Remember, the Creator gave us two ears and one mouth, to listen twice and speak once.
Learning to listen is the most important thing.
Wolastoqi Elder Gwen Bear, personal communication, October 26, 2010
STORIES FROM THE CIRCLE:

EXPLORING REFLECTIVE SCHOOLING EXPERIENCES WITH WOLASTOQI AND MI’KMAQ RECENT HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES

by

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Territorial Acknowledgement

I acknowledge that the land on which this dissertation research was conducted and written is the traditional unceded and unsurrendered territory of Wolastoqiyik (Maliseet). This territory is covered by the Treaties of Peace and Friendship which the Wolastoqiyik (Maliseet), Mi'kmaq, and Passamaquoddy peoples first signed with the British Crown in 1725. The treaties did not deal with surrender of lands and resources but in fact recognized Wolastoqey (Maliseet), Mi’kmaq, and Passamaquoddy title and established the rules for what was to be an ongoing relationship between nations.

(Mi'kmaq Wolastoqey Centre, 2018)
Abstract

Improving educational experiences and academic outcomes for First Nations students has become a central priority across Canada (Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, 2010). However, the voices and perspectives of First Nations students themselves are largely missing from both policy and research reports. Instead, existing literature adopts a deficit model that focuses predominantly on those who drop out of school. This dissertation builds on the premise that the dominant negative portrayal of First Nations students may be hindering efforts to improve education for First Nations youth by perpetuating and sustaining stereotypes. This is problematic for current students, and does not reflect the reality in New Brunswick, where the majority of First Nations students are graduating. In an effort to address this inequity and disrupt the discourse of deficit that has dominated the field of First Nations education, this dissertation explores the question “what was school like” for successful Wolastoqi and Mi’kmaq high school graduates.

Guided by an Indigenous research paradigm interwoven with a narrative inquiry methodology, I explored “stories of school” with seven Wolastoqi and Mi’kmaq high school graduates. Using a sharing circle and individual interviews, participants were engaged as collaborators and co-creators of this study. Narrative analyses—re-presented stories of participants accounts—were conducted to transport readers into the narrative worlds of students, and to honour the role of storytelling in Wolastoqey and Mi’kmaq First Nations. A thematic analysis and discussion of the data supplements the narrative analyses, and begins new conversations about personal, institutional, and familial factors that were important in shaping participants’ experiences in schools.
Participants’ stories offer hope to communities, educators and current and future generations of First Nations youth by demonstrating that academic success is possible. However, their stories also reveal that the struggle to find a place in mainstream public schools is also experienced by those who succeed academically and go on to graduate. Theirs are strong voices; voices that are needed in the discussion on improving education for First Nations students in this province.
Dedication

In loving memory of my father, Bob Schneider, my Elder, Gwen Bear, and my Dean, Ann Scherman. Your fingerprints are all over this work, and you are always in my heart. I miss you. Koselomulpa.

To my children and my participants’ children: may you be able to live and learn together, and appreciate one and other in dignity, peace, and prosperity on the lands that we all call home.
Acknowledgements

This dissertation was profoundly influenced by many relationships in my life. While it is impossible to thank everyone who contributed in some way to shaping this work, I must thank a few of my special teachers.

First and foremost, I want to thank my Elders, Gwen, Imelda and Dave—you not only worked with me and inspired my thinking along this journey, you embraced me and welcomed me into your communities and homes.

Gwen—even though I only knew you for a short time during your earth walk, I felt you with me throughout this journey. Woliwon for your guidance from beyond.

Imelda—you brought more to me than I ever could have imagined. You have been my mentor, my healer, my spiritual leader and my friend. Woliwon for your incredible gifts of time and love.

Dave—you are the one who gave me the confidence to keep going in those early, confusing years. You are a teacher in the truest sense of the word. Woliwon.

The love and gratitude I feel for each of you cannot be described in words.

Koselomulpa.

I also extend my deep gratitude to my supervisory committee. Each of you has contributed so much to this dissertation, and I can’t thank you enough for the years of commitment, patience and guidance you provided me.
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Thank you to my ‘team’ at MWC, who not only gave me a job and helped me become a teacher, a curriculum developer, and a researcher, but who also became my family. Your support and friendship over the past 9 years have been invaluable to me.

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To my parents, Bob and Bernice—you instilled in me the gift of wonder and the confidence to pursue my life work on my own terms. Dad, I miss you and I wish you were here to read this. I think you would have been proud. Mom, you have always been my greatest teacher. Thank you for everything you do.

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To Braelyn and Cole—your presence in my life is an incredible gift. This work is better because of the happiness and inspiration you have brought into my life.

Most of all I thank the young adults who collaborated with me in this research and entrusted me with their stories. Your courage and strength continue to inspire me and without you this work would not exist. It was by thinking of you, and your children, that I was able to persevere and finish this dissertation. Woliwon. Wela’lin.
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Coming to Terms

The language and terminology used with respect to Indigenous peoples of Canada have changed and evolved over time so that most of the names currently in use are those preferred by the people to whom they refer, rather than labels given to them by their colonizers (Martineau, 2005). Nonetheless, that the Canadian government retains the power “to name groups and determine membership in these groups is a [constant reminder and] remnant of Canada’s colonial history” (Findlay, 2014, p. 1). Therefore, as Findlay (2014) reminds us “[a]ny research involving Aboriginal peoples must begin with a discussion about naming and the importance of names” (p.1, emphasis added). As such, I include this segment on how I came to (some) terms and have also included a glossary of names, words, and concepts in Appendix A.

There are many derogatory and discriminatory terms that have been used to describe Indigenous peoples in Canada for generations, and some of these have been normalized and are still commonly used. Such terms include *Indian, tribe, band, reserve* and *reservation*, to name a few (Perley, 1997; see Appendix A for greater details). These terms were imposed on First Nations people by colonizers, including explorers, settlers, missionaries, and more recently anthropologists and archeologists, and they continue to promote the view that First Nations people are inferior. Knowing this, I have “had to make some political choices when deciding what words to use” (Bishop, 2002, p. 10).

According to the teachings I have received from my Elders and cultural advisors, I strive to use language that promotes *harmony*, rather than *disharmony* (Perley, 1997). This includes using terms that are consistent with the usage of local First Nations, particularly paying attention to their rights to self-identification.
The term *Indigenous peoples* meaning “the original inhabitants” (Wilson, 2008, p. 34) emerged in the 1970s primarily out of the political struggles of the National Indian Brotherhood in Canada, and the American Indian Movement in the United States. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), a Maori scholar, states: “It is a term that internationalizes the experiences, the issues and the struggles of some of the world’s colonized peoples” (p.7) and is currently used in a global context to refer to peoples, communities, knowledges, and traditions with historic ties to a land or region prior to the arrival and intrusion of foreign colonizers. In Canada, this term is often used interchangeably with Aboriginal peoples (Lavallee, 2007). However, in a CBC interview with Connie Walker (2015), Hayden King, professor of Indigenous Governance at Ryerson University, claims that to many people the term Indigenous is preferred over Aboriginal as it is seen to have originated from Indigenous peoples themselves.

*Aboriginal* is an inclusive term for Indigenous peoples of Canada, and refers to all First Nations, Métis, and Inuit individuals, families and communities (National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2011). These are three separate groups with unique heritages, languages, cultural practices and spiritual beliefs.

*Native* has similar meaning to Aboriginal. Native peoples is a collective term to describe the descendants of the original peoples of North America. The term is commonly used and mostly supported by Aboriginal peoples, although some argue that it is increasingly seen as outdated and is starting to lose acceptance (Lavallee, 2007). However, participants in this project used the term Native quite frequently when referring to themselves or other Aboriginal peoples and so I utilize it within the context of their stories.
The term *First Nations* was first introduced by the National Indian Brotherhood (now known as the Assembly of First Nations) in the 1970s to replace the word “Indian,”¹ which many people found offensive. The term *First Nations peoples* applies to both *Status* and *Non-Status* First Nations individuals: the former are registered under the Indian Act, while the latter are not² (Lavallee, 2007). *First Nation* is also used in the names of specific communities. According to the Assembly of First Nations National Chief, Perry Bellegarde, there are currently over 630 First Nations in Canada (personal communication, May 30, 2015; Assembly of First Nations, 2017) which represent more than 50 nations or cultural groups and 50 Aboriginal languages. *First Nations* has gained popular approval due to its recognition of the original inhabitants of this land (Perley, 1997).

While Aboriginal people have encouraged the use of Native, Indigenous, Aboriginal and First Nations (Perley, 1997), and these are useful terms to discuss similar issues that affect many different groups of people, they do not “truly represent the diversity of the Nations involved” (Wilson, 2008, p. 34). Aboriginal peoples have a right to self-identification, and more and more people are choosing to identify themselves as a member of a specific nation.

¹ It is important to remember, however, that in Canada “Indian” is a legal term. Indian is “used to signify those people the government recognizes as having Indian status; that is, those people who are recognized under the *Indian Act*” (Findlay, 2014, p.1).
² The term “non-status Indians” is formally used by the Canadian government to refer to First Nations people who are not officially recognized because their parents or ancestors lost their status for a variety of reasons. “Non-status Indians may identify themselves as Aboriginal, yet they are not considered status Indians by the government and so do not have many of the same rights under the law. …Consequently, “the Indian Act definition has been and continues to be a divisive force among Canada’s natives”” (Cardinal, 1969, as cited in Findlay, 2014, p.2)
Wolastoqiyik (generally pronounced Wool-luss-too-gweeg, and sometimes spelled Wolastoqewiyik) are generally known in English as Maliseet people; however, this term is an exonym attributed to them by Mi’kmaq who referred to them as Malisitchik—literally, “slow speakers” (Mi’kmaq-Wolastoqey Centre, 2018) or “the broken talkers”—in conversation with early European colonizers (Chamberlain & Ganong, 1899, p. 8). While the majority of Wolastoqiyik still accept and use the term Maliseet (Perley, 1997), many are striving to reclaim their own name for themselves after Wolastoq (Wool-luss-took)—the original name for the St. John River—which lies at the heart of their traditional territory, Wolastokuk (Wool-luss-too-gook), in New Brunswick and Maine. Wolastoqiyik are therefore “people of the beautiful and bountiful river” (Opolahsomuwehs, personal communication, May 8, 2012). While Wolastoqiyik is a noun referring to all of the people, Wolastoqi (Wool-us-took-gey) and Wolastoqey (Wool-us-took-way) are adjectives that are used with animate and inanimate subjects/objects, respectively. Today, Wolastoqey First Nations remain located in proximity to the St. John River throughout Central and Western New Brunswick. Throughout this dissertation, I utilize Wolastoqi, Wolastoqey and Wolastoqiyik as much as possible, but I also utilize the term Maliseet as it is still used commonly in communities and was used quite frequently by collaborating participants.

Mi’kmaq (generally pronounced Meeg-maw) are the largest group of First Nations people of Mi’kma’ki, which includes Atlantic Canada (Nova Scotia, Prince

3 Opolahsomuwehs is UNB’s Elder-in-residence, Imelda Perley’s, Wolastoqey name, which she uses when she is transmitting traditional knowledge. It translates in English to Moon of the Whirling Wind.
Edward Island, New Brunswick, and Newfoundland) the Gaspé peninsula of Quebec, as well as parts of Maine. Their traditional territory and current day First Nations communities in New Brunswick are along the eastern, coastal parts of the province, in a district of Mi’kma’ki known as Siknikt4 (Sable & Francis, 2012). The name Mi’kmaq literally means “The Family” (Native Council of Nova Scotia, 2003, p. 2), and is derived from the term nikmaq meaning “my kin-friends” or “my brothers” which was used to greet early European colonizers in the 1600s (Nova Scotia Museum, n.d.5. In this way, Mi’kmaq is an exonym attributed to these First Nations people by French and British settlers who heard and recorded this greeting. According to the Nova Scotia Museum’s Mi’kmaq Portraits Collection (n.d.), their autonym, Lnu (pronounced ell-nu) in singular, or Lnúk, Lnu’k, Lnu’g, or Lnùg in plural, means “human being” or “the people.” The variant form of Mi’kmaq is Mi’kmaw which is used as both the singular form of Mi’kmaq, and also as an adjective where it precedes a noun, such as in Mi’kmaw people or Mi’kmaw students (Native Council of Nova Scotia, 2003, p. 2). For centuries, their name has been spelled Micmac in English, however, according to the Mi’kmaq Resource Guide (Native Council of Nova Scotia, 2003, p. 2) this is a corruption in spelling and pronunciation of the word Mi’kmaq, and is considered demeaning. Nonetheless, this term is still widely used in parts of Nova Scotia, PEI and Conne River, Newfoundland and Labrador (Sherman, personal communication, January 27, 2016). Even so, I will

4 Mi’kmaq recognize seven districts of Mi’kma’ki in Nova Scotia, PEI, New Brunswick and the Gaspé region of Quebec, with an eighth district, Ktaqmkuk being recognized in Newfoundland. Siknikt, meaning “drainage area” is the district in New Brunswick that includes the Miramichi River, the Acadian Coast and Bay of Fundy Region (T. Sable & Francis, 2012, pp. 21–22). For more information on the seven districts of Mi’kma’ki see Sable & Francis (2012).
5 http://novascotia.ca/museum/mikmaq/?section=spelling
only utilize this term when referring to titles of documents or directly citing important historical information.

I have made the decision to capitalize terms representing groups of people, such as Indigenous, Aboriginal, First Nations and the names of specific nations, just as other designations based on the social construction of race (ie. White) and nationality (ie. Canadian) are capitalized (Findlay, 2014; Warry, 2007). However, throughout the text, there are direct quotes from academics, including Indigenous scholars, who do not always capitalize the collective terms Indigenous and Aboriginal. In these cases, quotes are presented as written.

The final ‘s’ in the terms Indigenous peoples, Aboriginal peoples and First Nations peoples is utilized throughout this text as a way of acknowledging and recognizing “that there are real differences between different indigenous peoples” and nations (Smith, 1999, p. 7). This usage is common in the literature and “has been argued for quite vigorously by indigenous activists” (p. 7).

Recognizing that “it is a political act” (Graveline, 2000, p. 367) to name a group of people, particularly when that name designates a race or ethnic group, I also name some of the terms that I use to describe myself within this dissertation. These are terms that are often left unspoken and therefore remain invisible.

White and Whiteness are powerful social and political constructions that do “not just refer to skin colour but… [an] ideology based on beliefs, values, behaviors, habits and attitudes” (Calgary Anti-Racism Education, 2015, para. 9). Throughout history, Whiteness has become normative and natural; that is, the “standard against which all other cultures, grounds and individuals are measured” (Henry & Tator, 2006, pp. 46–xviii
47), while usually remaining invisible. As such, Whiteness also represents a position of power (Frye, 1983a) and results in unequal distribution of power and privilege based on skin colour (Frye, 1983b; Kivel, 1995). The act of naming Whiteness and recognizing my own positioning, and hence privilege in society as a White woman, reveals its invisible position whereby structural advantages and racism can start to be explored and questioned.

*Settlers* in this dissertation is used to refer both to people of European heritage who *settled* in Canada during centuries of colonial expansion, as well as their descendants, like myself, who continue to benefit from colonization and the widespread dispossession of existing Indigenous societies (Castree, Kitchin, & Rogers, 2013). By naming myself a settler I strive to recognize that my ancestors were not from this land and in doing so simultaneously acknowledge those who were.

*Allies* refers to people, generally from a dominant group, “who use any opportunity to learn more and then act on what they learn” (Bishop, 2002, p. 109). Allies recognize the unearned privilege they have received and continue to receive from society’s structural inequalities and take responsibility for changing these patterns of injustice. However, they also recognize that “they did not individually bring the situation about” (p.110) and they must act *with* others to contribute to change. Allies also “believe that to do nothing is to reinforce the status quo” (p.110); that is, by doing nothing, you are actually part of the problem. Over the past ten years, I have begun to call myself an ally to Indigenous people and particularly to First Nations students in New Brunswick. I hope that through my actions I have earned this right.
Prologue: Looking Forward, Looking Back

Stories go in circles. They don’t go in straight lines. It helps if you listen in circles because there are stories inside and between stories and finding your way through them is as easy and as hard as finding your way home. Part of finding is getting lost and when you are lost you start to open up and listen. (Tafoya, 1995, p. 12)

This research focuses on the personal stories of several First Nations students in New Brunswick. Set amidst a backdrop of increasing political and social pressure to improve the educational outcomes of Aboriginal students in the face of continuing colonial relationships and an abundance of deficit discourses which portray First Nations students as failures, co-constructed narratives of these successful students’ stories of school are presented to disrupt the dominant discourse and offer new insight into current needs and challenges. I invite you to read these stories in Chapter 5: What was school like? A narrative analysis first, if you wish. It is the voices of these students that brought me (and perhaps you) here in the first place.

This dissertation, however, did begin with someone, somewhere. As author of this dissertation I played a role in this study. My purpose, questions, presence and participation influenced how these students told and retold their stories, and my choices, albeit in consultation with them, led to the re-presentations before you today.

As I write this, sitting at my kitchen table looking out over the woods in my backyard in beautiful traditional Wolastoqey territory, I find myself struggling with where to begin this research story. My story of what brought me to this research is as much about the absence of stories, of relationships, as it is about my personal lived experiences.
I began this journey, an exploration into the conditions of First Nations education and, particularly, the experiences of a handful of Wolastoq and Mi’kmaq students, comparable to a novice portager, completely naïve to my surroundings but too stubborn to admit that I was in over my head. The path was very long and circuitous. At times I found myself trudging through the muck, weighed down by burdens. At other times, I floated along merrily on beautiful stretches of calm blue waters, while always knowing a twist lay ahead. I survived mostly due to the kindness and willingness of others to come to my aid. Nearing the completion of the journey, I find myself at times overwhelmed with gratitude.

I am also conflicted. It seems like there is so much more to do, so much more to learn, as if all the trudging and floating of nearly the past decade has been spent along a slow, meandering river, and now the current is speeding up, hurtling me forward into frothy white rapids.

Yet I must begin, and so I start with where I am and where this work took place. I use the metaphor of the river to describe my journey and the momentous flux I am currently witnessing in the field of First Nations education in this country to honour Wolastoq, the “beautiful and bountiful river”6 (Opolahsomuwehs, personal communication, May 8, 2012). Wolastoqiıyik7, the “people of the beautiful and bountiful

6 Wolastoq is commonly known today as the St. John River.
7 Wolostoqiıyik is generally pronounced Wool-luss-too-gweeg.
river” (Opolahsomuwehs, personal communication, May 8, 2012), are one of two
distinct First Nations peoples in New Brunswick, the other being Mi’kmaq\(^8\), and both
the University of New Brunswick (UNB) and my home in Fredericton, New Brunswick,
rest in their unceded and unsurrendered traditional territory, Wolastokuk\(^9\). It is
important for me to acknowledge where I write this to show proper respect for the land
and the people with whom I have worked closely throughout my doctorate. When we
acknowledge and situate ourselves on traditional territory we recognize those who were
here first and the lives of their descendants who are still here despite the colonization
and disruption that has occurred. In doing so, we recognize a longer history than is
normally taught in schools, a history that has been hidden from many Canadians. We
also begin to build a more equitable society.

During my time at the Mi’kmaq Wolastoqey Centre (MWC) at UNB, my Elders,
Gwen Bear and Imelda Perley (Opolahsomuwehs), also taught me that in order to know
who you are you need to know where you come from. In many First Nations cultures it
is considered “customary to introduce yourself by stating your name...your clan or
society, and where you and your ancestors are from” (Lavallee, 2007, p. xi). Providing a
personal introduction is an important protocol both in First Nations communities and in
narrative inquiry, the relational methodology which guides this study. By doing so I
provide others the opportunity to situate and assess where I come from, my motivations
for the research, and whether or not I can be trusted (Kovach, 2009).

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\(^8\) Mi’kmaq is generally pronounced Meeg-maw.
\(^9\) Wolastokuk is generally pronounced Wool-luss-too-gook.
Throughout this journey I have discovered, however, that situating myself within my family lineage is not easy. I suspect I am not the only settler Canadian to feel this way. Nonetheless, I offer a brief introduction to my family and how my upbringing, particularly my experiences in school influenced my beliefs about schools and my motivations for this work.

My family is, perhaps, what Eva Mackey (1999, p. 20) would describe as *Canadian-Canadians*. That is, White, Anglophone settler Canadians of European heritage whose ancestors – for the most part – have lived in Canada for many generations, and although I know my ancestors came primarily from Germany and Scotland, this has not really factored into my identity. I believe that growing up in my family was typical of many Canadian-Canadian families, in that culture did not play a conscious role in our lives. One could even say that I grew up seeing myself as “cultureless” and “normal” (Donald, 2009b, p. 335).

My parents, Robert (Bob) Schneider and Bernice Schneider (née MacIsaac) moved from Regina, Saskatchewan to Edmonton, Alberta after they were married to attend the University of Alberta. Five years later, I was born in Calgary. My siblings, Greg and Kim, followed two and four years later, respectively. We moved to Oakville, Ontario when I was nine years old and my dad was transferred for work. This suburban Southern Ontario town and the Catholic schools I attended there for most of my elementary and all my high school years were outwardly very multicultural. I had many friends of different ethnic backgrounds, a few of whom spoke different languages, and they definitely had culture. Yet I have no memories from this early period of my life of
ever asking: *What is my culture?* I was simply part of the “ordinary” (Mackey, 1999, p. 20), dominant majority to which everyone else was compared.

I also have no memories of any Indigenous families living in our town, or students attending my school. However, I do remember playing “Cowboys and Indians” during recess, and I recall several history lessons where we had to learn what kind of houses the “Indians” of early Canada lived in, what they ate, and what they wore. In these lessons First Nations people were always represented as romantic, mythological and archaic – ancient people of a less civilized time. Richard Wagamese (1994) writes, “Indians were always second to the explorers who were creating the real history of North America” (p.12-13), and, in my Catholic school, they were also second to the missionaries. Stories of the “brave” Jesuits who lived amongst and ministered to the “heathens” were abundant, and field trips to former mission sites occurred more than once. Through all of that, I do not remember ever thinking that the stories of these people were connected to me, the places I had lived, or the country I called home.

It is in this way that Indigenous histories, territories and peoples were absent from my life. It is embarrassing but also important for me to admit that throughout my high school and early university years, Indigenous issues were not present in my consciousness. I admit this despite the personal risks because I also know I am not alone. Until recently, curricula across Canada has largely been devoid of Indigenous histories and contributions to the development of this country, yet alone contemporary social, economic and political issues facing Indigenous communities and peoples. As such,

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10 While I do not typically use the word *Indian* I am using it in relating this memory from my school days because this is the word that was used by teachers and in the textbooks at the time.
many settler Canadians continue to be ignorant of Indigenous realities. For example, Paulette Regan (2010), in her remarkably powerful and timely book *Unsettling the Settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth Telling, and Reconciliation in Canada*, writes

> Despite the long history of Indian residential schools, characterized by the imposing presence of the school buildings that dotted the Canadian landscape and were embodied in the lives and memories of survivors, most ordinary [sic] citizens say that they know nothing about them. The schools, some of which are still standing, remain comfortably invisible to Canadians, as do the former inhabitants themselves. (pp. 5-6)

While Regan’s work focuses specifically on the legacy of residential schools, her words speak to many aspects of Aboriginal societies and cultures that have been effectively erased by the dominant narratives of Canadian history. For instance, a primary dominant narrative, the “Doctrine of Discovery” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015c, p. 50) that Canada was founded by English and French Europeans and the associated myth of brave settlers forging their way in the “virgin wilderness” (Wright, 2008), or *terra nullius*, ignores and erases the complex lives of Indigenous peoples prior to colonization and their vast contributions to this country, rendering them invisible to the majority of settler Canadians. Although many non-Indigenous researchers who have endeavoured to explore issues related to Indigenous or First Nations education and students, have written about how their personal and professional experiences in First Nations communities, schools, and / or submersion in Aboriginal cultures prompted them to undertake their research (for examples see Cain, 2003; Clark, 2001; Daigle, 2000; Lunney Borden, 2010), this was not my experience. That is not my story.
Unlike most of my colleagues pursuing their doctorates in the Faculty of Education, I did not complete a Bachelor, nor a Master, of Education. I completed a Bachelor of Science at the University of Guelph in Human Biology and Nutrition, and a growing interest in mental health led me to pursue a Master of Science in the Department of Psychiatry at McGill University. For a long time, I also wanted to pursue a career in Medicine. Instead, this meandering post-secondary path, brought me here to UNB, to pursue a doctorate in education.

Initially, I started this doctoral journey planning to explore the relationship between the holistic wellness of adolescents and their experiences of, and in, secondary school. My personal experiences in school combined with my post-Masters work experience in a youth-oriented mental health promotion program and, later, as Supervisor for a literacy intervention program for students with learning disabilities, had led me to believe that schools are not always very welcoming places, nor are they always good for students. I also believe that schools shape students. In many ways they dictate how individuals are seen by others and by themselves. In other words, they dictate what is possible for students. I was interested in how this impacted youth wellness and academic achievement. My academic background in mental and physical health research strengthened the foundation for my research interests and provided the skills necessary (or so I thought) to pursue this line of work. However, the types of questions running through my head (How do adolescents describe their schooling experiences? What school characteristics facilitated and inhibited youth wellness? How does experiencing or not experiencing a sense of belonging at school relate to an
individual’s mental, emotional, physical and spiritual health? and How does this impact academic achievement?) were influenced by, but did not really fit with my quantitative, clinical science background. I realized my interest was not in how hundreds of students would respond to a set of survey questions, but rather to hear the stories first-hand of a few students, related in their words, about their own, complex lived experiences.

Early on several chance events, which will be described in greater detail in Chapter 1: Journey to the Research, piqued my curiosity about the experiences of First Nations students in Canada, generally, and in New Brunswick, particularly, and sent me along a circuitous path that awakened me to a new reality from which I chose not to retreat. While it seems unusual, even to me, to begin a doctoral dissertation from the position of a “not-knower”, this was not entirely a weakness. Too often in the past, non-Indigenous, predominantly White researchers, considering themselves “experts” in their fields, have conducted studies with Indigenous peoples and communities without really listening. Instead, their (mis)interpretations of participants’ information has been filtered through their lens of expertise and their (mis)understandings have been sent out into the world, often perpetuating stereotypes and widening the gulf between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. In contrast, Mehmoona Moosa-Mitha describes the importance of settler researchers situating themselves not as experts but as learners: If “the researcher holds the attitude of a learner, of one who is a ‘not-knower’, [then]…through the act of empathic imagination and by possessing critical self-consciousness [he/she] comes to gain a sense of what the Other knows” (as cited in Regan, 2010, p. 26). Regan supports that this stance is particularly important in anti-oppressive or decolonizing experientially based research. By taking the stance of a learner throughout this research
journey, allowing an Indigenous research paradigm to guide my actions, and really taking the time to listen to my Elders as well as my participants I believe this dissertation presents co-constructed stories that ring true to all those involved. Through this research, I have gained a greater understanding of my country, myself, and my own complicity in the continuing colonization of First Nations peoples. Therefore, in a way this research also represents my own personal form of reconciliation.

During this dissertation journey I have also begun to see the world through a new lens, an Indigenous lens, albeit filtered through my current paradigms of understanding. As a non-Indigenous White female of settler origins who has become an ally of Indigenous peoples, I do not claim to fully understand the significance and intricacies of Indigenous worldviews. I have, however, made a commitment to continue to learn and to bear witness\(^\text{11}\) to the beauty and wisdom that reside within Indigenous knowledge systems.

Originally used merely for literal purposes, *Stories from the Circle*, referred to the use of sharing circles as a method to talk and learn about the schooling experiences of several Wolastoqi and Mi’kmaq high school graduates in New Brunswick. Only recently has the deeper, metaphorical significance of this title become apparent to me. Like the fiddleheads that grow abundantly along the shores of Wolastoq and permeate Wabanaki art and symbolism, the significance of the circle has slowly unfurled in my

\(^{11}\) In *Unsettling the Settler Within*, Paulette Regan (2010), a White, academic, settler, and ally herself, describes how she has learned from the First Nations she works with in British Columbia to view “the act of bearing witness as an ethical undertaking” (p. 18) that constitutes “re-testifying… to convey the teachings and responsibilities that have been gifted” (p. 32) to oneself by others. When we bear witness “we accept responsibility for making change in the world… attending to our unsettling responses … as important clues to our own decolonization” (p. 230).
consciousness; paralleling, if you will, my journey coming full circle.

The circle is a symbol that is considered sacred in many Indigenous cultures. As Bird (1993) writes, “[the sacred circle is a] major paradigm of Native thought: life, time, seasons, cosmology, birth, womb, and earth are intrinsically located in the symbology of the circle” (p. vii). Through observing cyclical patterns, one can grow to understand purpose and meaning. The physical structure of the circle is also significant, representing the inclusive, interdependent, harmonious relationship amongst all creation (Regnier, 1995). The chapters in this dissertation were written across several years. Each time a new chapter was composed, previously drafted ones changed and shifted. My journey, as reflected in this manuscript, was a process of slowly gaining greater understanding and meaning as each part influenced the whole through interdependent relationships.

This relational, interconnected worldview, that is quite widely accepted to be a shared aspect of many Indigenous cultures (Wilson, 2008), leads to a different way of thinking about life, and about research. Designing this research was a complex undertaking for me. In recent decades, many Indigenous scholars (such as Smith, 1999; Weber-Pillwax, 1999; Martin & Mirrabooka, 2003; Graveline, 1998, 2000; Wilson & Wilson, 1998, 2003; Wilson, 2001, 2007, 2008; Steinhauer, 2002) have organized to decolonize the research endeavour, calling for a critical examination and deconstruction of dominant research practices and for the conception of research infused with Indigenous beliefs, knowledges, cultural values and customs in order to authentically address the needs of Indigenous communities. This means that decolonizing research involves enacting Indigenous pedagogy. As Tuck and Yang (2012) emphatically remind
all of us, “Decolonization is not a metaphor” (p.1, emphasis added). For me, this meant I had to learn to think and act differently. I had to learn about First Nations ways of knowing and being in the world from First Nations people, all the while constantly reminding myself that I may never fully understand. In order to do this, I had to develop relationships and seek guidance from First Nations Elders who could provide advice throughout all phases of the research process. These relationships were instrumental in the development of this study and without them I would not have completed this dissertation.

**Honouring My Elders and Their Teachings**

I first met my friend, mentor, and current Director of MWC, David Perley, in the Fall of 2009. While I was in my early 30’s and new to the field of education, let alone First Nations education, David was in his early 60’s and had a lifetime of work experiences as a teacher, a Wolastoqi Chief, an Aboriginal education consultant for the province of New Brunswick, and as a University educator. He affirmed that he shared my emerging questions about the experiences of First Nations students, and he validated that they were important to Wolastoqi and Mi’kmaq people. He also helped push my understanding of Indigenous research methodologies off the page and into practice. He is the one who taught me how to approach an Elder to ask for help, including how to prepare a tobacco prayer tie as an offering in exchange for guidance. Thus, began a friendship I hold very close to my heart, a friendship that has helped me and guided me as I have toiled in this research, and in life, over the years.

In the fall of 2010, Elder Gwen Bear was hired as UNB’s first Elder in residence, a position that represented the beginning of a shift in consciousness and greater
recognition of First Nations cultures at UNB. Like most traditional Elders, Gwen was incredibly busy and had many other responsibilities around the province, so when Dave suggested I introduce myself to Gwen to ask for her guidance I was nervous and felt very humbled. Despite her busy schedule, Gwen and I talked for nearly two hours in her cozy little office that first day. I offered her the tobacco prayer tie, wishing to seek her advice. I explained what my research interests were, including my desire to hear students’ stories. Gwen listened, but also shared numerous stories of her own; stories about her school years, her student-teacher experiences, students she had met, her teaching career and her family. It was not until later that I realized she was teaching me through stories.

We also discussed the potential use of sharing circles as a method for gathering stories of participants’ experiences. Gwen described the importance of groups to First Nations people. Group support and group work represent ways of coming together to help each other and to learn new perspectives, thus widening our own perspective (Bear, personal communication, October 26, 2010). I asked Gwen if she would be willing to be involved directly in the research and lead the sharing circles if I were to use them, and she smiled. “Since you offered tobacco, I think it is already meant to be. Now it just has to be manifested.” (Bear, personal communication, October 26, 2010). These are words I have repeated many times whenever I have felt lost or that I would never complete this work: *It is already meant to be. It just has to be manifested.*

On January 23, 2012, two weeks after my ethics approval was received and a week before we were set to hold an information session to invite students to participate, everything changed. My friend, Elder Gwen Bear, passed away suddenly. I will never
forget Wednesday, January 25, 2012—the day I heard the news. I remember feeling stunned, like it could not be true. I cried a great deal that afternoon, big heaving sobs that rocked my body as I replayed my last conversation with Gwen over and over in my mind. Recalling that conversation, I felt incredibly guilty. I had been one more person asking something from Gwen, asking her to help me, asking her to give more of herself than she could spare. Now she could not help. She was gone. I also felt guilty for even thinking about how her passing would impact my research. I struggled to push those thoughts out of my head and mourned my friend.

During the months that followed, I felt a lot of pressure to “just get on with it,” to abandon the idea of involving an Elder and using sharing circles as a method, and simply move to individual interviews. “Time was ticking,” after all. But to do so, at that juncture, felt to me not only like I would be going against everything I had read and learned, but also like I would be dishonouring Gwen’s memory and her hopes for this research. So I waited.

While things were delayed, a strange thing started to happen: my relationships with others at MWC began to grow. We all missed Gwen, we all mourned for her, and we were connected in our desire to honour her memory and the work she had started. Just as I was starting to feel like the time might be right to approach Imelda and Dave for their help and guidance, they came to me. It seemed the time was right after all.

In the spring of 2012, my friend, mentor, and Elder, Imelda Perley agreed to collaborate with me in this endeavor. Even as Imelda supported the research decisions that had already been made under Gwen and Dave’s guidance – that a storytelling, narrative approach would honour individual students’ personal experiences and their
culture’s oral history traditions – she also gently nudged me to experience more of First Nations culture myself. Most notably, in the summer of 2014, Imelda honoured me by inviting me to attend a four-day Solstice Fast\textsuperscript{12} ceremony near a sacred Wolastoqey burial mound. Before participating in this ceremony, I could never have imagined fasting from food and water (not to mention all technology) for 12 hours, as I did, let alone four days, which several other individuals did. However, after my 12 hours I did not feel hungry or thirsty; I felt strong and sure of myself. I knew I had the strength to endure even longer and I felt a sense of connection and peace that I had never felt before. I also could never have imagined how much I personally gained from this experience. I went there as an honoured yet humbled observer, hoping to gain a greater understanding and appreciation of Wolastoqey culture. What I received instead was healing.

At the end of the four-day ceremony, Elder Imelda gifted many fastees with spirit names, names she had prayed over and asked Creator for. I listened in awe as she spoke to each individual, describing how their spirit names presented themselves to her and how they were manifestations of unique traits each person possessed and carried with them. When she turned to me at the very end, I was overcome with emotion. With tears streaming down my face, I listened as my friend, my Elder, honoured me:

And for my dear friend Andrea, who is helping us so much with her research and her writing, the name I have for you is Ponapsqiwikhiket. Ponapsqi (pronounced Bon-op-squee) means stone and Wikhiket (pronounced Wee-kee-get) means writer. Together they mean more than just stone writer, they mean \textit{the one who marks on stone}. Because your writing will be as strong as the petroglyphs my

\textsuperscript{12}Fasting, in First Nations cultures, is a way to nurture one’s spirit, to set the needs of the physical body aside and attend, instead, to the spiritual dimension (Opolahsomuwehs, personal communication, May 2, 2014).
ancestors made. And you will help bring to surface that which has been hidden for a long time. (Opolahsomuwehs, personal communication, June 22, 2014; Sept 3, 2015)

The Weight of the Words

From the lessons I have learned through these experiences and the responsibility given to me in this spirit name, I choose my words carefully; for words, especially printed words, have tremendous weight. When used appropriately, “words have the power to heal, encourage, help, and teach. On the other hand, words can also confuse, embarrass, and hurt” (Stowell, 1998, p.14). I have felt the weight of the words I lay here for quite some time, but became more conscious of this during the Solstice Fast when a dream warned me that not all teachings I received were to be shared through my writing. Some teachings are not for me to share, but for others who understand them and live them more fully to do so. It is up to me, with advice and guidance from my Elders and Creator, to find the balance all the while being constantly aware that my words carry an impact. Even now, as I liberate these ideas and send them out into the world, I worry that I may have made mistakes. For “[s]tories are wonderous things. And they are dangerous. … once a story is told, it cannot be called back. Once told, it is loose in the world. So you have to be careful with the stories you tell” (King, 2003, p. 10). You never really know what will happen after you set your story free.

Why Do I Write This?

I share all of this because by revealing some of my struggles and introducing some of the instrumental relationships that aided me along the way, I reveal myself to you. I hope that by doing so I am building my relationship with you. This purpose and the desire to bring you in, to build a relationship with you, influenced how this
dissertation is written. As I wrote this dissertation, I realized the dominant, academic style of writing a largely objective report to an anonymous reader “did not live up to the standards of relational accountability” (Wilson, 2008, p. 8) inherent in an Indigenous research paradigm. These principles need to be enacted, not just understood theoretically. Simply launching into research problems, questions and methods, without giving you some indication of how ideas progressed or the learning that took place, removes the relational context. In First Nations traditions, “this problem is overcome by utilizing the direct relationship between storyteller and listener. Each recognizes the other’s role in shaping both the content and process” (Wilson, 2008, pp. 8-9). In other words, the story and the storyteller cannot be separated. In order to know the story, one must come to know the storyteller. Likewise, the storyteller is influenced by the relationship with listeners.

