wholistic Learner Supports**

Another aim of the Sharing Circles was to arrive at a common understanding of wholistic learner supports. Gizhebi Omiimii shared that the Access Programs provided the supports that recognized the students as whole human beings and the guiding process begins from that premise:

*When I came here [to the University of Manitoba], thankfully I had the Access Programs. I don't think I would've survived, I mean I was going home, I was done, I'm going home, I can't do this. But fortunately, I had a really good support system both with the staff and with my peers... It was only then after graduating from that that I realized the importance of taking care of the whole person because the Access Programs does that—you know you have your personal counsellors, you have your academic counsellors, you have your tutoring, you have your financial support... you have the cultural component ... and a community.*

For some Indigenous students, the very size of the campus and the number of students are intimidating, therefore, it is essential to create an environment that is welcoming on campus. For Maniso Ikwe, it is the atmosphere that encouraged her, and in fact she

enjoys coming to university as a result of this connection to others from the same life experiences. *Migizii Agamik*, Bald Eagle Lodge, in which one of the Access Programs is located, is a place where Aboriginal students can go to connect with and to meet other students who are from the same cultural background. Gizhebi Omiimii observed that there is comfort in knowing that there is a place you can go on campus where people understand you and will listen to you and support you.

Wholistic learner supports distinguishes the inner circle of a student's nature and outer concentric circles consisting of family, extended family, and community. For this reason, supporting students wholistically means consistently facilitating the process of finding balance within these circles of relationships externally and internally. In this way, the students are more able to maintain focus on their studies. A number of the co-researchers agree with Gizhebi Omiimii who pointed out, "it's not just all about learning... from a textbook," but for many it is also about learning to maintain healthy relationships and the staff help to facilitate this learning process for students.

Maniso Ikwe shared that what helped her to grow internally is having people who believed in her and who took the time to listen. Gizhebi Omiimii agreed:

*I think that's the importance of Aboriginal supports...to not get bound by rules and regulations, I mean she was the director, she had no time, she was so busy, but she took that time, and she didn't say okay we met for an hour, now so you need to go. It was like she saw a situation that was going to require a lot of time, and she took the time, and so it's having people that really, really care and are really committed to seeing students succeed regardless of what it takes and helping people tap into that.*

Taking the time to listen plays a major role in tapping into the internal aspect and forming relationships that matter. Also key in supporting students is accepting where they are in their emotional condition. Notably, the co-researchers are of the same mind that an essential component has to do with internal strengths but, unfortunately, for many, identifying their gifts and strengths is atypical.

For some Indigenous students, it means going back to reconnect to their inner spirit and to their emotional aspect. The Teachings will help gain insight into those aspects within the whole human being and in significant relationships. For many Indigenous students, although there is *Mino-Pimatisiwin*, the reality is that we are touched by numerous tragedies within our communities and within our neighbourhoods. Aki Kwe's optimistic nature is revealed:

*I am not fooling myself, there are tragedies that continue to go on in the community... for different reasons, it's sad and tragic, but on the other side of that, we can do something about that. So, I believe wholistic learner supports takes into account the reality of what is happening... and then accommodating the situation however which way it needs to be accommodated.*

Accordingly, it is beneficial to our communities that we each pick up our responsibility and make the sacrifices that are necessary to move forward. Wholistic learner supports assist the students in becoming more aware of this reality and the role that each of us plays in the change process.

In relation to the spiritual aspect, Aki Kwe found that her spiritual development came from attending church, and also attending ceremonies such as Sundance. She goes on to say that, the wholistic learner supports incorporates spiritual development through

the Elder and through traditional teachings. Kitchi Anishinaabe's comments were consistent with this in that the learner's spiritual connection may vary whether they are traditional, Christian, or combination thereof, and all diversities must be honoured.

Maniso Ikwe recalls:

*At Urban Circle, every morning we had the smudge and prayer. We began like that in the classroom. Every classroom was like that. They began their day with smudge and Morning Prayer, we all stood in a circle and held hands, every one of us volunteered on different days that is why I said I miss that because I felt grounded and they have it here. I was actually surprised when I came here to Access that they had... smudging in the building.*

Mide Ikwe recalls that her spiritual connection began when she went to see her

Counsellor in the Access Programs:

*She had a poster there that said, "Sage picking for students." So I went to the sage picking for students, and I met this old grandmother. Her name was Nooshu Kwe and she became my traditional teacher. That was Mary Roberts from Roseau River, Roseau Rapids.*

Without this kind of support and encouragement, co-researchers indicated it is sometimes difficult to "keep going." The staff members or guiders are there to assist students, and they genuinely care that students achieve success in their studies.

A final observation was made by *Sha Sha Winibisie* that we have to hold high expectation of the students. He stated:

*As supporters to the learners...we cannot have low expectations of the students... My teacher she let me get away with a lot of things because she thought I was [not*

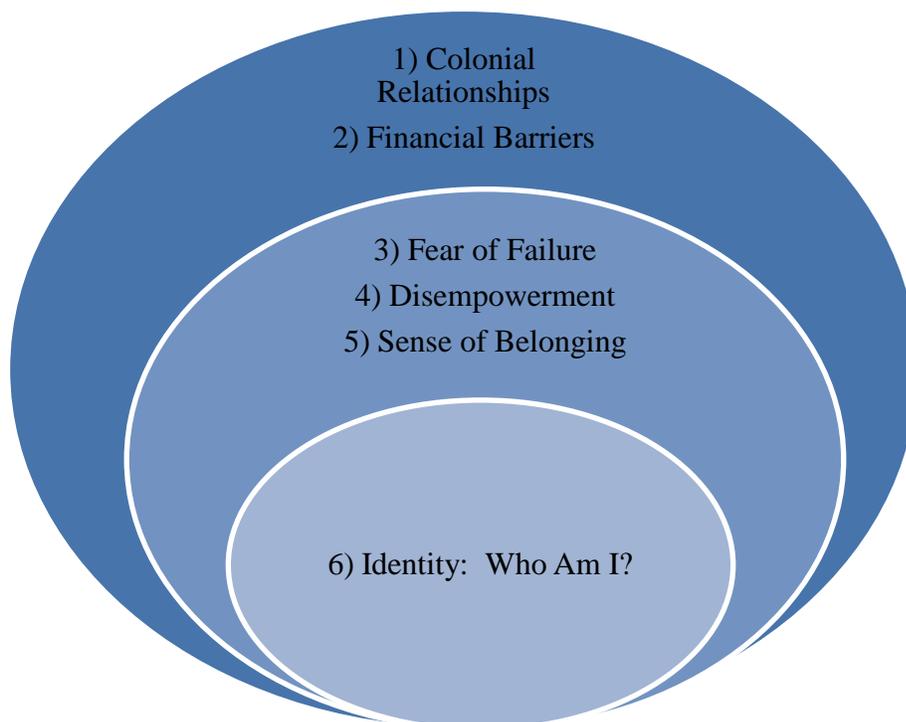
*as smart]. Well, it didn't take me long to realize the teacher didn't expect as much out of me, well, I gave her less, didn't expect me on time, well I didn't come on time. All that negative stereotype images, I fell into that. It was those old people that said, 'Wait a minute, I am not going to let you go,' and they are the ones that helped me to talk in my life, so us too, we have to learn that to give to the students.*

These relationships are essential to achievement. Of course Kitchi Anishinaabe shared that, "it's hard to pin down to say well this is what you need to be a successful learner" because it varies for each learner as everyone is different adding to the complexity of providing learner supports. She also reminded us that a learner's struggle might become their motivation. Nevertheless, there was agreement among the co-researchers that the focus must consist of not only developing the intellectual aspect, but also the emotional and personal aspect.

### **Co-Researchers: Challenges that Affect Wholistic Success**

The findings of this study highlight that although there are other factors that negatively impacted on the co-researchers access to education and their ability to achieve wholistic success such as family responsibilities and age maturity, the predominant six areas are: (1) colonial relationships; (2) financial barriers; (3) fear of failure; (4) disempowerment; (5) sense of belonging; and (6) identity. In addition, what adds to the complexity is that these challenges are all interconnected and blend into one another. What is more, Indigenous students may be impacted by more than one of these

challenges at the same time as well as inter-generationally, and at different periods in their lives, or at different levels of emotional condition.



**Figure 4: Challenges that Affect Wholistic Success**

### **Systemic and Structural Factors**

#### **Colonial Relationships**

Both past and present colonial relationships impact students' emotional well-being. For example, the findings indicate that when the co-researchers were growing up in their home communities, racism was essentially non-existent. It was not until students were required to attend school away from their home communities, or re-located to larger urban centers to attend high school or post-secondary institutions that racism became apparent. In secondary school, however, it seemed more difficult for co-researchers to

make sense of their subjective and personal experiences arising as a result of racism, discrimination, oppression, and stereotyping, etc.. Some did not have the words to describe what they were experiencing. For others, it was not until reaching university that they were more able to make sense of these larger forces that impact on them daily.

Ma'iingan explained:

*In university I learned... how Native people have been treated and what they faced. I found out that that was there way before I got to high school... was there then, and is going to stay there a long time. Well, like that sucks for a lot people you know what I mean because it just continues.*

He goes on to talk about how these colonial relationships “made me feel bad about myself at times, made me feel like nothing, made me hate being a Native person, not even Native, an Indian person.”

These negative relationships also shaped everyday life for Mide Kwe. She reveals that students have got to uncover the intergenerational trauma, chaos, family disruption and miscommunication. She talked about how difficult it is for some students to identify these effects in a personal way, and the necessity for those students to begin working on the positive changes on a regular and ongoing basis. Sometimes the difficulty for students was not working on the intergenerational trauma on an ongoing basis, but instead more on an emergency or as needed basis in the present. Not all students are at a place where they can begin working on their emotional or personal aspect on a continuous basis.

Ma'iingan considers his formative years in high school:

*There was a lot of times I skipped class. I didn't want to go to class. I wanted to drop out of school. I had a lot of trouble with the teachers, with the principal, with the people that were suppose to support you there. So, my high school experience in the country was not very positive at all. Those were two years in my life that I hated, and when I say that I hated those two years in my life, I don't have one good memory. Two years is a long time not to have one good memory of your high school experience!*

These depictions reveal what many Indigenous students experience in education. The study confirmed that it was not the intellectual aspect that posed the most difficulty, but the continuance of colonial relationships and the attitudes, behaviors, and practices which affected their emotional and personal well-being and got in the way of their educational achievement.

Ma'iingan expressed that for him, "success... was really just living" and being alive. He shared:

*A friend of mine...got me a birthday card, she got a bunch of people to sign it, it was really nice of her...she knew that I was Native, and she said congratulations. And I said, "On what?" And she said, "You are 22." I said, "Yeah." And she said, "You beat the statistics." I said, "What's that?" She says, "You are 22, and you are male, and you are Aboriginal, and you have not committed suicide.*

This was an eye opening experience for Ma'iingan. You see his friend was aware that Aboriginal youth between the ages of 15 to 24 are more likely than any other segment in Canadian society to commit suicide. Suicide was one way out to escape the pain and hopelessness of life and daily living. The opposite of this internal manifestation is to turn

it outward against society. Given this legacy, Ma'iingan goes on to reflect about his own reality, and hence, the reality for many Indigenous peoples:

*I would love to have a 9 to 5 job and go home at night and watch TV. I'd love to do that every day if I could. I would love to have a good paying job... just do it for myself... but as much as I would love that lifestyle, that lifestyle is not for me... My caring does not stop... it doesn't stop at 5 p.m... I always refer back to that quote... the honour of one is the honour of all... basically; it's the honour of everyone... that is the best success for me.*

### **Financial Barriers**

A number of the co-researchers agree there is a common misunderstanding in Canadian society that Indigenous students are getting “free” education and that they have it easy for this reason. The reality is that attending university was not a topic that was discussed in many homes as the financial barrier was too great and why access to education appeared impossible to many Indigenous families. Aki Kwe vividly makes this point when she shared her family's experience:

*My dad always told us that we were going to go to university. There were eleven of us and I never ever thought that that would ever be possible. I thought doesn't he get it, we need money to go to university and we were poor on welfare. I thought how is that ever going to happen, and I always thought that it would not be possible. But, I guess we were very fortunate at that period of time because there were programs out there, that would pay for poor people to go to university*

*and that is what happened to most of my family. There were eleven and eight of us went to university. Six of us through Access type programs.*

Still today, this is consistent with Kitchi Anishinaabe's observation:

*Nowadays it's very hard if you are First Nations. Many First Nations' students tell me that it's really hard even if they decide to go to university it's not a for sure because the Band has limited funding and not everybody is going to get the chance... There is student loan and people can go for student loans if they want and that is always an option, but... people at the reserve, they don't look at that as an option. If they don't get the funding from their Band, they don't really look at Student Aid as an option.*

In university, Ma'iingan was sponsored by his Band; however, he continued to face financial difficulties. He shared about the kind of minimal financial support he received:

*Keeps me in poverty still... I had the support of that that basically goes to my rent and really honestly what they give out of there for groceries you could probably buy a bag of salad nowadays, and I see other people from other Bands who get \$200 more than me and they are in the same situation.*

Ma'iingan did not know for the first two years of his education about Student Aid, and that he was eligible to apply for Student Aid because he was not getting enough money through his Band funding to cover his basic living needs such as rent, food, utilities, and transportation. Other significant costs are tuition and books and for those students who have children was daycare. In university, the financial barriers places students at great risk of leaving university and are one of the primary sources of pressure affecting their ability to remain focussed on their studies.

Gizhebi Omiimii described yet another aspect of the financial barriers. She attempted to supplement the approximate \$165 she was receiving bi-weekly from Student Aid. She said:

*I had to work. Access told me don't work because it was too much but I had to work. I was living by myself I had to pay rent... [In] my second year, I was working three jobs and going to school. I know it was crazy because student loan assesses you the money that you make in your pre-study period, and because I was only taking one course or two courses over the duration of the summer, I increased my hours at work because I could. And now in September, they look at the income over the summer, and they cut back what you get in September. It's like a vicious cycle, it's like on one hand, you work to try and save some money through the summer, and students are still experiencing that over the summer, they work to try and save some money for the fall, fall comes and student loan takes away dollar for dollar what they made in the summer, so they are no further ahead.*

Students applying for Student Aid are assessed a pre-study period during the summer months of May to August, and they are expected to save some of the money earned during this period. Even if students did not work over the summer months during the pre-study period, Student Aid assesses earnings based on minimum wage and deducts this amount from the students' total award. Saving money is difficult especially when the money you bring in totals your living expense which is a common experience for those who live in poverty and earn minimal income and are living from paycheque to

paycheque. These experiences are examples of the financial barriers students face like Gizhebi Omiimii and “to make ends meet somehow.”

The financial situation was critical, too, for Métis and non-Status students. In a report by the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development who studied Aboriginal post-secondary education in Canada, stated:

Funding is not available to Métis learners or to First Nation learners without status under the Indian Act. At the same, Committee members know, from our preparatory reading and the evidence we heard, that barriers to post-secondary educational attainment affect the entire spectrum of Aboriginal learners. (Canada, 2007 February, p. 24)

## **Social and Cultural Factors**

### **Fear of Failure**

One of the common concerns expressed by the co-researchers upon entering university was their fear of failure affecting their self confidence. Gizhebi Omiimii said:

*We [Aboriginal peoples] have always been told that you are not university material, you can't go to university, you know you're not smart enough, you don't have enough money, so you internalize all of those messages, so you don't even think that it's something that you can do so of course I was not prepared to jump in [with] both feet and fail and have to go back home.*

She goes on to say that because of her fear of failure:

*I thought I am going to do something at home first, because if I fail, then at least I am failing at home. So they had the first year distance education program out*

*there... I registered for an Intro to Psych... I would drive back and forth once a week... I did that for the first year and I did quite well in the course and so that sort of inspired me and gave me the confidence. Ok, take the next step now, go to the university and take more courses, and so it was sort of like a process that happened.*

Gaining confidence to apply to university took Gizhebi Omiimii approximately one year and only after she had succeeded in the distance education degree course. She also talked about using the tutors a lot during her year at Access Programs: “I used the tutors three times a week all the time... I was so scared of failing.”

Similarly, Ma’iingan talked about why he did not initially apply to the main campus: “For me, I think a huge thing would be self esteem issues followed me... Life is still kind of like knock at your door, and tells you, you are not going to do well, you are going to fail.” He said, “The main reason that I never went to the main campus, I was terrified I would never make it on my own there... it was just the fear of failure.”

Ma’iingan warns about the reality of many Aboriginal students and the internalized messages that we are not quite good enough to make it. “All of those things that I was called when I was a kid, those negative things probably would have just been nurtured... had I started off at the main campus without knowing about the resources available to me” there. The negative messages Ma’iingan was subjected to when he was growing up, especially the name calling in high school played over and over again in his mind and held him back.

For Mahkwa, though, the challenges he faced had to do with learning how to organize and how to balance his time between his family and his studies. He said:

*It really was... the amount of work that you have to do that is kind of scary and intimidating... the timelines and the pressure to do so many assignments, and assignments always seem to be due on the same dates. You have like three, four different assignments and you are trying to figure out how to organize. So, those were like my biggest barriers.*

Not only was balancing his time a challenge, but there were other issues as well.

Mahkwa had personal issues outside of university that were overwhelming him when he found out that his mother had cancer. At one point he did not believe he could continue. He felt responsible to help his mother as much as he could and to be there for her. He was emotionally drained, and he wanted to quit. Mahkwa explained what helped him to get through this challenging time was his ability to express how he was feeling to his Access counsellors, the Elder in residence, his brother, and his parents. They all encouraged him to continue. Although he did not have as much time, he could still get his work done and he persevered. He was able to recognize and value that, “When the pressure feels like it’s too much... it’s about being resilient and working hard and just keep pushing and walking forward to succeed.” The fact is that many Aboriginal students do not have family members with the experiences of studying at university and who can coach them on what to do. Therefore, the student supports offered by programs like the Access Programs are vital to the students staying on track with their studies.

### **Disempowerment**

I suggested earlier that what is viewed as “shyness,” for many Aboriginal peoples was really about the loss of voice and suffering in silence or disempowerment. You may

shut down to avoid reality, and you learn how not to speak up or perhaps you learn that what you have to say is not important. For some Aboriginal students, this also causes anxiety, especially when they have to make presentations, for example, in front of the whole class. What may seem easy such as presentations for many mainstream students may evoke much anxiety for some Aboriginal students who are disempowered. Mide Kwe thought about how in her own life, “All that oppression... silenced me so I couldn’t say it, that I could think... and I look back to that because oppression and colonization does that to people.” As a result of her oppression, she was ashamed to cry and learned how not to show her emotions. Maniso Ikwe felt, “Like my inner body was the garbage can, I just kept stuffing it down, blocking my spirit.” Especially, too, when it came to small chit chat at university; Kitchi Anishinaabe recalls feeling awkward and uncomfortable. Ma’iingan talked about how, when he came to higher learning, it was to find his voice and to gain his personal power. This would allow him to help others in a way that was more purposeful and not just maintaining the status quo.

Midwe Kwe explained that, “I was always a really shy person, and I never ever would have said that about myself, and that I can know things, only that I read a lot of books so I guess I can retain some of that.” She was unable to accept that she could in fact know from within herself, that indeed she was intelligent, but believed instead that the knowledge was external to her and was contained within a book. Mide Kwe recalls that, in the beginning at the Full Moon Ceremony, she was not able to make the Buffalo Yell because she was still healing from her childhood experiences and had lost her voice. She said:

*It was just amazing what happened after I found my voice at Full Moon, that's when I started really speaking about things, trying to describe things, talking more with people, I became more active then because I had a voice and I knew that I could use it, that's when I started helping... in the circles for sexual abuse survivors, women's groups.*

Consequently, for these reasons, an essential component of the work that guiders do with students who are from disadvantaged backgrounds consists of being knowledgeable about the manifestations of disempowerment and the culture of silence, loss of voice or what some may refer to as “shyness.” Gizhebi Omiimii asserts that the challenge lies in helping students “to find their voices and to question” in a way that is not more damaging, but decolonizing and about the students’ reclamation of their voices.

### **Sense of Belonging**

Aki Kwe talked about her feeling of not belonging and stereotypical views about Aboriginal people who grow up in poverty. A sad fact is that both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples believe that these stereotypical views are true. She explains:

*Growing up in the inner city, and being a poor family on welfare, just kind of the impression that gives to the rest of society you know--those kids are never going to go anywhere because look at how poor they are, their mother drinks and they don't go to school, and they are not taken care of. All those stereotypes and that's what people had of our family. And then we start believing that because people don't expect much from you, you are not doing well in school, and in fact, you hate school because it's not some place where you feel like you belong. And*

*you see school as just being for white people, white successful people, because they do really well.*

This student experience candidly highlights that which Carriere (2005) found in that an essential component to success is building a strong sense of community on campus as well as a “strong sense of belonging” (pp. 30-31). Gizhebi Omiimii shared:

*When I came to Winnipeg, I was so scared and I was so alone, and so I had that sense of belonging in the Access Program with the students. I mean listening to their story and sharing my story, there was so much common ground, and so much commonality in terms of our upbringing and how we lived, and what we were thought.*

Sharing these similar life experiences with students from similar cultural backgrounds facilitated connection and sense of comfort on campus among a community of learners. Unfortunately, it is not always easy for some Aboriginal students to form these life lines on campus.

### **Personal Factors**

In addition to the personal factors that affect students, I realize the list was not limited and included those identified by Mide Kwe: learning how to study, how to read a book and comprehend the information, how to sit and to focus for hours, how to get organized, how to make a schedule and stick to it, and how to get yourself to class on time. These are also difficult factors to address. But, the one focal personal factor that emerged was identity and knowing who they are.

**Identity: Who Am I?**

When you are an Aboriginal person in Canada, Kitchi Anishinaabe states, that “you spend a lot of time in your younger days... finding out who you are.” She revealed that, when she came to the city as a teenager was when she faced an identity crisis. She realized that not only was she different by, “my skin, but different economically and socially.” Gizhebi Omiimii added that if a student does not have a strong sense of identity, it creates vulnerability and causes them to not feel strong enough to handle life’s situations; therefore, establishing a strong sense of identity goes hand in hand with the strength to overcome barriers placed in their way.

Ma’ingan said that it was not until “I started university in 2008 that I realized what it meant to be an Aboriginal male... learning about the history of Aboriginal people in Canada... I started taking pride in what it meant to be Aboriginal.” When he was younger, he explained that as a result of colonial relationships and racism, “I had a lot of self hatred, I hated who I am.” Reclaiming his Aboriginal identity began in small steps. He first began to draw Aboriginal artwork and the battle he experienced within himself to know that it was not a sin to draw Aboriginal artwork and that it was okay. “It’s okay to see the beauty in the culture... it’s okay to be Native... I don’t need to hate myself.” His inner strengths are abundantly clear in these statements.

Gizhebi Omiimii experienced a similar encounter, “that’s been my life struggle and my life journey is to figure out who I am and to understand myself as a woman, as an Aboriginal woman, as a French woman.” She shared that when she was in her community, “we never had to identify who we were; we just were. Everybody was the

same.” But, when the school in her community closed, the children were bused to the neighboring non-Aboriginal town to attend school:

*It was only then that we started experiencing racist comments and when you don't know that part of your background, that part of your cultural identity, it was very confusing. And so I would go home and say well people are calling me an Indian, what does that mean. And I was told don't pay attention to that, they don't know what they are talking about, we are French. And so there was lots of confusion... [about] identity growing up.*

She shared that it was not until she came to university that she, “started learning about... what it meant to be a Métis woman.”