Since I cannot personally know everyone who will (hopefully) read this dissertation, I wish to disclose the two main audiences for whom I write. First, I write to Wolastoqi and Mi’kmaq people in New Brunswick. It has always been a central concern of mine that this research be beneficial to your communities, if only in some small way. I hope my stories of where I am coming from and what I have learned along the way, reveal to you the respect I hold for your cultures. More importantly, I hope the stories of school of Emily, Matt, Yvonne, Amanda, Hannah, Nate and Eden, make your communities proud. These seven young adults bared their souls to me because they believed their stories might help make a difference for younger generations of First

13 That research be beneficial to Indigenous communities is a central tenet of Wilson’s Indigenous research paradigm.
Nations students. I believe their stories offer some hope to communities, educators and current and future generations of First Nations youth by demonstrating that academic success is possible. However, their stories also reveal that the struggle to find a place in mainstream public schools is not only experienced by First Nations students who drop out of high school, but also by those who succeed academically and go on to graduate. Theirs are strong voices, voices that might be just what is needed to improve education for First Nations students in this province.

Second, I also write for other settler Canadians, particularly teachers. Whether you are an academic or not, at some point in your life you probably knew, or continue to know, very little about First Nations peoples and cultures. It is my hope that with the promises made by Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, to improve the relationship between Canadians and Indigenous peoples, including his commitment to implement all 94 recommendations of the recently released report of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (2015d), that the proportion of ‘not-knowers’ will continue to dwindle, particularly in the field of education. I should not have been learning about the history of colonialism in this country in my thirties while pursuing my doctorate. It should not have been acceptable to grow up in this country not knowing anything about the traditional territories I lived on, or about the past and present of peoples who traditionally dwelt here. Whether you came to this understanding years ago or the notion of traditional territories and Indigenous knowledges are still foreign to you, I hope that my story, my experiences of coming to know through the process of designing and conducting this research, resonates with you. Perhaps by first seeing yourself in my
shoes, you will be better able to understand *what school was like* for Emily, Matt, Yvonne, Amanda, Hannah, Nate and Eden.

Keeping this in mind, you will notice that my voice shifts throughout the dissertation from personal narratives to more “academic” prose. They frequently merge and bump into each other, entwining my personal reflective experiences in and of this research with the abundant wealth of literature that informs my contextual, theoretical and methodological stance. You will also encounter the “voices” of Emily, Matt, Yvonne, Amanda, Hannah, Nate and Eden. These are presented in a different font, and hopefully you will find that the tone is unique for each. Also, keep in mind that the stories presented within are representations of First Nations students’ experiences, and the characters do not necessarily represent the students who participated themselves. These stories, although representing many years of participants’ experiences, are static. The collaborating participants are not. As they grow and continue to have new experiences, their reflections on the past may similarly grow and shift. Nor were all the stories shared with me re-presented here. Some stories were too personal, too sacred to share. Others were courageously gifted to me, to share with you. I hope I have done them justice.

Now that you have reached the end of this Prologue, it might seem as if it is more like a summary, or a conclusions chapter. I included this to introduce myself and the ideas behind this research so that you will understand more fully where I am coming from and where I am going in this manuscript. As Shawn Wilson (2008) wrote near the end of his *Foreword and Conclusion*, after which I loosely modeled this section, “Perhaps it would be a good idea to re-read this section at the end, so that your research
process in itself will complete the circle’’ (p.11). Let us go forward in *Stories from the Circle* together.

**Chapter 1: Journey to the Research**

Since I started this doctoral journey in 2008, many changes, big and small, have taken place nationally in the field of Indigenous education. Although there have been many calls for change in Indigenous education for decades, the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015d) have gained attention. Across the country, Departments and Ministries of Education in every province and territory are starting to respond by integrating “age-appropriate curriculum on residential schools, Treaties, and Aboriginal peoples’ historical and contemporary contributions to Canada” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015d, p. 7) across K-12 education, and improving the educational experiences and academic outcomes for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students has become a central priority (Council of Ministers of Education, Canada 2010). That being said, the degree of response varies considerably from region to region. While significant progress has been recognized in several territories and provinces, New Brunswick was ranked “near the back of the pack, just ahead of Prince Edward Island and Quebec” (Baker, 2017, para. 10), and the New Brunswick curriculum was flagged as requiring significant work in almost every category (KAIROS Canada, 2015).
Even though changes might be slower to materialize in New Brunswick than elsewhere, there are changes happening here. On June 14, 2015, Premier Brian Gallant affirmed that,

The findings and call to action in [the TRC] report are important steps in recognizing the wrongdoings of our past. ...As a government, we will take the necessary time to review the report and its recommendations…We are currently renewing the Enhanced Education and Service Agreements with our First Nation partners to improve outcomes for aboriginal learners. (Office of the Premier, 2015, paras. 4–8)

To Premier Gallant’s credit, New Brunswick’s Department of Education and Early Childhood Development has recently begun to roll out their new 10-year Education plan: Everyone at their Best (2016), designed, in part, to meet the TRC’s calls to action. Spokesperson for the Department, Kelly Cormier, emailed a statement to CBC News New Brunswick stating, "The goal of the department is to ensure that First Nation realities, experiences and contributions to Canadian society are embedded throughout the K-12 educational system, not just in one class" (Baker, 2017, para. 3). While this is certainly good news for First Nations students in the province, this mandatory Indigenous content for the K-12 system is still in development and the Department has not yet released when it will be rolled out.

Amidst the increasing political and social pressure to improve schooling experiences and educational outcomes of Wolastoqi and Mi’kmaq students in New Brunswick, the voices and perspectives of former and current students themselves are largely missing from both policy and research literature. Instead, a portrait of these students is painted from statistics and reports that continue to focus predominantly on youth who drop out of school. In this chapter I argue that this dominant negative

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portrayal of First Nations students may be hindering efforts to improve education for Indigenous youth in provincial schools by perpetuating and sustaining stereotypes. I also chronicle my journey to the research, and how I came to believe that it is essential for the educational stories of successful Wolastoqi and Mi’kmaq students to be heard. Specifically, in an attempt to address the inequity in representation, this research will explore the question of what school was like for Wolastoqi and Mi’kmaq students who successfully graduated from the public school system in New Brunswick.

Confronting My Own Ignorance and Awakening to a New Reality

As I detailed in Looking Forward, Looking Back, I started this doctoral journey interested in exploring the relationship between the holistic wellness of adolescents and their experiences of and in secondary school. I was curious about how experiencing a sense of belonging and/or alienation from one’s school impacted youth wellness and academic achievement. Within my first few months at UNB, I was encouraged by my Supervisor, Dr. William (Bill) Morrison, to think about how I was going to focus my area of research. Who, specifically, would be my participants? I knew I was interested in institutional factors that might arise in students’ narratives, but given my background in science rather than sociology, psychology or education, I am now embarrassed to admit I had not considered how these might be perceived and construed differently by individuals of different backgrounds.

Then two things happened that made me come face to face with my own ignorance and drastically changed my research journey. First, during a casual conversation, Dr. Morrison suggested it might be interesting to consider interviewing some First Nations students in my work because their experiences of schooling might
offer a very different perspective than that of New Brunswick youth in general. This conversation forced me to admit that I knew very little about the First Nations people of New Brunswick, or elsewhere in Canada for that matter. It also left me pondering how public schools might be experienced by First Nations students, and how their experiences might differ from Anglophone and Francophone youth in the province.

Second, within that same week, serendipitously I came across a news release entitled *New Brunswick Takes Leadership Role in First Nations Education* (New Brunswick Department of Education, 2008), that pertained to an enhanced education and services agreement between the province, School District 15 and a local First Nation. This tripartite agreement was negotiated at the local level following a recent Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that all 15 First Nations Chiefs in New Brunswick, the New Brunswick Department of Education, and Indian and Northern Affairs Canada signed as a commitment to close the achievement gap between First Nations and non-First Nations students, province-wide. The MOU, signed in Fredericton on April 22, 2008, affirmed the intentions of the province, federal government and First Nations to work “collaboratively, collegially, and as expeditiously as possible” (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 2008, p. 2) to improve educational outcomes of all First Nations students, regardless of whether they attend First Nation community schools or public schools.

I have to awkwardly confess that up until this point I had been completely unaware of the jurisdictional complexities of First Nations education, or that 7 out of 15 New Brunswick First Nations had their own community schools which offered early childhood and elementary level education (New Brunswick Department of Education
and Early Childhood, 2017). This information awakened me to a new reality, and filled me with more questions: What is the history behind First Nations community schools? How do they differ from provincial schools? Why are they necessary? And what is the transition from First Nations schools to public middle and high schools like for First Nations students? With my curiosity piqued, I began to do some digging into the conditions and context of First Nations education in this province and nationally. What I discovered shocked, humiliated and angered me, and changed my life forever.

I was shocked at the gap in educational attainment rates between Indigenous peoples and the general Canadian population. In the 2006 Canadian Census (Statistics Canada, 2008)\(^\text{14}\) 40% of Indigenous youth ages 20-24\(^\text{15}\) had not completed high school in comparison to the national rate of 14%; when considering just First Nations youth in this age bracket (20-24) living in First Nations communities,\(^\text{16}\) this rate jumped to 61%. These statistics were most pronounced in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and the northern Territories where the following rates for Aboriginal young adults and for First Nations living in First Nations communities (ages 20-24 years) were reported: Manitoba – 48% and 72%, respectively; Saskatchewan – 43% and 62%; Yukon – 30% and 42%; Northwest Territories – 57% and 63%; Nunavut – 71% (and there is no First Nation on-

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\(^\text{14}\) Data from the 2006 Canadian Census is reported because this is the most recent reliable information available. When I began this doctoral degree in September 2008, this data had just been released. Please interpret these statistics with some caution since 22 First Nations communities across Canada were incompletely enumerated (Statistics Canada, 2008).

\(^\text{15}\) The high school non-completion rate is usually calculated using the 20-24 year age group because it accounts for those students who take extra time to graduate, including those who leave school and return (Clandinin et al., 2013).

\(^\text{16}\) First Nations people are referred to as “North American Indians” and First Nations communities are referred to as “reserves” by Statistics Canada. In keeping with a language of harmony, I prefer to use the terms First Nations and communities.
reserve population in Nunavut). The situation in New Brunswick, however, was not much better. In the 20-24 year-old age bracket, 27% of Indigenous youth in the province and 45% of those living in a First Nation community had not completed secondary level education versus 12% of the general population (Mendelson, 2006; Statistics Canada, 2008). That these rates of non-completion were present here, in Canada, a first world country that outwardly promotes pluralism and inclusion was astounding to me.

I felt humiliated also to be a 31-year-old doctoral student, who previously had felt well-educated and intelligent, who was born and had lived in this country my entire life, to awaken to the fact that I knew virtually nothing about our nation’s first peoples, the experiences they had undergone because of colonization, and how this was connected with the current drop-out rates among Indigenous youth. Re-learning the history of Canada, including the negotiation and breaking of treaties and the pivotal role that formal education played in the colonial endeavour to indoctrinate and assimilate Aboriginal children into Euro-Canadian society (Bear Nicholas, 2001; Doige, 2001; Hamilton, 1986), was a painful awakening that left me feeling ashamed of my country. Reading and writing about this legacy of colonialism in education, including the intentionally destructive, century-long era of federal day and residential schools, made me physically ill and filled with me with guilt.

I also became angry. Very angry. Angry at the schools I had attended over the years, angry at the Canadian media, angry at my parents, teachers and my country, and angry at myself. How was it possible that I was just learning about all of this for the first time? How was this acceptable? Students all across Canada are taught about World Wars I and II and the Holocaust, and every year as a country we remember our fallen
war veterans and victims of Nazi Germany so that we never forget the immensity of this tragedy that was spawned by hatred and discrimination. But why is our own history of colonialism, domination and racism not taught in schools? Why had I not learned more about Aboriginal history, peoples and cultures? What does this tell us about our country and our relationship with Indigenous peoples?

With these new questions and emotions inhabiting me, I decided to focus my research specifically on the personal, reflective, schooling experiences of First Nations students. Initially, this work developed from my desire to look more critically at our public schools and the historic, social and systemic factors that impact First Nations students’ academic experiences and wellbeing. On reflection, I also thought and felt that doing otherwise would mean choosing to remain oblivious to the realities faced by First Nations peoples and students, and to turn my back on my own awakening. This was the start of my journey to becoming an ally to Indigenous peoples.

**Research Rooted in Relationships**

While these questions and revelations might sound naïve to the well-informed, and even startling in light of the recent media attention given to the release of the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015a; 2015b; 2015c; 2015d), this was my experience at beginning of this journey in 2008. I share these embarrassing but honest accounts because I also know I am not alone in these experiences. When I had the privilege to teach *First Nations Education* in our B.Ed. program in 2014, the students in my class, the majority of whom were non-Indigenous, White settler students, expressed undergoing very similar, often painful awakenings and described experiencing comparable feelings of disbelief, shock, guilt and anger. Some of
my own family members are just beginning this awakening now. Sadly, I do not think this is that unusual. Many aspects of Aboriginal societies and cultures have been effectively erased by the dominant narratives of Canadian history and rendered invisible to the majority of settler Canadians. Acknowledging this ignorance and discussing its implications is important.

Fairly early in my doctoral studies, I encountered the work of Dwayne Donald, Assistant Professor with the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta and a descendent of the Papaschase Cree, which shed some light on my feelings of shock and anger and my position as a “not-knower” (Moosa-Mitha as cited in Regan, 2010, p. 26). He writes about the colonial divide between Indigenous peoples and Canadians and how this has been perpetuated and naturalized by the story of the Canadian nation that is taught in schools (Donald, 2009b, 2009a). This divide results in Canadians living in the same world as Indigenous people, but within a different reality where they are not exposed to, and therefore not part of, the history and current issues affecting First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities and individuals. From a constructivist ontological standpoint that posits that there is no ‘one true reality’ but rather a constructed reality that is actively created by individuals and societies through relationships and interactions (Crotty, 1998), one could argue that we are all living in different realities. This Canadian-Indigenous division, however, stems from our colonial past, and, by keeping generations of Canadians in the dark, continues to perpetuate a poor relationship based on misunderstandings and ignorance between Canadians and Indigenous peoples. For Donald, this relationship, or lack of relationship really, is the root problem behind the majority of issues facing Indigenous communities and peoples today as it effectively
stymies any attempts to address and rectify continuing social inequalities (Donald, 2009b).

As I was awakening to the relationships between my own lack of cultural awareness growing up, the dominant, invisible culture of provincial schools, and the realities of Aboriginal students attending these schools, the profound implications of this Indigenous-Canadian divide gradually became the foundational problem for my work. As I dove deeper into the literature surrounding Aboriginal education in general, and First Nations education in New Brunswick in particular, it became apparent that the academic achievement gap between Indigenous students and their non-Indigenous, settler peers is not a new problem; it is a very old problem that is directly connected to the legacy of colonialism in Canadian society in general, and education particularly (Bear Nicholas, 2001).

In recent decades, there have been a multitude of studies and reports regarding the state of Aboriginal education in Canada. As Leroy Little Bear (2009) recently iterated, all of these studies:

[R]egularly point out what has now almost become rhetoric: the existing education systems in Canada have largely failed the Aboriginal Peoples. From the Hawthorn Report in the 1960s to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples in the mid 1990s, all point out the same findings: Aboriginal peoples are not succeeding in the present education systems; Aboriginal students have the highest dropout rates; Aboriginal students consistently are at the bottom of performance scales. (p. 6, emphasis added)

There have also been countless recommendations, policy papers, and “action plans” to improve education for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students (for examples see Chapters 2 & 3). While there has been some progress, national and provincial level statistics, particularly for youth living in First Nations communities, remained virtually unchanged
between the 1996 and 2006 census surveys (Mendelson, 2008). Therefore, it is not just that some Indigenous students are still being alienated from provincial schools, but that they are still being alienated despite decades of awareness and supposed attempts to improve their educational experiences, engagement and outcomes.

For instance, in New Brunswick, the 2008 MOU is not the first attempt to create a more collaborative partnership between First Nations, the federal government and the provincial Department of Education, nor the first “commitment” the province has made to improve education for First Nations students. In 1991, the province adopted a Policy Statement on Maliseet / Micmac Education, which confirmed their “commitment to provide Maliseet and Micmac [sic] students with enhanced opportunities to learn, to grow, to succeed, and to become confident and responsible individuals, proud of their Maliseet/Micmac [sic] heritage” (New Brunswick Department of Education, 1991, p. 4). Despite these intentions, educational reforms continued to proceed at a glacial pace and more than 25 years later the issue of First Nations education is still a critical one.

In addition to blaming the complex jurisdictional matter, the New Brunswick Task Force on Aboriginal Issues (1999) cited the poor relationship between First Nations and the province as the root of the delays in effectively addressing and acting on a variety of issues, including education. Ignorance, misconceptions and misunderstandings permeate the relationship between First Nations people and the general New Brunswick population:

Many New Brunswickers mistakenly believe that Aboriginal people do not pay taxes and yet use services funded by taxation. What they fail to realize is that First Nations pay separately for many services New Brunswickers take for granted e.g. fire-fighting and road maintenance and plowing. As well, barring certain exceptions, Aboriginal people do pay taxes and those living off reserves
pay property taxes, fuel taxes and other taxes just as other New Brunswickers do.
(New Brunswick Task Force on Aboriginal Issues, La Forest, & Nicholas, 1999, p. 18)

Furthermore, the New Brunswick Task Force on Aboriginal Issues (1999) supports my previous assertion that the majority of New Brunswickers are unaware of the historical and political foundations of the social and economic issues that many First Nations are experiencing. This results in the formulation and perpetuation of negative public attitudes based on limited information and stereotypical representations in the media (New Brunswick Task Force on Aboriginal Issues et al., 1999). This essentialization of First Nations peoples is problematic for the relationship between First Nations and New Brunswickers since it promotes a we/they discourse wherein “we” are the dominant majority and “they” are viewed as outsiders and inferior (Daigle, 2000, p. 20; Pang, 1988, p. 376). In turn, this we/they mentality hinders efforts to reform education because issues surrounding Aboriginal education are located as “Aboriginal problems” rather than our collective problem.

Even in provinces such as Alberta where the provincial government mandated curriculum reform and worked collaboratively with local First Nations to include Indigenous perspectives and knowledges, change has been slow because of resistance on the part of teachers and administrators who view the changes as frustrating, unfair, and, in many cases, irrelevant (Donald, 2009b). For example, in his research on the perspectives of pre-service and in-service teachers, Donald (2009b) found that the predominantly white majority not only felt genuinely unprepared to engage with the new curriculum but also believed that “Aboriginal education” was only relevant for
 Aboriginal students; if they did not have Aboriginal students in their classroom they felt the inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives was unnecessary (pp. 331-334). The mindset that First Nations, Métis and Inuit cultures, knowledges and values are only relevant for Aboriginal students while Eurocentric education is seen as appropriate for all students exemplifies the colonial relationship that persists between First Nations peoples and the rest of Canadians. As long as this mentality exists it will continue to hinder government-First Nations initiatives to improve education and address inequality for First Nations students (Donald, 2009b).

Since the very structures—political and governmental—through which possible education reforms must be “negotiated and implemented are grounded in the historical relationship between First Nations and the settler population” (Archibald & DeRose, 2014, p. 10) the need for reconciliation and reparation of the relationship cannot be simply ignored by anyone researching First Nations education issues. However, to tackle this centuries-old problem directly within the scope of a dissertation is a monumental task. Instead, I turned my attention to what I saw as two prominent subsidiary problems. It is my contention that if the poor relationship between Indigenous and Canadian people and the resulting divide that exists between us can be seen as the root problem for the continuing inequalities in education (and in society), then a) the predominant focus on Indigenous students who drop out of school, and b) the virtual absence of the perspectives of students who succeed academically, are likely perpetuating and maintaining the division.

**Focus on failure.** Delving through the historical and current literature on Aboriginal education, I was confronted with a plethora of material that focused on the
failure of First Nations students. Some of this research blatantly takes an individual deficit perspective and focuses on individual-level reasons for why so many First Nations students leave school early, emphasizing their high rates of alcohol and drug abuse, pregnancy and parenthood, and delinquency (Brade, Duncan, & Sokal, 2003; Cummins, Ireland, Resnick, & Blum, 1999; Richardson & Blanchet-Cohen, 2000; Robertson, 2003; van der Woerd & Cox, 2003). The lure of finding a simple cause and effect relationship is so strong that this tends to be the de facto approach to studying the phenomenon of early school leavers (Clandinin, Steeves, & Caine, 2013). I admit, at the beginning of this research I was also fixated on individual characteristics and so-called “maladaptive behaviours” that were associated with First Nations youth dropping out of school. Now, I realize that this type of research not only tends to ignore both institutional and societal problems (Clandinin et al., 2013), but actually serves to reinforce the notion of individual pathologies and inadequacies. For instance, according to Ladner (1972) these types of “studies which have as the focal point the alleged deviant attitudes and behaviors of [minority students]... are grounded within the racist assumptions and principles that only render [minority students] open to further exploitation” (p. vii) and serve to maintain already existing stereotypes and the dominant status quo.

Of course, many of the reports and studies that I encountered do historically, socially and politically locate the problem of First Nations students dropping out of school in the colonial history of education and the ongoing devaluing of Indigenous cultures in mainstream schools. This body of work primarily focuses on the high rates of failure as a condemnation of the school systems and as a call for education reforms in
the name of social justice. However, by emphasizing the *damage* done to First Nations students, and subsequently families and communities, as evidenced by the high drop-out rates and the academic achievement gap between First Nations and non-Indigenous Canadian youth today, I wondered if the failure of First Nations students is sensationalized. Based on Mary Louise Pratt’s (1985) theory of “othering”, I argued in my doctoral proposal that this predominant preoccupation with First Nations students who fail and drop out of school may be homogenizing First Nations students into a “collective ‘they’” (p. 139) in the minds of many educators, administrators and policy makers (Schneider, unpublished manuscript, 2011). More recently I encountered Eve Tuck’s (2009) work which takes this proposition a step further. She proposes that this type of

*damage-centred research*… operates with a flawed theory of change: it is often used to leverage reparations or resources for marginalized communities yet simultaneously reinforces and re-inscribes a one-dimensional notion of these people as depleted, ruined, and hopeless. (p.409, emphasis added)

In other words, research that “operates, even benevolently, from a theory of change that establishes harm or injury in order to achieve reparation” (p. 409) may not only be ineffective due to the reinforcement of stereotypical representations of marginalized groups in the minds of dominant group members who have the power to enact change, but also carries the huge cost of reinforcing marginalized peoples’ vision of themselves as broken.

As a result, I started to wonder whether both types of research and reports—those taking an individual deficit perspective and those that socially and historically locate Aboriginal student failure in colonial relationships—may be perpetuating negative
stereotypical images of First Nations students. If so, I believe this may not only contribute to maintaining the us/them division between First Nations peoples and Canadians, but also affect how current First Nations students are perceived and perceive themselves, and what is possible for themselves, in schools.

**Missing perspectives.** Although I do not dispute the statistics or the struggles many Indigenous students face, nor do I want to de-emphasize the socioeconomic and social justice importance of improving education for Indigenous students, I came to see that the principal focus on Aboriginal student failure also overshadowed the bigger picture. In New Brunswick, even if 27% of all Indigenous students and 45% of First Nations students living in First Nation communities are not completing high school (Statistics Canada, 2008), 73% and 55%, respectively, are. This made me wonder, *Where are these students in the literature? What could their experiences and voices contribute to the discussion on First Nations education?* In order to begin the necessary process of conceptualizing the kind of reforms that might improve the educational attainment levels of First Nations students in New Brunswick, it might be useful to first hear about the kinds of experiences students who have been able to achieve success, “at least according to conventional definitions” (Lavell Harvard, 2011, p. 1), have had.

**Purpose Created**

Set against this backdrop of New Brunswick’s ongoing attempt to make public schooling more inclusive and equitable for First Nations students in the face of a continuing colonial divide between First Nations and New Brunswickers, this research explores the schooling experiences of Wolastoqi and Mi’kmaq youth who have recently graduated from high school. Through an exploration of these students’ reflective *stories*
of school I strive to gain a better understanding of what school was like for these students. According to philosopher Sara Worth (2005), to endeavour to understand What is it like in someone else’s shoes depends on stories of experiences and a narrative form of reasoning. In my quest to learn What school was like for Wolastoqi and Mi’kmaq recent high school graduates, the following wonderings also guided me in this research endeavour:

1. How do students describe the impact of their schooling, if at all, on their personal and cultural identity?
2. What elements of schooling are particularly highlighted in students’ stories, how are they intertwined and what do they mean for participants?
3. How do students position their schooling experiences within the greater landscape of their life narratives?
4. How were these students able to achieve success and graduate from high school?

Overall, the purpose of this study is to bring stories of Wolastoqi and Mi’kmaq students in New Brunswick schools to the discussion surrounding First Nations education in New Brunswick in a way that helps to illuminate current needs and challenges, while disrupting stereotypes and moving beyond the one-sided, negative portrait of First Nations students.

A Look Forward

Each of the following chapters are connected to one another, and yet they can also be read separately, at different times. I invite you to pick and choose which chapters are most interesting, or useful, to you. In Chapter 2: Entering the Historical Landscape, I delve into the history of education for First Nations peoples in Canada, particularly New Brunswick, and explore how the residual consequences of this collective story of school continues to influence current generations. This acknowledgement of the
historical, socio-cultural landscape of educational practices for and experienced by Indigenous students sets the tone for better understanding the background context of the participants’ stories.

Chapter 3: Entering the Research Landscape extends the argument that past research has predominantly focused on exploring and documenting the failure of Aboriginal students, subsequently generating a rhetoric of failure which continues to promote a negative stereotypic portrait of these students. In addition, this chapter also examines a second theme that has more recently emerged in the Indigenous education literature, namely programs and initiatives implemented in an effort to increase rates of academic success for Aboriginal students. This review found that a consistent message exists regarding actions required to improve education for Indigenous students, and therefore explores the important question: “If we know what to do, why aren’t we doing it?” (Berryman et al., 2014, p. 19)

In Chapter 4: The Methodology Story—A Journey Through New Terrain, I offer both short and long versions of how this research was designed and conducted. The short story was written with the intention of reaching an audience that extends outside of academia, and provides important methodological information without going into the details that are required by academic reviewers. The long story is divided into four parts. Part 1: Navigating Paradigms describes the Indigenous Research Paradigm that guided my actions throughout this work, as well as the narrative methodology I abided by. Part 2: Stories of the Research Context and Story Gathering Methods presents the particular setting in which this work took place at UNB, introduces the participants, and describes the sharing circle and biographical narrative interviewing methods used. Part 3:
Narrative Analysis and Narrative Production includes how the participants’ stories were reconstructed and negotiated, and then thematically analyzed and interpreted. Part 4: Criteria for Judging the Quality of this Research discusses the challenges involved with judging the quality of qualitative, narrative-based research and reviews the literature on how this can be accomplished.

Chapter 5: What was school like? Narrative Analyses is the heart of this dissertation. In this chapter I re-present the accounts of participants in a storied format using multiple genres. This decision was based on the contention that stories are a form of communication uniquely suited for displaying human experiences and emotions, and the meaning we attribute to these.

I wrote Chapter 6: Narrative Threads of Connection: A Thematic Analysis and Discussion much later than most of the other chapters of this dissertation. While some arts-based and narrative researchers advocate for allowing the creative work to stand alone, without didactic explanations which limit the potential interpretations readers might make, due to scholarly expectations of doctoral dissertations I decided to offer some preliminary analysis and interpretation of emerging themes. This chapter is intended to advance the conversation about First Nations education in this province, particularly with regard to reforms that could improve the experiences and outcomes of First Nations students.

Finally, Chapter 7: Looking Back, Looking Forward brings us full circle. In this chapter I provide my final thoughts, reflections, present possibilities for future research, and ponder some potential limitations of this work.
Chapter 2: Entering the Historical Landscape

Although my research focus is on the schooling experiences of recently graduated New Brunswick First Nations students as they remember and recount them, I assume that their lives and their experiences in schools were and are influenced by the historical “story of school” (Murray Orr, 2005, p. 22) for First Nations peoples in Canada and, particularly, in New Brunswick. As this foray into the historical landscape\(^\text{17}\) will detail, this collective story of school is one that is rooted in colonial relationships: relationships fettered with a history of domination, oppression, dispossession, attempts at erasure, non-consensual schooling, but also with resistance, survival and resurgence (Simpson, 2014). In the words of Sable (2005):

> What follows is not intended as a condemnation …but rather an acknowledgement of the residual consequences of history that still affect attitudes and motives for both teachers and Aboriginal students. …This acknowledgement of the socio-cultural context…opens the way for educators to explore and move forward in changing the legacy of colonization for Aboriginal students. (pp. 7-8)

It is also my hope that in coming to know something about this history, readers might be able to better understand the stories of Emily, Matt, Yvonne, Amanda, Hannah, Nate, and Eden.

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\(^{17}\) I use the term landscape in this and the next chapter to describe the history enfolding and research literature surrounding First Nations education because, as Hughes (1997) writes, “the way we talk about narrative is riddled with spatial metaphor” (para, 26). Writers, including researchers, write about “exploring” and “navigating” the terrain of their studies, of being in “a bit of a slog” (Hughes, 1997, para. 26), going on a “journey” and being desperate to “find a way through.” Like Hughes (1997), I see narratives not necessarily as nice, neat, linear paths, but rather “three-dimensional spaces, or landscapes, through which we can take paths” (para. 1).
First Nations Education in Canada: A Colonial History

The roots of colonialism in Canada run far and deep. They extend beyond the forming of the Canadian nation itself and begin with the imperialism of the British and French Empires of the 16th and 17th centuries. Smith (1999) explains that imperialism and colonialism are intricately connected; the latter being an essential element of the former’s realization. Imperialism, coming from the Latin term *imperium*, meaning to command (Kohn & Reddy, 2017), involves one country’s power over another usually for economic expansion, exploitation of lands and resources, and subjugation of Indigenous peoples (Smith, 1999). Colonialism, derived from the word *colonus*, meaning farmer, usually involves the transfer of people as settlers to the new land who continue to maintain their political allegiance to their country of origin (Kohn & Reddy, 2017). In this way, the early colonizers of Canada brought with them a centuries old European hierarchical system of dominance and oppression, stratified by wealth, class, race and literacy, and gradually imposed this scheme upon the original inhabitants of this land in order to further their colonial mission (Saul, 2008).

The story of Wolastoqiyik and Mi’kmaq societies, however, does not start with the introduction of European settlers, nor were these nations introduced to the concept of education by colonizers. Wolastoqiyik and Mi’kmaq peoples have been here—in what is now New Brunswick—since “time immemorial”, and each nation had its own education system in place prior to contact which reflected the values and beliefs, and served the needs of each society (Perley, 2008).

“Age of Independence”: Traditional Aboriginal childrearing and education. According to a Wabanki model for the evolution of Aboriginal education (Perley, 2008)
the Age of Independence occurred from the time of Creation until contact with European settlers. During this time, Wolastoqiyik and Mi’kmaq communities had complete control over education for their youth, and the purpose of education was to socialize individuals into certain roles for the betterment of the entire community (Perley, 2008).

It has been said that traditional Aboriginal philosophies and practices of childrearing were intrinsically holistic, grounded in a worldview of an integrated and spiritually connected universe. This means that Aboriginal societies held a holistic view of individuals, recognizing each individual’s spirit, body, heart, and mind, and they also viewed each member of the community as part of a greater whole. Within this greater whole all community members were related and connected to each other, to their environment and to all creation (Cajete, 1994; Hill, 1999). In these traditional societies, children were raised by the entire community and it was the duty of all adult members to serve as teachers for them (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Bockern, 1990; National Indian Brotherhood, 1972). In this way children belonged to their immediate family and to the extended family of their community.

Traditional Aboriginal education practices were based on principles of non-interference and a deep respect for individual empowerment (Brendtro et al., 1990). It was recognized that each child brought something unique and special to the community. Correspondingly, the community’s responsibility was to help children discover their individual gifts, talents and purpose in life by providing experiences that developed children’s spiritual, emotional, mental and physical selves (Aboriginal Children’s Circle of Early Learning, n.d.; Brendtro et al., 1990; Cajete, 1994). Brendtro et al.’s (1990) Circle of Courage model of positive youth development and resiliency, suggests that
traditional methods of Aboriginal education were effective because they fostered each individual’s sense of self-worth by addressing four critical elements necessary for holistic development: a sacred experience of belonging; occasions to experience mastery; opportunities that foster choice-making and independence; and chances to cultivate a spirit of generosity, valuing and appreciating others, and ultimately, looking after one and another (Brendtro et al., 1990). By fostering these characteristics in children, communities not only developed competent, caring individuals but also protected members of the community in times of hardship (Assembly of First Nations, 1988). Overall, traditional Aboriginal education directly reflected each nation’s underlying worldview and was an integral way of life that fostered individual growth while also satisfying communal needs.

“Age of Destruction—Pre-Confederation”: Early colonial educational endeavours in the Maritimes. According to Perley (2008), the time from European contact until Canada became a distinct nation can be considered the first Age of Destruction for Wabanki societies. During this time European settlers gradually attempted to impose formal Western education on Aboriginal peoples in order to indoctrinate them with Eurocentric customs and values (Bear Nicholas, 2001; Doige, 2001). Throughout the 16th and 17th centuries in the Maritime colonies, however, the settlers were initially few, the majority were poor and they did not know how to live and thrive off the land, especially in the harsh winters (Saul, 2008). Therefore, the French and the British forged strategic relationships with Aboriginal nations in order to survive and improve their circumstances. Males greatly outnumbered females among the “newcomers”, and by the mid-1600s marriages were common, and often encouraged,
between Europeans and daughters of Chiefs and important elders to improve relationships, as well as social and political circumstances (Delâge & d’Avignon, 2003; Saul, 2008). While these unions were initially viewed as beneficial for both sides, they seem to have been forged to serve different purposes. For First Nations, this was a traditional way to build alliances. For newcomers, intermarriages with Aboriginals was a policy aimed at improving their lives, stabilizing and controlling the fur trade (Saul, 2008), and transforming “Indians” into Europeans (Delâge & d’Avignon, 2003). Despite these interdependent relationships, or perhaps made possible because of them, it became colonial policy of the French, and later the British, to educate Aboriginal peoples in the European languages and Christianity in order to assimilate them and make them subordinate citizens (Bear Nicholas, 2001; Doige, 2001; Hamilton, 1986).

In the early 18th century, however, in an effort to regulate trade and assure peace following France’s relinquishment of Maritime landholdings in present-day Nova Scotia to Britain,

British Governor Dummer sought out the region's Aboriginal peoples… on December 15th, 1725, the two groups negotiated a "Peace and Friendship" treaty. The 1725 Treaty of Boston included the Aboriginal peoples of Maine, New Hampshire, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia (Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, 2013, para. 3).

This was the first of several peace and friendship treaties between British officials and Wabanki First Nations which were intended to “set out a new pathway” (Berryman et al., 2014, p. 20). According to the Mi’kmaq Wolastoqey Centre at UNB, these treaties were intended to reconcile First Nations’ nationhood and sovereignty with the occupation of First Nations’ territories by settlers of European heritage and the Crown’s assertion of sovereignty, to recognize the right of First Nations and the British Crown to govern their own internal affairs of their communities, and to
build a political relationship between First Nations and the British Crown. (Mi’kmaq-Wolastoqey Centre, 2015, para. 1, emphasis added)

As an example, the treaty of 1752 stipulated

‘the said Indians shall have all favour, Friendship & Protection shewn them from this His Majesty’s Government’ and in exchange the Mi’kmaq agreed to protect his Majesty’s subjects from harm and ‘use their utmost Endeavours to bring in the other Indians to Renew and Ratify this Peace’. (as cited in Carr-Stewart, 2001, p. 125)

Despite the declarations set out within the Peace and Friendship treaties and within the Royal Proclamation of 1763 regarding First Nations sovereignty and right to self-government, First Nations were rapidly outnumbered, dispossessed of their land and displaced by British settlers. Under enforced British governance, and pursuant with the model of church-run schools in Britain at the time, a push began to promote exclusive Anglican schools under the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (S.P.G) in peninsular Nova Scotia. Under this model, Church-employed educators were seen to be serving the special function of civilizing and humanizing the conduct of the poor, or in the case of the colonies, Indigenous peoples (MacNaughton, 1947). Overall, however, colonial efforts to educate Aboriginal peoples of the Maritimes during this era were modest and sporadic. Further, prior to 1783, the mainland area that would become New Brunswick had very few settler inhabitants (reportedly less than 5000), apart from the First Nations population (MacNaughton, 1947). Therefore, colonial educational efforts aimed at First Nations peoples in this region were limited (MacNaughton, 1947).

Following the American Revolution and the subsequent emigration of more than ten thousand Loyalists to the Bay of Fundy region in 1783, the situation began to change. The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in New England and Parts
Adjacent (hereafter referred to as The New England Company) was bent on “saving” First Nations peoples from their “inherently savage,” (MacNaughton, 1947, p. 48) migratory lifestyles and, as such, introduced an active and systematic “scheme for the improvement and education” (p. 47) of Mi’kmaq and Wolastoqiyik in New Brunswick. The Anglican clergy members who ran these schools reportedly focused on Christianity, illiteracy, and on bringing Wabanki into the lower echelon of society by “apprenticing them out to English families” (p. 48). In other words, even though these clergy men intended to raise the education levels of the First Nations peoples, they only wanted to raise it slightly; enough to make them useful to the settlers but not enough to disrupt the existing hierarchical social stratum. Nonetheless, despite establishing schools at Woodstock, Fredericton, Sheffield, Westfield, St. Andrews, Miramichi and Sussex Vale (MacNaughton, 1947), and offering food and clothing to families who sent their children (Doige, 2001), ultimately The New England Company was unsuccessful. The schools were viewed as alien to the First Nations of New Brunswick, and they resisted their efforts, attending only sporadically and for short periods of time (Hamilton, 1986). The last New England Company school closed its doors in 1820 (MacNaughton, 1947).

Overall, in more than two hundred and fifty years of colonization, “no formal educational tradition of any kind had been created” (Hamilton, 1986, p. 8) in the pre-Confederate Maritimes. By 1867 only a few Mi’kmaq and Wolastoqi individuals were reportedly able to read and write in English and/or French. That being said, while these early attempts to educate First Nations peoples bore meagre scholastic fruit, they were instrumental in indoctrinating them with the tenets of the Christian faiths (Bear Nicholas, 2001); a cornerstone of the colonial assimilation plan.
“Age of Destruction—Post-Confederation”: An aggressive era of ‘Indian’
education arises. Following Canadian Confederation in 1867, efforts to educate and assimilate Aboriginal peoples intensified. This era, which extends into contemporary times, has been called the second Age of Destruction (Perley, 2008).

By 1874 First Nations peoples were required to be “registered” in anticipation of the upcoming Indian Act (1876) which effectively consolidated the Canadian Government’s system for controlling and assimilating First Nations peoples. A few of the highlights from this Act include: provisions that forbade First Nations people from leaving their reserves without written permission on a pass card signed by a federal Indian agent; stipulations denying First Nations women who married non-First Nations men, along with their children, their status rights; and the criminalization of traditional, sacred ceremonies (Chansonneuve, 2005). Under the direction of the Indian Act and the newly created Department of Indian Affairs, the jurisdiction of all matters “dealing with the Indians [sic]” (Auditor General of Canada, 2000, p. 8) fell to the federal government. This included the responsibility for providing education for First Nations people registered under the Act. As a result, a system of federal day and residential schools was created to educate First Nations children throughout the country. These schools, however, were generally placed under the administrative control of the major churches of Canada. Although the initiatives taken by the new government may have been motivated by the spreading notion that all children should have a right to education, Hamilton (1986) points out that the educational policies and plans for implementation were designed from the outset on the prejudicial “assumption that native cultures themselves were unworthy of perpetuation, and that, indeed, these cultures represented
the denial or negation of basic Canadian values” (p.11). Consequently, First Nations languages, customs and traditions were aggressively targeted by school officials for eradication, to be replaced with those of mainstream society.

In New Brunswick, day schools were the predominant form of federally-run education for the Mi’kmaq and Wolastoqi First Nations from the late 1800s until the early 1970s. In fact, by 1900, “a day school was within walking distance of most Indian [sic] children in the Maritimes” (Hamilton, 1986, p. 13), and was often situated within First Nations communities. As in other parts of the Maritimes, these day schools, or reservation schools as they have also been called (Perley, 2011), were predominantly run by the Roman Catholic clergy, with nuns acting as teachers and priests as principals.

The history of day schools is less well known and documented than their sister residential schools. In his book *Defying Maliseet Language Death: Emergent Vitalities of Language, Culture, & Identity in Eastern Canada*, Bernard C. Perley (2011) states that while “[t]he most traumatic education experience has often been associated with the residential school system...the reservation schools [in New Brunswick] exerted similar assimilatory pressures” (p.49). Clergy members were responsible for instilling in First Nations children “proper white values” so that they might “become good citizens” (p.49). In addition, Perley (2011) documents that speaking First Nations languages was strictly forbidden on school and church grounds, and that the nuns would reprimand students for speaking “the devil’s tongue” (p.51) in front of other students in order to shame them.

I have also been privileged to speak with some former New Brunswick day school attendees about their experiences. David Perley, Director of MWC, described
how from the very first day of school students who did not understand the English-speaking teachers would be punished for not answering them fast enough.

Back in those days [1956-63], Maliseet was the main language spoken in Tobique. The only place most students heard English was in the Indian Day School and in the Church. But I had a bit of English because my mother believed the nuns who always told us that that in order to get ahead in the world we had to learn English. And I remember the very first day of school, the teachers asking “What’s your name?” And most students didn’t know what they were saying. So they would just smile at the teacher. And then they got punished for not responding right away. Right from the first day, they punished us. The nun would come up and either shake you, point fingers at you, or pull your ears, all while yelling at you. That was many students’ first exposure to English. (Perley, personal communication, October 14, 2012 and January 23, 2013)

Perley also recalled how “right from grade one, our teachers told us we were savage, barbaric people” (personal communication, October 14, 2012).

During the early years of federal day school, students continued to reside in their home communities and travelled with their families during hunting and gathering seasons, making compulsory attendance difficult to enforce. As a result, Sir John A. Macdonald’s government [1867–1873, 1878–1891] became increasingly interested in more aggressive measures of cultural replacement and assimilation. When Canada was created as a country in 1867, the major churches were already operating a small number of boarding schools for Aboriginal students (Milloy, 1999; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015b), and in response to the perceived failure of the federal day schools, residential schools became the focus of the federal government’s Aboriginal policy (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015b).

Since the dominant educational ideology of the time was that morality and education were “inextricably intertwined” (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003), the large majority of residential schools continued to be operated as joint ventures with the four
major churches of Canada. Under this arrangement the responsibility for running these schools was delegated to members of the respective Anglican, Catholic, Presbyterian and United clergy. Following this new residential school model, children were removed from the influence of their parents and communities, often separated by many miles, and acculturated in boarding schools based on the principles and values of the Euro-Canadian middle-class, including basic education, hard work, and religious devotion (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003). However, as in day schools, initial attendance was low. Under pressure from the missionaries running the schools, the federal government passed several amendments to the Indian Act enforcing compulsory attendance for registered First Nations children aged seven to fifteen years of age. These amendments effectively removed the rights of parents to their children, and gave the government and school administrators’ total control over the children’s lives. Some reports put these amendments as early as 1884 (Chansonneuve, 2005), others between 1894 and 1895 (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003), and the provision of mandatory attendance and measures to enforce this are clearly stated in An Act to amend the Indian Act, S.C 1919-1920, c. 50 (10-11 George V) (Government of Canada, 1920). Regardless of the exact year these amendments were made in the Indian Act, compulsory attendance began to be enforced prior to the turn of the twentieth century. In 1892, the Canadian government began a policy of “aggressive assimilation” and greater measures ensued to eradicate Aboriginal cultures and expedite the assimilation process. Consequently,

18 The United Church was not formed until 1925, when four Protestant denominations (Methodists, Congregationalists, some Presbyterian Churches, and the Association of Local Union Churches) amalgamated. Clergy prior to 1925 would have belonged to these other churches. Post 1926 they would have been designated United Church clergy (Schweitzer, 2011).
Indian Agents were given the authority and RCMP were employed to forcibly remove children from their parents’ homes and communities and deliver them to residential schools, if necessary (Bear Nicholas, 2001; Chansonneuve, 2005; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003).

The two primary objectives of the residential school system in Canada were to remove and isolate children from the influence of their families and communities, severing all ties with languages, customs and beliefs, and to assimilate them into the dominant culture (Chansonneuve, 2005). These objectives were based on the assumption that Aboriginal cultures and spiritual beliefs were inferior and unequal, and ultimately unable to adapt to a rapidly modernizing society. As Deputy Minister of Indian Affairs Duncan Campbell Scott\(^{19}\) told the parliamentary committee at the time, “our object is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic” (as cited in Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015b, p. 3). While some people like to dismiss Scott’s sentiments as a product of his time, it is important to note that this opinion was so wide-spread and so ingrained that it continued well into the twentieth century. As an example, these goals were clearly reiterated in 1969 in the *Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian policy* (generally referred to as the “White Paper”), which sought to end Indian status and terminate the Treaties (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 1969).

\(^{19}\) Library and Archives Canada, RG10, volume 6810, file 470-2-3, volume 7, Evidence of D.C. Scott to the Special Committee of the House of Commons Investigating the Indian Act amendments of 1920, (L-2)(N-3).
The popular belief at the time was that the best chance for Aboriginal children to be successful was to learn English, adopt Christianity, and assimilate into mainstream Canadian society. Since students would be isolated culturally and geographically in residential schools, the task of assimilation was supposedly ensured (Ing, 1991). Presumably, as students completed school and returned to their communities or found new places in the world, they would pass their adopted lifestyle on to their children. In this way it was thought that Native traditions would diminish or be completely abolished in a few generations.

As in federal day schools, Indigenous languages were particularly targeted for destruction in residential schools. Under the premise of ensuring English acquisition, students were forbidden from speaking their Native languages. Breaches of this rule resulted in suffering the consequences of cruel corporal punishment (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003). The residential school system was founded on these principles, and many Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal scholars contend that the history of residential schools in Canada is largely a history of genocide (for a sample, see Bear Nicholas, 2001; Chansonneuve, 2005; Chrisjohn et al., 2009; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003).

Although no residential schools were established in New Brunswick, some First Nations students from this province were sent to the Shubenacadie Residential School in Nova Scotia. This residential school operated from 1930 – 1967 (Paul, 2006, p. 261) and took in students from all three Maritime Provinces as well as the Restigouche (Listuguj) First Nation community in Quebec (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2011). The damaging effect of the separation of children from families, the harsh conditions and forced labour, and the horrific abuses suffered by children in this and
other residential schools, have been well documented (for examples see Canada. Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996a; Chansonneuve, 2005; Chrisjohn & Young, 1997; Ing, 1991; Knockwood, 2001; Paul, 2006; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015b). Most notably, in recent years many remaining survivors have shared their stories through Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

Whether Mi’kmaw and Wolastoqi children attended day schools or Shubenacadie Residential School, they were instructed in a foreign language and were often punished severely for using their own languages and observing traditional customs. Further, when these school systems began to be dismantled and First Nations students started to integrate into provincial schools, it was revealed that the large majority (60-80%) of federal day school and Indian Residential School attendees had failed to advance past grade three (Barman, Hebert, & McCaskill, 1986). Despite the laws and harsh measures to enforce attendance, residential schools also experienced high national dropout rates of Aboriginal students. Reportedly in 1946, of 16,000 students enrolled, only 883 reached grade seven, 324 reached grade eight, and 71 reached grade nine (Carr-Stewart, 2006). While many individuals did acquire basic academic skills and went on to become some of the Maritimes’ first Aboriginal teachers, lawyers, authors, and scholars who are now “writ[ing] back” (Episkenew, 2001, p. 125) about their experiences in an ongoing struggle towards social justice for their people, the costs were great.

The current generation of First Nations youth is only two to three generations away from the closure of federal day schools and Shubenacadie Residential School in
the Maritimes. Whether conscious of the impact or not, these students continue to be affected by the intergenerational trauma these schools perpetuated on their families, and by their family members’ subsequent personal struggles and mixed attitudes towards schooling (Bear Nicholas, 2001; Crain & Tremblay, 2013; Ing, 1991; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015b). This lasting negative impact has been evidenced through the interruption of family structures, the loss of nations’ traditional educational values and practices, the disappearance of communities’ first languages, economic depression, personal struggles such as alcoholism, drug abuse and violence, and an unfamiliarity with traditional spirituality (Alberta Education, 2005; Barnes, Josefowitz, & Cole, 2006; Bear Nicholas, 2001; Chansonneuve, 2005; Cote, 2001; Kirkness & Bowman, 1992; Robertson, 2003; Starnes, 2006). The fact that this shameful chapter in Canada’s short history is not part of the commonly told story of the Canadian nation that is taught in schools, and is not part of the consciousness of the majority of citizens, has only served to worsen the impact of this period on First Nations peoples.

Integration of First Nations students into provincial school systems: The national context. Initial efforts to integrate First Nations students into provincial schools across Canada began in the early 1950s in the aftermath of World War II and amidst growing international sentiments that segregation based on race was wrong (Hamilton, 1986). However, the federal government entered into negotiations with provincial education authorities regarding tuition transfer for First Nations students entering provincial schools without discussing the proposed changes with First Nations (Auditor General of Canada, 2000). Many First Nations leaders viewed the failure to be consulted on the terms for integration as paternalistic and a violation of the federal
government’s legal and treaty responsibility to provide education for First Nations students (Bear Nicholas, 2001). In fact, from the perspective of many First Nations leaders, integration “simply meant the closing down of Indian [sic] schools and transferring Indian [sic] students to school away from their Reserves, often against the wishes of the Indian [sic] parents” (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972, p.25). Therefore, despite any benevolent intentions that may have existed, the integration of First Nations students into provincial schools has consistently been criticized, studied and, in some cases, contested since this era of First Nations education began.

From the beginning integration presented complex jurisdictional issues and was plagued with many challenges. In 1964, the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration commissioned a study to review the situation of the “Indians” of Canada. The resultant report, *A Survey of the Contemporary Indians of Canada: A Report on Economic, Political, Educational Needs and Policies* was published three years later under the leadership of Harry B. Hawthorn (1967). Part two of *The Hawthorn Report*, as it is commonly known, focused on the status of First Nations students attending provincial schools. During their inquiry, Hawthorn and colleagues discovered that in the first twelve years of integration there was “a 94 per cent loss” of First Nations students “between grades one and twelve” (Hawthorn, Tremblay, Vallee, & Ryan, 1967, p. 130). When they attempted to explain such an astronomical drop-out rate, they pointed out “problems inherent in educating children of minority groups in institutions designed to meet the needs and standards of the majority” (p. 105), including: stereotypic beliefs, misinterpretation of behaviour, and different cultural orientations. Essentially, policy makers failed to take into account that the White community—school administrators,
teachers, parents, and children—were unprepared for integration (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972, p. 25). This is not that surprising given that many members of the White community had previously had little personal contact with First Nations peoples, and based their beliefs about “Indians and Indian life” (Hawthorn et al., 1967, p. 143) on the negative portrayal of Aboriginal peoples in “movies, radio, television, magazines, newspapers, books, advertisements, religious sermons, textbooks” and other forms of propaganda (Paul, 2006, p. 258). As a result, Aboriginal students frequently found themselves in classrooms with White middle-class teachers who had little or no understanding of cross-cultural differences or the skills to navigate the cultural boundaries between themselves and their new students (Haig-Brown, 1988). They also often faced discrimination from teachers, fellow students and the rest of the school community, and these negative attitudes profoundly affected their capacity to learn in school (Hawthorn et al., 1967). Hawthorn and colleagues also reported that provincial curricula across the country universally lacked any material related to First Nations cultures, and consisted of biased and erroneous accounts of history and depictions of Aboriginal peoples (pp.13-14). Although The Hawthorn Report ultimately attributed the difficulties First Nations students were experiencing in provincial schools to the students’ cultural differences and failed to acknowledge the history of education for First Nations peoples, this document is significant because it was the first major report to a) concretely identify the cultural disconnect between First Nations and the provincial school systems, b) link this to the alienation of First Nations students, and c) recommend the inclusion of First Nations cultural material in the curricula.
While the public systems were seen by some to be a major improvement over previous forms of schooling for Aboriginal peoples (Bear Nicholas, 2001), little progress was made in terms of enhancing education and academic achievement of Aboriginal students during the early decades of integration. The enduring belief that Aboriginal cultures were archaic and that Aboriginal students would be more successful if they assimilated into the mainstream culture continued to be the dominant ideology behind the policy of integration (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003). As such, no real effort was made to actually integrate anything from Aboriginal cultures into the existing schools, other than the students themselves.

Integration in New Brunswick. Simultaneous to these developments at the national level, the province of New Brunswick was also faced with the challenge of integrating and meeting the needs of First Nations students in public schools. Although efforts to integrate Mi’kmaw and Wolastoqi students into provincial schools in New Brunswick also began in the 1950s, the transition from federal day schools occurred slowly in this province, and in the 1960s a majority of students were still attending the federally-run, segregated schools (Hamilton, 1986).

Similar to other provinces in Canada, the initial years of integration of First Nations students into provincial schools were fraught with problems and difficulties. Although there has not been much published about the early years of integration in New Brunswick, my Elders, David and Imelda Perley, have spoken about the difficulties they encountered during their early years in provincial schools. In their experience, schools administrators held the attitude that First Nations students had to adapt to the
mainstream culture; yet, in reality, they were afforded very few opportunities to actually do so.

Relieved to finally leave the “Indian Day” school in Tobique First Nation, David Perley described his first day attending grade 7 at Perth Regional High School in 1962:

I remember sitting in the bus—which I learned later was identified as the “Indian bus” by the principal, teachers, and non-Native students—on my first day of school anxiously waiting to arrive at the high school. When we finally arrived at the school I remember the numerous faces looking out the windows of the school because the non-Natives students wanted to see the “Indians” coming out of the “Indian bus”. … As we stepped off the bus and continued walking into the school, I could see and hear some of the non-Native students mimicking the “Indian war cry” [Ow Ow Ow] of the “Hollywood Indians.” Shortly after our arrival the principal announced on the school’s public announcement system that all “Indian” students were to report to the gymnasium. We gathered in the gymnasium and the principal informed us the Maliseet language would not be allowed in the school, especially within the classrooms. We were also informed that misbehavior from “Indian students” would not be tolerated. Finally, we were issued a “meal ticket” for our lunches and we were assigned a specific location within the cafeteria. Welcome to Perth Regional High School! (Perley, personal communication, October 14, 2012 and January 23, 2013)

In addition to a segregated section within the cafeteria, Tobique students were also given a separate menu to order from. Within classes, where they were generally outnumbered 10:1, they sat together in a back corner for support and protection (Perley, personal communication, October 14, 2012 and January 23, 2013).

In July 1965, following escalating incidents of violence and racism, the ultimate form of segregation was instituted: The all-White school board\(^\text{20}\) voted 25-1 to bar all First Nations students from the school when it reopened in September (Nielsen, 1965). The motion stated that students from Tobique were no longer welcome at Perth Regional

\(^{20}\) At the time, the school board was referred to as the “ratepayers association”.

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High School. When interviewed by the press T.W. Tomilson, secretary of the Southern Victoria Regional School District, reported that the vote was taken by the ratepayers to ease their fears that “their daughters might go out with an Indian boy” (Daily Gleaner, 1965). The decision to ban First Nations students from Perth Regional High School garnered national attention, with the Toronto Daily Star (Nielson, 1965) referring to the move as “Mississippi-style segregation.” Additional local media outlets picked up the story, decrying the motion as blatantly racist (Daily Gleaner, 1965). The media coverage, combined with a successful boycott carried out by the community of Tobique First Nation against of the stores in Perth, finally forced the ratepayers to rescind the motion and reluctantly accept Tobique students at Perth Regional High School. By then, however, the damage had already been done; First Nations parents and students knew they were not welcome. While this is only one example of segregation in New Brunswick provincial schools in the early years of integration, similar stories exist in other areas of the province.

Establishment of First Nation community schools. While I am primarily interested in the literature regarding First Nations students’ experiences in provincial schools, both First Nation community schools and the New Brunswick provincial school system historically and currently play a significant role in the education of many Mi’kmaq and Wolastoqi youth this province, and the relationship between these forms of schooling is intertwined and complex.

In the early 1970s, in response to escalating assimilative pressures from the federal government, First Nations leaders from the across the country mobilized to form a single, national group that would work together to define their common interests – the
National Indian Brotherhood (NIB) (Scott, 1999). Increasing concern about their children’s education became a major area of focus for the NIB, and in 1972 they issued a policy paper entitled *Indian Control of Indian Education* (ICIE) (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972) to the federal government. The ICIE “policy document was, and continues to be, evidence of the power of Aboriginal peoples… working together to speak up against government assimilationist policies” (Pidgeon, Muñoz, Kirkness, & Archibald, 2013, p. 5), and continues to be seen as the foundational document for articulating the desires and goals of education by First Nations leaders for First Nations peoples. This foundation was recently reinforced and renewed following the release of a renamed edition of ICIE entitled *First Nations Control of First Nations Education: It’s Our Vision, It’s Our Time* (Assembly of First Nations, 2010a) which expanded on their vision.

In ICIE, the NIB (1972) asserted, based on their Aboriginal status and treaty rights, that it was time for First Nations to regain control of education for their children for the purpose of salvaging their cultures, languages, and worldviews and ensuring transmission of these to future generations. They also emphasized that education should achieve two main goals for First Nations students: instill the necessary skills for successful living in a modern society, and inspire pride in their cultural identity as First Nations people (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972). This document served as a major

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21 In 1982 the National Indian Brother (NIB) combined with the All Chiefs Conference to form the Assembly of First Nations (AFN). The AFN Charter was officially adopted in July 1985 (Marshall, Posluns, & Hall, 2016)
turning point in First Nations education in Canada and, as a result, First Nations community schools began to be funded by the federal government.

Establishing the new schools and attempting to incorporate the community’s culture, traditions and values while maintaining the mandated provincial curriculum took considerable time and effort, and the initial years of Band-controlled schools were challenging. As a result, several early education evaluation reports of First Nations community schools in New Brunswick (Hamilton & Micmac-Maliseet Institute, 1985; Hamilton & Owston, 1982b, 1982a, 1983, 1984) reported that while some gains were made, the schools were academically weak, which hindered students when they transitioned into provincial schools. It is important to remember that at this time First Nations curricular resources were extremely scarce, leaving communities and teachers to develop their own materials, if this was even within their means. Further, while communities had administrative control, INAC imposed multiple authoritative restrictions which had to be followed or else funding could be withheld, which strictly limited school administrators’ autonomy. These different definitions of control posed many problems, and continue to be an area of contention between First Nations communities and INAC. As Verna Kirkness, a renowned Indigenous Scholar and member of the NIB team which produced ICIE, recently stated:

We saw ourselves free to create a new system: a system where we learn how to read, write, do all the things we have to do… but based on our Indigenous knowledge as the foundation to our learning. Instead Indian Affairs’ interpretation of the new policy was that Indians would be administering Indian Affairs' programs. (Pidgeon et al., 2013, pp. 7–8)
 Nonetheless, First Nations persisted in their endeavours to educate their own children and today some of the shining examples of success come from First Nations community schools.

All that being said, community schools were not established in all First Nations communities in New Brunswick for a variety of reasons—possibly including size of the community, number of students, and desire. As such, many First Nations students in the province were sent directly to local public schools. Even today, only seven of fifteen New Brunswick First Nations have a community school (New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood, 2017). Among those communities that did establish their own schools, none of them received the funding or had capacity to provide education beyond the elementary or junior high levels (Hamilton, 1991b). This capacity is still true today; as of the 2017-2018 academic year, three out of seven First Nations schools are equipped to teach students from early childhood to grade eight, two offer up to grade six level programming, and two others can serve students up to grade five (New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood, 2017). Finally, in all of these communities, parents had, and continue to have, the right to choose whether to enroll their children in the community school or in local public schools from Kindergarten onward. As a result, since the time of integration all First Nations students living in New Brunswick have attended provincial schools for either a portion or the entirety of their K-12 schooling—unless they have dropped out prior to transitioning from their community school. Therefore, improving the educational outcomes and experiences of First Nations students in public schools is essential and has been an ongoing concern in this province for several decades.
First Nations Education Rights in Canada

In any conversation about the history of education for First Nations, Metis and Inuit peoples in Canada, it is important to discuss education in terms of legal rights. This is an area of study which is quickly proliferating as scholars from educational, legal and humanities disciplines are devoting much of their careers to examining the multifaceted and complex issues and implications associated with claiming education as an Aboriginal right. While a full discussion is beyond the scope of this dissertation, a brief explanation of how education is recognized as an Aboriginal right under treaties, the Canadian Constitution, and International law is warranted.

Education as a treaty right. As mentioned previously, British officials on behalf of the Crown entered into peace and friendship treaties with the Wabanki nations in the Maritimes starting in 1725. These treaties are considered “sacred documents to First Nations because they empower the older values of Aboriginal society, and because they are a sacred vision of the future of the first people among multicultural immigrants” (Henderson, 1995, p. 246). The intent of these treaties was to reconcile First Nations sovereignty and rights as sovereign nations with the British claims to assert their own sovereignty in the new land, and guaranteed First Nations their right to self-government, non-interference and the peace and friendship of the colonists (Carr-Stewart, 2001; Mi’kmaq-Wolastoqey Centre, 2015). Land was never ceded in exchange for services or goods under these treaties.

Although the peace and friendship treaties and the Royal Proclamation of 1763 did not specifically mention educational rights, as the numbered treaties that established the Western provinces did, these treaties are still regarded as giving rise to contemporary

Aboriginal control of education under Aboriginal culture and practice was a lifelong right and obligation… Aboriginal control of education has always been a Customary right. In the treaties between the British sovereign and First Nations in Atlantic Canada … it is evident that Aboriginal families did not transfer any part of the Aboriginal choice on education to the Crown. …Aboriginal educational customs or laws were never expressly given or signed away in any treaty.” (pp. 246-247)

In other words, Wolostoqiyik and Mi’kmaq maintained education as a traditional right and duty of parents and communities. They did not agree to send their youth to colonial schools. They did not delegate to the Crown any role in the education of their children.

On this point and its ramifications, Henderson (1995) is explicitly clear:

In these treaties with King George, Aboriginal choice concerning education was reserved to Aboriginal laws and customs. In this situation, the sovereign could not delegate this authority to either the Canadian federal government or the provincial governments, since no such rights had been delegated to the king. Without the clear and express wording of a delegation of Aboriginal authority from Aboriginal nations to the king, neither the king nor the state nor the colonists could interfere with Aboriginal education. If either the federal government or a provincial government interfered with this customary right, it would be liable for the damage and hardship created. This fact creates the modern obligation for…education [including post-secondary] as a restorative act. (p. 247)

It important to note that the treaty right to education is not simply viewed as theoretical in contemporary times. The peace and friendship treaties and the Royal Proclamation have been recognized by the Constitution and the Supreme Court of Canada to be legally binding. Under these treaties, Aboriginal education is viewed as a protected Aboriginal right.
**Education as a constitutional right.** Although the treaty right to education was violated and ignored for several centuries, in 1982 the Constitution of Canada, section 35, acknowledged aboriginal and treaty rights of Indigenous peoples of Canada as follows: “The existing aboriginal and treaty rights of the aboriginal peoples of Canada are hereby recognized and affirmed” (Canada, 1982). Under the Constitution and the Supreme Court of Canada aboriginal rights are “an element of a practice, custom or tradition integral to the distinctive culture of the Aboriginal group claiming the right” (Littler Bear, 2009, p.25). In *Naturalizing Indigenous Knowledge, Synthesis Paper* and on behalf of the Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centre (AbLKC), Littler Bear (2009) writes,

> In view of the fact S. 5279 of the Constitution Act, 1982 states that the Constitution is the supreme law of the land, the aboriginal and treaty rights are part of this legal supremacy. AbLKC strongly feels that legal rights are an excellent basis for the naturalization of Indigenous knowledge and that the education systems in Canada can take a leadership role in the recognition of aboriginal and treaty rights. (p.25)

Therefore, although treaties and aboriginal rights have a historical basis, they are nevertheless present with us today as “constitutionally entrenched” rights, so they “cannot be repealed by a simple parliamentary majority (Maaka & Fleras, 2005, p. 216).

**Education as an international Indigenous right.** On September 13, 2007, the United Nations officially adopted the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP) (United Nations, 2008). The declaration was the outcome of more than twenty years of “negotiations between indigenous peoples, UN member-states, observers from UN organs and specialized agencies” (Cosentino, 2010, para. 5). According to Cosentino (2010),
It is distinct as the only international instrument in which indigenous peoples’ representatives played a key role in UN standard-setting processes. It contains both individual and collective rights and the minimum standards necessary to achieve well-being, dignity and survival of the world’s 370 million indigenous people. (para. 5)

Canada was originally one of only four countries to vote against the declaration (with 144 voting for it and 11 abstaining) when it was adopted by the UN General Assembly, a very significant move as “Canada had never before voted against an international human rights instrument” (Cosentino, 2010, para. 3). However, four year later, on November 12, 2010 Canada formally endorsed the UNDRIP. Today, the Declaration is considered the most comprehensive international instrument on the rights of Indigenous peoples.

The United Nations Division for Social Policy and Development: Indigenous Peoples (2016) claims that the UNDRIP establishes a universal framework of minimum standards for the survival, dignity and well-being of the indigenous peoples of the world and it elaborates on existing human rights standards and fundamental freedoms as they apply to the specific situation of indigenous peoples. (para. 2)

Among the rights and freedoms identified is education. Specifically, in the Annex of the UNDRIP, the General Assembly recognized the “right of indigenous families and communities to retain shared responsibility for the upbringing, training, education and well-being of their children” (United Nations, 2008, p. 3). This recognition is expanded upon in Articles 14 and 15 which state Indigenous peoples, individuals and, particularly, children have:

- the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning (Article 14, 1)

- the right to all levels and forms of education of the State without discrimination (Article 14, 2)
• the right to the dignity and diversity of their cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations which shall be appropriately reflected in education and public information. (Article 15, 1)

Accordingly, the UNDRIP stipulates that nation states have responsibilities to “take effective measures, in consultation and cooperation with indigenous peoples” (p.7):

• in order for indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language (Article 14, 3)

• to combat prejudice and eliminate discrimination and to promote tolerance, understanding and good relations among indigenous peoples and all other segments of society (Article 15, 2)

The UNDRIP also reaffirmed and recognized “treaties, agreements and other constructive arrangements” (p. 3) as the basis for strengthened relationships and partnerships between Indigenous peoples and the Countries that contain their traditional territories. Overall, it is clear that the signatories to the UNDRIP, now including Canada, recognized the rights of Indigenous peoples, particularly children, to a quality education as defined by Indigenous nations, regardless of whether they attend community schools or public institutions. Further, the signatories also agreed that they would bear responsibilities in order to ensure these children have access to education infused with their culture, provided in their language, and designed to combat prejudice and discrimination against them.

To summarize, the treaties signed between Wabanki nations and the Crown confirmed their sovereignty and right to control their own education systems for their children. Since this right was interfered with, the federal government on behalf of the Crown became liable for damages and hardships which created a corresponding
obligation to finance educational facilities and opportunities for Wabanki peoples. Even though these rights and obligations were ignored for several centuries, in 1982, these rights were firmly entrenched in the constitution of Canada. Finally, in accordance with international law and the UNDRIP which Canada endorsed, Indigenous peoples and children have a contemporary right to education in their culture and language, and nation states have a responsibility to ensure that they receive this regardless of the type of educational institution they attend. Overall, these rights to education call for “the best education possible in order for First Nations people to know who they are and to achieve a quality education” (Berryman et al., 2014, p. 21).

**The Historical Landscape: A Summary**

Almost from the time of contact, colonial education for Aboriginal peoples was designed to indoctrinate them with Eurocentric customs and values for the purpose of assimilating them into mainstream society. Post-confederation, Canada’s educational policies continued to conform to colonial models and were designed based on the prejudicial assumption that Aboriginal cultures were “unworthy of perpetuation” and that they “represented the denial…of basic Canadian values” (Hamilton, 1986, p.11). As a result, aggressive assimilation plans were laid and Indigenous languages, customs and traditions were aggressively targeted. The establishment of federal day schools and residential schools was central to this policy, which has been described as “cultural genocide” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015b, p. 1). The painful legacy of this era of schooling for Aboriginal peoples, including the damaging effect on families and communities has been extensively documented.
Although integration into provincial schools was seen as an improvement over the more overt forms of colonial education, this period has also been criticized. Despite the mistakes of the past, the popular belief remained that Aboriginal children should negate their cultures and languages and assimilate into mainstream Canadian society in order to be successful, productive citizens. As such, during the integration era which extends into contemporary times, Aboriginal students encountered severe racism and ignorance on both individual and systemic levels, and left the provincial school systems in very high numbers. In an effort to combat this and to advocate for improvements in education for their youth, the NIB (1972) presented their seminal policy paper ICIE to the federal government. Following Canada’s acceptance of ICIE—which continues to be seen as the foundation for the desires and goals of education by First Nations leaders for First Nations peoples—many improvements were made in Aboriginal education, most notably the establishment of First Nation community schools. Since then many First Nations communities have founded their own schools; however, not all First Nations have done so. In the province of New Brunswick, where this study took place, only seven out of fifteen First Nations have their own community schools, and none of these extend to the secondary school years. As a result, since the time of integration nearly all First Nations students living in New Brunswick have attended provincial schools for either a portion or the entirety of their K-12 schooling. Therefore, improving the educational outcomes and experiences of First Nations students in public schools is essential and has been an ongoing concern in this province for several decades.

To conclude this chapter I want to quote the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015b) on the importance of acknowledging and understanding this
history of education for Aboriginal peoples and for jointly making improvements for Aboriginal students today:

Too many Canadians know little or nothing about the deep historical roots of these conflicts. This lack of historical knowledge has serious consequences for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples, and for Canada as a whole. In government circles, it makes for poor public policy decisions. In the public realm, it reinforces racist attitudes and fuels civic distrust between Aboriginal peoples and other Canadians. Too many Canadians still do not know the history of Aboriginal peoples’ contributions to Canada, or understand that by virtue of the historical and modern Treaties negotiated by our government, we are all Treaty people. History plays an important role in reconciliation; to build for the future, Canadians must look to, and learn from, the past. (p.8)
Chapter 3: Entering the Research Landscape

About two years into my doctoral journey, I was sitting on a patio with a group of friends. One of these friends, a young White man in his mid-twenties who had just finished his first year of teaching elementary school in New Brunswick, turned to me and asked: “What exactly are you studying, Andrea?” While the precise words may have been slightly different, I remember responding like this: “I’m doing a narrative study about the schooling experiences of First Nations students in this province.” He nodded along, a faint smile across his face, revealing little. I continued, “But I’m specifically interested in hearing from students who have graduated high school.” At that, puzzlement, maybe wonderment, filled his face, changing it. I have never forgotten what he said next; it has stayed with me and strengthened my resolve to do this work ever since. “Oh? I thought they were all dropping out of school.”

Our lives and the stories we share about our lives are situated within and shaped by other stories. These “other” stories, or dominant narratives in many ways dictate what stories are possible to tell, what plots are permissible. The research landscape within which stories of First Nations students and by First Nations students are told is so littered with stories of academic failure that statements like “I thought they were all dropping out of school” have now “become rhetoric” (Little Bear, 2009, p.6, emphasis added). This rhetoric, or to phrase this another way, this discourse of failure has filtered down since the time of contact between European settlers and Indigenous peoples, when colonizers’ hierarchical, White supremacist worldview caused them to view Wolastoqiyik and Mi’kmaq as savage, uncivilized people of limited intellect (Hamilton, 1986; Lavell Harvard, 2011; MacNaughton, 1947; Milloy, 1999). Centuries later, this
perception was a foundational ideology in “Indian” education policy. For instance, in 1847, a report commissioned by Indian Affairs and penned by Egerton Ryerson, the Father of public education in Ontario, was published that formed the basis for future directions for residential schools throughout Canada. Within this document Ryerson proclaimed,

I would suggest they be called Industrial schools....I understand them not to contemplate anything more in respect to intellectual training than to give a plain English education adapted to the working farmer and mechanic. ... in respect to the Indian: with him *nothing can be done to improve and elevate his character* and condition [except] the aid of religious feeling. (as cited in Milloy, 1999, p.16 emphasis added)

Post-Confederation, the Department of Indian Affairs demonstrated the perpetuation of this ideology by declaring that removing “Indian” children from their home communities and families was “nothing less than the emancipation” of these children from “conditions of ignorance and superstitious blindness” (as cited in Hamilton, 1986, p.13). As was already discussed in Chapter 2, the harsh and abusive conditions present in federal day schools and residential schools made basic survival a priority over academic learning, and the majority of students did not advance past an elementary level. If First Nations students entered various forms of colonial education assumed to be of limited intellect, it is easy to see how their performance, and possibly their resistance to these oppressive forms of schooling, could have also been mistaken as proof of low intelligence. By the time of the *Hawthorn Report* (Hawthorn et al., 1967), which described “a 94 per cent loss” of First Nations students “between grades one and
twelve” (p. 130) during the first twelve years of integration, the perception of Aboriginal students as being intellectually inferior was already well ingrained. Since then, generations of research focusing on high dropout rates have perpetuated the continuance of this rhetoric into the public sphere, carrying with it enormous “evocative, affective weight” (Blair, Dickinson, & Ott, 2010, p. 3). In short, this discourse has continued to promote a stereotypical, “taken for granted as a natural link between the term ‘indigenous’ . . . and ‘problem’” (Smith, 1999, p. 92). Statements linking failure and Aboriginal students have been so common over the years that they have “come to be seen as important, correct, normal, and so forth” (Blair et al., 2010, p. 4). Yet, like all rhetoric, it is important to remember that these statements have always been “partial… not ‘neutral’ or objective” (Blair et al., 2010, p. 4).

Map of This Chapter

Before embarking on my analysis of the research landscape on Aboriginal education, and specifically Aboriginal students’ academic performance, an introductory mapping of this chapter is necessary. In their work, Schissel and Wotherspoon (2003) found two predominant themes in the literature on Aboriginal education, which I find useful. Over the past several decades the majority of research has focused on the persistence of educational disparity between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations, producing a large body of research exploring and documenting the failure of Aboriginal students; failure particularly evidenced by low rates of educational attainment and high drop-out rates. This focus on Aboriginal student failure can then be broken down into two main types of research: those studies which take an individual
deficit perspective and focus on personal and family-level attributes, and those which historically, socially and politically locate the problem of Aboriginal student failure in the pernicious colonial history of education and related ongoing systemic factors.