These encounters are not uncommon experiences especially when both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children are not taught accurately about Aboriginal peoples and cultures or skimmed over too quickly in school. Unfortunately, far too often it is the media that teaches the general population about Aboriginal peoples and much of it is sensationalized and negative. For many Aboriginal students, it is about learning ‘who I am’ and what that means to me, to my family, and to my community. Gizhebi Omiimii states, “that comes from inside anyway you know, so whether or not you have a card [a Status card, or a Métis card], that’s not the issue, it’s who you know you are and who you believe you are!”

### **Co-researchers: Strengths that Promote Wholistic Success**

Students’ success related to developing capacity to give back to their family, community, nation building, and wanting the good life. Arvol Looking Horse, at his

presentation at *Migizii Agamik* on March 21, 2011, stated that the good life is the, “awareness that life is sacred.” Life is sacred meaning the way in which we respect life on a daily basis is what matters. Kitchi Anishinaabe adds that, “the good life is a journey” and sometimes you come to the realization that you have to “go out for a walk, or say a prayer, or to stop and listen, or to care more.” The co-researchers’ agree it was not so much the end result, but more about helping the people along the way and having experienced meaningful education. The good life is not necessarily what we are working towards, but more about day-to-day living in a good way.

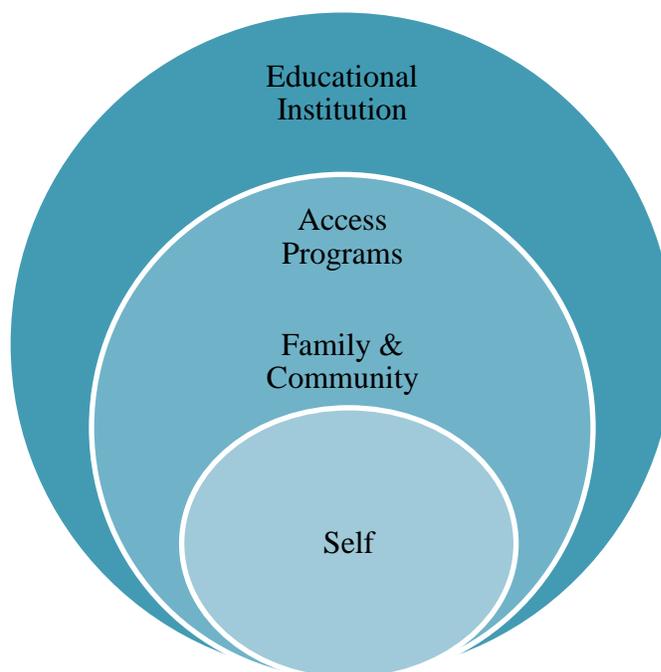
The co-researchers identified strengths that promoted their success. Gizhebi Omiimii said that as an adult learner, “I knew what I wanted, and you have to develop coping mechanisms that will help you to face the challenges when it gets too stressful.” For Aki Kwe, it was about the commitment she made to herself that she would stay and finish her four-year degree program; and she also made the commitment to do well for her family. What motivated her was the awareness that she “wanted a better life for them.” Secondly, she said:

*I knew that I enjoyed learning, I enjoyed reading books, I really enjoyed doing that and when I get stuck on something, I am not afraid to ask for help, so I feel secure enough about myself that I can actually go out there, take a risk and ask people to help me.*

Mide Kwe’s strengths lie in her ability “to plan ahead and to be a consistent parent,” to be a problem solver, and critical thinker, and to express herself. Ma’iingan’s strengths are his family and having the freedom to make his own decisions and choices. Mahkwa’s motivation came from within and wanting “to make an impact on the world,

then I will be in a good place.” Each of the co-researchers strengths and life experiences are unique, and their adaptations reflect their uniqueness.

In addition, the relational connections to external and internal factors are key and discussed below.



**Figure 5: Relational Dimensions**

In conversation with co-researchers, the four relational dimensions discussed were self, family, community, and nation; educational institution; and support programs like the Access Programs. For students, having access to these supportive relationships within these areas provides an enhanced capacity of wholistic success. The relationship begins with self, balancing the four aspects, and internal personal strengths and praxis of knowledge and skills inherent or developed. The students’ central supports were identified as family, community, peers, and guiders. A desire was for the educational institution’s recognition of them as participants in their education as well as the

humanizing approach of support programs like the Access Programs to assist and guide them in their educational journeys and reclamation of spirit, heart, mind, and body.

## **Systemic and Structural Factors**

### **Relationship with Educational Institution**

The co-researchers were of the same mind that educational institutions ought to take a more humanized approach in relationship with Aboriginal students. Educational institutions have a responsibility to provide excellence in education and inclusivity to Aboriginal learners, although, it is not the intention or scope of this study for in-depth discussion on curriculum and pedagogy of the educational institution. However, the co-researchers held that everyone had a role to play in all aspects of the student's educational development. They called attention to the fact that educational institutions must rethink the educational model and the way in which education was delivered. Relative to wholistic supportive programming, often in educational institutions the co-researchers agreed the major focus was on intellectual development and the spiritual, emotional, and physical aspects were often disregarded and seen as someone else's responsibility. A more humanized approach would make more certain the significance of the whole student, especially since it is the emotions that drive our intellect.

From a student perspective, the struggle was in a bureaucracy that was often not accessible, disconnected, rigid, and inflexible. The difficulty faced by Aboriginal students, for example, was that some faculties and departments at the educational institution were more concerned with maintaining their own domain rather than working collaboratively with programs like the Access Programs that support Aboriginal and non-

traditional students. For example, the Access Programs was not recognized by the student's home faculty. This omission was carried over to staff, such as the personal and academic counsellors, who work with the students on a daily basis in the Access Programs. An integrated approach is necessary campus wide. Gizhebi Omiimii says, "That way if a student runs into a problem, they know... the resources in the university as well as in the community as they are both equally important."

### **Relationship with Professors and Instructors**

An essential component of meaningful educational experiences for Indigenous students was their relationship with professors and instructors of educational institutions-- a relationship that is based on mutual learning, that is to say, the students are learning from professors and the professors are learning from the students. Although the professors' relationship includes that of teacher, the relationship is also based on one of power over the students. It was, therefore, imperative that students get to know their instructors and to feel comfortable with them. This connection allows the student to feel more comfortable to ask for help if needed. Since the professors are with the students a significant amount of time that students are on campus, they have much opportunity to build the learner-instructor relationships. For example, a mutual learning relationship would facilitate the Aboriginal students' communication with their professors in order to have a better understanding about the requirements of the course and what is expected of them, for example. Mahkwa highlighted the critical nature of the instructor/student relationship:

*Digging deep I don't want to be in school, I just hate it, there's too much stuff that I feel like I have to do outside, papers and readings. I don't want to do my readings. Every time I sit to do my readings this term and last term, I just feel so tired. I don't feel like I have any energy for school. All my energy is being put in my home... taking care of everybody, you know, the cooking, the cleaning, being on top of my kids, disciplining, and work... is so physically draining on you, but it's emotionally draining [too]. The emotional drain that you experience makes you tired, makes you physically tired, going through that and having to pick yourself up, get through until the kids are in bed... and then sit, and then try to read, a reading that's important, or sit and write a paper, can't, can't, I'm too tired. I can't even see the words on the page, and that's my biggest struggles right now. But, that's also about communicating that to your professors so they can understand what you're going through so they can help you, you know. They don't want to see you fail, but there are people that hold that ability to fail you or not, communicating your struggles with them is the most important thing.*

As mentioned earlier, Mahkwa learned that his mother had developed cancer and this was the underlying personal stressor that he faced draining his ability to focus on his academics.

In another example, some Aboriginal students experienced being put in a position by professors or fellow students to speak on behalf of Aboriginal peoples, or they felt a need to correct misinformation or missing information about Aboriginal peoples and cultures. Some may feel more comfortable to do that. Kitchi Anishinaabe expressed that she “felt, too, like I was out there representing our people.” Because she was confident,

she knew enough about herself and the people; she felt comfortable to do that. But for other Aboriginal students who are beginning their learning journey, they may not feel as comfortable to speak on behalf of the people. As a result of the assimilative education they received in secondary years, they may not know themselves and do not want to be noticed in that way. I agree with Kitchi Anishinaabe that because you are an Aboriginal person, you may not always know the answer or you may be uncomfortable to speak for the people. For some, being put on the spot in this way is fear-provoking and may leave them feeling more powerless. Aboriginal students have to make this decision for themselves and whether they feel comfortable to speak out and to represent a voice of Aboriginal people just as Kitchi Anishinaabe felt confident to do so.

### **Relationship with Migizii Agamik: Our Place**

For Aboriginal students like Aki Kwe, there is a sense that their participation matters on campus through the visible presence of *Migizii Agamik*, Bald Eagle Lodge. *Migizii Agamik* promotes cultural visibility and inclusion. The physical construction and design of the Lodge on campus provides an easily accessible view that Aboriginal students belong here on campus and that there is a community of Aboriginal learners that go here, who study here, and who succeed here on campus.

Elder Charlie Nelson was passed tobacco and requested to perform a Pipe Ceremony meant for a traditional name for the Aboriginal House. The name *Migizii Agamik*, Bald Eagle Lodge, came to him in a dream. In his dream, without going into specifics, the bald eagle flew down from atop the mountains into a valley of calmness below. That is how he envisioned the building in his dream as a place where students

would be able to come and experience that state of calmness. There is a spiritual aspect to the name *Migizii Agamik*, Bald Eagle Lodge, and that is, the eagle flies the highest in the sky and is the one who takes our prayers up to *Manitou*, the Creator. Kitchi Anishinaabe also shared about the eagle that:

*Eagles have vision, too, that is a powerful totem for that lodge, for that place, because eagles fly the highest and they see lots, and in a way that's what we are doing when we go to university, we get a chance to fly higher and to see more.*

In order for students to have that sense of calmness and peace, Kitchi Anishinaabe also believed, “it’s important to have that building, *Migizii Agamik*, and people can go there, people have a sense of somewhere where they can go where they feel accepted and welcomed.” She goes on to say *Migizii Agamik* is more than a building, it’s “more than bricks and mortar.” How are we ensuring that “students feel welcome when they come in there, if you are going to set up a bunch of rules, and I mean you have to have organization, too, for sure, but you also have to have flexibility” in order to ensure that students feel welcomed.

### **Relationship with Access Programs: Humanizing Approach**

Ma’ingan expressed that just knowing there are staff there to help you if you needed help and “even though I may not be there every day, I have a home, I have a place, I have a refuge”—students have that sense of family within the Access Programs; a home away from home. The Program fosters a sense of place and genuine caring and respect for students in a manner that supports them in their educational endeavours. Even with this support, however, not all students stay and complete their chosen field of study.

Even though they may not always complete their degree programs, it is important to note that they still have achieved success at some level for themselves and perhaps because of their experience may be more ready to come back at a later point in their life.