In comparison to the plethora of research on Aboriginal student failure, Schissel and Wotherspoon (2003) describe a second theme that emerged and has been growing over the past two decades, focusing on programs and initiatives implemented in an effort to increase rates of academic success for Aboriginal students. This second theme focusing on facilitators of student success is a result of increasing Aboriginal advocacy and a growing demand for educational equity and control over the education of their own children; a movement which began in the 1970s as a direct response to the negative impacts of colonial education and forced assimilation (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972). It is important to take some time considering these studies in order to shift our collective consciousness from the darkness that surrounds the history of Aboriginal education in this country and the resultant rhetoric of failure that has been associated with Aboriginal students.

I must confess that the full complexity of the research landscape on Aboriginal education can be quite overwhelming, and I could not hope to cover everything within the scope of this review. Nonetheless, I hope the path that I have navigated through this landscape provides substantial context for this study.

**A Dominant Focus on Failure**

Delving through the historical and current literature on Aboriginal education, I was first confronted with an abundance of material that focused on the failure of First Nations students. In the words of *The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples,*
The majority of Aboriginal youth do not complete high school. They leave the school system without the requisite skills for employment, and without the language and cultural knowledge of their people. Rather than nurturing the individual, the schooling experience typically erodes identity and self-worth.” (Canada. Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996b, Vol. 3, Pt. 5, p. 2, emphasis added)

Similarly, Van der Woerd and Cox (2003) inform us that, “Government reports state that there is no consistent profile of youth who drop out of school in Canada, except that Aboriginal youth, particularly boys, are the most susceptible to dropping out of school” (p.209, emphasis added). Some studies even report that simply being Aboriginal, or another ethnic minority, puts youth at elevated risk for dropping out of high school (Pallas, Natriello, & McDill, 1989; Ripple, 1995). This is supported from data from the United States where Native Americans have been found to be at the greatest risk for dropping out of school and have the lowest educational achievement and highest rate of unemployment (Cummins et al., 1999; Ramasamy, 1996). Here in Canada, Richards and Vining (2004) claim that “more than any other factor, poor education levels are condemning many Aboriginals to live in poverty” (p.ii). Indeed, the consequences of large numbers of Aboriginal peoples failing to complete high school have been a persistent area of study in and of itself. In addition to linking the significant dropout rate with lower employment earnings and high poverty levels, research has touted the “direct relationship” between early school leaving and higher than average crime rates and lower physical and psychological health outcomes amongst the Aboriginal population (MacIver, 2010; Sharpe, Arseneault, & Lapointe, 2007).

Certainly, the national statistics paint a dismal picture. To re-iterate from Chapter 1, as of the 2006 Canadian Census (Statistics Canada, 2008) 40% of all Aboriginal youth
(status/non-status, on-reserve/off-reserve First Nations, Métis, and Inuit) ages 20-24 had not completed high school in comparison to the national rate of 14%. Not quite “the majority” as is often reported, but still a very significant gap from the national average. If you consider just First Nations youth in this age bracket (20-24) who live in First Nations communities however, this rate jumps to 61%. These statistics were most pronounced in, and thereby skewed by, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and the Yukon and North West Territories, however; areas with the highest proportion of First Nations people in comparison to the overall population of these respective locales (MacIver, 2010). In contrast, the situation in New Brunswick paints a slightly different picture: In the 20-24 year old age bracket, 27% of all Aboriginal youth in the province and 45% of those living in a First Nation community had not completed secondary level education (Mendelson, 2006; Statistics Canada, 2008). Although there is still a lot of work to be done in New Brunswick and these numbers are a far cry from the provincial average of secondary school non-completion of only 12%, they do clearly show that the majority of Aboriginal students are graduating here.

**Focus on individual deficits and familial traits.** When I began to examine the reasons behind why Aboriginal students constitute a “very high risk population” (Cummins et al., 1999, p. 38), much of the research I encountered predominantly takes an individual deficit perspective and focuses on individual and family-level reasons for why so many First Nations students leave school early. This is not that surprising since, in general, “at-risk” students “have been defined in terms of their personal and familiar characteristics… [including] membership in a racial or ethnic minority, low socioeconomic status, a single parent in the home, and low educational attainment by
one or both parent(s)” (Donmoyer & Kos, 1993, p. 9). Evans (2007) concurs that historically, studies which examine students at risk of dropping out of school generally focus on students’ problems, “placing blame on students, their background, families, and/ or communities effectively negat(ing) the impact of structural inequality on students. . .their schools and communities” (p. 176).

Using data from the 2001 Aboriginal Peoples Survey, Siggner and Costa (2005) analyzed the reasons Aboriginal youth gave for dropping out of high school. Interestingly, the most frequent response by Aboriginal males was reportedly “boredom” (25%), compared with 19% of non-Aboriginal Canadian males reporting the same. For female Aboriginal youth, 25% stated that the main reason they dropped out was due to “pregnancy or caring for their children,” whereas only 16% of non-Aboriginal female Canadians listed this as a reason for leaving school without a diploma. The British Columbia Ministry of Education (2001) similarly published data noting that pregnancy and parenthood were the primary reasons Aboriginal students dropped out of school. In contrast, in 2003, van der Woerd and Cox (2003), claimed that Aboriginal youth’s elevated risk for dropping out of high school was correlated with their tendency “to engage in risky behaviours such as substance use and delinquency” (p. 208).

Even the body of “seemingly positive literature” (Lavell Harvard, 2011, p. 48) which focuses on learning styles of Aboriginal students and cultural discontinuity theories is contentious. It has been argued that Aboriginal students struggle in mainstream systems because their learning styles differ from those that are preferred and reinforced in schools (Hill, Johnny, George, & Methot, 2002; John, 1972;
Pewewardy, 2002; Plank, 1992; Swisher & Deyhle, 1989). While the focus on learning styles could, and sometimes has, resulted in looking for ways to better engage Aboriginal students, it has also been criticized for “reinforce[ing] the propensity for victim blaming as the student and his or her culturally defined learning style become responsible for educational failure, once again simultaneously disguising systemic inequity” (Lavell Harvard, 2011, p. 48; see also Saunders & Hill, 2007). In a similar vein, cultural discontinuity theories argue that the “differences between the culture of the school and the home culture of the student… leads to conflict and misunderstanding and eventual failure and/or drop-out” (Lavell Harvard, 2011, pp. 47-48). These theories were very popular before the turn of the 21st century (Huffman, 1990; Kawagley & Barnhardt, 1999; Ledlow, 1992; Philips, 1983; Wax, Wax, & Dumont, 1989) and still hold some sway today. As the National Indian Brotherhood (1972) cautioned, however, as a result of such theories, it has still been “the Indian student who was asked to integrate: to give up his identity, to adopt new values and a new way of life” (p. 25) in order to suit the structures of the non-Aboriginal educational institutions.

Family and neighbourhood effects have also been noted in several studies. In a two-year study of 991 Native American women from seven northern plains tribal groups, five reservations, and three states, (Bowker, 1992) described how at-risk Aboriginal students share many characteristics in common with non-aboriginal drop-outs including: distinct minority ethnicity, one-parent homes, low parental education, low sibling education, repeated school failure, family dysfunction and abuse in the home, drug and alcohol abuse, pregnancy, and discrimination or racism. In a study of the connection between socio-economic status and the drop-out rate of status First
Nations students, Hull (1990) found that educational attainment was even more sensitive to parental SES than for non-aboriginal students. Other studies have reported that Aboriginal students frequently live in poverty, experience malnutrition, come from single parent families, have parents with low educational attainment rates, and parents who abuse alcohol (Cummins et al., 1999; Richards & Vining, 2004; van der Woerd & Cox, 2003). Within the body of research on the larger non-Aboriginal population, low socioeconomic status and low educational background of one’s parents is commonly correlated with low academic achievement (Davis, 1992; Lavell Harvard, 2011). In addition, Willeto (1999) found Navajo youth who obtained higher grades were more likely to come from parents with higher income and education. Yet, both Rindone (1988) and Davis (1992) reported that the majority of successful Aboriginal students also came from homes with low incomes and parents with little education. According to Lavell Harvard (2011), this observation comes as little surprise:

As a result of historical oppression the majority of Aboriginal peoples, successful or otherwise, come from poor homes and parents with little education [although this is starting to change]. Such findings must at the very least call into question the commonly held belief that the low income and low education level of parents are a determining factor in the perpetuation of low educational aspirations and attainment for Aboriginal students.” (pp.63-64)

Continuing to blame low-income Aboriginal families for the academic failure of their children, continues to ignore the complicated, historically and politically situated reasons for why poverty is such a wide-spread issue in many Indigenous communities.

Given the historical attitudes towards Aboriginal peoples in Canada over the past several hundred years, it is not that surprising many of the theories advanced in mainstream research have focused on the characteristics of Aboriginal students
themselves, or their families, communities and cultures, as the source of educational failure (Lavell Harvard, 2011). By locating the “sole source of the problem” within individual and familial contexts, researchers conveniently failed “to analyze…the wider social economic and policy contexts” in which they existed (Smith, 1999, p.92). Indeed, Smith (1999) elaborates,

A continuing legacy of what has come to be taken for granted as a natural link between the term ‘indigenous’ (or its substitutes) and ‘problem’ is that many researchers, even those with the best of intentions, frame their research in ways that assume that the locus of a particular research problem lies with the indigenous individual or community rather than with other social or structural issues. (p. 92)

This uncritical identification of characteristics common to Aboriginal students who have failed has clearly not led to the kind of substantive changes in education that are necessary if we are to close the gap between Aboriginal students and the rest of the Canadian population. Building on previous research, Lavell Harvard (2011) explains how this type of research has actually become part of the problem facing current Aboriginal students:

Decades of research focusing primarily on those Aboriginal students who fail has had the unfortunate effect of reinforcing the prejudicial, ethnocentric majority attitude that certain cultural groups [such as the Aboriginal peoples] are inherently deficient and therefore incapable of greater achievement. (Lavell Harvard, 2011, p. 10)

Not only does this type of research ignore both institutional and societal problems it actually serves to reinforce racist notions of individual pathologies and inadequacies (Ladner, 1972). Put another way, research that focuses on individual and familial traits serves to maintain and perpetuate the stereotypical narrative, or rhetoric, of the failure of Aboriginal students. In order to put an end to the perpetual victim blaming, Battiste
(1998) calls for researchers and educators to “acknowledge the colonial shadow through a thorough awareness of the sociohistoric reality that has created the current context” (p.24).

**Focus on the failure of the system.** Shuffling through the dense, research literature landscape that focuses on Aboriginal education in this country also allowed me to see a second narrative of failure. As my former mentor, Lynda Curwin Doige (2003) writes, perhaps “Aboriginal students often fail because the system fails them” (p.7). Since scholars such as Battiste (1995, 1998, 2002, 2013) Cajete (1994), Graveline (1998), Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991), Little Bear (2009), Smith (1999), among others, have increasingly offered alterative perspectives to the individual deficit-centred approach, the suggestion that education systems have consistently failed Aboriginal students has gained increased acceptance. Lavell Harvard (2011) writes,

> These works marked a turning point as researchers began to look beyond the Aboriginal student for explanations of failure … opening the doors for critique of the ways in which schooling has been used as a weapon against Aboriginal nations to facilitate subjugation and oppression, rather than as a tool for their liberation. (pp. 48 & 5)

This second body of research typically follows a familiar narrative. The majority of studies “begin with a statement of the problem, usually focusing upon poor educational and socio-economic outcomes… [and link these to] the pernicious effects of cultural assimilation and racism” encountered in colonial forms of schooling (Berryman et al., 2014, p.9). Further, these studies point out that the legacy of colonialism continues in various ways resulting in the ongoing devaluing of Aboriginal cultures and peoples in mainstream schools and tend to conclude with recommendations for substantial action to remedy these challenges. While one should tend to feel encouraged about a clear
convergence of research findings and an apparent direction for educational reform to better meet the needs of First Nations students, I mostly experienced a sense of frustration reading through the decades of research and reports that comprise this large portion of Indigenous education research. The frustration I personally experienced is aptly summarized in a question posed by Berryman et al. (2014): “if we are and have been aware of what [the problem is and] what constitutes appropriate policy and program action, why has more not been done to address this issue?” (p. 12).

**Awareness of the problems and recommendations for change.** Although research focusing on the systemic problems facing Aboriginal students was not common during the residential school era, it is worth noting that as early as 1928 the *Meriam Report*, published at the request of the United States Secretary of the Interior, documented the harmful effects of Indian boarding schools on students and family life. The report condemned the practice of removing children from families and identified that the schools failed to properly prepare and support teachers for work with Native American children. Further, Meriam and colleagues stressed that there was a need for improved, adapted curriculum and pedagogies, stating:

The most fundamental need in Indian [sic] education is a change in point of view… the methods must be adapted to individual abilities, interests and needs. A standard course of study, routine classroom methods, traditional types of schools, even if they were adequately supplied—and they are not—would not solve the problem. The methods of the average public school in the United States cannot safely be taken over bodily and applied to Indian [sic] education. Indian [sic] tribes and individual Indians [sic] within the tribes vary so much that a standard content and method of education, no matter how carefully they might be prepared, would be worse than futile. (Meriam et al., 1928, Chapter IX, para 1–2)
In Canada, following the integration of Aboriginal students into provincial schools, problems with the educational systems have been regularly brought to the federal government’s attention.

The *Hawthorn Report* (Hawthorn et al., 1967), which was commissioned by the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, documented a 94% drop-out rate of First Nations students in the first twelve years of integration. Further, Hawthorn et al. (1967) clearly attributed the alienation of Aboriginal students to “problems inherent in educating children of minority groups in institutions designed to meet the needs and standards of the majority” (p. 105). Specifically, these problems included: stereotypical beliefs, misinterpretation of behaviour, different cultural orientations, a universal lack of any curricular material related to First Nations cultures, and biased and erroneous accounts of history and depictions of Aboriginal peoples.

According to Battiste (1995) during this time:

> Aboriginal peoples began to see educators, like their missionary predecessors as nothing more than racists, patriarchs, and oppressors who hid behind fine-sounding words or ideology. Their objectives were viewed as tainted and hypocritical. In effect, education did little except equip Aboriginal youth with resentment and cynicism and erode human consciousness within Aboriginal communities. (p. viii)

Given this context, perhaps it is not surprising that during the first decade of integration First Nations students left provincial schools in droves. Several scholars have argued that the high withdrawal rates signified Aboriginal students’ resistance and deliberate refusal “to be brainwashed by the teachings” of a foreign system that was not only in direct conflict with their own culture, but actually designed to perpetuate the assimilation of Aboriginal peoples into mainstream society (Robinson & Quinney, 1985,
p. 23; see also Haig-Brown, 1988; Lavell Harvard, 2011). As Robinson and Quinney (1985) write,

Many people have called Indians [sic] ‘dumb’ or ‘stupid’ because they would not learn to be obedient of European headmasters and teachers. In reality it is all part of a silent, passive resistance to the growing control and domination of Canadian Society. (p.23)

Considered collectively, the *Hawthorn Report*, the statistics, and the comments of researchers about the growing resistance of Aboriginal peoples paint the picture that all students were rejecting mainstream education, choosing failure over assimilation.

Despite the abysmal statistics during the early years of integration, there is also ample evidence that First Nations peoples desired education for their children. In 1972, the NIB presented the federal government with their policy paper ICIE precisely because of mounting concerns about their children’s education. In addition to being the driving force behind the initiation of First Nations community schools, ICIE (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972) recognized that over 60% of First Nations students were enrolled in provincial or territorial schools, and that more students would transition into these schools at some point during their education. In their report, the NIB (1972) asserted that provincial / territorial schools were “culturally alien” (p. 9) to First Nations students and largely responsible for the high dropout rate among junior and senior high school students. They emphasized the following recommendations for improvement:

- Curriculum reform including integration of First Nations “culture, values, customs, languages and the Indian contribution to Canadian development” (p.9);
- Elimination of biased textbooks;
Training programs and professional development opportunities for teachers and counsellors in inter-cultural education, native languages and English as a second language;

Training and hiring of First Nations teachers, counsellors and para-professionals;

The “urgent need” (p. 7) for First Nations representation on all school boards serving First Nations students; and

Increased opportunities for “parental participation in the educational decision-making process” (p.7).

The majority of subsequent reports and recommendations for improving education for First Nations students, in both First Nations Band-controlled schools and provincial school systems, largely echo the suggestions provided in this 1972 policy statement. For example, the following major national reports all emphasized that the current provincial and territorial systems of education were failing Aboriginal students, emphasizing high dropout rates, and advocated numerous recommendations for change.

In Tradition and Education: Towards a Vision of Our Future the Assembly of First Nations (1988) noted an 80% high school non-completion rate among First Nations students versus 25% of the student body at large. The AFN emphasized that the involvement of parents, Elders and the community was essential in all aspects of educational programming and practices serving First Nations students.

Eight years later, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (Canada. Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996b, Vol. 3) reported that the “majority” of Aboriginal youth were not completing high school. They described that inadequate funding, curriculum development, training, implementation, and the continued alienation of parents from provincial schools continued to impede Aboriginal goals for education.
The RCAP’s interviews with youth also revealed that they felt unsupported, overwhelmed and marginalized in provincial schools, excluded from decisions regarding their education, and often ashamed to be identified as “Indian” in their schools. They recommended that the federal Government could learn much from several First Nations community school initiatives that had undertaken substantive efforts to infuse the curriculum and teaching and learning practices with holistic, culturally and community-based knowledges and values. The RCAP also advocated for greater collaboration between federal, provincial / territorial governments and First Nations, as well as Aboriginal organizations and educators, in order to achieve the progress required in educational reforms to meet the needs of Aboriginal students (Canada. RCAP, 1996b, Vol. 3, Pt. 5, p. 36).

In 2000, the Auditor General’s report expressed deep concern over the continuing education gap between First Nations peoples living on reserves and the Canadian population as a whole, and criticized the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) for their hands-off attitude towards First Nations students attending public schools. Since few First Nations offered secondary level education and the majority of First Nations students left their communities to attend provincial schools at some point during their education, the Auditor General affirmed that INAC needed to be more involved with the provincial education systems (Auditor General of Canada, 2000). The Auditor General also pointed out examples where significant improvements had been made because of tri-partite educational agreements between the federal and provincial governments, and First Nations (such as the Mi’kmaq Education Agreement in Nova Scotia), and recommended that more of these agreements be put in place. Four
years later, however, the Auditor General chastised the efforts of INAC to address the situation or the majority of the recommendations presented in their 2000 report (Auditor General of Canada, 2004).

In 2002, the Minister's National Working Group on Education (2002), a federal initiative involving Aboriginal educators from across the country, continued to point out that the current “drop-out rates of First Nations students in provincial and territorial schools [were] unacceptably high” (p.36). Their recommendations echoed many of the sentiments of ICIE and RCAP, calling for transfer of jurisdiction to communities and the development of culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy. The authors also argued that since the “provinces and territories receive substantial federal dollars for First Nations students” (p.36) enrolled in public schools, they should be held accountable for how they serve those students.

In 2005, INAC acknowledged the persistent problems facing Aboriginal students and responded with an Education Action Plan. This document outlined their strategies to transfer greater responsibility for education to Aboriginal communities in Canada and to work more collaboratively with First Nations and provincial governments to improve education for students attending public schools (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 2005). This same year, the AFN (2005) responded with their own First Nations Education Action Plan. They reminded the federal government that their ultimate vision was a sustainable education system under the “full control and jurisdiction of First Nations based on the recognition of inherent Aboriginal and treaty rights, and under international law” (Assembly of First Nations, 2005, p. 1). The AFN also recognized, however, that “provincial / territorial jurisdictions would continue to play a key role in
the provision of ...education [for First Nations students] for some time to come” (pp.7-8), and they emphasized their dissatisfaction with these school systems, noting the continuing high failure rates of First Nations students. They also argued that since the provincial and territorial governments receive significant tuition funds for First Nations students enrolled in their schools, they should be held accountable to First Nations on educational matters. Like INAC, AFN believed that “enhanced relationships” (p.8) between First Nations, federal and provincial / territorial governments, school boards, and individual schools were needed to increase First Nations participation in public education decisions and governance in order to improve programming for and progress of First Nations students in public schools.

As is evident from all of these national level reports, the facts about the high dropout rates of many First Nations youth have been “often repeated in Canada… [yet] Canada and its provincial curricula has continued to marginalize or be indifferent to First Nations peoples” (Battiste, 2005, p. 5). Little Bear (2009) furthers this argument: “the education systems in Canada have also consistently been… unresponsive to the educational needs, wants, strengths, and weaknesses of Aboriginal Peoples. They have largely resisted making the infrastructure, curricular, and pedagogical changes required to effectively service Aboriginal students” (p.6). Similar to the many claims made in ICIE and reinforced by the research and reports that followed, Little Bear purports that historical and ongoing racism in schools, teachers who are often ignorant about the culture, history, and social situations of First Nations peoples, and the lack of curricula related to Aboriginal peoples and their contributions to the development of Canada, are
primary reasons for the high dropout rate among Aboriginal students and the ongoing resistance to change (Little Bear, 2009).

**The New Brunswick context.** There is little published information available on First Nations student achievement levels in New Brunswick provincial schools prior to the 1980s. There are, however, several important studies and reports since then that have documented the school-based issues facing First Nations students and recommended government action to address them. As a result of these efforts, in 1991, the Department of Education adopted and published a *Policy Statement on Maliseet / Micmac Education in New Brunswick*. This policy statement acknowledged:

> To date, the educational experiences of the Aboriginal students within the provincial schools have not been successful compared to those of their non-Aboriginal counterparts. The Maliseet and Micmac students have the highest dropout rate in the province and continue to have low educational attainment. (New Brunswick Department of Education, 1991, p. 1)

The following section will briefly discuss the key research reports that were influential in this development.

In 1984, under the leadership of the newly appointed Indian Education Consultant, Malcolm A. Saulis, the Department of Education convened a Minister’s Study Group on Indian Education. In their report, Saulis and colleagues (1984), documented that the academic achievement levels of First Nations peoples still lagged significantly behind the general population. They suggested that multiple relational and contextual factors impeded students’ success in school. These included: home and family issues, lack of competence in the languages used in school, a lack of cultural awareness and sensitivity among teachers, and the clash between First Nations’ collective orientation towards achievement versus the emphasis on individualism in
schools. Saulis and colleagues (1984) also reported that the majority of First Nations students dropping out of school were found to do so at the junior high school level (grades 7-9), while those who moved on to senior high school (grades 10-12) reportedly had “a good chance of success” (p. 12). Their list of recommendations, based on concerns raised during First Nation community consultations, included curriculum reform with the inclusion of local First Nations perspectives, training for teachers, involvement of parents, hiring of First Nations teachers, counsellors, and paraprofessionals, and the establishment of a formal policy framework on First Nations Education (Saulis & Minister’s Study Group on Indian Education in the Province of New Brunswick, 1984).

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Hamilton and colleagues at UNB’s Mi’kmaq Maliseet Institute (now MWC) also undertook several research initiatives to evaluate First Nations student achievement and experiences in provincial schools. The Kent County Project Report (Hamilton & Leavitt, 1985) revealed that over a five year period between 1979 and 1984: 27% of First Nations students in grades 10-12 had dropped out or been expelled from school at least once, compared to 12% of the non-Aboriginal population; 38% of First Nations students had failed at least one year in school between grades 7 and 12 (versus 15% of non-Aboriginal students); and 77% were enrolled in lower academic streams (versus 47% of non-Aboriginal students). In Closing the Gap: The Native Indian Student’s Achievement Study (Hamilton, 1991), the authors described that First Nations students generally entered grade one just slightly below average in terms of academic performance, but then proceeded to “slip backwards relative to their non-native counterparts” particularly from Grade 4 onward (Hamilton, 1991, Executive
Summary). Poor student achievement was found to be compounded by growing rates of absenteeism, grade repetition and deteriorating relationships with teachers. At the senior high school level, First Nations students were found to be typically streamed into practical studies rather than academically focused programs, had high absenteeism, were earning low grades, making slow progress, and were dropping out in high numbers (Hamilton, 1991). When asked about their absenteeism, current students attributed avoiding school due to perceived unfair treatment as well as personal problems, while recent dropouts reported having experienced significant discipline problems at school which had often led to expulsion (Hamilton, 1991). From comments about students’ perceived unfair treatment and racially prejudiced teachers we can deduce that there were numerous systemic barriers to success facing these students.

In response to these findings the New Brunswick Department of Education (1991) put forward their *Policy Statement on Maliseet / Micmac Education*. Acknowledging the need to improve education programs “for and about” (p.2) the First Nations peoples of New Brunswick, the Department of Education stipulated the following guiding principles:

- That the Department of Education recognize the importance of partnerships and strong working relationships among schools, Aboriginal people and the Department.

- That Maliseet and Micmac peoples be given the opportunity to participate fully in the education system at all levels. This includes the employment of Maliseet and Micmac professionals by the Department, district offices and individual schools... [and the involvement of parents] in school activities...to help guide and influence the education of their children.

- That the education system recognize that Maliseet and Micmac students are the children of people whose cultures are different from those of the people who established the school system...[and that these] differences, which may include
learning styles, language and worldviews, should be reflected in curriculum, programs and teaching methods in the schools.

- That Maliseet and Micmac histories, culture and lifestyles should be included in the studies taken by New Brunswick students...[so that they will be able to] recognize and appreciate Maliseet and Micmac cultures and their many contributions to our province and society.

- The establishment of local [school district - First Nation level] education committees to address students' needs and parents' concerns is advised.

- That the education system establish both short-term and long-term goals to meet the needs of Maliseet and Micmac students in provincial schools.

- That the Department of Education and school districts provide direction and leadership in the development and implementation of Aboriginal Education programs which meet the needs of Maliseet and Micmac people.

- That all curriculum and materials present Aboriginal people accurately in historical and contemporary terms. (New Brunswick Department of Education, 1991, pp.2-3)

Overall, the Policy Statement reportedly confirmed the Department of Education’s “commitment to provide Maliseet and Micmac students with enhanced opportunities to learn, to grow, to succeed, and to become confident and responsible individuals, proud of their Maliseet/Micmac heritage” (New Brunswick Department of Education, 1991, p. 4, emphasis added). Commitments on their own, however, do not yield results.

A year after the publication of the Policy Statement, David Perley (1992), the Aboriginal Education Consultant for the Department of Education at the time, released Excellence in Education: Improving Aboriginal Education in New Brunswick. This paper was written in response to the New Brunswick government’s establishment of the Commission on Excellence in Education, which reportedly was created to “foster excellence in education, training, and human resource development in New Brunswick” (Perley, 1992). In his report, Perley reminded the government that the educational
experiences of Aboriginal students in the province had been far from “excellent”, suggesting that “if educators and officials aspire to excellence they must [first] strive to meet” (p.8) the basic needs of all of their students. Perley (1992) cited evidence (Hamilton, 1991) that the New Brunswick public school system was failing to provide a quality education to First Nations students. Furthermore, he pointed out that while the Department of Education had solicited research and introduced several initiatives in recent years to improve Aboriginal education, the educational needs of First Nations students were still not being met. Although Perley heralded the *Policy Statement on Maliseet / Micmac Education in New Brunswick* (1991) as a “clear direction for the positive development of Aboriginal education” (p.11), he expressed frustration that nearly one year after its release funds had still not been set aside for the implementation of the outlined principles. In the final pages of his report, Perley recommended that the ”tuition fees collected from the Department of Indian Affairs on behalf of the Maliseet and Micmac students attending provincial schools” (p.12) could and should be utilized for efforts to improve education for First Nations students. Overall, Perley (1991) was clear that he perceived significant resistance on the part of educators, administrators and policy makers to make the necessary changes to address the high dropout rates and improve education for Aboriginal students in this province.

**Does the focus on failure inscribe resistance to change?** The literature reviewed in the preceding section reveals that the problem of First Nation students’ alienation from public schools has been an ongoing concern for nearly 50 years in spite of research consensus, consistent recommendations for change, and ‘commitments’ to educational reform. While there has been some progress, national and provincial level
statistics, particularly for youth living in First Nations communities, remained virtually unchanged between the 1996 and 2006 census surveys (Mendelson, 2008). In fact, between 1996-2006 “the number of 20-24 year olds in Canada as a whole with less than high school graduation decreased from 19 percent to 14 percent” (Mendelson, 2008, p. 1, emphasis added). Therefore, the relative gap between First Nations young adults living in First Nations communities and Canadians in the same age bracket actually increased during that decade. As such, it is not just that some Indigenous students are still being alienated from provincial schools, but that they are still being alienated despite decades of awareness and supposed attempts to improve their educational experiences, engagement and outcomes. In this context, it is understandable that the majority of the research reviewed focused predominantly on the high dropout rates of First Nations students.

The fact that governments, policy makers, and educators have been aware of this problem for so long, indicates a deeply rooted resistance to change. In fairness, as a result of pressure created by the RCAP (Canada. Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996b), the Auditor General Reports (2000; 2004), and the continued efforts of local First Nations leaders and the Assembly of First Nations (Assembly of First Nations, 1988, 2003, 2005, 2010, 2011), the past two decades have seen significantly greater collaboration between federal, provincial / territorial governments, First Nations, and school districts. However, in order for these partnerships to be fruitful and for recommended educational reforms to be successfully implemented, resistance to change must be examined and addressed.

As Little Bear (2009) writes,
One may wonder why present education systems in Canada are so resistant to any change. Other institutions within Canada such as the courts have gone a long way to recognize colonization and racism in their past practices and have since begun to decolonize. (p.16)

Hamilton and Leavitt (1985) interviewed 24 First Nations and non-First Nations educators around the province, to ascertain their opinions regarding the state of education for First Nations students, found that many teachers felt that the majority of the problems students were facing were due to their inability to adapt to the school system and their social and living conditions. Overall, these authors reported a general resistance to change among the school teachers and administrators interviewed, stating “having decided how to package and deliver an educational program, they tend to reject any suggestion that it might be better packaged or delivered in another way” (p. 23).

Even in Alberta, where the provincial government mandated curriculum reform to include local First Nations content and Indigenous perspectives, Donald (2009b) has reported that change has been extremely slow because of resistance on the part of teachers and administrators who view the changes as frustrating, unfair, and, in many cases, irrelevant. These perspectives and attitudes reveal an underlying ideology within the education system, and give some indication of why meaningful educational reforms have been slow to materialize.

According to Sikes (2005), the reason this research has not resulted in the educational reforms desired may be connected to the predominant focus on First Nations students who fail academically and dropout of school. She claims the realities of these students are so far removed from the realities of mainstream educators, administrators and policy makers that they are immediately ‘othered’ in comparison.
Historical othering of Indigenous peoples and the narrative of failure. Since the time of European contact, First Nations peoples have been ‘othered’ in Canada. The success of French and British imperialism depended on subordination of Indigenous peoples through colonialism so that their resources and land could be taken to expand the economic and political power of their empires (Smith, 1999). This process was intensified by Christian missionaries and beliefs that focused on the weaknesses of First Nations people, while extolling the ‘moral’ responsibility of the ‘stronger’ and ‘superior’ Europeans to educate, convert and civilize them (Bear Nicholas, 2001; Smith, 1999).

According to this theory of ‘othering’\textsuperscript{22}, when humans perceive differences, or a separateness, between themselves and another, a feeling of alienation is created, and this, in turn, is threatening to their very sense of self; therefore, we either try to resolve this by attempting to make others more like us thereby preserving our self-certainty, or by rejecting others as extreme opposites of ourselves (Hegel, Miller, & Findlay, 1977). Pratt (1986) speaks of a “familiar, widespread and stable form of ‘othering’ [which occurs when ]...the people to be othered are homogenized into a collective ‘they’” (p.129). When all people of a marginalized group are seen to be represented by the traits exemplified by some of them, especially when those characteristics are viewed as being “pregiven” (p.129), rather than the result of specific historical, economical, social, and political contexts, their differences are essentialized.

If “othering” is perpetuated and maintained by emphasizing the perceived weaknesses of a marginalized or minority group, then it stands to reason that the

\textsuperscript{22} The idea of the ‘other’ is a key concept of continental philosophy. It was first conceived by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1807/1977).
predominant focus on First Nations students who drop out of school in the research reports reviewed may actually serve to cement the narrative of ‘otherness’ of First Nations youth, perpetuate stereotypes about all First Nations students, and hinder efforts towards reform. Although it has been absolutely essential to point out that the provincial school systems have been failing First Nations students since the time of integration, continuing to focus on the academic failure and dropout rates of some First Nations students while ignoring the realities of others is problematic.

**Focus on Failure: A Summary**

The first group of research reports presented in this chapter focused on the connection between individual deficits and familial traits and the high dropout rates amongst Aboriginal students, and I find this body of work highly concerning. Such uncritical, de-contextualized claims foster the notion that there is something inherent in students’ aboriginality itself that puts them at risk, and opens current students up to further exploitation (Ladner, 1972). In effect, they locate the problem of First Nations students’ alienation from public schools with either the students themselves or their cultures, families and communities (Egbo, 2009; Hogg, 2008; Levine-Rasky, 1998; Orlowski, 2008). These statements make their way into educational policy documents and filter down to become part of the rhetoric within education communities. While the second body of work examined has collectively provided strong evidence that the education systems have themselves been major factors in the alienation and poor performance of Aboriginal students, they still emphasize and perpetuate the narrative of Aboriginal student failure in order to attempt to leverage reparations, particularly from the federal government. According to Tuck (2009), both of these types of research are
“damaged-centred” and they operate from a “flawed theory of change” (p.409). She describes that research that “operates, even benevolently, from a theory of change that establishes harm or injury in order to achieve reparation” (p. 409) may not only be ineffective due to the reinforcement of stereotypical representations of marginalized groups in the minds of dominant group members who have the power to enact change, but also carries the huge cost of reinforcing marginalized peoples’ vision of themselves “as depleted, ruined, and hopeless” (p.409). Put another way, the ongoing negative portrayal and essentialization of First Nations students reinforces existing stereotypes and prejudicial attitudes among non-Aboriginal Canadians, including their teachers, classmates, and people in charge of educational reform, and also influences how Aboriginal students see themselves and what is possible for their futures.

Research has shown that Aboriginal students in provincial schools are aware of the predominant negative perception of First Nations, Métis and Inuit students, and that this does impact their learning and chances to succeed. This is exemplified by the frustrated sentiments of a grade nine Aboriginal student in Kanu’s (2002) study: “Aboriginal people are seen [in white society] as backward, stupid, and responsible for their own failure. When one individual fails to make it, everyone in the culture is called a failure” (p. 114). Unfortunately the negative and discriminatory attitudes and low expectations of teachers, combined with the lack of First Nations cultures in schools can lead to enhanced feelings of resentment among First Nations youth which, in turn, can create a “self-fulfilling prophecy” (Hogg, 2008, p. 151).

According to Bazylak (2002), “with a small but crucial change in the point of view, educators can approach educational change from a new perspective” (p. 149).
Rather than focusing on factors that contribute to and perpetuate failure, many researchers are increasingly turning their attention towards facilitators that encourage success for Aboriginal students.

**Research on Facilitators of Aboriginal Student Success**

Although scores of Aboriginal students historically and contemporarily have struggled academically, it is important to also highlight that “there are of course many who are very successful in this area” (Whitley, 2014, p. 157). Given our increased understanding of the complex reasons behind why so many Aboriginal students resist and abandon provincial / territorial education systems, perhaps the questions that ought to be asked are “why do some of them stay” (Mackay & Myles, 1995, p. 171) and how do many of them succeed?

As mentioned previously, Schissel and Wotherspoon (2003) identified a second theme in the Aboriginal education literature that has been growing steadily over the past several decades, focusing on programs and initiatives implemented to increase rates of academic achievement and success among Aboriginal students. Sparked by increasing Aboriginal advocacy and a growing demand for quality education, important changes to Aboriginal education across Canada began to happen in the 1970s with the federal government’s recognition of the NIB’s (1972) national policy paper, *Indian Control of Indian Education* (ICIE). In ICIE, the NIB (now AFN) emphasized “the principles of local control; parental responsibility; Indian culture, values and language; Indian teachers; and culturally sensitive non-Indian teachers and counselors” (Archibald & DeRose, 2014, p. 17). More than forty-five years later, Aboriginal education remains a pressing concern all across Canada; however, significant changes have taken place and
“some areas of Canada are moving toward success in Aboriginal education” (Archibald & DeRose, 2014, p. 17).

As First Nation band-controlled schools began to proliferate, and more and more studies began to report the beneficial impact on the identity and self-respect of students (Assembly of First Nations, 1988), a gradual, growing awareness of the importance of looking beyond failure to what is actually working began to gain acceptance. It is important to note that overall there is still a lack of work focusing on academically successful Aboriginal students relative to the plethora of studies which focus on failure (Berryman et al., 2014; Lavell Harvard, 2011; Tuck, 2009). Nonetheless, identifying factors and facilitators that contribute to student success is currently considered a key component to improving the experiences and academic outcomes of Aboriginal students (Whitley, 2014), and research in this area is quickly gaining ground.

A review of the research literature concerning the factors that influence educational attainment among Aboriginal peoples revealed that improving rates of “success is a multifaceted and exceedingly complex issue” (Lavell Harvard, 2011, p. 57). Nonetheless, there is also a consistent research direction regarding the improvement of education for Indigenous students. While the multiple facilitators of success and success promoting schools have been discussed and presented in various ways, in my examination of this literature I realized that my focus kept being drawn to two broad categories: the incorporation of Indigenous cultural content and perspectives into curricula and classrooms, as well as a simultaneous and ongoing institutional commitment to making necessary changes within education systems and schools.
Incorporation of Indigenous cultural content and perspectives. Although Aboriginal people and communities in Canada have been heavily influenced by Western ways of life and their livelihoods vary considerably from that of their ancestors, extensive research literature suggests that the essential worldview underlying an Aboriginal philosophy of education remains fundamentally unchanged (Battiste, Bell, & Findlay, 2002; Battiste, 2004; Canadian Council on Learning, 2009; Ireland, 2009; Kovacs, 2009; Little Bear, 2009). This philosophy was strongly emphasized by NIB (1972) in ICIE, and is still prominent in current research and reports on improving Aboriginal education (Assembly of First Nations, 2011; Battiste, 2013; Bazylak, 2002; Cajete, 1994; Lavell Harvard, 2011; Little Bear, 2009; Pidgeon et al., 2013; Toulouse, 2014). In brief, the NIB’s (1972) statement of philosophy of education offered the following:

As our fathers had a clear idea of what made a good man [sic] and a good life in their society, so we modern Indians [sic], want our children to learn that happiness and satisfaction come from:

- Pride in one’s self
- Understanding one’s fellowmen, and
- Living in harmony with nature (p.1)

To achieve these goals, NIB also specifically addressed the need for culturally congruent and relevant education for their youth:

We want the behaviour of our children to be shaped by those values which are most esteemed in our culture. When our children come to school they have already developed certain attitudes and habits which are based on experiences in the family. School programs which are influenced by these values respect cultural priority and are an extension of the education which parents give children from their first years. … We believe that if an Indian [sic] child is fully aware of the important Indian [sic] values he will have reason to be proud of our race and of himself [sic] as an Indian [sic]. (p.2)
Overall, the NIB envisioned that schooling instill in First Nations children not only the necessary skills for successful living in a modern society but also pride in their cultural identity as First Nations people. They also recognized that the inclusion of local culture and language was foundational to successful education.

Over the past several decades many researchers have supported the philosophy, vision and claims in ICIE, showing through their work that traditional Indigenous cultures are crucial for the educational attainment of Indigenous students (Agbo, 2001; Antone, 2003; Doige, 2003; Harris, 2006; Jones, 2003; Lee, 2007; Reyhner, Martin, Lockard, & Gilbert, 2013; Richardson & Blanchet-Cohen, 2000). Indigenous Canadian scholars in particular have argued that the inclusion of Indigenous knowledges and perspectives across school curricula is key to closing the achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and increasing the proportion of Aboriginal students who graduate from high school (Battiste, 1998; McAlpine, 2001; Simard, 1994). As the community of researchers examining “what Native students need in order to succeed in school” has grown, so has the notion that motivation for learning will be highest when students’ cultural affiliation is present and valued (Kanu, 2006, pp. 118–119).

**Theoretical underpinnings.** Such research is grounded in socio-cultural theories of cognition and learning, and is a far cry from colonial ideologies and assimilationist policies of former generations of Aboriginal education where Indigenous cultures, values and languages were believed to be barriers to success and unworthy of perpetuation (Lavell Harvard, 2011). According to Kanu (2006) “[s]ocio-cultural theories link the development of children’s thinking, communication, learning, and
motivational styles with the culture into which they are socialized, and posit that an intricate connection exists between culture and student learning” (p.120). In other words, such theories posit that students will perform better when a high level of congruence exists between their familial culture – including the beliefs, values, behavioural expectations, and assumptions about knowledge and education – and that of their school. The premise that cultural congruence is important for student learning is also supported by constructivist learning theories which posit that students “construct” their own understanding by synthesizing new experiences into their previous fund of knowledge (Brooks & Brooks, 1999). Constructivists such as Dewey (1929), Piaget (1954) and Vygotsky (1978) all maintain that students arrive in learning situations with a range of prior knowledge and experiences that influence how they perceive and respond to new information. In schools, children draw on their previous experiences in order to make sense of the school environment as well as the curriculum content presented to them. These socio-cultural theories are endorsed by a rapidly growing body of research that has found that Aboriginal students learn better when educational practices and the curriculum reflects the home and community culture from which they come (Demmert, 2001; Erickson, 1987; Philips, 1983; Trueba, 1988; Yazzie, 1999).

**Integration of Indigenous knowledges to support learning and academic achievement.** The central importance of Aboriginal culture and content as a facilitator for Aboriginal student success is articulated in the following examples. In two different studies, Kanu (2006, 2007) examined the outcomes of integrating Aboriginal cultural knowledge and perspectives into high school social studies curriculum on academic achievement, class attendance and school retention among Aboriginal students. In
accordance with previous studies (for examples see Lipka, 2002; Vogt, Jordan, & Tharp, 1987), her results suggested that when school curriculum and teaching/learning processes were compatible with students’ cultures and cultural socialization patterns, the chances of students’ academic success and engagement in school were increased (Kanu, 2007, p.33). Integrating Indigenous content was also reported as promoting the “breadth and depth of understanding of curriculum content and higher cognitive skills” (Kanu, 2006, p. 137) among students. Students in one of the studies reported that the use of counter-stories were “particularly useful for understanding and challenging what was presented as factual content in the dominant school curriculum” (2006, p. 137).

Supporting Kanu’s (2006, 2007) claim that integrating Aboriginal perspectives into pedagogies and curricula will support increasing academic achievement and success among Aboriginal students, Brade and colleagues (2003) found that students who liked what they were taught about Aboriginal peoples in elementary school had higher academic achievement rates than those who did not. In a similar vein, Archibald and DeRose (2014) reported that success promoting schools in British Columbia regularly embedded local Aboriginal knowledge throughout their curriculum and offered provincially developed courses designed in conjunction with local First Nations authorities at multiple grade levels. In Whitley’s (2014) literature review on facilitators of Aboriginal student success, institutional factors such as the inclusion of a curriculum that was reflective of Indigenous cultures went a long way to create a positive and welcoming environment for students. Combined, these factors related to their academic achievement and success both directly and indirectly by positively influencing students’ self-concept, their volition (their will to make decisions and carry them out in order to
succeed), academic expectations for themselves and their academic aspirations (Whitley, 2014). Pamela Rose Toulouse (2014), also asserts that Indigenous teaching and learning strategies as well as content are crucial for Aboriginal students’ success. According to Toulouse (2014), First Nation, Métis and Inuit (FNMI) students’ “self-esteem is grounded in classrooms where they recognize themselves in the curriculum through the inclusion of various resources, teachings, strategies, histories and knowledge exchanges” (p. 21). Stated differently, in addition to the importance of the content itself, the inclusion of Indigenous cultures and knowledges in schools, particularly from the local context, demonstrates to students and communities that their histories and contributions to Canada are valued and respected.

Integration of Indigenous knowledges to demonstrate respect and value for culture. In their study of ten diverse schools across British Columbia, Yukon, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba, Bell and colleagues (2004) reported that including local First Nation cultural knowledge in the curriculum promoted increased understanding of and respect for First Nation communities by school officials and demonstrated to families and students that their culture and peoples were valued. Further, when Aboriginal cultures were respected and effectively integrated to make learning relevant for First Nations students, the climate of the school was reported to be secure and welcoming (Bell et al., 2004). Seeing that one’s culture and people are being portrayed with respect and dignity is empowering for Aboriginal students, and goes a long way towards supporting the development and maintenance of healthy cultural identities (Lavell Harvard, 2011), feelings of cultural pride, and a sense of self-worth in Indigenous students (Antone, 2000). These in turn have been found to promote school
retention and success. For instance, in Bazlyak’s (2002) study on the perspectives of five successful female Aboriginal high school graduates, participants identified that a school environment which valued Aboriginal cultures—as demonstrated through the curricula and support programs designed from Aboriginal perspectives—was influential on their success. According to these students, this type of environment enabled them to develop a sense of awareness of their inner self and their identity as Aboriginal people, find their gift, develop volition, and influenced their desire to obtain their diploma and graduate (Bazlyak, 2002).

Integration of Indigenous knowledges to address systemic biases. Marlene Brant Castellano (2014), a distinguished leader in Aboriginal education, recently promoted Indigenizing education not only to make real progress for Aboriginal students but also to address ongoing systemic biases in schools. In her statement, Castellano asserted,

a major barrier to Aboriginal students’ success is their resistance, either overt or intuitive, to being absorbed in a world of knowledge and a society that appear to have no place for them or their people. The change I would propose is to Indigenize education in Canada. Indigenizing education means that every subject at every level is examined to consider how and to what extent current content and pedagogy reflect the presence of Indigenous/Aboriginal peoples and the valid contribution of Indigenous knowledge. Such an examination would shift the focus from remediating deficits in Aboriginal students to addressing bias and omissions in the educational system. (p.10)

For many decades, provincial curricula has been largely void of any Aboriginal content, in effect promoting the erasure of Indigenous contributions to the foundations of this country (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013). Where Aboriginal nations and peoples have been present, too often they have been misrepresented and misunderstood, resulting in the perpetuation and maintenance of negative stereotypes and prejudice. Redesigning
the curricula to include Indigenous histories and perspectives starts to offset generations of misinformation and biases present in the mainstream curricula, which benefits all students and teachers alike (Toulouse, 2014). Non- Aboriginal teachers and students also need to be exposed to curricula content that presents a more honest history of Canada and respects the historical and on-going contribution of Aboriginal peoples in this country. As Castellano (2014) writes,

> despite the evidence that Aboriginal people are participants and contributors to the vitality of community in Canada, the prevailing public perception is that we are problems resistant to solution and impediments to economic development. Content about Indigenous societies, coloured by the perspectives of Indigenous knowledge and woven through the curriculum, could diffuse or dispel the residue of colonialist arrogance that maintains stereotypes and prejudice. (p.10)

By building on a more truthful narrative of Canada, Indigenous content builds relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and staff by facilitating understanding and challenging preconceived stereotypes and myths (Toulouse, 2014).

**Integration of Indigenous knowledges will not be successful in isolation.**

Notwithstanding the central importance of integrating Aboriginal content and perspectives into schools, there is also substantial agreement in the literature that this inclusion alone “is not enough to transform the education system and increase rates of Aboriginal student success” (Lavell Harvard, 2011, p. 56). Although Kanu (2007) found integrating Aboriginal cultural knowledge and perspective into the Grade 9 social studies curriculum resulted in significant improvements in academic achievement for Aboriginal students at her study site, she still advised “cautious optimism”. Specifically, Kanu (2007) emphasized that
culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy alone cannot provide a functional and effective agenda in reversing achievement trends among Aboriginal students. A holistic and comprehensive approach that also takes into account larger social, economic, and political variables affecting schooling may provide a more meaningful and lasting intervention. (p.21)

**Institutional commitment to systemic changes.** Once again my investigation of the research literature on facilitators of success in Aboriginal education revealed a consistent narrative: in order for changes to be long lasting, a comprehensive approach including an institutional commitment to making necessary changes within education systems and schools is also necessary. Although different authors emphasize varying factors, the research overall “consistently references key practices and policy directions in relation to future direction” (Berryman et al., 2014, p.27) for the improvement of Aboriginal education. In the context of this body of research the “institution” referred to is larger than individual schools and includes the school district, provincial or territorial education authorities, and the federal government, which is responsible for funding Aboriginal education in Canada.

Using a case study approach, Bell and colleagues (2004) examined ten diverse schools across the prairie and Western provinces, as well as the Yukon, which served a high proportion of Aboriginal students—ranging from 35% to 100%—to identify common elements of successful educational institutions. In their findings, they documented a total of 24 factors, clustered into six broad categories that were associated

23 The schools themselves were as diverse as their locations, which ranged from urban centres to small, isolated First Nation communities. They included two secondary schools, four elementary, one pre-Kindergarten to Grade 9, and three schools serving pre-K to Grade 12. While six schools were band-operated, the remaining four schools were under the authority of school districts or the province / territory. Their sizes also varied significantly, ranging from only 74 to 915 students.
with successful schools. These six categories included:

- Leadership effectiveness - involving local First Nation control or strong partnerships with provincial education authorities, a shared vision for the school and a culture of success;
- School climate - characterized by a welcoming environment, high level of trust and high expectations for students;
- Staff-related factors - presence of Aboriginal teachers and staff, continuity of staff, and caring, dedicated teachers;
- Funding and resources - availability and strategic employment of resources, often supplemented by the community;
- Community engagement and involvement - including local ownership of education, shared vision for the school and excellent communication with school authorities;
- Programs - with Aboriginal content, strong focus on literacy, and a holistic approach to meet individual needs (paraphrased from pp. 312-313).

Somewhat similarly, McBride’s and McKee’s (2001) investigation of schools in British Columbia that were effective in terms of promoting success among Aboriginal learners, revealed key factors such as holding high academic expectations for Aboriginal students, making extensive efforts to include Aboriginal staff, and committing to sustain a welcoming environment for parents and children. Also in British Columbia, Archibald and DeRose (2014) documented that school district teams were more likely to be successful when they engaged in certain practices, which included:

- working together with Aboriginal communities;
- tracking students and using local and provincial data to drive decisions;
- having an Aboriginal Enhancement Agreement (EA) with Aboriginal communities that included measurable, attainable goals;
- embedding local Aboriginal knowledge throughout their curriculum;
- offering provincially developed courses such as the English First Peoples 10, 11, & 12 and First Nations Studies 12;
- seeking to employ Aboriginal educators and support staff; and
- offering ongoing professional development for all educators (paraphrased from p. 17).

In Saskatchewan, Steeves (2009), Raham (2010), and Berryman et al. (2014) also identified similar frameworks for key priority areas in Aboriginal pre-Kindergarten -
Grade 12 education. Under the office of the Saskatchewan Instructional Development & Research Unit (SIDRU), Steeves (2009) conducted a literature review on the academic achievement of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children. He reported eight priorities for government, policy makers, administrators and teachers to focus on. These included:

- Strong Leadership and Governance Structures
- Language and Cultural Programs
- Teachers, Instruction, and Curriculum
- Effective Schools
- Community and Parental Influences
- Student Characteristics
- Assessment Linked to Instruction and Planning
- Appropriate Levels of Funding

A year later, Raham (2010) presented strikingly comparable key practices necessary to improve education for Indigenous students at The Colloquium on Improving the Educational Outcomes of Aboriginal People Living Off-Reserve. In her associated paper (2010), Raham identified eight key domains influencing educational outcomes:

- Literacy and language
- Culturally-based curriculum and instruction
- Student engagement and retention,
- Home and community partnerships,
- Teacher supply, quality and support,
- School leadership,
- School programming and
- Assessment, monitoring and reporting (p.11)

Lastly, in Seeking Their Voices: Improving Indigenous student learning outcomes, Berryman and colleagues (2014) proposed the following conceptual framework of factors related to improving student success:

- Language and Cultural Programming
- Parent and Community Engagement
- Student Engagement and Retention
- Effective Schools
- Role of Assessment
- Classrooms and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy
• Retention of and Support for Teachers/Administrators
• Governance and Leadership (p.28)

In Prince Edward Island, Walton and coworkers (2009) conducted an interview-based study and reported that in addition to the integration of Mi’kmaq culture and language into curriculum the following were key facilitators of success for Mi’kmaq students: the need for a comprehensive action plan; professional development for educators; recognizing and supporting the role of parents and community members in educating children; strengthening communication between parents, First Nations communities, and learning institutions, the Department of Education, the Mi’kmaq Confederacy, and the Native Council; and additional supports for students, teachers, and parents (pp.13-14).

The Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (2011), the national representational organization for the protection and advancement of the rights and interests of Inuit in Canada, also addressed 10 areas for core investment in Inuit education in First Canadians, Canadians First: National Strategy on Inuit Education. These include: mobilizing parents; developing leaders; increased bilingual education; early years investment; investment in Inuit-centred curriculum and language resources; improved services to students requiring additional support; increased post-secondary success; a university in Inuit Nunangat; a standardized Inuit writing system; and measuring/assessing success.

Finally, seven key areas of focus for improving the educational experiences and academic performance of Aboriginal students across Canada were identified in Nurturing the Learning Spirit of First Nation Students: The Report of the National Panel on First Nation Elementary and Secondary Education (Haldane, LaFond, & Krause, 2011, pp. 43–44). These seven domains included: increased attendance rates; well-run schools; good student-teacher relationships; good student relationships; daily reading; sports, art and
music; and trades training programs. While the latter priority areas vary from those identified in other reports, these recommendations were notably proposed under three overarching principles: the child’s right to their culture, language and identity, and to a quality education that is appropriate to their needs; that reform must be undertaken in the spirit of reconciliation between First Nations, the Government of Canada, and provincial/territorial governments; and a commitment to mutual accountability for roles and responsibilities, financial inputs, and educational outcomes (p. viii).

As Berryman and colleagues (2014) wrote in their literature review on contemporary research examining directions for the improvement of Indigenous educational programming, this “sampling of related research confirms the essential strategies that are required for successful school experiences for Indigenous students. It seems clear that a consistent message regarding the actions required [for] improving school success for Indigenous students exists” (p.18). Further, comparing the systemic factors that perpetuate failure and the recommendations made to address these (identified in the previous section of this chapter), and those that facilitate success as discussed in this selection of research literature reveals that they are quite similar. In fact, the failure to properly prepare and support teachers working with Indigenous students and the need for improved, culturally-based curriculum were identified in the United States as early as the Meriam Report (1928). In Canada, ICIE (NIB, 1972) and the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996b), as examples, clearly documented the need for the federal government and provincial educational authorities serving Aboriginal students to: work *with* and receive guidance from Aboriginal communities, parents and Elders to better serve their youth; include curricula that reflects Aboriginal cultures, histories and communities; prioritize and support Aboriginal languages; and education and professional development for teachers. So the question, as
aptly posed by Berryman et al. (2014) remains: “If we know what to do, why aren’t we doing it?” (p. 19)

Decolonizing education as part of Institutional commitment to change.

Despite the recent and growing interest in identifying facilitators of Aboriginal student success and key priorities for governments, policy makers and educators, it is also clear that the schooling experiences of many Indigenous youth across the country are often difficult. Personal and familial issues such as poverty, alcohol and drug abuse, combined with racism and systemic discrimination grounded in a colonial history that has always viewed Aboriginal peoples as ‘less than’ can be debilitating for students. In order for schools to successfully implement the key systemic practices for improving Aboriginal education identified above, a process of *decolonization* must be undertaken and committed to, as well. This is not an easy or simple task, and it requires all involved to decolonize their minds and ways of thinking about education before substantial systemic change can take place. For instance, Smith (2016) asserts,

> decolonizing needs to begin within the mind and spirit of educators so that they can seek to accept that there are worldviews that exist other than the dominant Western perspective and acknowledge that current Canadian systems of education exist within a Eurocentric framework. (p. 49)

Berryman and coworkers (2014) also agree that in order to begin to see that our current education systems continue to promote the assimilation of Indigenous and other minority students into mainstream society,

> a change in attitude regarding assimilation and colonization is necessary. … rather than simply focusing on the tragedy of residential schools, increased attention must be given to the underlying social and economic attitudes that created these schools. Accompanying this increased attention must be an acceptance that similar attitudes remain in mainstream society. (p. 27).
This means that those involved in education reform must examine the power relationships that exist inside schools, and within school-government-community relationships in terms of “policy and decision-making, curriculum and pedagogy, teacher-student-community relationships… and assessment of student success” (McGregor, 2013, p. 107). These steps require “understanding and unpacking the central assumptions of domination, patriarchy, racism, and ethnocentrisms” (Battiste, Bell, & Findlay, 2002, p. 84), as well as a consciousness of who privileges and who is marginalized when these assumptions are maintained. Further, the literature clearly articulates that these changes cannot be tackled by mainstream educators and policy makers in isolation, but rather require that they commit to working with, and under the guidance of, Aboriginal communities, educators and Elders as equal partners. Battiste, Bell, and Findlay (2002) explain,

> Aboriginal initiatives may have the term *Aboriginal* in its title but without animating consultation with and plenary participation of indigenous peoples … programming will continue to be paternalistic, promoting a gendered, classed, and racialized politics of knowledge production and dissemination. (p. 83)

In other words, without the active and equal participation of Indigenous partners, the integration of Indigenous knowledges and perspectives into mainstream education systems risks colonizing and misrepresenting them all over again. In contrast, when governments, schools, communities, families, teachers and administrators are all engaged and commit to working cooperatively and respectfully together, positive change and success has been seen (Archibald & DeRose, 2014).

Other essential steps that are necessary in the decolonization of schools in order to promote the success of Aboriginal students have been identified in the literature. First,
districts and schools that serve Aboriginal students successfully commit to creating safe, welcoming environments for students and families (as defined by and negotiated with Aboriginal communities) (Archibald & DeRose, 2014). Archibald and DeRose’s (2014) work in British Columbia revealed that it was essential for district staff to “commit to providing educators with strategies to address barriers where students do not feel safe at school and do not have a sense of belonging” (p.17). This commitment is in accordance with the belief that “until students feel safe and welcome in schools, they will not achieve to their fullest potential” (p.17).

Second, the lack of Aboriginal teachers and staff in the majority of provincial schools is also a problem that education systems need to address. The underrepresentation of Indigenous peoples and other minorities among school employees is a result of the privileging of white, middle class citizens in this country for centuries. Further, the presence of Aboriginal teachers and other staff in schools provides visible role models and has been identified as a factor that encourages success for Aboriginal students (Brade et al., 2003).

Third, while Canadian universities are beginning to infuse Bachelor of Education programs with Indigenous content (Archibald, Lundy, Reynolds, & Williams, 2010) in hopes of producing new teachers who are better equipped to teach Indigenous students, this process will take some time and does not address the needs of professionals who are currently teaching in the K-12 system. Schools, districts and provinces that have been identified in the literature as being the most successful in terms of promoting academic achievement amongst Aboriginal students are those that mandate and encourage ongoing
professional development for all teachers, including anti-racism education (Archibald & DeRose, 2014; Bell et al., 2004; Steeves & Carr-Stewart, 2017).

Fourth, part of acknowledging the damage caused by assimilative and colonial education systems is recognizing the devastating impact on Aboriginal languages. Battiste writes that “[i]n Canada, every Aboriginal language is endangered” (p. 144). This language loss affects many aspects of Aboriginal life: identity, self-esteem, self-confidence, connections to family, community, and creation itself. In a previous co-publication, my Elder and friend, Imelda (Opolahsomuwehs)24 Perley, explained when Wolastoqi peoples are using English there is an absence of sacredness, an absence of a relationship with the earth, people, and all of creation: “If you are going through your life in another language, then you are missing out on the sacred gift of the relationships that you could have if you knew your language”.

(Opolahsomuwehs, personal communication, May 8, 2012; as previously published in Schneider & Perley, 2012, p. 4)

Her words speak directly to the point that Crystal (2000) drives home in his book Language Death, that “each language reflects a unique encapsulation and interpretation of human existence” (p. 44), and without knowledge of the language of our ancestors our relationships with our past and our world are broken. Committing to decolonizing education therefore also requires a commitment to respecting, protecting and supporting the revitalization of Aboriginal languages (Battiste, 2013).

Clearly decolonizing education will not happen overnight. It requires a commitment from many parties—federal and provincial governments, policy makers,

24 Opolahsomuwehs is Elder Perley’s Wolastoqey name, which translates in English to Moon of the Whirling Wind.
school districts, administrators, teachers, Aboriginal communities, leaders and families—to a long-term process; a process that will have deep implications not only for educational institutions but Canadian society itself. This type of deep systemic change cannot happen if educators and educational leaders continue to think about Indigenous students from a deficit-based perspective. To paraphrase Smith (2016, p. 49), there is a need to move beyond thinking about the individual deficits of Indigenous students and recognizing the failures of past education systems. It is time to begin looking at the strengths that these students possess and implementing changes that have been identified as essential to promoting their success.

**Limits of the Research Landscape**

I conclude that while there seems to be a consistent message regarding the actions required to improve school success for Indigenous students, the question of why some Aboriginal students fail to graduate and, conversely, why others persist still remains. Clearly not all school systems have undergone the profound changes needed to decolonize education in their provinces and territories, nor have they all implemented the majority of success promoting initiatives identified in the literature. Therefore, First Nations students who have graduated in recent years have done so despite many barriers, setbacks, and challenges. While the research literature on facilitators of student success offers many insights, the experiences and voices of successful Aboriginal students in provincial schools are largely lacking. The few studies which did interview successful high school students (Kanu, 2002, 2006; Whitley, 2014) or recent graduates (Bazylak, 2002; Walton et al., 2009) rarely reported their findings in the words of students themselves, at least beyond brief snippets. Instead, they tend to fracture their voices into
categories and typologies in their quests for “answers” to predetermined questions. In order to develop a deeper understanding of the experiences of Aboriginal students in Canadian classrooms with respect to academic competence and success it is important that their voices and stories be heard.

Lavell Harvard (2011) documented two pressing reasons for examining the experiences of successful Aboriginal postsecondary students and graduates, which transfer easily to the K-12 context. First, the stories and experiences of “those who have persisted and achieved their academic goals” (p. 6) have the potential to shed light on success strategies with other Aboriginal students, which, in turn, may contribute to the overall effort to increase rates of Aboriginal academic achievement. Second, focusing on the success of Aboriginal students could also be “instrumental in the deconstruction of the numerous racist stereotypes” (p. 6) that continue to contribute to the marginalization of Aboriginal peoples in mainstream education systems, and society at large. In addition to these reason, I believe that it is also essential to pay attention to place. Since each province and territory is implementing changes in Indigenous education on its own terms and at very different paces, it is important to hear from local students when making decisions that affect local education. While I was able to track down several research studies and reports published in New Brunswick in the 1980s and 1990s, current research on the experiences of Wolastoqi and Mi’kmaq students in this province is noticeably absent.

Accordingly, the present study focuses on a qualitative narrative exploration of the experiences and stories of Wolastoqi and Mi’kmaw youth who have achieved some academic success and graduated from high school. This research endeavours to bring a
largely missing perspective to the discussion surrounding First Nations education in New Brunswick. It is my hope that the stories produced may successfully connect readers with the worlds of the students portrayed, and push them to think twice about the stereotypic representations of First Nations students as well as the location of the problems inherent in First Nations student alienation from public schools. Although this is a small study, involving only seven recent graduates, it is novel in terms of its approach as well as its focus on the stories of Aboriginal students; a format that is rarely seen in the education research community. This type of study represents a move towards documenting and re-presenting contextualized, first-hand narratives of student experiences rather than relying on deficit-based explanations or researcher typologies of the academic disparities that exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in Canada, in general, and in New Brunswick, in particular.
Chapter 4: The Methodology Story—A Journey Through New Terrain

The Short Story

I have decided to begin my methodology chapter with a short story in the hope that this dissertation reaches an audience that extends outside of academia. In particular, I am writing to Wolastoqi and Mi’kmaq people throughout New Brunswick, and also to other settler Canadians, particularly teachers, for whom I think the stories enclosed in this dissertation might be useful and illuminating. By now, you are probably ready to get to the heart of this dissertation: the stories of school shared by Emily, Matt, Yvonne, Amanda, Hannah, Nate and Eden. I wanted to be able to answer the questions—How did you do this research? Was this research done respectfully?—in a timely, efficient manner without bogging you down in the details that are required by academic reviewers. Perhaps you will bypass the long version of this story entirely and go straight to the stories that follow in the next chapter. Maybe you will return to that section of this chapter later. Or perhaps you are intrigued enough to read both short and long versions now. At least that choice is now yours.

Designing this research was a struggle for me. Research has been conducted in the past to justify and excuse continuing inequalities between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in this country, and I could not ignore this. Yet I also knew that to use research principles designed by Indigenous scholars and stemming from local First Nations worldviews was problematic because I am not Indigenous. After much soul searching, I decided I had to incorporate these principles and let them guide my conduct
throughout this work all the while admitting to myself and others that I do not claim to understand everything fully and am still influenced by Western approaches.

From the beginning, my goal has been to hear the personal stories of schooling experiences from First Nations students who have recently graduated from high school. This goal was influenced greatly through many conversations with my Elders – Gwen Bear, Imelda Perley and David Perley. They shared my questions about the experiences of First Nations students, and they believed that they were important to Wolastoqi and Mi’kmaq people. They taught me many lessons by sharing their own stories with me. They also helped push my understanding of Indigenous research principles off the page and into practice by encouraging me to experience more of First Nations culture myself.

Imelda, in particular, invited me to ceremonies—sweat lodges, sunrise ceremonies, a solstice fast—and to her home. She introduced me to other Elders, and taught me many cultural teachings. Through all of this, the importance of sharing stories to Wolastoqi and Mi’kmaq people was emphasized. So I decided to use a storytelling, or narrative inquiry, method.

My true starting point in this research came when I invited potential participants to tell me stories of their schooling experiences. I held an open information session and provided a free pizza lunch to all attendees. Aboriginal students from all over campus were invited to attend via MWC’s email listserv. After that session, all seven participants had signed up. Over the course of roughly three and a half years (September 2012 - February 2016), and in many contexts— offices, libraries, hallways, classrooms, conferences, family kitchens—I developed relationships with these participants, some of
whom I became quite close to and consider friends today. Together we made a safe space to hear their stories.

Initially I had hoped to host Elder-led sharing circles to create a sense of ceremony and community in which to reflect and share stories of school. As it turned out, most participants preferred to meet with me individually. In the end, two participants took part in a single sharing circle, while the remaining five initial interviews and all follow-up meetings occurred one-on-one.

Beginning with the first set of interview recordings and continuing after all the data had been collected, I composed summary stories for each participant. I also included many of my stories—of meeting the participants, of our conversations together, of questions going through my head while we spoke—because I recognized their recounting was influenced by my presence and that I played a part in the research. Above all, I strove to be respectful of their stories. Clarifications were negotiated with each participant, and everyone received copies of their re-presented stories for their comments, feedback or revisions. Participants also had the opportunity to select nicknames, or pseudonyms, for the characters that represented them in the final stories. However, in all cases they deferred to my discretion. Pseudonyms were also created to represent names of First Nations communities, towns, cities, and schools, in order to provide anonymity.

I must confess, at first the writing did not go smoothly. I was new to narrative research and my academic training and work life up until then had not left much time for story writing. Writing stories is an art form that requires practice. There is also a “science”, if you will, to writing a good story. My first attempt to re-present participants’
stories resulted in seven drafted summaries that were structurally all the same. Unfortunately, when I presented them to my advisory committee, they fell terribly flat. I was heartbroken. The participants had entrusted their stories to me, but if I could not present them in a better fashion, their experiences – the whole reason I did this work – would be lost to readers. This was when I came to the realization that form mattered.

Thereafter, I made the decision to study and employ multiple genres of writing (creative nonfiction, fictional short stories, and poetry) in order to re-create and re-present participants’ stories. I hope that by doing so, each story will draw you in and help you come to know more about the experiences of Emily, Matt, Yvonne, Amanda, Hannah, Nate and Eden.

I am the one who spent time with and shared lived experiences with the Wolastoqi and Mi’kmaq young adults who agreed to be interviewed for this work and my thumbprints are all over their stories. However, I also wanted to re-present them in ways that allow interpretations beyond and in contrast to my own (Diversi, 1998). I have provided windows into the schooling experiences of recently graduated First Nations students; experiences which are underrepresented in academic and education circles. Now the gaze that interprets and makes sense of their stories must be yours.
The Long Story

Part 1: Navigating Paradigms

Designing this research was a complex undertaking for me. Just as there is a long history of colonialism in education for Aboriginal peoples, there is an equally lengthy history of colonialism in research involving Indigenous peoples globally. The abuse of past researchers going into communities and taking information away, as if it were their own, and publishing it, sending their (mis)understandings and (mis)representations of Indigenous peoples, customs and cultures out into the world lingers. From this vantage point, it is not surprising that to many Indigenous peoples, the term 'research' is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. The word itself, 'research', is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary. When mentioned in many indigenous contexts, it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful. (Smith, 1999, p. 1)

I have felt this distrust at various times during my doctoral journey. Every time I have revealed that I am doctoral student researcher when participating in First Nations community events in New Brunswick, I have initially felt distrust. I have had to earn trust. It has helped immensely that I have frequently been with one of my Elders, Dave or Imelda Perley, who are highly respected and trusted in these communities. Their trust in me has helped me to forge new relationships. The way I went about this research also helped to build trust, not only with community members who have heard me talk about this work, but also with the collaborating participants themselves. It is not that Wolastoqi and Mi’kmaq people are distrustful of all researchers, it is that they are very distrustful of the kinds of research they have seen within their communities in the past.
Stories of researchers coming in, recording stories of ailing elders, and not sharing these with families after they have passed, are just some of the stories that rightfully give rise to wariness and skepticism.

That said, many Indigenous peoples globally, and Wolastoqi and Mi’kmaq people locally, want research. They recognize the potential for research to benefit their communities and their people in a variety of fields, including education, health, and economic development to name a few. In response to these growing concerns and desires, Indigenous scholars such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999, 2005), Cora Weber-Pillwax (1999), Karen Martin and Booran Mirrabooqa (2003), Fyre Jean Graveline (1998, 2000), Stan and Peggy Wilson (1998, 2003), Evelyn Steinhauer (2002), Margaret Kovach (2009, 2010), Shawn Wilson (2001, 2007, 2008), and many others have organized to decolonize the research endeavour, calling for it to be infused with Indigenous beliefs, knowledges, cultural values and customs in order to authentically address the needs of Indigenous communities. At the same time, many local First Nations have also been taking charge of research going on in their communities, setting the priorities, conducting the hiring and staying involved throughout the process. On both global and local scales, these decolonizing, Indigenist\textsuperscript{25} approaches to research can be seen as ways to “research back to power” (Smith, 2005, p.90). They are, formed around the three principles of resistance, political integrity, and privileging indigenous voices... [there is a] purposeful agenda for transforming the institution of research, the deep underlying structures and taken-for-granted

\textsuperscript{25}In Research is Ceremony, Wilson (2008) uses the term Indigenous research paradigm and this is the terminology I predominantly use throughout this dissertation. However, in his editorial piece for the Canadian Journal of Native Education, Wilson (2007) refers to his paradigm as Indigenist rather than Indigenous, stating that “It is [his] belief that an Indigenist paradigm can be used by anyone who chooses to follow its tenets” (p.193). As such, both terms appear in this document.
ways of organizing, conducting, and disseminating research and knowledge. (Smith, 2005, pp. 88-89)

In other words, as Lunney Borden (2010) writes, this new paradigm “creates space to privilege indigenous knowledge” (pp. 66-67).

When I began to design this research, I knew I could not in good conscience proceed without paying close attention to the developing work on Indigenous research protocols, principles and methodologies. However, I also recognized the complexity of Indigenous worldviews and still do not claim to understand them fully. Therefore, rather than viewing this work as situated firmly within this paradigm, I see it as existing in the **liminal space** interwoven *between* Indigenous and Western approaches. This decision was not made easily. On one hand there are legitimate concerns amongst Indigenous scholars and communities about non-Indigenous, settler allies claiming to understand and write from a “Native perspective” or speak for Native people (Graveline, 2000, p.362), assuming “their status as researchers entitles them to acquire such knowledge” (Regan, 2010, p. 26). On the other hand, Wilson (2007) also insists that

an Indigenist paradigm can be used by anyone who chooses to follow its tenets. It cannot and should not be claimed to belong only to people with ‘Aboriginal’ heritage. … [afterall] one does not need to be female to be a feminist… researchers do not have to be ‘white’ to use a Western paradigm. Nor do Indigenous researchers have to use an Indigenist paradigm. (p.194)

As such, in this research I chose, and continue to choose to follow the tenets of an Indigenous research paradigm (discussed more fully below), privileging Indigenous principles and desires for research above those of Western paradigms, which have long held a privileged, dominant position in the academy. Nonetheless, I also recognize and “embrace the uncomfortable epistemological tension” (Regan, 2010, p.26) that comes
from realizing I may never fully understand the Indigenous worldviews that inform these
tenets. For, as Meyer and Ramirez (1996) caution,

To say that … [First Nations people] see the world holistically as one spirit is not
the same as to see the world that way. For another to see the world that way
would require a kind of gestalt switch involving a shift in ‘styles of reasoning’ as
well as ways of perception. It would entail responding to the world according to
the exhortation: Mitakuye oyasin – “We are all related.” (p. 104)

I believe I began this “gestalt switch” quite a few years ago, and in the section that
follows I detail my current understanding of Wilson’s (2008) Indigenous Research
Paradigm.

An Indigenous Research Paradigm

Navigating the paradigm puzzle is not an easy task. A single, universal definition
of paradigm does not exist, even when you limit the sphere of meaning to that utilized
within qualitative social science research. Different authors and researchers use
paradigm to mean different things at different times, and I have seen paradigms
described as “overarching philosophical systems” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p.6) or
“interpretative frameworks” (p.22), research “labels” (Wilson, 2008, p.33), “perceptual
orientations” (Given, 2008, p. 591) and “research camps” (Lunney Borden, 2010, p.65).
Perhaps the summary description of research paradigms that has been most influential in
my quest to understand them more fully, as stated by Wilson (2008), is:

Research paradigms are …sets of beliefs [that] go together to guide researchers’
actions. Any research represents the paradigm used by the researcher, whether
the researcher is conscious of their choice of paradigm or not. … As paradigms
deal with beliefs and assumptions about reality, they are based upon theory and
are thus intrinsically value laden. (p.33)

In general, these sets of beliefs and assumptions that provide a framework for research
can be grouped into four interrelated categories: ontologies (beliefs about being and
reality), epistemologies (beliefs about knowledge and knowing), methodologies (strategies for gaining more knowledge about reality), and axiologies (ethical and moral considerations) (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Given, 2008; Shawn Wilson, 2008).