Maniso Ikwe talked about the empathy of the Access Programs' staff when she lost a family member on the first day of the Access Programs orientation and she chose to attend anyway. She said:

*I knew that I would be assigned an Academic Counsellor, but I didn't think I would be seeing my counsellor at the orientation on the first day. I figured it would be in September, and I have to say they are very comforting, they empathize... they take their academic hats off; they are not afraid to be themselves in the office with you. They are talking to you from one person to another... not the counsellor, not the student, just two people in a room.*

In the spirit of empowerment, another dimension of learner supports and teachings that the Access Programs undertake is identified by *Sha Sha Winibisie*, "If I want to help those learners then I have to get them away from using excuses." This lesson is critical for some students. Picking up their responsibility in this way means finding their own inner and personal strength. When this happens, they no longer feel a need to blame others or to be a victim; they find ways and support to overcome their own personal suffering and struggles. In a supportive program, there is an opportunity to see how some students do grow exponentially spiritually, emotionally, physically, and intellectually. The students' achieving wholistic success is one reason why staff are passionate about the work that they do. That is, to witness the students growth and achievement. This is evident especially on their graduation day and to have been a part

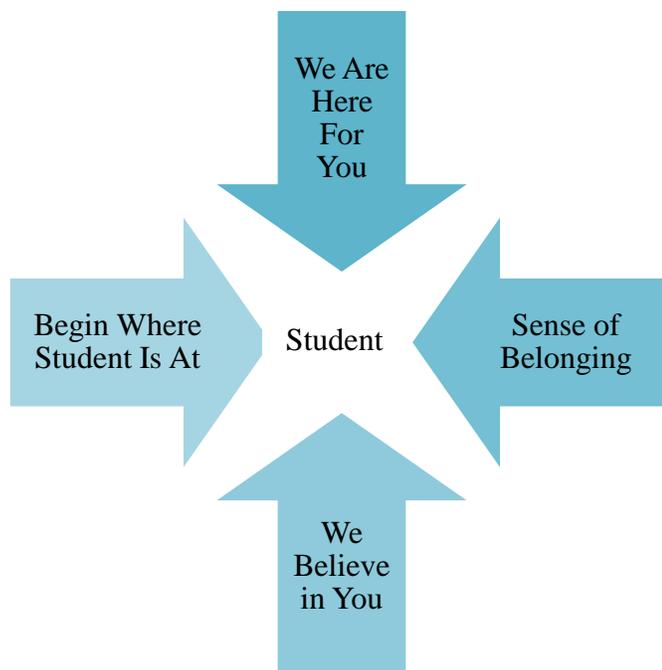
of their learning journey and students' perseverance through many challenges and overcoming fears.

A part of the guiders' work may entail assisting students to piece together their fragmented view. "For me as a supporter to that learner, I have to find ways of saying, 'no,' that's not true, this is the way it was." *Sha Sha Winibisie* refers to the missing pieces of history and is another component to the teaching that is done with students. If we put this into perspective, the Aboriginal peoples in Canada began attending university in the early 1970's—approximately 50 years ago—and that is not a long time. Although we have been moving forward in our formal education, there is still much work to be done. Kitchi Anishinaabe stated that the Access Programs is there to provide a path to:

*Make education more accessible, and we know given the history, that a lot of our people still don't always feel comfortable in these kinds of places, you know. I think that it's very important for these kinds of programs not to forget why they are there, not to become a part of the system.*

"Not to become a part of the system" in a way that was driven by too many rules and inflexibility for the Aboriginal students' unique situations. Gizhebi Omiimii reflected about the Access Programs that represent "one of the few places on campus that students can feel accepted and feel like they have some movement, they have some freedom to be who they are." Therefore, the Access Programs not only provide access to education, but provide the supports to students that they need to have more capacity for success.

## Social and Cultural Factors



**Figure 6: Social and Cultural Factors Illustration**

### **Relationship to Program Staff as Guiders: We Believe in You**

One of the earliest precepts of programs like Access was that which Kitchi Anishinaabe identified, and that was, the concepts that “we are here for you” and “we believe in you.” Access staff belief is that the student’s motivation in tandem with program supports increases the student’s capacity for success. One of the co-researchers identified a life changing experience that shaped his realization to the fact he was going to make it in his studies, “because people expressed that they believed in me.” Their belief in him provided the inspiration in that he wanted to succeed and he wanted to do better. This belief is also reflected in the selection process of new students. The applicants selected into the Access Programs are those with the most identified need, but

also balanced with those who are motivated. The belief is that with the support of staff and the student's motivation, the likelihood of achieving success is greater.

Kitchi Anishinaabe highlighted that as program staff, we “have to be aware of the diversity of our people” in creating “an environment that welcomes everybody.” Staff ought to continually work at being aware of the various life experiences, strengths, and challenges that students bring with them to the learning environment. These include their differing values or ways of practicing spirituality, differing levels of emotional condition, differing levels of financial need, differing levels of ability to access resources, and so on. For example, since some Indigenous students are challenged with their pain and anger, and perhaps do not succeed even with the help available, the staff may become the target for his or her frustration. Additionally, sometimes the student may apply to university for other personal reasons but they are not ready for the academic challenge, and staff may be the ones to deal with difficult situations. These examples highlight the need for staff to be supported by leadership. It is essential the staff maintain their well-being as the work that is done is challenging and rewarding. Furthermore working together within a team effort approach is essential.

However, one of the tasks of staff is to provide a bridge on campus to students who are feeling like Mahkwa in that they are “still not quite fitting in, feeling like I can't talk to no one, feeling like I have no one to relate to, nobody knows what it's like to be feeling racism.” Through the support of staff, they have access to resources that validate how they are feeling and work with them on a continual basis in reclamation of inner strength.

### **Peer Relationships**

Gizhebi Omiimii shared “that one of the things that I learned was that when the staff was gone home at 4:30 or 5:00, that’s when we usually ran into crisis.” Therefore, encouraging students to develop peer relationships or mentoring was important. She said:

*The importance of establishing peer supports and the mentoring... [was] because it’s your peers that you can call at 2:30 in the morning, and say, you know what? I can’t write this paper. I am having a melt-down. So, I would... emphasize the importance of establishing those supports with their peers because those are the ones that are going to be there at 8 o’clock at night when you are struggling to study for an exam or study for a paper or those kinds of things.*

For example, in the Access Programs, these peer relationships are established early on at orientation with fellow students. Also, Gizhebi Omiimii pointed out that, “You didn’t get that sense of belonging in those text books.” Instead, she went on to say that students develop synergy with their peers within a more coordinated support system approach. She mentioned that there is a danger of getting caught up in the institutional policies, and we might get trapped into a certain way of thinking, “but it is important to remember that the students will talk to whoever they are comfortable with.”

Ma’iingan stated that, “It was being around Aboriginal people who I seen [sic] trying and getting an education, and that was encouraging to press on harder.” Peers can be very supportive and as Gizhebi Omiimii shared that it may be your peers that you call late at night if you are having a meltdown and you cannot get started on a paper. With peers, some students may feel like they are in a space with less judgement: We hear what

other students are telling us and what they tell us matters. On a cautionary note, some students may get pulled into adverse situations if some peers are influencing them in a way that does not foster well-being. Nevertheless, peers can be one of the students' most valuable supports.

### **Relationship with Guiders: Begin Where the Student Is At**

The way in which respectful relationships are developed with students is one of the guiders primary tasks. According to Kitchi Anishinaabe, these relationships are key when working with students and how connected they feel to guiders. These connected relationships influence in turn how guiders respond to students, how students respond to guiders, and how guiders can empower them. In wholistic and supportive programs like Access Programs, it is not uncommon for guiders to go beyond what is expected of them to support the students.

As stated earlier, some students have experienced much suffering as a result of their disadvantaged position in society. For instance, an earlier life experience was shared:

*Realizing somewhere along the way I was third generation residential school product, my grandfather was there, my mother was there, and I was there. But also, not understanding how messed up I was when I came out of there... I had a love-hate relationship with my mother because my mother put me inside that residential school, and in talking to those old people, I found out that my mother didn't have a choice. It was just the way they came and they took us and put us inside there. And that was really good because once I understood that then I*

*could love my mother because she was my mother. What happened to me inside that residential school I had to deal with, but inside there also I learned a lot of bad habits about relationships, of not being able to have relationships.*

The guider begins from where the student is at and undertakes to help the student to process various life experiences if the student is ready to do so. The staff may also make referrals to outside resources on-campus or off-campus should the situations call for such referrals.

Not all students are prepared, however, to begin this process and it is their choice. As guiders, one consideration when working with students is not enabling hurtful or harmful behaviours that impact on them in the learning environment. The guiders and students work together at identifying challenges that get in the way and the strengths that will help them to adapt or to adjust what is not working. For example, Ma'ingan pointed out a simple but very complicated endeavour for some and that is, to know “how are you going to take care of yourself” as your well-being affects your ability to balance and to focus all areas of the whole student and influences you to be in a better position in relation to your role as student.

### **Relationship with Family and Community: We Are Here For You**

The relationship with family and community entails one of mutual support. As previously mentioned a small number of Aboriginal peoples began attending university in the 1970's. As a result, some families still have first and second generation family members yet who are attending university for the first time. Now in some families, it will be the grandchildren who are attending. For this reason, some families and communities

are still learning about what is required from their family member who is attending university in terms of the demands and the amount of time and energy that is required for each of their courses. Gizhebi Omiimii was the first in her family and extended family to attend university and she says that:

*My family, my extended family, they tried to be a support. But not having gone through...the experience, it creates a distance there...that you can't really close because they haven't experienced it. They don't understand the demands, they don't understand the amount of time and energy that you have to put into each course, and so I think it affected our relationship that they thought I was ignoring them or just avoiding them. No, I'm really busy and I can't do that right now or I have to say, 'no,' to this, so it really affects the relationship with family and with community.*

Another challenge for Gizhebi Omiimii was leaving her family, friends, and especially her son, when she relocated to the city from her small community. This was followed by having to adjust to the city and to:

*Find my way around, figure out... where do I go and pay bills, where do I go to a bank, you know everything was so scary and that was probably the biggest challenge to make that transition from rural to urban because in the small towns...everything that you need is on one street.*

For Aki Kwe, her family support came in the form of a dream that her father had for her and her siblings. She said:

*Part of it was my dad always had this dream for us that we were going to go to [university]... but the other part of it was someone had to get the ball rolling in*

*my family, and my older sister did. She was the first one to go to university and graduate. So if one of your siblings does it, then you say well if she could do it, then we can do it too. So, we all followed.*

Incredibly, eight of Aki Kwe's eleven siblings went to university. She talked about how when you have family or extended family that have attended university before you, you can see that it is possible, and their achievement paves the way for you. While attending university, Aki Kwe shared that whenever she needed help, she could always count on the support of her family—her parents, sisters, and brothers. Kitchi Anishinaabe states, "That students may succeed in spite of not having family or community to support them; however, it sure makes the learning journey easier if those supports are there."

### **Personal Factors**



**Figure 7: Personal Factors Illustration**

### **Relationship with Self**

Kitchi Anishinaabe indicated one of the principles of programs like Access was to provide a path to education:

*Because even though we are in 2011, we still have a lot of people coming in there that need a lot of support, and yes, they need academic support, and they need all those supports as a student, but they are human beings first.*

A strong relationship with self helps us to mitigate times when we are not feeling confident. Mide Kwe used self talk:

*I used to think, when I was sitting at the computer, about my grandfather on the trap line. And I'm here [at university], amazing how that happens over generations, and that really helped me. Because I thought of him walking every day of his life and how hard that was, and how he had to go in the snow and whatever kind of weather it was. And here I was in the house, and there's just this computer machine in front of me, that's all I had to do. I didn't have to go walking for days and days, I could do this work. And that is how I persuaded myself to do the work.*

The relationship with self also includes the level of self confidence and motivation. For example, a student coming to university as a graduate from high school may feel more confident whereas a mature student may not be as confident due to having been out of school for a number of years. In addition, if he/she arrives on campus with negative experiences from the educational system, his/her relationship with self and self confidence may have been weakened. The mature student may be relocating into the urban centre from a northern community and may be leaving behind his/her family and

maybe also have the added responsibility of caring for children. On the other hand, a mature student's motivation may be higher than a recent graduate. The level of motivation may be driven more intrinsically by the mature students' personal educational or professional goals such as he/she's will to succeed as a way of making a better life for their family. Thus, their level of motivation and will to succeed may be greater as a result of these goals that pertain to their family.

### **Relationship with the Spiritual: Identity**

The relationship with our spiritual aspect entails connection to spirit, or inner self. In this space we are more able to discover who we are. For Aki Kwe, "whenever the opportunity presented itself, I would really look into discovering that part of me... I was very proud of being Anishinaabe." In the same vein, Mahkwa stated, "I didn't know who I was, just knew I was Aboriginal, and that I looked white." He was, "searching for who I am." All he really knew about being Aboriginal as he was growing up was about the negative stereotypes. In his early life, he mirrored and conformed to the negative stereotypes and he got into trouble and was getting involved with people whose influences were not so good. He said that back then, his knowledge and understanding of being "Native" was more about braided long hair and dream catchers. He recalls feeling stuck not knowing who he was and shared about a difficult time he experienced. His uncle helped him to get through it:

*We drove all around the city and we just talked.... what makes you who you are is what you do with your life... something kinda clicked... it's about me making my*

*own identity and being comfortable with that and being happy with who I am and being proud of all the parts... from that moment on, it was life changing.*

Mahkwa looked up to his uncle and it was his uncle who exposed him to the positive side of his Aboriginal identity. He introduced him to ceremonies, and together they explored Mahkwa's family history and ancestors. Later on in university, Mahkwa shared:

*Once I got into university, I realized that I had to write about my story a lot more. The more pages that were asked for me to write my story, the more I had to dig; the more I had to dig, the more I had to really understand who I was, and then it became easier for me to talk about myself.*

Today, he knows that who you are was not just "one answer," but "who you are is a long story." Mahkwa carries much strength. Among his strengths is that he has made a conscious choice to learn from his early life experiences instead of letting them consume him and to remain entrapped by them.

The co-researchers identified that knowing who we are as Aboriginal peoples and honouring our cultural DNA plays a key role in our successful learning. Kitchi Anishinaabe sums up a key element:

*I think in the end it's... that internal part of who we are, I think that is probably the most important part, that you can build up a lot of external supports for people, but in the end it's the internal that really will determine... how well they do in whatever they decide to do.*

One role of external supportive programming is to assist Indigenous students in building up their internal strengths.

### **Relationship with the Emotional: Confidence**

The relationship with the emotional aspect relates to the differing levels of emotional condition that manifests within the learning environment. The challenges for some students result more from the emotional aspect rather than the intellectual aspect that puts them more at risk. For some, the differing levels of emotional condition may be due to unresolved fear, hurt, pain, grief, or anger like fear of failure or fear of being judged. Through strengthening the internal aspect, taking risks, and belief in self, challenges manifesting from colonial relationships, attitudes, behaviours, and practices, become less of a threat. As indicated earlier, Kitchi Anishinaabe stated that a big part of students' wholistic success has to do with their internal strengthening. Through internal strength, Ma'iingan added that the internalized impacts become less and less and do not get played out in students' hearts and minds as much:

*Remembering the people who never thought I would become anything... those people who called me bad names, I remember those people in times when I want to quit, I think screw you, I'm going to get it, I'm going to become somebody, I remember those people and in some ways, thank you to them because you've helped me become better than you.*

Kitchi Anishaabe asserts that “in order to be a successful learner” external supports are essential, but it is one's internal strengths that are the foundation to their wholistic success.

**Relationship with the Physical: Responsibility**

The relationship with our physical aspect means awareness of our physical being as sacred. Co-researchers highlight that each of us has a responsibility to take care of and not abuse our physical being with alcohol, drugs, and commercial tobacco. Instead, respect our physical being through sleep, exercise, and healthy eating. We take care of our physical being by means of putting into place adequate housing, daycare, or transportation during our educational careers.

The co-researchers maintain that as students we accept responsibility for our own actions and behaviours and do not blame others or make excuses for our inactions in relation to our studies. We are responsible to maintain our focus, organization and time management. For example, we maintain our responsibility by beginning to study for tests/exams early, as well as beginning our papers early, attending and being on time for classes, and asking for help such as tutoring when needed. Paying attention to our physical aspect helps us to learn in a more balanced way and convergence of resiliency and adaptability as the heart or focal point that facilitate achievement. Responsibility is a key value of Indigenous culture.

**Relationship with the Intellectual: Strengths**

The relationship with the intellectual aspect from a traditional cultural perspective is to seek out our purpose in life through identification and development of our gifts and strengths. The co-researchers highlight that in contemporary society, having access to information through higher learning equips us to move forward through a greater understanding of our context. For example, in high school fragmentation and missing

information did not facilitate our knowledge about colonial relationships and their impacts such as racism. Instead, Indigenous students felt isolated, excluded, and marginalized; we did not fit in thinking that it was just about us and it was just in that one place, when in fact it is all around us in the whole of society. Ma'iingan says that in university, "I found out that was there, racism, way before I got to high school."

Consequently, co-researchers agree that higher learning is valuable because it raises our consciousness and our ability to understand the larger systemic and structural forces in society, that impact on us, and to ask questions that count. Higher learning allows us to develop our intellect in a way that empowers us to make our own decisions, to find our own solutions, to take informed action, and to reclaim the Good Life. Higher learning provides us with the ability to set our own course for the future through education: One that will provide us with the capacity to succeed in contemporary society with our cultural identity whole.

## CHAPTER 6: ENVISIONING NEW DREAMS: DISCUSSION

*This is what this whole journey has been about. Through our minds, hearts, bodies and spirits we are pushing the edges here in these Western schools, we are taking a little bit of friggin' space ... And we hold our hands up to those who helped create it. (Kovach, 2009, p. 173)*

The discussion that follows is based on the three levels of factors that impact on Indigenous students: (1) systemic and structural, (2) social and cultural, and (3) personal. The areas reviewed under each are the factors that affect wholistic success and the factors that promote wholistic success in higher education for Indigenous students.

### **Systemic and Structural Factors**

#### **Challenges that Affect Wholistic Success**

##### *Colonial Relationships as Root Causes*

Consistent with Yosso (2005), a deficit approach (p. 75) continues to exist rather than attributing the root causes as systemic and “structural deficits of educational systems” (Pidgeon, 2009). Mide Kwe revealed, “There was a lot of racism in school...my friends dropped out...because they couldn't take school. It was too racist, and even the teachers were racist.” These colonial attitudes, behaviours, and practices persist in educational institutions serving as barriers. The co-researchers warn about the structural power relationships (Leonardo, 2004), cultural capital and class differences (Lamont and Lareau, 1988), white privilege (McIntosh, 1989) that are exerted on a daily basis.

Privileged attitudes, behaviours, and practices are exclusionary which continue to hinder relationships in higher learning.

Some faculties and departments are not fully aware of the work that is done by Indigenous programming, like the Access Programs, inhibiting guiders' ability to support the students. The transference of alleged inferiority, difference, and unintelligence (Sefa Dei, 2006, p. 9) onto staff and students in effect rationalizes the dynamics that hinder achievement. Instead of approaching the deficit situation from a systemic and structural position, it is often the individual staff or student who is targeted as the liability. Ponting and Voyageur (2001) identify these patterns of sustained inequality of treatment of Indigenous staff and students as justifiable by their alleged inferiority (p. 270).

Schick and St. Denis (2005) point out that the mistreatment of Canada's Aboriginal people tends to be ignored (p. 304). This omission was highlighted by the historic apology in 2008 by Prime Minister Harper and brought attention around the globe about Canada's mistreatment of Aboriginal peoples in the residential schools. More recently, on October 27, 2011, Dr. David Barnard, President and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Manitoba also presented a statement of apology and reconciliation at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to Indian Residential School survivors. Dr. Barnard said:

The next logical step in healing is telling our own story. For over 130 years, the University of Manitoba has worked to create, preserve and communicate knowledge...encouraging debate, building excellence and fostering innovation. In spite of this we have failed Aboriginal peoples...The University of Manitoba educated and mentored individuals who became clergy, teachers, social workers,

civil servants and politicians. They carried out assimilation policies aimed at the Aboriginal peoples of Manitoba...In order to take the next step in advancing Indigenous scholarship and the success of Indigenous people, collectively as well as individually, we must acknowledge our mistakes, learn from them, apologize and move forward in a spirit of reconciliation.

Dr. Barnard's raising the consciousness of educational institutions in this way is beneficial to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students as a new relationship can be reconstructed based on truth. Telling the truth about the Indigenous peoples in Canada benefits the well-being of all society. Now, the children of Indigenous Nations can take pride in knowing that the people have contributed authentically to Canada and to modern society.

### ***Financial Barriers***

The co-researchers agree that for Indigenous students a primary challenge lies in the financial barrier to accessing post-secondary education. The fact is that the majority of Indigenous families in Canada live in poverty or are low income earners. This is amid the capped financial assistance of the Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP), the rising costs of tuition, rising cost of living, family responsibilities, and that a substantially higher number of First Nations youth have become eligible to apply for PSSSP financial assistance. But, the Métis and non-status students remain excluded and are ineligible to apply for PSSSP financial assistance. The chronic underfunding for education and general poverty in our communities leads to widespread despair and sense of hopelessness rather than seeing opportunity and access to post-secondary education.

Division was caused among Indigenous peoples, for instance, by the limited financial resources allotted to post-secondary education for only “status Indians.” Non-status and Métis peoples do not have access to the financial resources allocated through the Post-Secondary Student Support Program Funding. Even the cost of tutoring and transportation to get to class are prohibitive if access to financial resources is limited. The students are pressured by strained financial resources and under heavy debt load which causes them to lose focus and puts them at risk of leaving their studies.

### **Strengths that Promote Wholistic Success**

#### ***Relational: Engaging Relationships through Wholistic Guiding Principles***

Through the interpretation process and making meaning of data, guiding principles emerged in the helping relationship that reflects wholistic learner supports. The teacher as guider and student, in concerted effort, seek to maintain the following reciprocal approach and guiding principles:

1. Recognizing the students as whole human beings who are influenced by four aspects—intellectual, spiritual, physical, and emotional—that blend into one another;
2. Facilitating process of maintaining balance spiritually, emotionally, intellectually, and physically;
3. Facilitating process of maintaining balance with outer concentric circle of relationships including family, peers, community, nation, educational institution, and society;
4. Aiding in creating a welcoming environment and sense of belonging on campus;

5. Guiding the students from where they are at in their personal and emotional condition;
6. Recognizing their unique gifts and strengths that they identify;
7. Building reciprocal relationships within a space that is equitable, safe, and trusting;
8. Speaking from the heart in relationship with mutual respect and genuineness;
9. Supporting the rights of students to identify who they are in their reclamation of Indigenous identity and as Indigenous learners in contemporary society;
10. Maintaining high expectations of students;
11. Supporting the students in “picking-up” their responsibilities;
12. Fostering belief in the students’ abilities;
13. Supporting and validating the students toward re-constructing their wholeness of being, self-worth and self-confidence;
14. Advancing an integrated approach campus-wide with staff, peers, and other campus resources.

The study confirms that teachers as guiders take a “non-directive” (Hart, 2002, p. 55) and wholistic approach to helping in relationship with Indigenous students. This relational approach consists of not telling students what to do, but guiding them in finding their own solutions and supporting them to take responsibility for their informed learning, decisions, solutions and actions. The students maintain responsibility for their educational goals and careers in a reciprocal and collaborative working relationship with the guiders. The guiding principles emerged from my conversations with the co-

researchers as well as my experience working with Indigenous students in Indigenous programming at the university.