Building on the combined efforts of many Indigenous scholars, Wilson (2008), an Opaskwayak Cree academic from northern Manitoba who has spent much of his life straddling the Indigenous and academic worlds, recently articulated an Indigenous research paradigm. Wilson (2008) encourages researchers to view ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology not as separate, categorical components of a research paradigm but as a relational continuum, represented by a circle; that is, interconnected parts that only make sense within the context of the whole. In his words,

> Relationality seems to sum up the whole Indigenous research paradigm to me. Just as the components of the paradigm are related, the components themselves all have to do with relationships. The ontology and epistemology are based upon a process of relationships that form a mutual reality. The axiology and methodology are based upon maintaining accountability to these relationships. (Wilson, 2008, pp. 70-71)

**Indigenous ontology and epistemology.** Although Indigenous peoples of North America, and First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities across Canada, differ greatly in terms of their languages, traditions, and customs, they also maintain similar underlying Indigenous beliefs about reality and ways of seeing, knowing and being in the world (Hill, 1999). In concert, these ontological and epistemological elements form an Indigenous worldview. According to James (Sakej) Youngblood Henderson (2000), at the heart of this Indigenous worldview lies the belief in a Creator that has animated and interconnected all creation through an “unseen but knowable spiritual realm” (p. 261); a foundational belief amongst Wolastoqiyik and Mi’kmaq as well. Wilson’s (2008)
Indigenous research paradigm is grounded in this ontology of an interconnected universe and the belief in multiple realities existing through sets of relationships between subjects and objects. According to Wilson (2008), “reality is relationships or … a process of relationships, [therefore] Indigenous ontology is actually the equivalent of an Indigenous epistemology” (p. 73). Correspondingly, within an Indigenous worldview knowledge is fundamentally relational; that is, knowledge of objects, people, nature and even ideas can only be known through relationships with them and it is through these relationships that we come to know and be accountable to one another. This relational epistemology extends beyond the notion of individual knowledge (a notion strongly held in all the dominant, Western paradigms) and posits that knowledge is a shared phenomenon. As individuals come to know new information and form relationships with new ideas, they incorporate these into their lives, their very being, and are changed (Wilson, 2008). In turn, this changes the nature of their other relationships with people, objects, and ideas about life.

This is why an Indigenous research paradigm cannot be known strictly theoretically, but must be enacted. For only through developing relationships and working in a relational context can researchers possibly come to a place of knowing. When trying to recount and represent this new found knowledge, “[w]e cannot be separated from our work, nor should our writing be separated from ourselves” (Wilson, 2008).

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26 This relational concept of knowledge is evident in many Indigenous languages where words of certain objects literally translate into what they are used for, denoting the connection between subject and object. For example, Wilson (2008) writes that the Cree word for chair literally translates in English to “the thing that you sit on” (p.73). Similarly, in the Wolastoqey language the word for table, tuwihput, means something you eat on (Schneider, Brewer, Perley, & Doige, 2011).
2008, p. 194). This epistemological stance of knowledge gained in relation with many others, and the advice from Wilson to maintain and show these relationships in our writing, is largely why I describe and build on relationships – with my family, with my experiences, with the Elders involved in this research, with participants, and with the ideas I introduce to you – throughout this dissertation.

In order to design and conduct research that honours an Indigenous worldview, Wilson (2007) proposes five ontological and epistemological principles to guide researchers in their endeavours:

- The foundation of the research question must lie within the reality of the Indigenous experience.
- Respect for all forms of life as being related and interconnected.
- Any theories developed or proposed must be grounded in an Indigenous epistemology and supported by the Elders and the community that live out this particular epistemology.
- It will be recognized that transformations within every living entity participating in the research will be one of the outcomes of every project.
- It is recognized that the languages and cultures of Indigenous peoples are living processes and that research and the discovery of knowledge is an ongoing function for the thinkers and scholars of every Indigenous group. (p. 195)

Given the responsibility inherent in this relational view of knowledge, researcher accountability is the foundational concept of an Indigenous axiology.

**Indigenous axiology.** An Indigenous axiology provides the moral and ethical framework for conducting research with Indigenous peoples. Of primary importance in this axiology is the principle and acknowledgement that researchers become a part of their research through the relationships that they form, and that they have an obligation to these relationships. This includes following ethical guidelines for conducting research
with Indigenous peoples and being accountable to research participants, but also extends to choosing topics and methodologies that are relevant and respectful of Indigenous communities, being responsible for the interpretations that are made, and ensuring that the benefits of the research and results are reciprocal (Wilson, 2008). Wilson (2007) outlines four main axiological principles of Indigenous research:

- Conduct all actions and interactions in a spirit of kindness and honesty; compassion.
- The reason for doing the research must be one that brings benefits to the Indigenous community.
- It will be recognized that the researcher must assume a certain responsibility for the transformations and outcomes of the research project(s) which he or she brings into a community.
- It is recognized that the integrity of any Indigenous people or community could never be undermined by Indigenous research because such research is grounded in that integrity. (p. 195)

Ultimately, axiology works in concert with the underlying ontological and epistemological beliefs of the researcher and/or community to determine what questions are important to investigate, which, in turn, influence the methodological strategies employed.

**Indigenous methodology.** Wilson (2008) defines methodology as “how we go about gaining more knowledge about reality” (p. 13) but he also suggests that an Indigenous methodology is open-ended and does not prescribe specific methodological approaches. Wilson (2007) does, however, stipulate two key methodological principles: that researchers should employ process-oriented methods, and that researchers should work as part of a team with Indigenous scholars and with guidance from Elders and/or
other knowledge keepers. In order to be process-oriented, rather than results oriented, Wilson (2008) advises researchers to consider the following points, which I have paraphrased:

1) How do your methods help to build respectful relationships between the topic being studied and yourself, as a researcher?

2) How do your methods help to build respectful relationships between yourself and your participants?

3) How do all people involved (yourself, participants, and others) build a stronger relationship with the idea?

4) What are your roles and responsibilities?

5) How are you giving back to the relationship established with participants?

By drawing on the wisdom of Elders, Indigenous methodologies frequently “manifest themselves through a variety of methods that … [arise from] existing community practices” (Lunney Borden, 2010, p. 67). However, Wilson (2008) acknowledges that Indigenous methodologies, and Indigenous research paradigms in general, are still emerging, and that part of this emergence will include the melding of “formal” (Western) and Indigenous knowledge systems. Smith (1999) also suggests that Indigenous methodologies can consist of “a mix of existing [Western qualitative] methodological approaches and Indigenous practices” (Smith, 1999, p. 143). It is important to note that in their call for the development of Indigenous methodologies, neither Wilson (2007, 2008) nor Smith (1999) are advocating for the abandonment of everything that is “Western”. Rather, they are calling for a critical examination of Western methodologies and the development of research practices that emphasize the active participation of Indigenous peoples and demonstrate respect for Indigenous

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knowledges, customs and values during the research process. By grounding the research in the ontological, epistemological and axiological tenets presented above, researchers may utilize a variety of methodologies and methods as the “particular [strategy and] tools… that you use to actually gather data” (Wilson, 2008, p. 39). Wilson (2008) does caution, however, that “[s]ome methods and strategies have inherent in them more relationship building and relational accountability than others and therefore may be more attractive in an Indigenous paradigm” (p. 39).

A Relational, Narrative Methodology

From the beginning of this research journey, my goal has been to hear personal, reflective stories of schooling experiences from First Nations students. As such, I sought a relational methodology that utilized narrative approaches to research and allowed me to abide by the tenets of Wilson’s (2007, 2008) Indigenous research paradigm. My preference for a narrative methodology has been influenced greatly by my own Elders – Dave, Gwen and Imelda – along with the writings of Indigenous scholars who point out storytelling is “culturally significant as a way of knowing and as a way of telling” (Moore, 2011, p. 23; see also Battiste, 2002; Bishop, 1996; Cajete, 1994; Kovach, 2009; Lanigan, 1998; Little Bear, 2000). In claiming that narrative methodologies are “culturally significant” for Indigenous research aims and purposes, these authors refer to the integral role that storytelling has played within traditional and contemporary Indigenous communities. Tewa scholar, Gregory Cajete (1994) explains that “story—in creative combination with encounters, experiences, image making, ritual, play, imagination, dream, and modeling—forms the basic foundation of all human
learning and teaching” (p.68). Locally, pre-contact Wolastoqi and Mi’kmaq are known to have relied

on what we consider a narrative approach to communicate…knowledge. Learning was multi-sensory and occurred through a variety of media—story, song, dance, and visual images—through which knowledge of the world was understood, expressed and communicated in a meaningful way. (Sable, 2005, p. 26)

According to my Elders, contemporary Wolastoqi and Mi’kmaq still rely on storytelling as a powerful means for the transmission of oral histories, knowledges, beliefs and values from one generation to the next, and to assess knowledge acquisition and understanding of youth as they relay their own stories back to their parents and Elders (D. Perley, 2015, personal communication; Trenholm, Perley, & Perley, 2015).

In addition to honouring the important place of stories in Indigenous teaching and learning systems and communities, storytelling research methodologies and methods also honour individuals as carriers of important knowledge. An Indigenous research paradigm is “structured within an epistemology that includes a subjectively based process for knowledge development” (Hart, 2010, p.9) and truth finding, and research that allows individuals to speak their truth is based on respecting this subjective view of knowledge while allowing for “multiple voices and multiple truths” (Moore, 2011, p.166). When individuals share stories of their lives they are sharing their deepest, most intimate perceptions, attitudes and relationships (Keeshing-Tobias, as cited in Moore, 2011, p.166). As Margaret Kovach (2009) elaborates,

Stories remind us of who we are and of our belonging. Stories hold within them knowledges while simultaneously signifying relationships. In oral tradition, stories can never be decontextualized from the teller. They are active agents within a relational world, pivotal in gaining insight into a phenomenon. Oral stories are born of connections within the world, and are thus recounted
relationally. They tie us with our past and provide a basis for continuity with future generations. (p. 94)

By demonstrating and forming relationships, rather than fracturing voices and categorizing information, storytelling approaches to re-presenting research respects individuals as interconnected beings and the relational worldview inherent in Indigenous cultures.

The question of “what is story” is an ontological one (Dwyer, Davis, & Emerald, 2017, p. 4). The Indigenous scholars cited above and the Elders I work with express deep-seated beliefs about stories being central not only to human learning and relationships but to human existence itself. This belief is the foundational link, the interweaving stitches if you will, between the Indigenous and Western paradigms framing this research, and, as such, guided my decisions regarding which narrative methodology to employ.

**Narrative research.** There is a wide variety of divergent methodologies that make use of narrative research methods. Ethnography, Auto-ethnography, life history research, socio-linguistics, phenomenology, narrative inquiry and others all draw upon “stories” as data. However, these various approaches stem from diverse historical roots, reflecting different ontological and epistemological standpoints. For instance, Bamberg (2009, as cited in Dwyer et al, 2017, p. 5) describes three predominant methodological categories within narrative research: Psychoanalytic, Discursive, and Phenomenological. While these three approaches are not necessarily exhaustive of all narrative research methodologies, nor as separate from each other in practice as they are theoretically, they do provide a “useful broad sweep entry in to the field” (Dwyer et al, 2017, p. 5).
In brief, “psychoanalytic approaches seek access to a *truth behind the story*, or a deeper truth, perhaps not even known to the teller of the story” (Dwyer et al., 2017, p. 5, emphasis added). Therefore, this approach to narrative research is inherently objectivist, viewing the researcher as separate from the participant and able to search their stories, their data, for internal motivations and conflicts which lie behind them, unbeknownst to them, much like a psychoanalyst in a therapeutic session. Somewhat similarly objectivist, the discursive methodological approach uses “close-grained conversation analytic techniques” to try to determine what speakers are trying accomplish in their storytelling. This approach “notices how story is remade in the telling” (Dwyer et al., 2017, p. 6) and pays close attention to the telling itself, including aspects of the narrative performance. In contrast, narrative methodologies which stem from a phenomenological stance, “adopt a constructivist / interpretivist epistemology to glimpse into the lived experience of individuals, which brings with it a respect for the participants’ perception of reality; a belief that reality is multiple and situational” (Dwyer et al., 2017, p. 5). For me, a phenomenologically grounded narrative methodology that values participants subjective knowledge as important, while allowing for multiple perspectives and truths, and maintains a storied re-presentation of data rather than analytical categories, was most consistent with the ontological and epistemological framework provided by the Indigenous research paradigm guiding my research. In particular, *narrative inquiry* as defined and delineated predominantly by Clandinin and Connelly (2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, 2006), and their colleagues (Andrews, 2007; Clandinin et al., 2006; Clandinin, Murphy, Huber, & Murray Orr, 2009; Clandinin et al., 2013; Freeman, 2007;
Huber, Murphy, & Clandinin, 2011; Huber, Clandinin, & Huber, 2006; Murray Orr, 2005), seemed most suited to my needs.

**Narrative inquiry.** Narrative inquiry is a relatively new, but established qualitative methodology that is devoted to investigating and understanding the life experiences of a single or a few individuals (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). The overarching purpose of narrative inquiry is to interpret and re-tell individuals’ stories in ways that increase awareness and knowledge of their experiences (Freeman, 2007). In other words, this type of methodology relies on narratives, or stories, as a *way of knowing* (Coulter, 2003). Connelly and Clandinin (2006) provide the following understanding of narrative inquiry:

People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience *as* story, then, is first and foremost *a way of thinking about experience.* (p.477, emphasis added)

What the preceding definition makes clear is that narrative inquirers, in this tradition, understand experience as a storied phenomenon. In order to engage in this type of research, one must begin to think narratively about *both the phenomenon under study and the methodology* through which one studies experience (Clandinin, Murphy, Huber, & Murray Orr, 2009). Clandinin and colleagues elaborate,

Lives are composed, recomposed, told, retold and lived out in storied ways on storied landscapes. We cannot study experience narratively, that is, through narrative inquiry, without understanding experience as a storied phenomenon. The interwoven relation between narrative as phenomenon and narrative as methodology is central to our work… (Clandinin et al., 2009, p. 82)
Understanding narrative as both the phenomenon as well as the methodology is key to both doing and writing narrative research. From this epistemological viewpoint, the researcher cannot be separate from the work; he or she is inherently a part of his or her work in relation with their participants. Clandinin, Murphy, Huber and Murray Orr (2009) continue, this is also “central to our understanding that narrative inquiry is relational inquiry. Narrative inquiry is the study of people in relation studying the experience of people in relation” (p.82). In other words, narrative inquirers recognize the important impact relational contexts have on their conversations with participants, and attend to the relational contexts within participants’ told stories.

In order to be responsive to these “relational contexts”, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) employ the terminology of a metaphorical three-dimensional inquiry space with “temporality along one dimension, the personal and social along a second dimension, and place along a third” (p. 50), as a way to help researchers attend to the intricacies and boundaries of others’ lived and told experiences. The dimensions of temporality and personal-social interactions are posited as having four directions for inquiry:

... inward and outward, backward and forward. By inward, we mean toward the internal conditions, such as feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions and so on. By outward, we mean toward the existential conditions, that is, the environment... By backward and forward, we refer to temporality—past, present, future. To experience an experience is to simultaneously experience these four ways and to ask questions pointing each way. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50)

The third dimension, place, further contextualizes the research by attending “to the specific concrete physical and topological boundaries of inquiry landscapes” (p. 51). In combination, these three dimensions of the narrative inquiry space, also termed the “commonplaces of narrative inquiry” (Clandinin et al., 2009, p. 82; Connelly &
Clandinin, 2006, p. 479), offer a way to honour individuals' personal lived experiences as a source of important knowledge, while also attending to the temporal, “social, cultural, and institutional narratives within which individuals’ experiences are constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, pp. 42–43).

While attending to these three dimensions within participants’ experiential stories, narrative inquirers are challenged to remember that our lived and told stories are always in relation to or with those of our participants. We do not stand outside the lives of participants but see ourselves as part of the phenomenon under study. As narrative inquirers, we study the lives of participants as we come alongside them and become part of their lives and they part of ours. Therefore, our lives and who we are and are becoming on their and our landscapes is also under study. (Clandinin et al., 2009, p. 82)

This key feature, this inherent relationality of narrative inquiry, has ethical implications and is, in large part, what made this methodology particularly suited for this research.

As previously asserted, the primary axiological (ethical) tenet of Wilson’s Indigenous Research Paradigm is that researchers acknowledge and genuinely become part of their research through the relationships that they form, and, therefore, that they have an obligation to these relationships (Wilson, 2008). Clandinin and colleagues similarly contemplate the ethics involved with developing relationships with collaborating participants throughout the process of working closely with them, generally over prolonged periods of time, together co-creating understandings and meanings of the participants’ experiences. Citing Clandinin’s earlier work (2006, p.5) they state,

Naming narrative inquiry as relational inquiry calls us to consider our long term responsibilities, responsibilities that may not end when we negotiate that final research text but that may linger and reappear, may, in some sense, haunt us, for neither our lives nor the lives of our participants end when we hand in our
Recognizing and being accountable for the transformations that take place within the research process, and because of the research itself, as well as claiming responsibility for the interpretations and representations that are eventually put out into the world, are not issues that I take lightly. My greatest fear is that the words contained within this document will somehow cause harm, not only to the seven individuals who graciously and bravely shared their stories with me, but in extension, to other Wolastoqi and Mi’kmaw students. To reuse a quote from Thomas King that I introduced in the Forward “[s]tories are wonderous things. And they are dangerous. … once a story is told, it cannot be called back. Once told, it is loose in the world. So you have to be careful with the stories you tell” (King, 2003, p. 10). I don’t really know what will happen after I set these stories free, but I do know they were not told to me to hold onto forever. They were, and are, meant to be shared.
Part 2: Stories of the Research Context and Story Gathering Methods

My true starting point in this narrative inquiry into the experiences of recently graduated First Nations students came when I invited participants to tell me stories of their schooling experiences. Over the course of roughly three and a half years (September 2012 - February 2016) I developed relationships with participants. Some of these individuals are still my friends today. Together we made a safe space to hear their stories.

Research Context

Since May 2009 I have worked in multiple capacities at UNB’s Mi’kmaq-Wolastoqey Centre (MWC)27, in large part thanks to Dr. Lynda Doige, our former Director (2003-2013). Dr. Doige agreed to be a member of my comprehensive examination committee and hired me as a research assistant, and since then I have become part of a tight-knit community of colleagues committed to working collaboratively with Mi’kmaq and Wolastoqey communities in Atlantic Canada to advance First Nations educational programming. It is because of Dr. Doige that I was able to meet the three Elders, David and Imelda Perley, and Gwen Bear, who guided me in this work.

MWC offers a variety of programs and support services to Aboriginal students enrolled at UNB. The Bridging Year program accepts First Nations students who wish to

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27 When I began this project, MWC was known as the Mi’kmaq Maliseet Institute (MMI) and many people still know it as such. The name change, which was officially approved by UNB’s Senate in February 2015, reflects the Centre’s desire to use the proper, local names for the First Nations we work with. For this reason, Maliseet was changed to Wolastoqey. See my note in Coming to Terms and the glossary at the end of this dissertation for a further explanation and differentiation of these terms.
pursue university studies but who do not have all of the required grade 12-level courses and academic qualifications to enter UNB degree programs. The program is individually tailored to each student’s academic needs, and students who successfully complete the one-year (8 month) program are guaranteed admission to the undergraduate program of their choice at UNB. The majority of students accepted and enrolled in the Bridging Year program are recent high school graduates who require additional qualifications to begin university studies. The program, however, also accepts a significant number of mature students\(^{28}\) who have been out of school for three or more years, have a strong work record and supporting letters of reference (Dr. Andrea Belczewski, MWC Assistant Director, personal communication, May 5\(^{th}\), 2011). MWC also offers a Bachelor of Education for First Nations Students (BEdFNS),\(^{29}\) a four-year program in Elementary Education. This program began in 1977 when UNB, like many universities across Canada, began to offer direct-entry teacher education programs to address the desperate shortage of Aboriginal teachers in the K-12 education systems. Today, the majority of licensed First Nations teachers in the Maritimes are graduates of this UNB program (Mi’kmaq-Wolastoqey Centre, 2014). At the time that I started my data collection, a First Nations Business Certificate (FNBC)\(^{30}\) also existed at MWC.

\(^{28}\) UNB defines Mature Students as “[a]nyone 21 years or more who does not fit the traditional profile of the student who comes to university directly from high school” (UNB College of Extended Learning, n.d., p. 18).

\(^{29}\) This is also known as the First Nations Teacher Education Program (FNTEP). Although this program had students enrolled at the time of data collection, in 2014 MWC temporarily stopped accepting applications due to a rebuilding process.

\(^{30}\) This program was dissolved in 2013 and students were enrolled in the Faculty of Business certificate programs instead.
At MWC we endeavour to serve as a “home away from home” (David Perley, personal communication, April 10, 2015) for current and former MWC students, as well other Aboriginal students enrolled in a variety of programs across UNB’s campus. To this end, we occasionally hold pot-luck style “lunch and learns,” host bowling tournaments, began a mentoring program, and offer space for students to come to relax or do their work in small groups. David Perley, one of my Elders and the current Director of MWC, once suggested that the institute should adopt the term “MWC First Nation.” Although this sentiment was made in jest, it also was stated in recognition that MWC does function as a community.

This community, comprised of First Nations and non-First Nations faculty, staff and students, and the larger UNB landscape it is situated within, formed the social and physical context of my research. It was through these existing and developing relationships that I hoped, in part, to honour Wilson's (2008) pivotal axiological principle of relational accountability in this work. Since I was, and am still, both personally and professionally responsible and accountable to the MWC community, I had, and continue to have, a vested interest in not only the outcome of the research but also the design, questions, process, and results of the research endeavour.

**Inviting Participation**

On September 13, 2012, I hosted an information session to which all Indigenous students on MWC’s campus-wide contact list (not limited to students enrolled in MWC programs) were invited via email. I provided lunch to anyone who attended, regardless of whether or not they chose to sign up. I hoped that offering food would create a sense of community and decrease the formality of the event. Providing food and having a feast
is very important in First Nations cultures, including Wolastoqey and Mi’kmaq communities in New Brunswick. This is seen as “a way of expressing gratitude for whatever one has been given” (First Nations Voice, 2009, para. 1). In my case, this was my way of thanking attendees for honouring me with the gift of their time.

My collaborating Elder, Imelda Perley, honoured me by welcoming the 12 students who came to hear about my research that day. She spoke about why she felt this research was important and how their stories might help to invoke change to improve education for First Nations students in this province. When it was my turn to speak, I began by telling them about myself, and why I wanted to do this work. Taking the time to introduce myself to potential participants was an essential part of my research process, for, as Kovach (2009) writes, “[i]n asking others to share stories, it is necessary to share our own, starting with self-location. ...The researcher’s self-location provides an opportunity for the research participant to situate and assess the researcher’s motivations for the research” (p. 98). Together we discussed the details of the intended research, including the specific methods I planned to employ; namely, sharing circles as the primary method and individual interviews for clarification and validation purposes. Information sheets, including my contact details, were distributed so that attendees could make an informed decision as to whether or not they wanted to participate. Near the conclusion of the information session, we spent about 10 minutes engaged in a question

and answer period. As questions started to wane, I set out a prepared sign-up sheet for anyone that wanted to receive more information or talk about the project further. As I laid out this sheet, I remember holding my breath. Thankfully, I did not have to hold it long as several students came forward right away. When this introductory session finally concluded, I had names and contact information for nine potential participants, including all seven whose stories are re-presented in the coming chapters. The additional two individuals who initially indicated interest in participating in the project discontinued email communication with me prior to the first sharing circle event. Several attempts were made to re-engage them but I received no further responses.

By introducing myself and my research in this way, I was able to invite individuals to participate rather than merely recruiting and selecting participants. This is important in decolonizing research designs that envision both researchers and participants as active agents in the research endeavour (Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008).

**About the Participants**

In the coming chapters you will be introduced to the characters of Emily, Matt, Yvonne, Amanda, Hannah, Nate and Eden and will learn a great deal about their experiences in schools. That said, the stories presented within are re-presentations of First Nations students’ experiences, and the characters do not necessarily embody the students who participated themselves. These stories, although representing many years of participants’ experiences, are static. The collaborating participants are not. As they grow and continue to have new experiences, their reflections on the past may similarly grow and shift.
In keeping with my desires to hear from recent graduates, all seven participants had graduated high school within six years from when we met (ie. between 2006 and 2012). While I originally planned to interview only students who had graduated within three years, in keeping with a flexible and emergent methodology, and in accordance with my desire to invite participants rather than recruit, I decided to widen this range. After meeting interested participants, I also expanded the definition of “graduating” to include both students who completed high school without interruptions, through the so-called “regular” or linear route, and those who completed high school requirements through an alternative program or through taking the General Educational Development (GED®) exam. Although formally recruited through MWC, students enrolled in other UNB programs were also engaged. Six individuals identified as Wolastoqiyik, one as Mi’kmaq. The participants represented by Emily, Yvonne, Nate and Amanda had grown up in their respective First Nation communities (“on reserve”) and lived there throughout their K-12 schooling years, while Eden, Matt and Hannah grew up predominantly in urban and suburban contexts (“off reserve”). Although this study was open to any student who self-identified as Mi’kmaq or Wolastoqiyik, (regardless of legal status), all of these participants had First Nations status and were affiliated with five different First Nations throughout New Brunswick. The character names, as well as the names chosen to represent First Nations communities, towns, cities and schools are all pseudonyms to order to provide anonymity to participants.

Research Timeline

The relational nature of research within the Indigenist paradigm that I have adopted does not fit well with the Western research idea of having a data collection
phase that is separate from the rest of the research process. Nonetheless, for clarity of reporting in this document, the formal “data collection” phase of this research can be thought of as beginning shortly after the Information Session I hosted in September 2012. While both sets of formal interviews were completed by the end of March 2013, I continued to share numerous emails, face-to-face conversations, and a few telephone calls with participants over the course of the next three years which informed the development of their re-presented stories. Due to several unanticipated events in my life, most notably my father’s courageous battle with cancer and his death in April 2013, the narrative analysis and production phase (described in the next chapter) was temporarily put on hold and took much longer than anticipated. Final validation checks began in December 2014 and extended until February 2016.

**Story Gathering Methods**

As described in Part 1 of this chapter, storytelling has historically played an important role in the transmission of knowledge in Indigenous cultures and continues to have special significance in local New Brunswick First Nations. However, as I have written elsewhere,

> [a]ccording to First Nations traditions, the telling of stories does not happen in a random or haphazard fashion, and sharing of deeply personal information requires trust and safety. Furthermore, as Aboriginal scholar Dawn Lavell Harvard [2011] notes, in many First Nations, the direct questioning of another person, particularly when a relationship is not established, is considered rude and should be avoided. Standard researcher-led question-and-answer interviews also tend to privilege the researcher's preconceptions, and this was something I wanted to get away from in this project. (Schneider-Trenholm, 2014, p. 7)

As a non-Aboriginal researcher wishing to engage First Nations youth whom I was just getting to know at the beginning of this study, I felt directly questioning individuals in a
one-on-one format would be neither culturally appropriate nor productive for eliciting their personal stories. I was concerned that “the standard, researcher lead, unidirectional question and answer interview process, [would create] an inequitable if not outright exploitative relationship” (Lavell Harvard, 2011, p. 106). Thus, after many discussions with Elder Gwen, and later with Elders David and Imelda Perley, I decided to utilize sharing circles as a primary method; a “method” directly derived from First Nations cultures wherein participants maintain control over the process of sharing their own stories and knowledge.

**Sharing Circles.** Sharing circles offer researchers a method that fosters a sense of community and connectedness amongst all participants. “People come together to share their own personal stories about a shared collective phenomenon, and often, relationships are forged as a result” (Schneider-Trenholm, 2014, p.7). In some ways, sharing circles are similar to group interviews or focus groups in qualitative research, where researchers gather information through group discussion (Lavallee, 2009). However, they are also quite different.

For starters, they proceed in a more structured and egalitarian manner, with only one person speaking at a time, for as long as they wish, while everyone else listens and learns. There are no interruptions or crosstalk.

More importantly, on a philosophical level, sharing circles are derived from the traditional First Nations Talking Circle which is used for healing purposes and has sacred meaning in many First Nations, including the Wolastoqiyik and Mi'kmaq Nations in New Brunswick. Traditional Talking Circles are gatherings of community members for the purpose of teaching, listening, learning and sharing. They promote the principles of respect, equality, balance and harmony and help people connect – to each other, within themselves and with the universe. (Schneider-Trenholm, 2014, p.8)
Like the traditional Talking Circle from which it is derived, a sharing circle is highly structured “in the way it begins, the way it unfolds, its flow pattern, and its process of sharing. [They]... always opens with ceremony ... and speech is strictly the privilege of the person holding the sacred object” (Gillis, 2005, p. 57). In a traditional Talking Circle, only Elders or individuals who have earned the right to lead may convene the circle and this individual offers the opening prayer. Although this degree of formality is not necessarily required in research using sharing circles as a method, I felt it was important to do so for my work. Fortunately, my friend and mentor, Imelda Perley, who became UNB’s second Elder in residence after Gwen’s sudden death, was very supportive of this work and was happy to participate. By involving Imelda, a traditional Wolastoqi Elder, and honouring First Nations traditions, I hoped to enhance the feeling of community in the group and convey to the students that their culture, traditions and knowledge were important to me.

Initially, I had planned to conduct three to five sharing circles (lasting approximately two to three hours each) over the course of six to twelve weeks. I intended to follow these up with one-on-one clarification and validation interviews to review summarized stories and interpretations with each participant. However, I had no idea at the outset how difficult scheduling these sharing circles was going to be. As I have noted in a previous publication,

the practical reality of scheduling a 2–3 h[our] block of time that would work with everyone’s schedules (initially nine students, one Elder and myself) proved difficult. Everyone was very busy and already had full and varying agendas. It took me 2–3 weeks of emailing to finally book and confirm our first sharing circle during a time that eventually worked for seven students, myself and our Elder-in-residence. (Schneider-Trenholm, 2014, p. 9)
While a detailed narrative of this first sharing circle is provided in Chapter 5, here I will divulge that, unfortunately, only two potential participants attended that day. Although we had a small group—including Imelda, Dave, who came into UNB with Imelda and was unanimously invited to join our circle since so few participants had come out, the two participants, and myself—that circle provided a rich, in-depth look into the schooling (and life) experiences of Emily and Matt. It was also a highly emotional occasion, “we laughed together when someone related something funny, and we cried when someone recounted particularly painful events. These moments were numerous, and I was extremely grateful for them” (Schneider-Trenholm, 2014, p. 9).

After Imelda closed the circle, leading us in ceremony, we discussed availability for a second sharing circle. During the following days, I proceeded to contact everyone who had indicated interest but had not attended the first sharing circle to ascertain if they still wished to be involved in the study. After receiving many affirmations,

I began to set a time for a second sharing circle. This time I received five confirmations and two maybes. But once again, I was disappointed. The day and time arrived, and not a single participant came out. While I still believed in the power and potential of sharing circles as a research method, something had to change. (Schneider-Trenholm, 2014, p.10)

Shifting to individual interviews. In the meantime, while I was in the process of scheduling the first sharing circle, a young woman who had attended my information session and was interested in participating in this study approached me. She explained that she was extremely busy, both working and attending UNB full-time, and she asked if she could meet with me one-on-one. Not only would meeting individually allow us to pick a time that suited her unique schedule better, she also informed me that she would feel more comfortable in this context. I had to think about this: I did not want to lose an
interested participant, yet I was still wary of using one-on-one interviews for all the reasons I mentioned above. Then I had a realization, which I have written about elsewhere (Trenholm, 2014, p. 107): My research design called for me to be process-oriented, and collaborate with participants, and this choice came from her. She wanted to meet with me one-on-one. So I agreed and we set up a time.

After the non-attended second sharing circle, I initially tried to schedule a third. The potential participants I was in contact with continued to affirm their interest, yet I could not seem to find a date and time that worked for everyone. Eventually, one by one, they began to ask me for individual meetings. I took this as a sign. As I have written previously, “although I still believed, and continue to believe, in the potential of sharing circles to be a powerful research method for exploring personal experiences and stories, my research context and the participants involved required a different primary method” (Trenholm, 2014, p. 107).

At first, the decision to change primary methods during my data collection phase, after literally years of planning, felt disastrous. Thankfully, in large part due to Wilson’s advice (2008) to be process-oriented, my research proposal had included a variety of potential secondary methods along with the admission that I may need to utilize methods that I did not foresee at the time of planning. Therefore, as I have previously confessed, “while I was disappointed, I was able to relatively quickly switch to interviewing participants individually” (Trenholm, 2014, p.108). The remaining decision that I had to

32 Lynn Lavallee (2009), Dawn Lavell Harvard (2011), and Jane Vera Martin (2001) all provide excellent examples of sharing circles used as a powerful research method.
make was regarding what type of interview would best suit my research purposes and enable participants to share their stories.

**Biographic narrative interviewing method.** There are many types of interviews that qualitative researchers can choose from. These range from very structured questionnaires, to semi-structured protocols with some open-ended questions, to completely open conversational style interviews. In a previous publication, I described that I knew that

I wanted an interview approach that would mirror the type of sharing that takes place within a sharing circle, where individuals are free to share their stories as they wish, on their own terms, without interruptions or questions. However, I also knew that the dynamic of the one-on-one context would be quite different than the group dynamic of the sharing circle, and I couldn't expect to just sit there for an hour or two listening – that wouldn't be natural for me or them. (Schneider-Trenholm, 2014, pp. 10–11)

While searching for an established interview process that resonated with my purposes, I came across Wengraf's (2001, 2008) biographic narrative interviewing method (or BNIM). While I did not utilize the very structured analysis guidelines put forward by Wengraf (2001; 2008) as they did not meet my purposes, the minimally structured interviewing guidelines he recommended seemed to be exactly what I was looking for. In BNIM,

the interviewer first offers a carefully constructed single narrative probe, asking the participant to begin sharing his or her story (generally about his or her life overall, but in my case about his/her life associated with schools). The participant is told he or she may take as long as he or she likes and is encouraged to think of as many events and experiences that stand out in his or her mind as he or she can. In addition, the interviewer promises that he or she will not interrupt, but will just listen and take notes, which the interviewer will follow-up on immediately after the participant is finished. When the participant comes to a natural prolonged lull, or states something along the lines of ‘that's pretty much everything’, the interviewer digs deeper into particular topics, instances and
events that they noted, in order to elicit more narratives while trying to stick to
the sequence presented and the words used by the participant. This subsection of
the interview allows participants to fill in additional details about chosen
segments of their stories, or what Wengraf terms ‘particular incident narratives’
(PINs). This ‘going back in’ provides a richer, more nuanced look at the
experiences of participants and helps to provide depth to constructed research
narratives. The whole session is audio-recorded and later transcribed. (Schneider-
Trenholm, 2014, p.11)

Following the interview, BNIM recommends that researchers spend some time
reflecting; that is, writing field notes about what transpired, jotting down reflections of
how they were affected, what emotions, memories and questions were evoked, to list a
few. A second interview scheduled following transcription and preliminary analysis of
the first is highly recommended in BNIM so that further narratives can be explored and
clarifications sought to flush out developing stories.

These guidelines seemed to work very nicely with my understanding of narrative
inquiry and my overall goal of hearing participants' stories of school without directing
and controlling the interviews too much. As a result, while the stories of Emily and Matt
were developed primarily from data gathered during the sole sharing circle, albeit
flushed out further in follow-up interviews, the stories presented in the chapters of
Yvonne, Amanda, Hannah, Nate and Eden were co-constructed from individual
interview data guided by BNIM guidelines.

Interestingly, although BNIM was used in all of these cases, the interviews
proceeded somewhat differently with each participant. Although each individual was
aware that I had originally planned to utilize sharing circles as the primary method,
when I stated that I wanted to mirror the sharing circle process by allowing them
to tell their stories and experiences of school – beginning with their earlier
memories, moving through elementary, middle and high school, through to today
– and that I would try my best not to interrupt, several participants balked. It

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seemed like it was a lot to be asked to do, right off the bat. Some even mentioned they had expected me to ask them questions ‘as in other interviews’. Needless to say, after a few minutes of initial discussion and gentle prompting, all participants were eventually able to get into the flow of describing their schooling experiences. Some took advantage of the time and shared for 30–40 min. Others tended to skim over the major chronological details of their schooling – where they went, for how long and a few details about teachers – and were ‘finished’ in 10–15 min. During this time, I scribbled a handful of notes on a clipboard – never more than a single page of points – of times, places and events that they described that I wanted to probe deeper. This required a lot of ‘on-the-fly’ thinking and had to be balanced with a desire to look my participants in the eye and really be present while they were sharing. When my participants came to a natural lull, or otherwise indicated that they were finished, we moved into the second subsection of the interview. (Schneider-Trenholm, 2014, p. 12)

During the second phase of initial interviews, I asked participants prompting questions to elicit PINs. Specifically, I tried to read a quote back to them or mention a time described by them during the first phase that I had recorded on my clipboard and, using the following probes, gently asked:

• could you describe a particular time when this happened/you felt this way?
• if you had to say ‘I remember this one time when…’, what would you say?
• do any specific stories stand out in your mind regarding…?
• what do you remember about (your first day of high school/this particular teacher/graduation/etc.)? (Schneider-Trenholm, 2014, pp. 12-13)

Using this technique, some participants easily recounted additional details and narratives about specific events and occurrences.