These guiding principles highlight the wholistic approach guiders engage in relationship with Indigenous students in supportive programming situated within the post-secondary educational institution. These guiding principles support the self-mastery of the learning spirit identified by Anuik, Battiste and George (2010). One aim is to enhance the capacity of Indigenous students to bridge the gap caused by fragmentation and the two worlds and two cultures in which students walk and the compelling obligation to be proficient in both the Indigenous and Western worlds. Hence, there is inevitability, for bicultural expertise (Fitznor, 2006; Graveline, 1998; Montes, 2006; RCAP, 1996) and ability to navigate successfully back and forth between the Indigenous and Western cultural worlds. As stated previously, part of the work of programs like the Access Programs is to help the students to turn inward and to begin there to build up their internal strengths. One of the strengths that the students have is that they already know the answers, but the work done in reciprocal relationships with guiders facilitate them to uncover their truth.

Maria Campbell in her keynote address at *Shawane Dagoiwin* (In *Anishinaabemowin* means being respectful, caring, and passionate for Aboriginal research), 2011, stated that “it is important to ground ourselves in the ways of the peoples...[and to] always walk the talk.” The guiding principles reflect the culture through the respectful and caring relationships that guiders work at cultivating with students and the passion with which that work is carried out. For example as stated, many times guiders go above and beyond of what is expected in their job descriptions

because right now the reality is that a student needs that extra support. As attested to by the co-researchers, they may have dropped out were it not for the support of programs like Access Programs and the staff. The wholistic guiding principles reflect the basis on which the reciprocal relationships are carried out with students.

Within the helping relationship and wholistic learner guiding principles, the whole student is regarded in the learning process. Wholistic learner supports foster piecing together the student's fragmented view and life experiences in a way that support their educational journey through wholeness, balance, and growth in the learning process, significant relationships, and wholistic success.

## **Social and Cultural Factors**

### **Challenges that Affect Wholistic Success**

#### ***Fragmentation***

The incongruence caused by conflicting encounters, invisibility, and disruption of Indigenous cultures in Canadian society creates a fragmentary view (Ermine, 1995; Smith, 1999) or split personality (Friere, 1993) causing chaos (Gaywish, 2008) and confusion in the lived experiences of Indigenous students. The co-researchers agreed with Tyler, et al., (2008) about the incongruence experienced by some Indigenous students in the classrooms. Aki Kwe described this experience, "at home we were allowed to be Indian [or Indigenous], but then when we went to school, we had to hide that, we had to protect that in some way." For some, this experience has to do with not wanting to be seen in judgement causing them to be treated differently.

Mahkwa identified another facet of fragmentation that impact some Aboriginal students like him who have Caucasian physical features. He says:

*You know, you grow up and you're kind of quiet...but you're outgoing when you're with friends. And then at a certain point...you hit that identity crisis stage, you start trying to identify more as Métis or Aboriginal. And my friends start to turn on me. It seemed like junior high, grade eight...And when they started to think it was fun to make one person in our group singled out, they would pick on them...When it got to be my turn, when people started to single me out, I felt like it was more when I started to identify more as Aboriginal.*

Mahkwa's outward appearance is made up of light physical features--he experienced not fitting in within the dominant world, nor within his Indigenous roots. His experience highlights another issue that affects some Indigenous students if their physical features are Caucasian and their internal DNA relate more with their 'Aboriginalness.'

Another aspect is that of walking in two worlds in Canadian contemporary society as Indigenous cultures continue to evolve. Kitchi Anishinaabe cautioned us to be mindful of that, "The culture can change, like we are all living in this city and we are not living the way we used to live... some of us, but you still carry whatever that means to be Aboriginal inside of you and those principles and values are always there." Thus, although our cultural DNA remains in constant flux (Little Bear, 2000, p. 78), our cultural identity remains deeply rooted within our being. In addition, knowing our true historical roots reclaims our place in society in the present time.

Upon entering higher learning educational institutions, some Indigenous students are challenged with reclaiming identity and place within education and within Canadian society. Kitchi Anishinaabe shares that Aboriginal peoples have:

*Been trying to have our voices heard for a long time and it has not been easy... because people did not want to hear what we had to say... The reason why I believe we were able to survive was those teachings were inside of us and they stayed inside of us all through history. And while we were not allowed and we were punished for practicing our culture and traditions, they were still inside of us and that's why we were able to continue on and to be strong.*

The co-researchers agreed with Ramp and Smith (2004) that Indigenous peoples' intimate and contextual knowledge of historical truths are intimately bound to our identity, culture and well-being (p. 74). Having access to authentic historical knowledge creates the space in us to piece together fragmented views to one that provides a clear understanding of the whole and "to have a total vision of the context" (Freire, 1993, p. 104).

### **Strengths that Promote Wholistic Success**

#### ***Right to Express Cultural Beliefs and Values***

As Aboriginal peoples Ma'iingan talked about our right to express our cultural beliefs and values without fear of being stereotyped, discriminated, or judged. He stated:

*For Aboriginal people...there is still so many negative stereotypes about Aboriginal traditional people; they must be doing something with black magic or something evil or something like that. But I think for wholistic success means*

*believing and expressing your spiritual beliefs whether through conversation or symbols like having something that has meaning to you like tobacco pouch and being able to have it around your neck... and not feeling that you are going to be stared upon or talked about, having that freedom to express your beliefs.*

There is consensus among co-researchers that knowing and celebrating our cultural identity and heritage advances our full participation at educational institutions. As Indigenous students' wholistic success increases knowledge about rights and affords the freedom to express cultural identity, beliefs and values. The reality for many Indigenous students is that disregarding cultural belief and values is not an option at educational institutions.

### ***Support of Family and Community***

The co-researchers agreed with Degen's (1992) findings in that the support of family is one of the primary factors that promote educational success for Indigenous students. A finding of this study is that the support and recognition of the student's community is also regarded as a key component. Ma'iingan described, through story, about his efforts to succeed at university and the support he received from his family and friends. He envisioned:

*It's like a whole bunch of people in a race, and you are the person racing. And there's a whole bunch of people cheering against you, you are going to fail, you are going to be wrong. But you are like "no," I am going to win this race, I am going to beat you, I am going to overcome you. But success is, there are always a few people in the crowd cheering you on, helping you along the way, and I think*

*huge is having the supports. Those are those who helped me, my dad ... and the people... my mom... some close friends who helped me along the way.*

This depiction about the support received from family, friends, and community is significant as well as the leadership of the communities who are also significant to student motivation and achievement.

### ***Reclaiming the Good Life***

The co-researchers agree with Ramp and Smith (2004) and Hampton (1995) that the purpose of education is not so much their individual attainment, but rather to serve the well-being of the collective and breaking destructive cycles that have occurred as a result of the root causes of colonial relationships. *Sha Sha Winibisie* shared that we have a responsibility to do what we can to make life better for those who are coming behind and “to set those good footprints and to feel good about who we are.” For many Indigenous students, it is what Hart (2002) refers to as *Mino-Pimatisiwin* and is one of the reasons why they attend educational institutions and to achieve a better future. This is expressed by Ma’iingan, “I don’t do it for myself, the success comes from helping the other people, for me, that’s what makes me happy is by helping other people” and in essence “the honour of one is the honour of all... basically; it’s the honour of everyone... that is the best success for me.” The co-researchers identified it was necessary to have those who blazed the trails which Ramp and Smith (2004) identify as the successful persons who others could look up to and whom they could follow.

Another component is the leadership as key within programming at educational institutions. Leadership who have the vision and understanding about the reality of

Indigenous staff and students and ensuring the processes are in places that support both staff and students. In this way, the teachers as guiders can assist the students to uncover more their responsibility and accountability for their actions and decisions in a way that helps them to grow personally, culturally, emotionally, academically, physically and spiritually.

## **Personal Factors**

### **Challenges that Affect Wholistic Success**

#### ***Multilayered and Multicomplexed Internalized Messages***

For Ma'iingan, the message that played over in his mind was, "I'll never make it to a faculty, I'll never pass courses, like all of those things that I was called when I was a kid, those negative things probably would have just been nurtured" at the main campus. But, from taking risks and not giving up, and "with success they [internalized negative messages] get less and less." The challenges for students lie in facing their fears and raising their individual consciousness to understand the impacts of these internalized messages in a personal way, and to begin to work through them with guiders. For example, one co-researcher indicated that, "I had a teacher tell me I wasn't going to be anything in my life." It is these internalized messages from colonial attitudes, behaviours, and practices that students need help to process. In another example, Mahkwa described how the internalized messages made him feel alone and isolated. He states:

*I feel like my turn of being singled out of the group was done in a more racist way, I got threatening phone calls at home sometimes saying they were going to*

*beat me up, or whatever, and I was a dirty Indian, I'm a savage. All those little nasty racist type of comments, I heard them, I was threatened. I felt threatened, people start to beat you down like that... your just a kid, you start to take that kind of stuff to heart, and you're feeling... alone and isolated.*

These internalized messages are deeply rooted in the persona of some Indigenous students. For that reason, leadership is critical. For example, it is leadership that ensure staff are afforded a workload that allows time to work with students in a manner that is prevention meaning taking proactive and preventative measures. Mide Kwe highlights one danger if staff workload is unmanageable; there is “just... enough time during the day to put out fires... [staff] can't really do like good solid work, so I think the administration has to take a look” at situations such as this in staff efforts of providing wholistic learner supports to students.

### ***Fear of Success***

Although fear of success was not mentioned in the individual interviews, it was discussed in the closing Sharing Circle as a reality experienced by some Indigenous students. Some students may feel they are not deserving of success or they may question whether they are ready, and may sabotage completing their degree programs either consciously or unconsciously. Some carry fragments of unworthiness magnified by continuance of colonial attitudes, behaviours, and practices on them. Some may experience depressive episodes that reflect their fear of success and the attendant responsibility that may bring. For some it is a grieving process or of expending energy and the overwhelming feeling of relief and ending a challenging educational journey

upon graduation. Now they have to go on to something new—a new life, a new career, a new role in their community, perhaps in a leadership position. Some may still question whether they are ready for their new roles. Now, they are not the student, but they are the ones who people in their community will look to for answers. They need to gain familiarity in their new roles. They need to gain financial stability for themselves and their families. They need to live up to the aspirations they have set out for themselves. There is a lot of pressure for some graduates as they go on into the next new phase in their lives.

### **Strengths that Promote Wholistic Success**

#### ***Validation and Opportunity***

What became apparent throughout my conversations with co-researchers is the fact that validation, for example about who they are, was life changing. They talked about the people in their lives who were instrumental in fostering the feeling that they mattered. For the co-researchers, most often this person emerged as a family member, a staff member of programs like the Access Programs, or a teacher involved at all levels of their education. These “clicks” spurred their resiliency, motivation, ambition, and perseverance. It encouraged them to take risks, and to see, and to dream a new future. It encouraged them and created a space in which to strive and to want to resist and to “re-right” (Absolon, 2008; Fitznor , 2002) their own personal stories through education.

***Responsibility: Re-Righting Personal Story***

For some, re-writing their own personal story may mean facing their fears. The co-researchers agreed with Alfred (2009) and Young (1997) about the difficulty for some Indigenous students of articulating their colonial experiences and the uncomfortable feelings that result. Aki Kwe identifies the work that has to be done, and that is, for some Indigenous students to articulate for themselves how to re-right their own personal story: Their personal intergenerational experience, how was their family affected, and to work continually on their personal awareness and understanding of the intergenerational trauma and impacts on them, their family, and their community.

Responsibility is an important cultural component; and taking responsibility means identifying and developing their inner personal strengths. In this way, students no longer feel a need to blame or to fall victim, as a result of their personal suffering, historic trauma, and intergenerational impacts of colonial experiences. In a supportive program, there is an opportunity to see how some students grow exponentially spiritually, emotionally, physically, and intellectually. Kitchi Anishinaabe explains that the students' aim is gaining the ability to make their learning a part of who they are, and in making sense of their experiences, putting into action their awareness and making those key decisions in their lives. Because of the historical colonial experiences, past and present, Indigenous students are required to take up the responsibility and re-write their personal story in order to move forward.