For others, this task was more difficult. I began to find that most people have a tendency to speak in general terms versus telling stories of particular instances, and I had to try more direct lines of questioning to pull these stories out. Sometimes this worked; other times the memories were too remote, or just didn't stand out enough in the participants' minds. If it felt like I was really 'pulling teeth', so to speak, I would move on and hope that when I went through the audio recordings and transcripts I would come up with better prompting questions. As it turned out, this was usually successful, and more details did come out during the follow-up interviews. (Schneider-Trenholm, 2014, p. 13)
Additional Interviewing Considerations. When I was making decisions about the types of interviews to employ I was also conscious of the fact that interview data are context-dependent. In other words, “when, how, where and why interviews take place can dramatically affect the amount, form and content of the data being collected” (Baldwin, unpublished manuscript, 1998, p.234). I have already discussed the “hows” and “whys”, and it is important to note that when and where the interviews took place also play a major role in setting the interview context.

In all cases, participants were consulted about possible interview times and arrangements were made to hold interviews, including the sharing circle, at a time convenient for them. I sent reminder emails a few days prior to the scheduled date and time, and requested confirmations back from them. Nonetheless, last minute cancellations and no-shows challenged this project. When someone missed an appointment, I set about contacting them to reschedule and try again. On three occasions, different participants contacted me and said they happened to be nearby and had a window of time open. In all three circumstances, I managed to meet with them within 10-30 minutes. While “meeting on the fly” worked for us and was convenient for the participants involved, these situations did not allow me to be very critical of where the interviews took place.

Where interviews take place is more complicated than when they take place, and sets the tone for the whole meeting. Where interviews take place reflect “a broader socio-cultural and power context that affects both researcher and participant,” and their relationship with the site, with each other and with the research topic itself (Edwards & Holland, 2013, p. 45). Being aware of issues in relation to perceptions of power and
positionality in the research relationship, that is, my position as a Ph.D. candidate / researcher and a white woman in an institution that historically favors and produces white academics working with younger, First Nations women and men, I tried to always allow participants to choose a location comfortable and preferable to them. That being said, I did offer suggestions: their home, a private meeting space in the campus library, in my building on campus, with which all students were familiar due to their affiliation with MWC. On a practical level, privacy was important in offering and selecting a location due to the personal nature of the interviews and also to ensure adequate sound recording of the conversations (Edwards & Holland, 2013, p. 43). The sharing circle was held in a room in my building that is filled with couches, comfortable chairs and coffee tables, even plants, and is generally used for informal meetings and luncheons.

Similarly, many of the individual interviews were held in an office suite that contained a private interview room, set up with couches and chairs, dim lighting, paintings and plants, so as not to feel like a university office. One of the participants elected to have me meet with him at his home. We sat in the kitchen and drank lemonade while he shared his stories with me. Several of the follow-up interviews were conducted in a private meeting room in the basement of the library. While the library location was chosen by and was convenient for participants who were between classes, the starkness of the location did become a topic of conversation. For the three interviews that were conducted at the last minute, I had to resort to a pragmatic approach to selecting a location for our meeting, as I simply needed to find a space that was available and convenient for both of us. In two instances, we met in my office, and in one case I was
able to reserve a library meeting room. Refreshments and snacks were always made available during all interviews.
Part 3: Narrative Analysis and Narrative Production

Analyzing “data” in a narrative inquiry is a very long, involved process. Stages overlap, transcripts and other field notes are written and read, rewritten and reread, to become interim texts. Interim texts are shared with participants for feedback, often intertwined with additional interview data. Just when you think you might have a final story, a final research text, you realize you have only just begun. This was very much my experience in this study.

Long before I met my participants I began reading about ways to analyze data in narrative inquiry. I had to do this in order to write my dissertation proposal. Laying out how you are going to manage and conduct your analysis is a requirement of this process. Ironically, what I actually ended up doing during this phase of the research was quite different than what I originally envisioned. I know now that this is because step-by-step models for narrative research do not exist. As Andrews et al. (2013) comment in the introduction to Doing Narrative Research: “Clear accounts of how to analyze the data… are rare” (p.1). This is because the type of analytical process necessary in narrative inquiry is “as artistic as it is rigorous” (Coulter, 2003, p. 233). In other words, narrative inquirers may have an idea beforehand as to how they are going to proceed but until you are living with your data, with both your own and your participants’ stories of experience, along with all the other types of field notes, you do not know exactly what are you going to do with all of the “stuff” you collect.

Narrative Analysis versus Analysis of Narratives

Before I launch into the specifics of how I went about analyzing and eventually producing the narratives presented in the following chapters, a distinction needs to be
made regarding two basic analytical approaches within narrative research: narrative analysis and analysis of narratives. According to Polkinghorne (1995), narrative analysis is “studies whose data consists of actions, events, and happenings, but whose analysis produces stories” (p.6). In contrast, analysis of narratives involves “studies whose data consist of narratives or stories, but whose analysis produces paradigmatic typologies or categories” (p.6). In other words, while the analysis of narratives may be interested in hearing individuals’ personal accounts and stories, it does not consist of a storied approach to analysis or re-present stories to readers as part of the final research texts. I knew from early on that I wanted to use narrative analysis expressly for “the purpose of… produc[ing] stories as the outcome of the research” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p.15), in order to maintain and show relationships and foreground participants’ unique, individual experiences and voices. Yet, late in the writing phase, when I wanted to look across the participants’ stories and discuss my additional interpretations, specifically the “narrative threads” (Clandinin et al., 2013, p. 52) that I discerned, I found that a thematic analysis of the narrative data was useful in framing this discussion. Therefore, while my primary analytical method was narrative analysis and the majority of this section is concerned with the intricate process which led to the stories presented in Chapter 5, I will also briefly discuss the thematic analysis of narratives that I utilized to frame the discussion in Chapter 6 of narrative threads common to many participants’ schooling experiences.

**Narrative Analysis**

The absence of clearly defined rules, processes and steps that could be learned and followed made my journey of becoming a narrative researcher quite difficult and filled me with uncertainty at many times, particularly during the narrative analysis and
production phase. When I revisited Clandinin and Connelly’s seminal work *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research* (2000) late in the writing process, I discovered that this uncertainty was exactly what I was supposed to be experiencing. They state:

> Although in some people’s minds, narrative inquiry is merely a process of telling and writing down a story with perhaps some reflective comment by researchers and participants, the process of moving from field texts to research texts is far more complex. … It would be tempting to view this overall process of analysis and interpretation in the move from field texts to research texts as a series of steps. However, this is not how narrative inquiries are lived out. (pp. 131-132)

As one begins to work on analysis and interpretation, this transition is filled with uncertainty. … The circumstances surrounding each inquiry, the relationships established, the inquiry life of the researcher, and the appropriateness of different kinds of interim and final research texts mean that the inquiry is frequently filled with doubt. The doubt and uncertainty are lived out in endless false starts. (p.134)

I certainly experienced my fair share of doubt and was faced with countless false starts throughout this process. Part 3 of this chapter, therefore, is as much my way of navigating the messy, almost imperceptible, tangled pathway I eventually charted through the narrative analysis and production phase, as it is presenting a way to understand how the stories presented in the following chapter came about.

Even though Clandinin and Connelly (2000) emphasize that narrative analysis is *not* a step-by-step process, they do offer a foundational interpretative-analytic guideline for researchers to continue developing their relationship with, and understanding of, the various field texts they have gathered and produced. When I first encountered this guideline and used it to frame the analysis section of my proposal, however, I did not really “get it”. I *wanted* to be told how to do the analysis and move from field texts to
research texts, and I presented it as a logical, linear approach. Only much later did I come to understand for myself what they meant when they stated “[t]here is no clear path to follow that works in each [narrative] inquiry” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 134). Therefore, what follows, although guided and shaped by Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) interpretative-analytic strategy in many ways, is also unique to my experience in this particular study.

**Archiving and sorting the data.** Before deciding what to do with all of the field texts and how to rework them into re-presentable stories,

…we need to know what there is. At one level, this is an archival task. We need to make sure that we read and reread all of the field texts and in some way sort them, so we know what field texts we have. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 131)

For me, analysis started during data collection, immediately following each meeting with participants, and was conducted in an integrated and cumulative process with deeper analysis and writing continuing for several years after data collection was completed. The archival considerations highlighted by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) above, involved carefully saving and coding digital copies of all audio recordings from the sharing circle and individual interviews with participants on my computer. All of the individual interviews, including one phone interview, as well as the sharing circle, were audio recorded utilizing two digital audio-recorders in case one of the recordings was inaudible or failed to record. As a result, I had clear recordings in all cases. I also converted my reflective observations, personal journal entries, and field notes that were written down prior to and immediately after meeting with participants into electronic format with notation of dates, and contexts for the composition of the field texts.
Reviewing the audio recordings and transcription. Following the sharing circle and each initial individual interview session, I listened to the respective audio recordings in full, and then had them transcribed. A transcriber was employed to transcribe five of the initial interviews, including the sharing circle data from Emily and Matt. I transcribed the remaining two initial interviews as well as all seven follow-up interviews myself. Recognizing that the process of transforming the spoken word into the written has the potential to lose much important data (Baldwin, 2000), I then re-listened to the audio files while reading the transcripts—multiple times—to make corrections and revisions and to include notes of any non-verbal utterances (ums and ers, etc.). Even later when I was working with interim research texts, I often returned to these original audio files time and time again to listen to each participant’s voice and aspects of his/her speech that are lost once represented in written form. Specifically, I listened for their pauses, moments that were difficult for them to articulate, or indicated tension of some kind. I listened to their intonation and how their feelings were articulated, where they got excited, angry, upset, where they expressed being hurt, and made note of these in the transcripts. I also paid attention to the way they spoke, the rhythm of their speech, and tried to keep a mental representation of this in my mind as I rewrote their stories.

Rearranging and combining transcripts. After the first interviews (including the sharing circle interviews) were transcribed, I rearranged each transcript into chronological sections, grouping everything about elementary school, middle school, high school, and post-secondary school together. Since stories of school naturally overlap and intertwine with stories of life, occasionally I also created primary sections
about events that occurred parallel to school but did not concern school itself. Within these main chronological sections, I also created subsections related to major topics: Native Studies classes, Native Resource Room, Perceptions of First Nations students, History Class, etc. While I was doing this, and in subsequent readings, I used the review function in Microsoft Word to make comments in the margin of anything that stood out to me as warranting further discussion with the participant.

In preparation for the second interviews, I further “cleaned up” this chronological version of the transcript, removing any of my (researcher) lines that consisted solely of single verbal nods (mm-hmms, okay’s, yeah) that indicated that I was listening, and italicized the rest of my lines to easily distinguish them from the participants’. Finally, I prepared and printed two copies of the revised, chronologically ordered transcript for the second interview: one for me and one for the participant. My copy contained all comments and questions I had recorded in the margins, while I removed these from the participant’s copy which made the document easier to read and follow.

The follow-up interviews were also audio-recorded and fully transcribed. Data from the second transcripts were then combined with the chronological version of transcript one, section by section for each participant. One participant also had a third interview which took place over the phone, since we ran out of time during her second interview. This phone interview was also digitally audio-recorded, transcribed and then combined with the chronologically combined transcripts from her first two interviews. In this way preliminary chronological interim texts, composed of data from both/all transcripts, were created for each participant.
Narratively coding the data. This initial analysis phase also consisted of starting to identify and make note of the key elements of each participant’s “story”. In other words, this was when I began to note “the characters that appear in the field texts, places where actions and events occurred” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.131), scenes, timelines, tensions, conflicts, resolutions, endings and tone. However, “making note” of these elements, which I did at this point, in separate documents for each participant, is very different from actually working with them to restory the narratives which were shared with me. For me, this restorying phase occurred much later and I will return to this shortly. Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) approach for narrative analysis is not a set of step-by-step instructions, but rather a road map which may twist and turn and circle back before guiding you to the final destination.

Attending to the relational inquiry space. The second level of analysis in Clandinin & Connelly’s (2000) interpretive-analytic strategy entails paying greater attention to the three axes of time, personal-social interactions, and places. At the proposal writing phase, I felt I understood this strategic step in theory; however, when it came time to actually doing it I realized I did not know how to proceed. Clandinin, Steeves & Martin (2013) reminded me that by working “within the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space” when drafting and writing the accounts, researchers are “mindful …that it was participants’ stories shared in relation” (p.50) with them that they are re-telling. Therefore, during this phase of absorption with the data, reading and rereading, I began to review my other field texts (field notes, reflective observations and personal journaling), and started to construct summaries of these for each participant, paying attention to the temporal, personal-social, and physical contexts within which the
interviews took place, and making note of these dimensions within the stories themselves.

**Preliminary interim texts.** The third level of analysis involved creatively merging the constructed summaries from level two with each individual participant’s developing stories, essentially laying these beside the chronological summaries, to create a narrative account that reflected my work in relation to each participant and their storied tellings. This phase shaped the field texts and initial summaries into preliminary interim texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), which I began to share as they emerged individually.

The first person with whom I shared a preliminary interim text was one of my participants, represented by the character of Nate. At this point, I happened to see Nate quite frequently and we had developed a friendship. I was nervous and I explained that it was definitely not a finished product, but as part of the collaborative endeavour I asked if he would read it and tell me what he thought. He agreed. A week later he got back to me and said he liked it. He felt as if it represented him and his story, and he was not aware of how much rearranging I had done. But I could tell he was not excited about it. I decided to share the other developing stories with my advisory committee for feedback. This sharing allowed them to respond to my “tentative interpretations and representations in the narrative accounts” (Clandinin, et al., 2013, p.50) before presenting them to other participants for their collaboration and validation.

This phase took place over several months, and as these preliminary interim texts began to take shape, I knew something was wrong. I was not happy with them and my advisors admitted to me that they were falling flat. On the one hand, they sounded like
the participants’ recounting their stories, as if they had told them that way in the interview. This was a good thing. They did not sound like me; they were not in my voice. Further, my advisors were quite receptive to the first participant’s story, which they read in isolation from the others. On the other hand, when all seven were piled together, they became structurally repetitive, and worse, boring. The fact that they did not read as interesting, intriguing stories, which I knew in my heart they were, or could be, disheartened me. These participants had entrusted their stories to me, but if they were not presented in a better fashion, their experiences – the whole reason I did this work – would be lost to readers.

Interpretive interim texts. I made the decision to go back into every story. I read and reread all of Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) guidelines for analyzing narrative data, and realized I was in the midst of living something that they had written about years ago:

As we begin to write interim and final research texts, we may try out one kind of research text and find it does not capture meanings we have in mind, find it lifeless and lacking in the spirit we wish to portray, find that research participants do not feel the text captures their experience, or find the research text to be inappropriate to the intended audience. We try out other kinds and continually compose texts until we find ones that work for us and for our purposes. (pp. 134-135)

Even though this explanation resonated with me deeply, it did not provide me with answers. I was reminded that there was no clear path to follow. I had to live with my texts. I had to feel them, and try to get inside of them. I also had to try other kinds of (research) texts.
As Butler-Kisber (2002) writes, "[w]hat seems rather obvious now, but turned on a light for me then, was Eisner’s explanation of how understanding is mediated by form. What we know and how we know are inextricably related” (p. 232). Eisner’s (1991) pivotal work, *The Enlightened Eye: Qualitative Inquiry and the Enhancement of Educational Practice* gave many social scientists the permission and impetus to begin experimenting with forms of representations hailing from the arts and humanities, disciplines with a “long tradition of ways of describing, interpreting, and appraising the world” (p. 2). For instance, he writes

> History, art, literature, dance, drama, poetry, and music are among the most important forms through which humans have represented and shaped their experience... [while, in contrast] These forms have not been significant in educational inquiry for reasons that have to do with a limited and limiting conception of knowledge. (Eisner, 1991, p.2)

In brief, advocates, such as Eisner, for embracing the language of the arts in the social sciences, contend that the traditional format of research reports is a “fundamental artifact” of a “positivistic understanding of science” (Polkinghorne, 1997, p. 3;8). Even when qualitative research became commonplace in the academy, it

> accommodated the conventional approach by adapting for its own the standard format for reporting research. This format confines the presentation of research to a logically ordered justification of results… [It] is a convenient design to allow ‘the community of scholars’ to judge the validity of the knowledge claim presented by a researcher… [and] whether or not the claim was the product of an approved methodological algorithm. (Polkinghorne, 1997, p.4)

To this end, Polkinghorne (1997) points out that the audience for conventional research reports is other experts in the field, and not general readers or the practitioners in this discipline. In fact, he asserts “that practitioners, whose interests focus on the usefulness...
of knowledge claims, do not find the conventional format of the reports a useful means for displaying the significance of the knowledge for practice” (p.4, emphasis added).

Part of conveying useful information to practitioners and wider audiences is communicating the importance of the work in a way that resonates with readers, and to do that “one must be able to use language to reveal what, paradoxically, words can never say” (Eisner, 1991, p.3). In other words, the feelings of the participant and the researcher must be transmitted, and this is something that traditional research reports do not accomplish.

For feeling to be conveyed, the ‘language’ of the arts must be used, because it is through the form a symbol displays that feeling is given virtual life. The point, therefore, of exploiting language fully is to do justice to what has been seen; it is to help readers come to know. (Eisner, 1991, p.4)

The reason for choosing texts, or genres, stemming from literary traditions, therefore, is not simply aesthetic but epistemological. For one thing the social sciences and the arts and humanities have in common is the aim “to help others see and understand” (p.3). For Eisner, narrativization techniques common in the arts, such as voice, alliteration, cadence, allusions, metaphors, and others, should be “as much a part of the tool kit of those conducting qualitative inquiry as analysis of variance is for those working in conventional quantitative research modes” (p.3).

The challenge for me was the realization that choosing the same form, chronologically summarized non-fiction stories, rendered all seven stories structurally similar. Layered one on top of the other, they started to be redundant despite the fact that the content contained within was very different. The form mattered; it was not a passive instrument in making the message (Eisner, 1991, p.28). The last thing I wanted after all
of this was for readers to feel bored halfway through the third or fourth story. So I started to play with the form and the type of texts I was creating.

First, I realized I had to pay a lot more attention to the emplotment process, or the way that the stories unfolded—their beginnings, middles, endings, the major themes present, the goals of the main characters, conflicts that make it difficult for them to reach these goals, and how the stories resolve. According to Polkinghome (1995) participants’ descriptions of events and happenings become data that “need to be integrated and interpreted by an emplotted narrative” (p. 15). He says the researcher attempts to “develop or discover a plot that displays the linkage among the data elements as parts of an unfolding temporal development culminating in the denouement” (p.15). In order to do this, I had to look at the stories anew.

I began to flesh out the literary elements within each story. In particular, for each participant / character, I constructed: his or her overall goal(s) and conflicts preventing the goal(s); the growth that the character undergoes; major and minor supporting characters and conflict characters; the overarching theme of their story, that is, what is the universal statement about the human condition that can be found in their story, and what is the thematic conflict, if any; what is the problem, solution and goal(s) of the story itself (not necessarily the character’s); and the major plot points that combine to tell the story and resonate with readers. In selecting plot points I began with questions such as “How did this happen?” or “Why did this come about?” and searched for pieces of information that contributed to the construction of a story that provided an answer to the questions (Coulter, 2003, p. 233). At the same time, I had to keep in mind the goal of my research: to present stories of school of First Nations high school graduates, to offer
fuller representations of their lived experiences in schools—representations that show the depth of their humanness and that transcend the limited, stereotypical image of “failures” and “drop-outs” prevalent in the national and local dominant narratives.

Even as I worked on the emplotment process and began to play with different literary genres, I was conscious of the fact that research is different from strictly writing fiction; I felt that I should not take as many liberties with a real person’s story as I would have been able to with a fictional character. These participants’ entrusted me with their stories, so even as I altered them slightly I worked to ensure that the representations still resembled and resonated with each individual’s experiences.

In addition, there is a current debate in narrative research circles about whether or not social scientists should try to produce nice, neat, emplotted stories of participants’ experiences (Baldwin, 2017). We do not live our lives in nice, neat ways, and they do not follow plot lines. They are inherently messy. How can we claim to be trying to authentically represent participants’ lived experiences, if we present them in neat, structured, chronological ways? So I decided to not always start the stories near some created chronological beginning because sometimes it made more sense to start in the middle, and then move into episodes from earlier in their lives. These questions and this decision were largely influenced by one of my advisors, Clive Baldwin, Canada Research Chair in Narrative Studies at St. Thomas University, who advocates for making space for different kinds of narratives. His view is that the type of ‘story’ we are so used to seeing (beginning, middle, end, clear plot line with conflict arcs, and resolutions) is an Aristotelian (Western) construct that is so dominant in literature that it effectively marginalizes other forms of representation.

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As a case in point, in a lot of Aboriginal literature there is an emphasis on oral stories being changed to text, with a reminder to readers that what they are reading is just one way of telling the story (Eigenbrod, Kakegamic, & Fiddler, 2003). The stories are not meant to be static, new understandings are evolving, and participants may have a different take on things at a later time in their lives. Poetry is also a favored genre in Aboriginal literature in Canada and innovative uses of the English language, reflecting the nuances of local speech, are prevalent in multiple genres (Eigenbrod et al., 2003). All of these factors influenced my decision making.

To be very clear, I am not Wolastoqi or Mi’kmaq, and I claim no expertise in storytelling or in First Nations ways of understanding the world. In re-writing and re-presenting participants’ stories, albeit in collaboration and consultation with them, I have also had to rely on what I know about stories. Stories are told in different ways in different cultures, and while I have learned much about Aboriginal oral traditions and have experienced the writings of many Aboriginal authors, I cannot set aside the fact that I have been influenced by a lifetime of reading literature written through a Western lens. As a result, the stories presented within were composed through an interweaving of Western narrativization techniques and a conscious desire to retain a degree of orality and not shape the stories too much. Like Sylvia Moore (2011), “I take personal responsibility for any errors, omissions, or misunderstandings in this writing” (p.8).

**Narrativization techniques.** The process of applying narrativization techniques in order to produce sociological or educative narratives of experience brings both benefits and costs to the original accounts articulated by the participants (Baldwin, 2000). As Laurel Richardson (1997) explains,
The story of a life is less than the actual life, because the story told is selective, partial, contextually constructed and because the life is not yet over. But the story of a life is also more than the life, the contours and meanings allegorically extending to others, others seeing themselves, knowing themselves through another’s life story, re-visioning their own, arriving where they started and knowing “the place for the first time.” (p.6)

Recognizing that my storytelling was as likely to “limit the production of meaning”, as it was to enable it (Game & Metcalfe, 1996, p. 68), an essential step in this work included checking back with my participants and seeking their feedback, giving them the opportunity to make clarifications and request changes, and ensuring that the new representations resonated with them. Clarifications and validations were negotiated with each participant, and everyone received copies of their re-presented stories for their comments, feedback or revisions. Five out of seven participants took this opportunity to provide feedback, which was highly positive, and validated that “they felt the account was an adequate representation of their experience(s)” (Clandinin et al., 2013, p. 50).

There were only minor revisions requested and made. In applying the following narrativization techniques and in selecting the literary genres that will be outlined in the next section, I always strove to be respectful of the recent high school graduates’ stories of their schooling experiences.

*Introductory stories.* Before each set of stories is a preface, an introductory story written from my researcher/narrator point of view which introduces the character(s) whose story(ies) follow. They set the tone, but they do not give away the essence of the stories which follow. They also provide some information on how the stories were written, and why I made these decisions. Lather and Smithies (1997) used a similar literary device, which they called “intertexts” in their groundbreaking, and heartbreaking
work with women living with HIV/AIDS, which they described as serving “as both bridges and breathers” (p. xvii). These prefaces are intended to serve those purposes as well.

Even though there are seven participants represented by seven characters, each with their own unique story, I have chosen to include only five introductory stories. There is a joint preface describing the single sharing circle that took place in this study, and which introduces you to Emily and Matt, the only two participants who were present that day. I decided to also employ a joint preface leading up to Hannah’s and Nate’s stories, which, for a variety of reasons that are discussed in more detail later, I chose to represent using fictional short stories which are intertwined with each other.

**Participants’ stories.** A number of narrativization techniques are utilized within the participants’ stories themselves, but they are not uniformly applied. Voice, authorial presence, the use of headings and subheadings, dialogue, character development, the creation of composite characters and situations, fragmentation, and epigrams were used to render different stories, with varying aesthetics, and which, hopefully, resonate with readers. In terms of actual presentation, the participants’ stories were also set in a smaller font (Times New Roman 11), from the rest of this dissertation (Times New Roman 12). Italics were used sporadically within their stories for points of emphasis.

**Voice.** All participants’ stories are presented from a first-person point of view. Efforts were made not to “sanitize” each individuals’ way of speaking (Lather & Smithies, 1997, p. xvii). I also decided to utilize a conversational, “oral” voice for each of the main characters. This choice attempts to honour the change from their original
oral versions to written texts, and also allows you, the reader, to feel “spoken to” (Eigenbrod et al., 2003, p. 1).

**Authorial presence.** Although I am present as an author/narrator/researcher and implied listener in all of the stories, and readers are reminded of this in the prefaces to each set of stories, in some of the participants’ stories I am also present as a character. In particular, I chose to write both Yvonne and Amanda’s stories in a form of poly-vocal creative non-fiction, wherein they are the dominant characters / first person speakers, but where my researcher character comes to the fore occasionally, distinguished by different fonts, to include my thoughts and wonderings, as if the story is just unfolding and being told for the first time. These stories also include sections of dialogue between participants and me adapted from the transcripts of our meetings together. I made these choices because they draw the reader into the research context and, hopefully, they can then imagine themselves having this conversation with Yvonne and Amanda. Tierney (1999, p. 308) challenges researchers to experiment with their authorial voice and presence in their texts, and I found that including myself as a character in these two stories was another way of including nuance and differentiating the texts.

**Headings and subheadings.** I also strategically chose to / not to use Headings and Subheadings throughout the different stories. These devices not only help authors organize content and provide a frame for the context, they also signal to the reader what is coming in each section (Hatalla, 2017). Skimming the headings and subheadings gives readers an idea of the layout and the content of the story. There were times when I wanted to do this, and other times when I decided I did not want there to be any hints or signals; times when I wanted readers to just read.
Character development and creation of composite characters/situations. One cannot
tell a good story without the creation of good characters. Each story is centred on a
single rounded character, real and complicated, based on the participants who shared
their stories. Each of the characters show growth, although some, particularly Matt,
demonstrate more internal angst and transformation than others. These characters shared
more about how specific events and happenings made them feel and allowed me to get
inside their heads more than others. I use reflective sections throughout all of the stories
to allow characters to express their point of view in the present on things that happened
in their past.

I also used creative license to create composite characters and situations,
bringing together generalizations, or partial and abstract descriptions of several people,
events, and contexts into concrete examples formed directly from participants’ stories. In
all of the stories, and especially Eden’s poetic representation and the fictional short
stories representing Hannah and Nate’s experiences, I endeavoured to “show rather than
tell” (Sparkes, 2002, p. 156). Situations were recreated for readers with additional details
so that they “can see and hear, smell and touch, listen to the dialogue, feel the emotional
tone” (Agar, 1995, p. 118). In other words, I try to transport the reader into the
“narrative worlds” of the participants (Gerrig, 1993, p.1).

Use of dialogue. One way to bring readers into the moments portrayed in a story
is through dialogue. As I have already mentioned, in Yvonne and Amanda’s stories, I am
present as a researcher-character and we engage in dialogue as if the interview were
unfolding in the present. Most of this dialogue is pulled from the transcripts, and some
of it is created, but all of it is based on our actual conversations that took place during
our interviews together. In Hannah and Nate’s fictional short stories, their characters engage frequently in dialogue with other supporting or antagonistic characters. While I will go into greater detail about my decision to use fictional writing in my dissertation in the next section, in brief, utilizing fiction allowed me to portray these characters as actually living the events and experiences they described, as opposed to re-telling them from a removed vantage point some years later. If they were actually living the events, they would be engaging in conversations with other people—teachers, students, parents, grandparents, friends—and so I naturally included dialogue. Dialogue also allows readers to know what the speakers are thinking, and “can expose things about characters, about their habits, thoughts… and many other interesting and important details” that are otherwise difficult to approximate (Kernan, 2016, p. 2).

*Fragmentation.* Perhaps the most abstract of all of the narrativization techniques employed is fragmentation. This technique ties back to the reality that we do not tell our stories, and nor did the participants in this study, in nice, neat, consistent ways. Rather, we tend start at a point, go off on tangents, circle around and come back, moving forward and backward through time, places and events. We also do not usually tell stories of a cohesive self, either. Participants in this study, some much more than others, described themselves in multiple, sometimes contradictory ways, often unbeknownst to even themselves. Presenting a tidy text about a coherent story centred on a unitary self, would not have done justice to those multiple identities (Tierney, 1999). Instead, the texts are somewhat fragmented, some “events have uncertain meanings for readers…cultural knowledge [may be] slipped to them in fragmented and disjointed ways” (Sparkes, 2002, p. 157). Also, as you will encounter, some participants stories,
especially Hannah’s, Eden’s and Matt’s, but also others, demonstrate how their own conception of themselves, their identity, is constantly “undergoing reconstruction” (Tierney, 1999, p. 308).

**Literary genres.** The three literary genres used to represent the seven participants’ stories came about as much by accident and an intuitive “gut feeling”, as they were purposefully chosen. Some were thought and read about at length before “playing” with them, and ultimately selecting them through a process of trial and error, while some arose organically, as if that form were pre-destined for that particular story. Words flowed where they had previously ebbed; work that had been painstaking was suddenly easy. It was during this process that Coulter’s words, “as artistic as it is rigorous” (Coulter, 2003, p. 233) resonated deeply with me. That said, the following section necessarily discusses certain aspects of the participants’ stories that resulted in the specific genres being chosen.

**Creative nonfiction.** Four of the participants’ stories, represented by the characters of Emily, Matt, Yvonne and Amanda, are written as creative nonfiction. They are based on real events and people, but some factual evidence is being shaped and dramatized using fiction techniques to provide a forceful, coherent rendering of events that appeals to aesthetic criteria rather than simply reported (Sparkes, 2002). All are emplotted to a certain degree, with selections of their reported experiences being arranged to build dramatic tension. That being said, they are also different from one another. I have included my authorial presence as a character in relating the experiences of Yvonne and Amanda, creating polyvocal texts that shift between my and the participants’ voices, in order to inscribe the interactional nature of the interview process.
and let readers into my head, as researcher, with wonderings, ponderings, incredulity, etc. These stories are closest to a traditional academic tale, and might appeal most to readers who appreciate the familiar and conventional.

The stories of Emily and Matt are primarily constructed from the experiences they shared that stormy Sunday afternoon in our small sharing circle, but are supplemented with greater detail and additional experiences they shared with me later, during one-on-one interviews. In many ways, these re-presented stories are the least altered, the least played-with, and are the closest to textual representations of oral storytellings. That being said, they have also been shaped and dramatized.

Emily’s story and the way she described many events, contexts, situations, and interactions, mostly details extraneous to herself, lent itself well to develop a plot-driven narrative. Tobias (1993) explains, that in a plot-driven narrative the primary focus is action: the action that propels the movement of the plot forward. These types of stories are often described as “roller coaster ride[s]” (p.41). There is still character development, but if you had to describe the narrative as either an action or character story, you would choose action because it dominates character by some degree. In Emily’s case, her description of constantly “bumping up against” obstacles (teachers, bullies, suspensions, expulsions) and yet always picking herself up again and remaining determined to succeed, fit with an underdog plot line. In an underdog story, the protagonist is at a disadvantage and is faced with overwhelming odds. This plot is near and dear to our hearts because it represents the ability of the one over the many, the small over the large, the weak over the powerful… An important attribute of the underdog is disempowerment. The protagonist is overwhelmed by the power of the antagonists. … But the nature of the protagonist is to resist. … The protagonist attempts to reverse a power position only to fail. However the third time’s the charm. After the initial failures, protagonist must adjust her
thinking and her action accordingly if she wants to fulfill her intention: to achieve her goal. This represents the real turning point in the second dramatic phase – movement from the position of weakness toward a position of greater strength. The protagonist must get to the point where she can effectively challenge her rivals. (Tobias, 1993, p. 157)

In a classic underdog story, like Cinderella, the protagonist succeeds in her challenge against her rival(s), and goes on to achieve his or her goals. It is a plot that resonates strongly with us as readers and movie watchers. However, since Emily’s story is creative non-fiction, based on a real person, real events, and real life, it is not as nice and neat as a classical underdog story where, finally, the underdog “wins” and lives happily ever after. Even after Emily graduates high school “against all odds” she faces struggles. Those struggles continued when we met, and likely continue today. Nevertheless, Emily continued to persevere and was as determined to finish her undergraduate degree in nursing as she was to finish high school on her own terms.

The way the participant represented by Matt shared his story contrasted in many ways with Emily’s story. While he still described many events, contexts, situations, and interactions, he mainly delved inward, detailing what he was thinking and feeling at many points along his plotline. In this way, Matt’s story lent itself well to a character-driven narrative (Tobias, 1993, p. 42). Character-driven narratives, or plots of the mind, emphasize the interior journey of the protagonist. They examine their beliefs, attitudes, ideas, and the character is almost always searching for meaning. In this way, character-driven narratives examine existential issues, the meaning of life, rather than just portraying it. “This doesn’t mean that you can’t include action in a plot of the mind. But in weighing the mental against the physical, interior against exterior, the mental and interior will dominate to some degree” (Tobias, 1993, p. 42). In particular, Matt’s story
fit well with a maturation plot: it is a story of a young boy who faces many hardships that turn his life upside down and force him to grow up very quickly (Tobias, 1993). For Matt, stories of school were a sub-plot.

**Fictional short stories.** The decision to utilize fiction writing in this dissertation – an academic manuscript traditionally written using scientific prose and facts – was not made lightly. Even amongst narrative researchers, including fictionalized segments is sometimes seen as taboo. According to Anna and Stephen Banks, this is because,

> Fiction threatens the whole research enterprise. Research, no matter how qualitative and interpretive, rests on fundamental beliefs in reliability, validity, and objectivity in reporting. …there’s never any doubt that the researcher is telling about actual people doing actual things in the actual social world. On the other hand, because fiction necessarily uses the writer’s imagination, it vaporizes construct validity and sometimes even calls into question reliability in research. (Banks & Banks, 1998, p. 17)

That being said, ever since the “so-called crises of representation and legitimation” (Banks & Banks, 1998, p. 14) of the post-modern turn, more and more researchers, particularly those who do ethnographic work, have been experimenting and theorizing with narrative form and the boundaries between social research and fiction writing have been blurred. I feel it is important to specify exactly how and why I used fictional techniques in the writing of Hannah and Nate’s stories of school. But first, I want to address concerns about the truth of these stories, which means discussing the distinction between a fictionalized story and falseness.

First, it is important to point out that all storytelling is interpretative. The stories I was told by participants in this study “are interpretations of their lives, given from their point of view as they describe and explain their lives…[they] do not retell ‘life as lived’” (Finley & Finley, 1999, p. 317). Further, all research stories undergo a series of
modifications as they are transformed from raw transcripts and field notes into final research texts. Realist tales, or traditional ethnographic/sociological research texts, often verge on the edge of creative nonfiction, autobiographies are often the result of two or more consciousnesses after the editing and revising process, and fictional devices are employed in many types of research reporting “to give a bit of shape or texture” (Angrosino, 1998, p. 100). Second, as Angrosino (1998) points out,

> We all know that certain obviously literary works—Hamlet, Anna Karenina, Madame Bovary, Lady Chatterley’s Lover, and on and on—are true even though we know they are “made up” stories. They all say something that convinces the reader that the characters’ experiences, particular and colorful though they may be, are not unlike his or her own experiences. Truly evocative literature “rings true” even when it is certainly not factual in the sense most social scientists have traditionally recognized. (p.97)

Advocates for the inclusion of fictional techniques in social research narratives believe that fiction can help convey the truth as experienced, that is, it can place the reader in the moment the participant or researcher is experiencing something and “evoke the emotion… portray the values, pathos, grandeur, and spirituality of the human condition” (Banks & Banks, 1998, p. 17) in ways that straight exposition cannot. Banks and Banks (1998) elaborate,

> This is because facts don’t always tell the truth, or a truth worth worrying about, and the truth in a good story—its resonance with our felt experience—sometimes must use imaginary facts. The emotional texture of experience often is what interests me—the consequences of the facts in the lives of actual persons. When I want to evoke the emotional texture of a human experience for an audience I find the canons of social science writing aren’t very productive. …I’ve been trained to make my academic research oriented to the factual, but my telling of the story of that research often is disturbingly vacuous, because it lacks the traditional qualities of good storytelling… (p.11)

Rather than getting caught up in the “black-and-white distinction between fiction and nonfiction” (Angrosino, 1998, p. 100), or the “opposition between the scientific and the
humanistic, between the academic and the poetic, between the scholarly and the literary” (Bruner, 1993, p. 2) a binary which Bruner goes on to definitively reject, Benson suggests researchers refocus their attention on what the two can do for each other.

[T]he fusion of anthropology and literature is one in which the language of the science employs the aesthetics of art. …It is a discourse where the beauty and the tragedy of the world are textually empowered by the carefully chosen constructions and subjective understandings of the author. The product is one that simulates the situation under study with all the imaginative advantages of poetically crafted prose.” (p. xi)

Catherine Reissman (1993) furthers this argument by suggesting that researchers should aim for believability over certitude, and the enlargement of understanding over control of data.