## **Envisioning New Dreams**

When Indigenous students arrive at post-secondary institutions, they have varying levels of knowledge about systemic and structural factors, social and cultural factors, and personal factors that are impacting on their wholistic success. There needs to be true and genuine commitment on the part of governance structures at educational institutions to assist in the forward movement of Indigenous students through education. It requires commitment of leadership who will continue to dialogue with Indigenous programming and Indigenous students, and not exclude their voices from the processes.

Based on the findings, I propose the following recommendations. Given that this is a qualitative study, these recommendations are not generalizable, but are likely to be transferable to similar contexts.

- 1) That there is continuing need for supportive programming like the Access Programs in higher learning and delivery of wholistic guiding principles that remain flexible in order to meet the changing needs and aspirations of Indigenous students. The findings of this study indicate that programs like Access Programs are necessary and require an ongoing high level of commitment by educational governance in support of wholistic programming and approaches for Indigenous students.

Kitchi Anishinaabe suggests being ever aware of how Indigenous students are evolving is a key component. Aki Kwe also asserts one of the missing pieces in her educational experience was a learning environment that assists Indigenous students to

build up their confidence as learners. She says that it is not enough to build this confidence through the students own success in their individual courses, “just take the course, and the confidence will come.” She explains that there has to be more concrete efforts in programming and through a learning environment that facilitates an evolving cultural identity, honing cultural values and facilitating discovery of unique gifts and strengths. Programs that support Indigenous students more wholistically contribute to retention through greater resource accessibility and to be more in touch with cultural identity on campus. The relationship of wholistic learner supports to wholistic success for Indigenous students promotes greater participation and more meaningful educational experiences within the academy on a daily basis.

- 2) That higher learning faculty, staff, and other personnel are informed about Indigenous students’ cultures, languages, traditions, and the barriers to their full participation.

A greater awareness and understanding about the assimilative experiences of Indigenous students is necessary at the post-secondary level. For example, the following two degree credit courses are compulsory and are offered to undergraduate students at the University of Manitoba: Aboriginal Education in the Faculty of Education, and Aboriginal People and Social Work Practice in the Faculty of Social Work. In addition, there is an Aboriginal awareness workshop that is offered at the University of Manitoba to faculty and staff. This workshop needs to be mandatory for all present and new faculty and staff at all levels including administration and professors. The findings highlight the

need for more compulsory initiatives such as these at educational institutions that include a compulsory course in Indigenous histories and experiences at the first year level for all new university students. This will help to ensure greater understanding campus wide and the mutual advantage to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities as a form of reciprocity.

- 3) That an integrated approach and collaboration are necessary with Indigenous programming that affords equal participation of Indigenous students and respects the guiding principles that emerged from the students' voices in this study.

More awareness within educational institutions is necessary about Indigenous programming and the need for an integrated approach that enhances delivery of more seamless supportive programming and educational excellence to Indigenous students.

- 4) That Indigenous students are supported and provided with the same opportunity in their chosen fields of study in all faculties and departments to gain proficiency in both Indigenous and Western ways of knowing, through strengthening Indigenous identities, languages, and voices at educational institutions.

Educational institutions have an obligation to educate both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in acquiring full knowledge such as colonial and assimilative experiences and acquiring full knowledge is necessary to informed action.

- 5) That the higher learning educational institutions address the chronic underfunding of Indigenous students as it remains one of the greatest barriers to their wholistic success.

The study confirms that current under-funding for post-secondary education remains one of the greatest challenges to access and attainment of post-secondary education for many Indigenous students including First Nations, Métis, non-Status, and Inuit students. The reality is that for many students such as mature students who are returning to attain post-secondary education, many have family members and children to support financially. Therefore, financial support in the form of bursaries or forgiven grants would assist in alleviating pressures and support students to focus in their chosen field of study. Other considerations for alleviating financial pressures include male and female residences for Indigenous students, family units, a cafeteria that promotes affordable healthy meals three times a day, and daycare facility to alleviate the below poverty living situation of students and provide them with access to basic living needs. Instead of underscoring only deficiency as the basis for eligibility of funding education, why not also highlight and fund Indigenous students such as graduates from Grade 12 or graduates from adult learning centres.

### **Limitation of the Study and Future Consideration for Research**

The purposeful sampling of this study did not include the voices of the younger generation of Indigenous students between ages 18 to 20 years as support programs like the Access Programs aim to serve more the non-traditional students. The non-traditional students tend to be mature students over the age of 21, who have had their education interrupted and have been away from the education system for a number of years, and generally have family whom they are supporting. As suggested by Kitchi Anishinaabe, there is a younger Indigenous population that is fast approaching the age to attend university. For some Indigenous families, it is the grandchildren who are becoming the next generation and reaching the age to attend post-secondary educational institutions. A common perception among the co-researchers was indicated by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996), and that is, “The youth struggle to find a place for themselves as Aboriginal people in the modern world... to learn their peoples’ traditional values, beliefs and practices and to have a say in their future” (V4, Ch. 4, pp. 3-4).

A consideration for future research is identifying the unique strengths and needs of the younger generation of Indigenous students and the ways in which post-secondary educational institutions intend to respond to their needs and aspirations.

### **All My Relations**

I am in consensus with Pidgeon (2009) that a wholistic approach to success for Indigenous students will make more certain their wholeness and balance of spirit, heart, mind, and body, while building the relationships necessary to reclaim and to maintain their unique cultural integrity (p. 254). With the support of educational institutions for a wholistic approach, the wholistic success of Indigenous students would ensure that good footprints are set for future generations. As Dr. Barnard said when he spoke to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (October 27, 2011), “Education has a transformative power for students, their families and communities.” The wholistic success of Indigenous students means that our families, communities, nations and the Seventh Generation will continue to enjoy the beauty, abundance, and prosperity of Mother Earth.

Elder Garry Robson, *Sha Sha Winibisie* honoured us with a closing prayer at our Sharing Circle and I am honoured to close this segment of our learning journey and research for truth and knowledge with his prayer:

*Aaah Boozhoo, Mishomis. Sha Sha Winibisie nindizhinikaaz, Mikinaak doodem.*

Grandfather, I say miigwetch, miigwetch, that we were able to gather together here, Grandfather. I ask that all the ones who come to listen to see what we had to say here Grandfather, that they might go back to those four directions to let our relatives know over that way, that our Grandfathers over that way, that they found their Spirit in good spirit and in good health, Grandfather, that again we tried our best to create a situation that would be helpful for those that are coming after us Grandfather. Aahh miigwetch.

*Gakina ndinawemaaganag* (All my relations)

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## Appendices

## Appendix A: Consent Form for Co-Researchers

Date:  
 Research Project Title:       Constructing Wholistic Success in Higher Education:  
   Exploring the Experiences of Indigenous Students  
 Researcher:                     Audrey Richard, Graduate Student  
 Advisor:                         Dr. Nathalie Piquemal

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.

I am a Master's student in the Faculty of Education enrolled in the Faculty of Graduate Studies at the University of Manitoba. I am currently in the process of conducting a study for my Master's thesis that will explore why some Indigenous students succeed in higher learning despite the challenges they face and to what extent, if any, is their wholistic success impacted by the efficacies of wholistic learner supports.

I am requesting your participation in this study. This will require your participation in an initial Sharing Circle (approximately 2 hours), one interview (approximately 1 hour), and a final Sharing Circle (approximately 2 hours) in that order respectively. For the Sharing Circles, an Elder was offered *asemaa* (tobacco) to say the opening and closing prayers and to partake in our discussions. The approximate time that is required for your participation is six to seven hours and includes your travel time and parking. In addition, I am requesting that you send me debriefing emails throughout the process if you wish and soon after each of the Sharing Circles and interview. The number of debriefing emails that I am requesting is zero to three (approximately 1 hour). The debriefing emails may consist of feedback and/or comments that you would like to add throughout the process or that resonate for you from the Sharing Circles and interview. Please send your emails to my University of Manitoba email account to ensure that information is received with as much security as possible although please be aware that email transmission is not fully secure. My email address is [richard@ms.umanitoba.ca](mailto:richard@ms.umanitoba.ca). Your email address and all other potentially identifying information will be automatically removed before it is made available for analysis (Z.M. Lutfiyya, email communication, November 19, 2010) thereby ensuring confidentiality is maintained as much as possible.

The questions you will be asked are open-ended questions and are attached for your information. The Sharing Circles and interview will be audio-taped and transcribed by me. In addition, detailed written notes will be kept to record your ideas and responses. Only I, and my advisor, Dr. Nathalie Piquemal, will have access to these documents. The written documents will not include your name or any identifying information about you or the program, and will be stored in a locked office, at Room 226-45 Curry Place, to ensure confidentiality of the information. These written notes will inform my Master's

thesis with respect to findings of the study, and all information will be destroyed (shredded) at the conclusion of the study by April 2012.

The Sharing Circles and interview are to be conducted at the Aboriginal House, University of Manitoba, during the period January to March 2011 at a time that is convenient for you. The location of the interview may change to a neutral location at your convenience. By signing this consent form, you agree to keep confidential the identities of the co-researchers and Sharing Circle discussions. In addition, please be advised that the results of the study may be shared or disseminated through conference presentations, journal articles, etc.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You will be free to disregard any questions during the Sharing Circles and the interview or to withdraw from them at any time. If you would like to receive a written summary of the results of this study when it is completed, please indicate so on the form below.

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding your participation in the research study and you agree to participate. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, or involved institution 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. If you would like more information or clarification of any of these points, please contact me, Audrey Richard, at (204) 474-8027 or by email at [richard@ms.umanitoba.ca](mailto:richard@ms.umanitoba.ca) or my advisor, Dr. Nathalie Piquemal, at (204) 474-7032 or by email at [piquemal@ms.umanitoba.ca](mailto:piquemal@ms.umanitoba.ca).

This research has been approved by the Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board (ENREB). If you have any concerns or complaints about this project, you may contact any of the above-named persons or the Human Ethics Secretariat at 474-7122. A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Co-Researcher's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_ Please provide me with a written summary of the results of the study.

My email or mailing address is

\_\_\_\_\_.

## Appendix B: Letter to Dean of Extended Education



UNIVERSITY  
OF MANITOBA

Fort Garry Campus Research Ethics Boards  
CTC Building, 208 - 194 Dafoe Road  
Winnipeg, MB R3T 2N2  
Phone: (204) 474-7122

Date

Dear (Name of Dean),

I am a Master's student in the Faculty of Education enrolled in the Faculty of Graduate Studies at the University of Manitoba. I am currently in the process of conducting a study for my Master's thesis that will explore why some Indigenous students succeed in higher learning despite the challenges they face and to what extent, if any, is their wholistic success impacted by the efficacies of wholistic learner supports.

I am writing to request your approval to contact the Director of the University of Manitoba Access Programs (UMAP), Health Careers Access Programs (HCAP), Education Access Program (EAP), and Professional Health Program (PHP) to request assistance to inform current students about the study by way of letter that I will provide. The letter to students will invite them to contact me, the researcher, directly if they are interested in participating in the study. In this way, the students' participation is completely voluntary. The students' written consent will be obtained prior to their participation in two Sharing Circles and one interview during the months of January to March 2011. The Sharing Circles and interview will be arranged at a convenient time and location for participants and will require approximately six to seven hours each of their time. They will be free to disregard any questions or to withdraw from the Sharing Circles and interview at any time. Although the identities of co-researchers will be known to me at the time of the first Sharing Circle, their identities will be kept confidential including any information that is disseminated. The Sharing Circles and interviews will be recorded (audio taped) and any written notes will not include the participants' names or identifying information.

Basically, this describes the purpose of the study and what the recruitment of the co-researchers involves. If you would like more information or require clarification on any of the aforementioned information, please contact me, Audrey Richard, at 474-8027 or by way of email at [richard@ms.umanitoba.ca](mailto:richard@ms.umanitoba.ca). My advisor is Dr. Nathalie Piquemal, who can be reached at (204) 474-7032 or by email at [piquemal@ms.umanitoba.ca](mailto:piquemal@ms.umanitoba.ca).

This research has been approved by the Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board (ENREB). If you have any concerns or complaints about this project, you may contact any of the above-named persons or the Human Ethics Secretariat at 474-7122. Thank you for your consideration to my request.

Sincerely,  
Audrey Richard, Graduate Student

## Appendix C: Letter to Director



UNIVERSITY  
OF MANITOBA

Fort Garry Campus Research Ethics Boards  
CTC Building, 208 - 194 Dafoe Road  
Winnipeg, MB R3T 2N2  
Phone: (204) 474-7122

Date

Dear (Name of Director):

I am a Master's student in the Faculty of Education enrolled in the Faculty of Graduate Studies at the University of Manitoba. I am currently in the process of conducting a study for my Master's thesis that will explore why some Indigenous students succeed in higher learning despite the challenges they face and to what extent, if any, is their wholistic success impacted by the efficacies of wholistic learner supports.

I am writing to request your assistance in inviting students to participate in my study. Your assistance will consist of distributing the attached information letter to students. The students, who are interested in participating, will contact me directly. In this way, their participation is completely voluntary. The students' written consent will be obtained prior to their participation in two Sharing Circles and one interview. The Sharing Circles and interview will be arranged at a convenient time and location and will require approximately six to seven hours each of their time. They will be free to disregard any questions or to withdraw from the Sharing Circles and interview at any time. Although the identities of students/co-researchers will be known to me at the time of the first Sharing Circle, their identities will be kept confidential including any information that is disseminated. The Sharing Circles and interviews will be recorded (audio taped) and any written notes will not include co-researchers' names or identifying information.

Basically, this describes the purpose of the study and what your role in the recruitment of co-researchers involves. At the completion of the study, if you wish, I am happy to share the findings of the study with you. If you would like more information or require clarification on any of the aforementioned information, or if you are interested in helping me with the recruitment of co-researchers as outlined, please contact me, Audrey Richard, at 474-8027 or by way of email at [richard@ms.umanitoba.ca](mailto:richard@ms.umanitoba.ca). My advisor is Dr. Nathalie Piquemal, who can be reached at (204) 474-7032 or by email at [piquemal@ms.umanitoba.ca](mailto:piquemal@ms.umanitoba.ca).

This research has been approved by the Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board (ENREB). If you have any concerns or complaints about this project, you may contact any of the above-named persons or the Human Ethics Secretariat at 474-7122. Thank you for your consideration to my request.

Sincerely,  
Audrey Richard, Graduate Student

## Appendix D: Information Letter to Present Co-Researchers



UNIVERSITY  
OF MANITOBA

Fort Garry Campus Research Ethics Boards  
CTC Building, 208 - 194 Dafoe Road  
Winnipeg, MB R3T 2N2  
Phone: (204) 474-7122

Date

Dear (Co-Researcher's Name)

I am a Master's student in the Faculty of Education enrolled in the Faculty of Graduate Studies at the University of Manitoba. I am currently in the process of conducting a study for my Master's thesis that will explore why some Indigenous students succeed in higher learning despite the challenges they face and to what extent, if any, is their wholistic success impacted by the efficacies of wholistic learner supports. Your participation will help me to gain insight through your perceptions about student wholistic success and wholistic learner supports.

If you are willing to share your experiences, please contact me at (204) 474-8027 or by email at [richard@ms.umanitoba.ca](mailto:richard@ms.umanitoba.ca). If you agree to participate, I will meet with you at a time and place that is convenient for you. The two Sharing Circles and one interview will take approximately six to seven hours of your time during the months of January through March 2011. Everything you share with me will be kept strictly confidential and you do not need to answer any of the questions that are attached that make you uncomfortable. You are also free to leave the Sharing Circles or to stop the interview at any time. By signing the consent form, you are also agreeing to keep confidential the identities of the co-researchers and Sharing Circle discussions.

It is important for you to know that your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. No one will be informed about whether you are involved in this study and your participation is not at all related to your evaluation in any way.

I hope that you will consider your involvement in this research as your experiences will be very helpful in my understanding about student wholistic success and wholistic learner supports. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or if you require further information or clarification at (204) 474-8027 or by email at [richard@ms.umanitoba.ca](mailto:richard@ms.umanitoba.ca). My advisor is Dr. Nathalie Piquemal who may be reached at (204) 474-7032 or by email at [piquemal@ms.umanitoba.ca](mailto:piquemal@ms.umanitoba.ca).

Thank you for your agreeing to participate in this study.

Sincerely,  
Audrey Richard, Graduate Student

## Appendix E: Information Letter to Past Co-Researchers



Fort Garry Campus Research Ethics Boards  
 CTC Building, 208 - 194 Dafoe Road  
 Winnipeg, MB R3T 2N2  
 Phone: (204) 474-7122

Date

Dear (Co-Researcher's Name)

I am a Master's student in the Faculty of Education enrolled in the Faculty of Graduate Studies at the University of Manitoba. I am currently in the process of conducting a study for my Master's thesis that will explore why some Indigenous students succeed in higher learning despite the challenges they face and to what extent, if any, is wholistic success impacted by the efficacies of wholistic learner supports. Your participation will help me to gain insight through your perceptions about student wholistic success and wholistic learner supports.

Thank you for your willingness and agreeing to share your experiences. I will meet with you at a time and place that is convenient for you. The Sharing Circles and interview will take approximately six to seven hours of your time during the months of January and March 2011. Everything you share with me will be kept strictly confidential and you do not need to answer any of the questions that are attached that make you uncomfortable. You are also free to leave the Sharing Circles or to stop the interview at any time. By signing the consent form, you are also agreeing to keep confidential the identities of the co-researchers and Sharing Circle discussions.

It is important for you to know that your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. No one will be informed about whether you are involved in this study and your participation is not at all related to your evaluation in any way.

Thank you for your involvement in this research as your experiences will be very helpful in my understanding about student wholistic success and wholistic learner supports. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or if you require further information or clarification. You may reach me at (204) 474-8027 or by email at [richard@ms.umanitoba.ca](mailto:richard@ms.umanitoba.ca). My advisor is Dr. Nathalie Piquemal who may be reached at (204) 474-7032 or by email at [piquemal@ms.umanitoba.ca](mailto:piquemal@ms.umanitoba.ca).

Thank you for your agreeing to participate in this study.

Sincerely,  
 Audrey Richard, Graduate Student

## **Appendix F: Sharing Circles' Questions and Protocol**

### **Sharing Circle #1: Questions**

The aim of the first Sharing Circle is for group learning to occur and for the researcher and co-researchers to reach a consensus in our common understanding about the definitions of “wholistic learner supports” and “wholistic success.” According to Pidgeon (2009)

A wholistic approach to success would ensure that the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual needs of Aboriginal peoples are being met while, at the same time, facilitate relationship building... and assist Aboriginal students and faculty to maintain their unique cultural integrity (p. 254).

The questions that will be posed are:

1. How do you define wholistic learner supports?
2. How do you define wholistic success?
3. Describe situations that you experienced that reflected wholistic learner supports?
4. To what extent, if any, do you feel the wholistic learner supports you may have received positively impacted on your wholistic success, or not, and how were strengths enhanced?

### **Sharing Circle #2: Question**

The final Sharing Circle will consist of the researcher sharing preliminary results to which the co-researchers will have the opportunity to provide feedback. One question is posed:

- Are your thoughts and feedback accurately reflected in the preliminary results?

### **Sharing Circle Protocol**

- Our first purpose is to make connection with each other
- A trusting and safe atmosphere is created for open discussion and learning
- *Asemaa* (tobacco) is offered to the Elder and co-researchers in exchange for our learning together and the acceptance of *asemaa* (tobacco) acknowledges our obligation of working together in a good way with open minds and hearts
- The Circle is made sacred through *asemaa* (tobacco), smudging, prayer, and everything discussed in the Circle is real and confidentiality is maintained
- We will listen to the person inside of each of us, and we will take ownership of our feelings
- What is true for you will be determined by what is within you, by what you feel and by what you find making sense within you. Also, the way in which you live inside yourself is important
- The decisions made within the Circle need everyone to take part in some way
- As the researcher, I am responsible for protecting each member's place within the Circle
- As the researcher, I will ensure that everyone in the Circle is provided with an opportunity to speak and will ensure that everyone is heard

The above guidelines are adapted from Hill cited in Hart, 2002, p. 79.

## **Appendix G: Interview Questions**

The interviews are semi-structured and follow an open-ended question format that will guide our conversations.

### **Indigenous Methodology**

1. In order for me to begin to develop a relationship and to get to know who the co-researcher is up front, I asked them to tell me a little bit about themselves to aid in my coming to know him/her that will include, but not limited to the following:
  - Gender (obvious);
  - First Nation, Status, non-Status, Bill C31, Métis or Inuit;
  - Age: Adult learner, or recent graduate from high school;
  - Place of birth: rural, northern, or urban;
  - Married status;
  - Number of children and their ages;
  - Are you first or second generation family member to attend post-secondary;
  - Was there ever a person in your life who inspired you the most and why;
  - Do you consider yourself to have maintained your Aboriginal/Indigenous identity, i.e., do you speak your language; and
  - Can you share with me how you decided to come to university?
2. How do you define wholistic success in post-secondary and beyond?
  - What does wholistic success mean to you?
  - Describe your understanding of the outcomes of wholistic success for you?
3. Describe your understanding of what does the good life mean to you?
4. What were the challenges you perceived you would face in post-secondary that would hinder your wholistic success (i.e., academic, personal, cultural, social, or economic)?
  - What challenges did you in fact face?
5. What is your perception about why you are succeeding or not?
  - What is helping or hindering your wholistic success?
6. Describe the strengths you brought to the learning environment or developed that helped you to overcome the challenges you faced.
7. How did the wholistic supports you received help you to recognize or to develop your strengths?
  - How did the wholistic supports help you to deal with the challenges?
  - How did you cope with or address these challenges?

### **Indigenous Epistemology**

1. Describe what things you know because of having gone through the experience, like a time(s) when you almost dropped out of university and you doubted yourself?
  - Describe what was it that helped you the most, from your inner most being, to persevere and to get over not leaving?
2. Can you tell me what meaning, if any, does spirituality have in your life?
  - If this aspect is important to you, how do you experience your spiritual self?

**Indigenous Ontology**

1. Describe what you believe about your relationship with self, with others, with the support program you went through, and with the educational institution?
  - How did these relationships impact on your wholistic success?
2. What role, if any, does your family, extended family, or community relationships play in your educational success?
3. Having gone through or currently in a program like Access, what does/did the program have to offer you?
  - How did it respond to your needs, or not?
4. Considering the aim of programs like Access in providing learner supports, what is your perception of the impact on your wholistic success?
5. What more can be done?
6. How does that give us direction in strengthening wholistic supports that are offered through programs like Access?

**Indigenous Axiology**

1. Describe what are the rules of right behaviour in your relationships that contribute to your wholistic success?
2. How is your perception of right behaviour impacted by the wholistic learner supports you received?
3. What is the value of education for you?
  - Why are you interested in furthering your education?
  - What is behind your desire to learn?
4. What force or volition is helping you to make key decisions in your life on campus?
5. What helps you to act upon key decisions and to carry them out?