My goal in producing fictional short stories to present Hannah’s and Nate’s stories of school was similar to the authors I have quoted above: to allow readers to get closer to the experiences that these characters went through, and to actually experience something of what the participants represented by Hannah and Nate experienced. Utilizing fiction allowed me to portray these characters as actually living the events and experiences they described, as opposed to re-telling them from a removed vantage point some years later. These characters are based on real people, and the situations and events depicted are based on real things that happened to these people; however, they are fleshed out and added to in ways that make abstract or generalized statements of experiences more tangible. For instance, I created composite characters, specific friends or antagonists who never actually existed but who represent several or many people with whom the participants interacted in their past and spoke about at the time of their interviews. I also liberally rewrote incidents and events that were told to me, to create
specific, concrete situations within which Hannah and / or Nate could interact and
dialogue with these characters, representing them with rich detail as if I had actually
been there to observe the events. These inventions, the creation of characters and
situations, also allowed me to condense experiences in ways that altered time and space,
and signify the shift from creative nonfiction to creative fiction writing (Sparkes, 2002).

Interspersed throughout these short stories, however, are reflective sections, in
the participants’ voices, which allow them to express their point of view in the present
on things that happened in their past. The juxtaposition of the two formats, I hope,
grounds the former and confirms that they are based on “real” research, and not just my
imagination. All of that being said, to paraphrase Angrosino (1998, p. 97): I think I can
count myself successful to the extent that readers stop asking, “Did this really happen?”
and start saying, “I understand what these characters are going through.”

**Poetic representation.** When I began this doctoral journey I never imagined that
my final product would contain poetry. I have dabbled in writing poetry, privately, from
time to time, but have not shared any of my efforts since high school. I certainly had not
seen many examples of dissertations that contained poetry. However, when I came
across Clandinin, Huber and Huber’s (2006) book, *Composing Diverse Identities:*
*Narrative Inquiries into the interwoven lives of children and teachers*, their descriptions
and use of “found poetry” (p.33) and “word images” (p.99) intrigued and appealed to
me. At this time, I was in the midst of attempting to write a concise summary story of
the schooling and life experiences Eden had shared with me. After several weeks of
working on this, I was still dissatisfied. The process felt laborious; I had to force myself
to sit down to write each day. I could not seem to find a way through. Eventually, I had
30 pages of events, some in school, some out of school, without connections or purpose. I was concerned about how many more pages would be added if I continued to work in prose format, adding in the interrelated aspects to construct a more compelling or “emplotted” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 15) story. I felt I needed to find a way to bring it all together, a way to reduce word count while “illuminating the wholeness and interconnection” (Sparkes, 2002, p. 113) of Eden’s stories of her life.

When I started playing with word images, a poetic representation which demonstrates a temporal sense “of a how a participant stories her[ self] or himself or a particular experience” (Huber, 2013, p. 54) the writing began to flow. To quote Richardson (2001), one of the pioneers of the use of poetic representations and other forms of alternative ethnographic research writing, it was “as if the writing had a mind of its own” (p. 883).

The use of poetic representations in research has been variously labeled “found poetry” (Butler-Kisber, 2002; Clandinin et al., 2006), “word images” (Clandinin et al., 2006, 2013) “poetic transcription” (Glesne, 1997), ethnographic or anthropological “poetics” (Denzin, 1997), “investigative poetry” (Hartnett, 2003), “research poetry” (Faulkner, 2005), and “interpretive poetry” (Langer & Furman, 2004). As Faulkner (2005) writes, “[a]ll of these labels describe a method of turning research interviews,
transcripts, observations, and reflections into poems or poetic forms” (p. 6). While ethnographic and anthropological, investigative, and interpretative poetry often include the personal experiences of the researcher within the research experience (Denzin, 1997; Harnett, 2003), found poetry, word images, poetic transcription, and research poetry usually refer to a poetic representation process that utilizes only participant’s exact words from interview recordings and transcripts and compresses them “in an effort to reveal the essence of a participant’s lived experience” (Faulkner, 2005, p.7). Butler Kisber (2002) elaborates,

Creating found poetry is not a linear procedure. … [It] require[s] returning to the videotapes many times to get at the subtleties …, I began to “nugget” words and phrases from the chained prose… As I selected words and phrases from the chained narrative, I experimented with the words to create rhythms, pauses, emphasis, breath-points, syntax, and diction. I played with order and breaks in an attempt to portray the essence of her story while inherently ”showing more.” … Reading the work aloud many times facilitated changes. (p. 233)

Following the advice offered by Butler Kisber (2002) and Clandinin and colleagues (2006; 2013), I began to write my own poetic representations of Eden’s stories of school.

I returned, once again to the original transcripts and audio recordings of our conversations, selected Eden’s words, and worked with her rhythms, pauses, and emphases (Butler Kisber, 2002) in an attempt to portray her story. I began to see how

33 Poetic representations in social research are not universally labeled poetry. Glesne (1997) suggests that they move “in the direction of poetry” (p.217) but are not necessarily poetry themselves. Faulkner (2005) contends “that the goals of poetic representation mirror closely those of poetry suggesting that we should aim to present research poetry and poetic representation as poetry with an understanding of poetic history and craft” (p.12). While others, such as Percer (2002), caution researchers that if we are going to use and support poetry in our work, we must engage in critical discussions about how we understand poetry, the workings of metrical poetry, and the demands of a centuries old craft and tradition.
Eden’s words created a kind of “word image” (Clandinin et al., 2006, p. 99) of herself and herself in relation with the school landscapes she had inhabited. The particular “poems” that are presented in the following chapter are just some of the possible tellings that could have been created as I tried to make sense of how Eden’s stories of her search for identity (primary plot) bumped up against stories of school (sub plot).

**Discussing the Narrative Data: A Thematic Analysis Framework**

Since narrative analysis is an interpretative endeavor, “a stepping stone, a beginning for dialogue about both the study it portrays, and wider experiences in other settings” (Coulter, 2003, p.238), some have argued that narrative researchers should simply present their stories, which are their analyses and interpretations, and walk away, without offering an additional scholarly discussion. Indeed, Barone (1995), one of the forefathers of arts-based inquiry, writes

… some stories deserve their own space, with inviolable boundaries surrounding the message that they attempt to convey in their chosen format and language. We do not always need, within the same textual breath, to deconstruct in another style and format the epiphanies they foster. Sometimes the conversation between writer, reader, and characters should be allowed to wane before additional voices interject themselves into the dialogue. (p.72)

Yet fear of how readers might interpret one’s stories, whether stereotypes might be reinforced rather than challenged, and the pressure of academic expectations lead many narrative researchers to encase their stories in theoretical or thematic analyses (Barone, 1995). For me, it was less out of fear of the countless, unknown ways these stories might be interpreted, and more due to scholarly expectations of a doctoral dissertation that compelled me to discuss some of the emerging “threads of connection” (Clandinin et al.,
2006, p. 25). To be clear, this thematic analysis is based on the raw transcript data and not on my storied re-presentations.

As soon as I began reading through the transcriptions from participants interviews, I began noting, and later coding, “interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88). While initially I did this to aid in the development of the storied re-presentations, later these notes and codes became the backbone of my thematic analysis of the narratives which shapes the interpretations and discussions presented in Chapter 6.

According to Reissman (2008), thematic analysis is “probably the most common method of narrative [research] analysis … [and is] arguably, the most straightforward and appealing in applied settings” (p. 53). Essentially, thematic analysis is an approach to seeking out and categorizing participants’ experiences into various themes that are present across the data set. Braun and Clarke (2012) elaborate, stating that thematic analysis allows investigators “to see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences […] it is a way of identifying what is common to the way a topic is talked or written about and making sense between those commonalities” (p. 57). These authors further note that this type of analysis is

a flexible method that allows the researcher to focus on the data in numerous different ways. … you can legitimately focus on analyzing meaning across the entire data set, or you can examine one particular aspect of a phenomenon in depth” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 58).

This flexibility made thematic analysis very appealing to me, and allowed me to utilize this strategy as a guideline rather than a step-by-step approach. Indeed, Reissman (2008)
cautions that novice researchers “looking for a set of rules [to guide their thematic analysis] will be disappointed” (p.53).

While many researchers that use thematic analysis are influenced by prior theory, others utilize an inductive strategy and allow themes to emerge in their consciousness through numerous readings, and the associated coding of the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Riessman, 2008). While I predominantly used this type of inductive thematic approach to analyze participants’ data, my paradigmatic and methodological stance did influence my decisions and how I ended up sorting and presenting the emergent themes. Throughout this dissertation I have been cognizant of an Indigenous worldview which posits that we are all interconnected and related and, as a narrative researcher, I have attempted to honour these relationships by presenting and discussing stories in context, temporally, personally / socially, as well as situationally. As such, after I had narrowed down the specific themes I wanted to discuss further, I began to see how they could be sorted into personal (social and cultural), institutional, and familial-communal overarching threads. These threads and the themes they contain, all also connect back to my original research question(s), which Braun and Clarke (2006) maintain is an essential aspect of thematic analysis.

While I realize these three narrative threads along with their sub-themes are interwoven with each other (Clandinin et al., 2013), each theme and thread is also distinct. In accordance with recommendations put forward by Braun and Clarke (2006), I attempt to “provide a clear sense of the scope and diversity of each theme” (p.93). Unlike research studies that utilize thematic analysis as a primary analytical method, however, I try to limit verbatim quotes to just a few illustrative examples within each
theme and focus more on my interpretations of the significance of the theme. Where relevant, I have broadened my analysis outward, moving from an interpretative level to a discussion about the overall story the theme(s) tell, connecting to existing literature (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Overall, the purpose of this chapter is to begin new conversations around some of the themes I grew aware of that were important in shaping these First Nations students’ experiences in schools and in their lives. Supplementing the Narrative analyses with this thematic analysis offers readers (ie. First Nations communities, educators, policy makers and academics) another means of accessing the information participants shared with me, in a way that is more direct than the narrative analyses alone.

**Part 4: Criteria for Judging the Quality of this Research**

It was incredibly difficult to do justice to the experiences of Emily, Matt, Yvonne, Amanda, Hannah, Nate and Eden. Any number of forms of representation could capture something of, say, the alienation Emily and Yvonne experienced as soon as they entered public schools, or the shifting identities of Hannah as she learned to negotiate for herself when she wanted to disclose her Wolastoqi identity and when she did not.

I did not set out to push the boundaries of academic writing, yet I find myself now amongst those “concerned with epistemological issues and challenges” (Richardson, 2001, p.877) posed by transgressing the standards and norms of the academy. It is my belief that offering multiple genres of representation to readers provides a more engaging, inviting and evocative format, which ultimately ties to my
epistemological goal of helping others come to know something of what these
participants know, to experience something of what these participants experienced. Now
you, as a reader, must decide for yourself whether or not I have achieved my goal.

But how should the quality of this research be judged? In the past, where
evaluative criteria have been created they typically have been scrutinized in relation to
positivistic concerns about objectivity, validity, reliability and generalizability of
research results, which bespeak an underlying belief in a fixed, true reality that is
explicitly rejected in constructivist-interpretative qualitative research (Pinnegar &
Daynes, 2007), as well as research guided by Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies
(Wilson, 2008). Tierney (1999) elaborates:

…as we move toward different representational practices, new purposes, more
complex treatments of identity and authorial voices, and new standards for
judging the postmodern text need to be developed. One simple rule book will no
longer suffice. … This is not to say that honesty and veracity are irrelevant or
that one can simply make up quotes out of thin air. The immediate challenge …is
to come to terms with criteria for goodness. (p.311)

So what should the “criteria for goodness” entail?

In narrative inquiry, collaborating participants are viewed as our “first audience
and, indeed, our most important audience, for it is to them that we owe our care to
compose a text that does not rupture life stories” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p.
173). This is also true of Indigenous research which seeks to honour individuals’
contributions as important and sacred knowledge. The participants’ feedback and
validation of the final research texts was therefore considered the most important
judgement of narrative research quality and trustworthiness in this study. In particular,
validation interviews were specifically included in order to share emerging
interpretations and seek clarifications with participants. Their feedback was essential to co-constructing the final narrative analyses that represent each participant’s story of school. All participants also received copies of their re-presented stories and were invited to share their comments, feedback and requested revisions. Five out of seven participants took this opportunity to provide feedback, which overall was highly positive. Only minor revisions were requested and made.

In order for this research to have an impact in the field of study, however, it must also connect with readers. Clandinin and Huber (2010), offer criteria they look for in narrative inquiries, which are pragmatically derived from the definition of narrative inquiry and the conceptual frame for thinking narratively within the three-dimensional inquiry space. Throughout the composition of this dissertation I have kept these four criteria in mind: Does the work present the experiences of the participants and the researcher in a storied manner? Does the reconstructed narrative present a new view of the participants’ experiences in a way that increases understanding of those experiences and is personally meaningful? Does the work attend to the three dimensions of the narrative inquiry space—temporality, personal-social interactions, and place? Has the researcher paid attention to the ‘readability’ and aesthetics of the final text?

The importance of the readability and aesthetics of the texts cannot be underplayed in determining the quality of narrative research productions. According to Sikes and Gale (2006), narrative research texts should be judged by many of the criteria that are used to evaluate a ‘good story’. These authors define a good story as “one that takes the reader or listener along with it, one that engages their interest and makes them want to know more” (para. 24). Building on the qualities and characteristics Sikes and
Gale (2006) suggest should be identifiable in “good stories”, I developed a list of questions that I attended to:

1. Does the final text provide liminal spaces which build on experiences and contexts familiar to readers but also transport readers into a narrative world beyond the limits of their normal thoughts, attitudes, and behaviours so that they might experience something new?

2. Does the writing incorporate transgressive ‘data’ from our emotions, inner thoughts, dreams, and sensory information which can serve to enhance the quality and richness of the narrative?

3. Can the narrative emotionally move its readers and allow them to connect with the characters portrayed?

4. Is the text complex and creative, involving thick descriptions and interweaving the various types of writing—standard prose, journal entries, participants verbatim quotes, poetic representations—in imaginative and fluid ways?

5. Does the story capture and engage readers, and transport them into the world of the characters presented?

These are all lofty aspirations, yet I believe that this dissertation has accomplished them.

In addition to having aesthetic merit and impacting readers, Sikes and Gail (2006) suggest that narrative inquiry texts should also demonstrate scientific merit by a) making a substantive contribution to the field of research and our understanding of human lives, b) including the reflexive thoughts of the researcher regarding how he/she came to write the narrative and whose views are represented, c) discussing ethical issues involved in the study and the final re-presentation, and d) presenting a credible, or fair and reasonable account of the experiences and social world it claims to represent.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I strove throughout this work to abide by the principles of Wilson’s (2008) Indigenous Research Paradigm. Without re-iterating
all of these points, which are presented already, some central issues that I attended to
included my self-location as the researcher(s), the description of the research design and
process, including my relationships with guiding Elders and, seeking extensive feedback
from participants, and the importance of the work for the community involved. First, as I
have previously discussed, in many First Nations communities, self-locating is seen as
the beginning step in forming a relationship. In research abiding by an Indigenous
Research Paradigm therefore, there should be sufficient information about the researcher
in relation to the topic being studied for readers to understand, and therefore critically
consider, the researchers’ perspectives and goals for the work (Socholotiuk, Domene, &
Trenholm, 2016)

Second, in the discussion of methodology and methods used, there should be
sufficient “context and rationale for choosing a particular strategy… [which] readers can
use” to judge whether or not attempts are made to conduct the study “in a way that
promoted and sustained equitable relationships” (Socholotiuk et al., 2016, p. 257). Third,
a key criterion for quality in Indigenous research is that the foundational research
question and the outcomes should be beneficial to local communities and people. While
this research has not been presented in its entirety to local communities yet, the feedback
I have received thus far from my Elders has been that the questions contemplated and
the stories presented are indeed important to Wolastoqi and Mi’kmaq people in New
Brunswick. Finally, Indigenous research is also inherently a form of decolonizing,
“resistance research” (Kovach, 2009, p.18). As such, throughout I have also
endeavoured to disrupt dominant beliefs about reality, knowledge, and practice, and
instead privilege Indigenous beliefs, knowledges, customs and peoples (Socholotiuk et al., 2016).
Chapter 5: What was school like? Narrative Analyses

The stories that you are about to read grew out of my relationships with Emily, Matt, Yvonne, Amanda, Hannah, Nate and Eden. These relationships grew in specific contexts, and I retreated with the transcripts in a specific place—both in time and in geography. If a single one of these conditions were changed, different stories would be before you now. These stories provide an inside look at what life was like for these participants in schools throughout New Brunswick, each story highlighting and emphasizing something unique, while also being grounded in similar elements. They are my attempt to illuminate the complexities of First Nations students’ experiences in a way that moves beyond negative stereotypes and foregrounds successes, often amidst struggles.

Please keep in mind that these stories are also open to interpretation. Each reader will experience, and therefore understand, them slightly differently. In this way narrative analysis is unique. Coulter (2003) explains:

Narrative analysis includes the voice of the researcher, of the collaborators, and of the reader. All take part in interpretation of the research, though at various times in the research, with the reader’s interpretation happening through the very act of reading, after the account has been written. (pp. 235-236)

While this prospect may still sound foreign to some readers, I stand by my decision to explore these First Nations students’ experiences narratively. In this way, my experience in this research journey has been similar to Coulter’s (2003), who writes, I could have done another type of research. I could have stated a hypothesis then designed a study in which to test my hypothesis. Or I could have collected all of my data, then looked for patterns, found categories, and based assertions on my findings. But had I chosen another way to do my research, I would not have been able to understand or express the profound ways in which the real and important aspects of my [participants’ lives] were [impacted by] their schooling. (p.234)
Rather than fracturing voices, categorizing information, and making assertions, I chose to re-present the narrative accounts participants’ shared with me in the form of stories—a form of communication uniquely suited for displaying human experiences and emotions, and the meaning we attribute to these. For it is through stories that “we can see the stuff of people’s lives within the context of their world” (Coulter, 2003, p. 235).

An Introduction to Emily and Matt: An intimate Sharing Circle

The single sharing circle that was conducted in this research stands out in my memory as quite distinct from the one-on-one interviews I moved to later. A sharing circle is a ceremony, a spiritual tradition enabling members of a community to come together to reflect on and share personal experiences in order to facilitate healing (Lavallee, 2009). In this case, they were designed to hear participants’ stories of school and I recognized from the outset that this sharing might be difficult and might be highly emotional. This is why Elder participation and smudging, to remove negativity from the circle, were so essential.

In the previous methodology chapter, I described how one might conduct a sharing circle. In the paragraphs that follow, I focus less on the actual method and more on what I experienced using a sharing circle in my research as recorded in and revised from my journal entries. This section also introduces you to Emily and Matt, characters whose stories, which immediately follow, are based on those shared by the two participants who gifted me with their time that day.

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After weeks of emailing, I finally managed to find a date that worked with all nine potential participants’, Elder Imelda’s, and my own schedule: Sunday October 14, 2012, at 1:00 pm. During the days leading up to the sharing circle, my anxiety escalated. I thought about and prepared for everything: I booked a lounge two weeks in advance, I planned for snacks and beverages for everyone, I had scripted and re-scripted how I would introduce myself and reiterate the purpose of the study, and I had more than enough information and consent forms printed and ready to distribute. Looking back, I was trying to convince myself that I could control everything that could possibly go wrong that day.

What I couldn’t control was the weather.

When I woke up the morning of the circle, my heart sank. The sky was dark with storm clouds, the wind was howling, and rain was battering the house. I decided to head out early. I arrived at noon, an hour before I expected everyone to arrive. My first task was to make sure the lounge was clean and rearrange the couches and chairs into a circle around the long, low coffee table. In the corner of the room, I pushed two tall tables together to form a larger one, and set up snacks, water, coffee and tea there.

To my surprise, Imelda and Dave arrived at approximately 12:30 pm. They had come straight from church; that’s why they were a bit early. While they headed down to Imelda’s office to hang up their coats and quickly check their email, I retreated to my own office to calm my nerves. This study, that I had been preparing for for four years, was finally going to begin.

I reviewed the information letter and informed consent one more time, made sure I had enough for the second time, and reviewed the protocol guideline I had prepared for
a third time. Feeling more prepared, I headed back to the lounge where I found Dave and Imelda comfortably seated, engaged in conversation.

About five minutes later, at approximately 12:55 pm, the first participant, Matt, arrived. Although we had already met at the information session, Matt’s quiet, gentle demeanor, juxtaposed against his strong physical presence, stood out to me once again. I was definitely intrigued by this young man.

Fifteen minutes went by and no one showed up. Fifteen more minutes; no one. Half an hour after we were supposed to start, after the agreed-upon meeting time, no one else had arrived.

Meanwhile, thankfully, Matt knew Dave and Imelda and conversations flowed easily among them, and none of them appeared strained by the lapsing time. That said, with each passing minute tension grew within me.

Just as I was about to give up on anyone else making an appearance, Emily burst into the room. She was out of breath from rushing, her scarf strewn about her, a flurry of activity and energy. She immediately started apologizing for being late.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry. My sitter canceled and I had to find someone to watch my kids. I really planned to be here for one o’clock but I didn’t find someone until then. Am I too late?” I was absorbed by her. As she finished this explanation, she took a second to look around the room, only then realizing that there were just four of us, and only one other potential participant, present.

“You’re totally fine,” I reassured her, laughing. “Thank you so much for coming. We were waiting to see if any more people would show up.”
“It’s probably this weather,” she exclaimed. “It’s crazy out there! I didn’t really want to go out, but I wanted to know what this was all about.”

While Emily got settled in, taking her jacket off, hugging Imelda and Dave, and grabbing some hot coffee, I contemplated what to do. It was now 45 minutes after the scheduled start time. Although only two youth participants were present, they had driven in on this miserable day—Emily from half an hour away—to take part in this sharing circle because they felt it was important. And there were five of us present, enough to hold an intimate sharing circle. Dave was not scheduled to participate in the circle itself, but given our small numbers and his personal relationships with Matt and Emily, the thought crossed my mind that maybe he could join us. Rather than make the decision unilaterally, I posed the question to the group and particularly to Matt and Emily:

“Well, it doesn’t look as if anyone else is going to arrive. But there are only two of you and I don’t want you to feel pressured. Do you want to continue with a circle today as planned, since you came all the way here? Or would you rather reschedule for a time when more of your peers can be present? I promise more people were supposed to come today!” After sharing a laugh at this, they both agreed that they did not mind the small numbers and wanted to continue. Then I asked the next question, “Since we have such a small group, would either of you mind if Dave joined us in the circle today?” Although I was conscious that I was asking them with Dave present and might be putting them on the spot, there was no hesitation in their answers.

“No. Not at all,” Matt responded, nodding.

“That would be great. I, personally, would like to hear Dave’s stories, too,” Emily chimed in. So it was settled, and the five of us proceeded with the sharing circle.
As it turned out, it was the only sharing circle in this study.

If you have never been in a sharing circle, they are highly intimate events. As we sat together in ceremony, we shared so much more than stories. The degree of emotion that was present when everyone spoke was almost alarming to me. Multiple times the hair on my forearms stood on end, giving me goosebumps. It was both a heartwarming and a heartbreaking experience. Including Dave and Imelda in the circle eased any remaining tension. They modelled a level of openness that inspired me, and I think Emily and Matt, to speak from the heart, too. As for the experiences Emily and Matt shared, Imelda said it best that day: they were so brave and courageous to entrust their life stories with us. They both had experienced significant struggles, both in school and in their personal lives, and both had chosen to continue their education. Afterward, as I was driving home reflecting on how spectacularly the day had gone despite the low attendance, I was so filled with emotion I was trembling.

The following sections contain the narrative accounts of Emily and Matt. These are primarily constructed from the stories they shared that stormy Sunday afternoon in our small sharing circle, but are supplemented with greater details and additional experiences they shared with me later, during one-on-one interviews. In many ways, these re-presented stories are the least altered, the least played-with, and are textual representations of oral storytellings. That said, they are creative non-fiction reconstructions that represent only a partial understanding of Emily and Matt’s stories of school.
Emily: Achieving Success Against All Odds

At times, it felt like everything was against me. My mom was a dropout. Most of my family were dropouts. They had real bad experiences in school. So I didn’t have a role model, someone to cheer in my corner and show me options of what I could achieve, or to inspire me. They didn’t know how to navigate the system. And right from the transition, public schools seemed to rule out my future: as someone doing and being nothing. But I never quit. To this day, I'm one of the only ones in my family that’s going to university. Now I work extra hard because I want to demonstrate to my kids, “If I can do this, you can do anything. Don’t ever let anybody put you down.”

I started school in my community, at Kilhuswikuk 34 Elementary. It was a little white building. Very little, very old. There’s a brand new school now, but we still had the old one then. There were two big classrooms that were shared amongst grades. You know, grade one and two in one class, and grade three in the other class. Kindergarten and day care were in buildings outside. And even though there were problems—like, it was kind of rundown—I always felt amongst family. We were all from the same reserve. It was our own little world.

I remember I had trouble with reading early on but I had a really nice tutor, an Aboriginal woman from Manitoba, who came in and helped me one-on-one. I don’t remember her name, but I remember I always liked working with her. So even though I wasn’t the smartest academically, everything was going really well. I liked going to school.

Then one day at the end of grade three, the Principals from Deacon and Pinegrove—the two schools the reserve sent kids to when they had to transition to the public system—they came into our classroom. They came in, all real nice and happy, just looking around at us. Smiling at us. When I think about it now, it’s like… it seemed as if that afternoon was a process for “picking puppies”. That’s how I look at it. Because they were looking at us deciding which kids they wanted at their school. I’ve always wondered if they looked at transcripts and stuff. You

34 Kilhuswikuk (pronounced Gil-hus-wee-goog) is a pseudonym. It is the Wolastoqey word for “the place of the muskrat.”
know what I mean? To help them pick. Because I really felt like the ones who were probably a little smarter went to Deacon. That was the newer, nicer school. And the kids that weren't as strong, in an academic sense anyways, went to Pinegrove. Which was more of an older school. A rundown school. It's hard to prove that, but that's the way I always felt about it. So we all got separated. And I got picked to go to Pinegrove.

I really didn't want to go to Pinegrove. I'd heard a lot of stories about that school. Mostly from my mom, about her dealing with that school when my sister went there. She's a lot older than me, my sister. And, uh, she like, she... it's hard to explain. She really doesn't like school, and she wasn't the best academically. She has a serious thyroid problem. But when she went to Pinegrove it wasn't diagnosed yet, and it made her extra hyper and she acted up a lot. And because of that they treated her kind of rudely. They would do stuff to her, like take her to go get assessed with psychologists without informing my mother or my grandparents; stuff like that. It's hard to explain. She dropped out of school when she was in grade eight or nine. She just couldn’t go anymore.

I guess there must have been other schools that were bad too, but I have a lot of cousins and family that went to Pinegrove who didn't have good experiences there. They all have stories of being treated very ignorantly. Before there was like, a ban on hitting children, they would strap their hands. And everyone knew they were racist there. One girl that went there years before me got locked in a bathroom! They thought she had lice or something. She must be in her 30s now. Maybe 40s. But it's true. I know who the girl is. They locked her in a bathroom!

So I didn’t want to go to Pinegrove, but I had no choice. I got picked to go to there. But all these stories were always in the back of my head.

Right from the beginning I felt I was treated differently because I was Native. I knew that right away. I knew that at a young age. I was like, what, ten? Ten years old. When we started there in grade four it felt like everyone was like, “Oh, here's the little Indian kids coming
in from the *Indian school.*” That’s what it felt like. Like we were a *spectacle.* Right from the beginning they were always watching us. And they were always *checking* us. You know? They’d check us for lice all the time! I don’t know if it was just because we’re stereotyped as *dirty* Indians and stuff, you know what I mean? But my mom kept my hair pretty clean, so I showed them!

It also didn’t help that my first year there, grade 4, I had a *real* mean teacher. Mrs. Henard. She was *so* mean. She was a very mean woman. And she treated *us* different. You could just tell. When she spoke to the non-Native children, she had more of a nicer tone, and then when she talked to us, she used more of a strict, in-your-face, tone. Like, “Do. You. Understand?” It was as if I was a disobedient child. And maybe I was sometimes, but definitely not *all* the time. I was afraid of her! So I wouldn’t really talk or anything in class. What made it worse was everyone was *ahead* of us. All of us from Kilhuswikuk, we were kind of behind the kids from the town school. (Which, *now* I think that’s probably because of lack of funding. That probably contributed to that.) I guess I just wasn’t ready for their teaching curriculum. I always had to get extra help. And it sucked being behind while they were all ahead.

I remember thinking they were going to make me repeat the year, since I was so far behind. But instead I feel like they just *socially promoted* me to grade 5.

Oh, grade 5! Ms. MacKinnon’s class. That didn’t work out too well. Within the first few weeks… well, let’s just say there was an *incident.* What you need to know about Ms. MacKinnon is, well… you could just *tell* she was a racist woman. We were always getting yelled at, getting in trouble, while the non-Native kids got away with everything. This one day, I don’t know what I was doing, I think I was just talking too much. I was looking back, talking to a friend behind me. And she grabbed me! The rule had already set in that you can’t touch your students, but she grabbed me! She spun me right around by the arm, and it hurt! I was so scared! I couldn’t believe it. I just shut up and listened. I mean, come on! I’m a little girl! But when I
went home, I nicely told my mother, and showed her the big red mark on my arm. My mom freaked right out! Oh my mom! My mom, she had a temper on her. She left me at home and she marched right down to that school to stand up for me. She was going to beat that teacher up! And Ms. MacKinnon knew she did wrong, she was hiding in the principal’s office. That’s what my mom told me. That was my last day at Pinegrove. I never went back after that.

So I transferred schools, and I got to go to Deacon. It was so exciting! It was a nicer school. It was right in town, right near the high school, and I was just like, “Wow!” But it didn’t last long. I started getting picked on, on the bus. Our “Indian bus”. Bus 5, Kilhuswikuk Indian bus it was called. Can you believe it? Anyways, I was always one of the smaller, younger ones, so I guess I was an easy target. So yeah, I was bullied by students from my own reserve. To make things worse, it was the bus driver’s kids! She would look back, see them making fun of me, spitting at me, punching me, whatever they felt like, and then just not do anything. And, at that time, I was too small to fight back.

Because of all that, my mom sent me to another school a few months later. In grade 5 I went to three different schools! Pinegrove, then Deacon, and then River Valley.

I didn’t mind it at River Valley. It was a pretty big school. They had elementary classes upstairs, and they had junior high downstairs in the basement. I actually liked the teachers at River Valley. They weren’t that bad at all. But I was the new kid, and I definitely felt different because I was Native. There were a couple kids that would always make Indian chanting sounds, like “Owh Owh Owh” whenever they’d see me. And there was one guy, he was in grade 7 so he was a lot bigger than me, he would always tease me trying to be funny or something in front of his friends. He’d call me a wagon burner or squaw, or other stupid names I didn’t even understand back then. I don’t even remember all of them. But I knew they weren’t good, and I really got sick of it after a while. That’s when I just decided I didn’t want to take it anymore. Nothing ever happened if I told on them, and sometimes that only made it worse. So one day I
just started to fight back. I wasn’t going to let them put me down anymore. If they yelled at me, I yelled back. If they got violent, I got more violent. I actually kind of turned into a bully. I had to defend myself, because no one else would. After a while, I guess, you know, sometimes maybe I was a bully just to be a bully. Because I knew I could. I am Native after all. We are always depicted as bullies and the bad ones anyways! Plus I had witnessed it, because I was bullied on the bus. So I guess that rubbed off on me. I was an Indian who wasn’t going to be pushed around anymore.

In grade 6 I transferred schools again! I went back to Deacon. I got back on the Indian bus. But this time I wasn’t afraid of anyone anymore. I showed them all I could defend myself. And honestly, none of them really mouthed off to me anymore, or picked on me, or tried to fight me on the bus. And I admit, I grew into a bad bully. After that, grade 6 wasn’t that bad.

Just as school was starting to go better for me, we switched again. My first year at the junior high, I had this teacher Mr. Stafford. Oh he was a bastard! I already knew about him because he actually taught my mom in junior high, and she warned me about him. He just… oh, he was terrible, Mr. Stafford. There were only two of us, me and my friend Thomas, that were Native in his class, and he made sure to pinpoint us all the time. Especially Thomas. He was really awful to him. Thomas had trouble learning, and school was just really hard for him. But rather than help him, Mr. Stafford would just tease him and pick on him in front of everybody in the class. He did the same thing to me, just not as often. Like, if I didn’t do very good on a test he would point it out in front of everyone. Just pinpoint me, make fun of me, in front of everyone. Who does that?! I remember just sitting, slumped over in my desk, my face burning, thinking over and over, “I don’t want to be here. I don’t want to be here.” I really, really hated his class.

I remember telling my mom and stuff, but I’m not sure if she talked to anyone because nothing ever happened. I was stuck in his class for the whole year. And I had to go to school. My
mom made me. I had to keep going. It was awful. It was the worst year. But I did it. No one
helped me, but I survived anyways.

Finally I went on to grade 8. Which was fine… I think. It’s weird cause nothing really
stands out from that year. I did my work. I passed. I got out of there.

But then I got into high school. High school was a different story cause there were more
of us. I always hung out with my people from Kilhuswikuk, and we had each other’s backs. We
had to. Some days that place felt like us against everyone. Well… I’m not going to say
everybody, but a lot of the teachers and a lot of the students.

I always remember this one day, I was outside with three of my girlfriends in the
smoking section near the South parking lot after lunch. (I smoked then, but I quit. I don’t smoke
anymore.) We were sitting on these concrete slabs, there were a bunch of them that kind of
formed a ring. We were sitting on one slab, and just down from us was another Aboriginal
boy—I think his name was Ronnie. I didn’t really know him, cause he had just transferred. I
don’t even know where he was from. He had no friends, he was just sitting alone, reading a book
or something. Outside the concrete slabs were some of the football players, and all of a sudden
they started picking on him. Like, saying really rude stuff about him, about Indians, about … I
can’t even remember everything they said, it was such a long time ago. But it was pretty racist
and just rude. The whole time I was sitting there listening and watching, and I started getting
really mad. After all my experiences of being bullied I don’t like watching people picking on
other people, it really bothers me. Especially if it’s one person against a whole bunch. And the
whole football team was picking on him, and picking on him, and he wasn’t defending himself. I
got so pissed off, I looked at the girls I was with and I was like, “Are you hearing this shit?” And
then we got up and went over and stood by him. So it was me, three of my girlfriends, and
Ronnie, against the football team! But I didn’t care, they didn’t scare me. I wasn’t going to let
them speak to him that way. I was the main one arguing with the whole football team.
The bell rang, and this carried on inside the building in the hallway after we went in. Right where the doors are, outside the cafeteria, and near the doors to the stairs and classrooms. There were all kinds of people around there. Then in the centre, were all those football players and the four of us. I remember one of them, his name was Theo, started doing the Indian chant, clapping his hand over his mouth, like “Owh Owh Owh!” Oh my God! I could feel my heart pounding and my fists clenching, I was so mad. I lost it on him, “You bastards! You’re so rude, you’re so ignorant! Don’t your parents teach you anything? Like, how ignorant are you? I don’t know what your race does, but I’m not doing that to you.” And I ended up attacking him! Punched him right in the face. And he was so much bigger than me. There was a bit more yelling and shoving after that, and then it just all broke up on its own and we went to class.

I know I was wrong, but I felt like I had to do something. Everything happened with all those people watching, and nobody said anything. Nobody stepped in. Nobody stopped it. No teachers stepped in or anything. I was so angry. And so I acted.

What made me even more angry, is nothing happened after that. Nobody got in trouble. I always remember that because that’s when I realized it wasn’t a big deal when it's a group of, say, football players, picking on one Aboriginal boy that is helpless. (Well… he wasn’t helpless, but in a sense he was, because he was one person and they were big football players.) It was more of just a big laugh. But if it was us starting trouble, just picking on one little person that was non-Native, it would've been a big deal. If it was a bunch of Indians picking on one person, there would've been something made of it. But it was not a big deal when it happened to Native people. (When I think about that now, gosh! I wish I could go to the high school and just tell someone off!) I kind of wanted to quit school after that. I didn’t, but I really didn’t want to be someplace like that anymore. You know?

The fact that nothing happened that time stands out so much because I was kicked out of school for fighting with people a few times. I was kicked out a lot actually… probably, um, like,
five times. We’ll just say that. That’s actually what I remember most about high school: banding together, getting in fights, and getting kicked out of school. Cause I always stood up for my friends. We were always in trouble. We were always considered “the troublemakers”. And some of us were. I’m not going to lie, some of us were. But mostly we were just defending ourselves. I admit, I got so used to getting in trouble it was almost like a rush for me. I’d get in trouble, I’d be sitting in the office, and I’d almost be like “Ha ha!! I’m in trouble now! Yeah.” Cause they couldn’t control me anymore. I wasn’t powerless anymore. But then I’d get kicked out of school and sent home. That wasn’t so great. To have to go home. Sometimes I’d get kicked out for a few weeks, other times longer. I got kicked out for the whole year probably… I’d say three times. Well, it was in the middle or towards the end of the year, so I’d just miss the remainder. And then I’d go right back in the fall. I never quit. Believe it or not, I actually liked going to school!

I think a lot of what helped me get through high school was Doug, our Aboriginal Advisor. He was awesome. I was in Doug’s office probably every other day. Doug drove me home about three or four times I’d been kicked out of school. My mom got pretty used to seeing that red truck coming up the lane.

There was this one time, in grade 10, I got kicked out of school for something that didn’t even happen at school! A bunch of us were getting stoned first thing in the morning on the reserve. But the bus driver saw, and when we got to the school she went in and told on us. She didn’t like us and she reported us. While we were waiting, I was just like, “Okay, this is what everyone is going to say. …” We had it all orchestrated, and everyone was going to say that story so nobody would get in trouble. They hauled us into the office, and we were all ready with the story. But then they brought Doug in there. Oh they were good! They knew me that well. They knew that I respected Doug so much that I would never lie in front of him. Everyone else could lie in front of him, but I couldn’t. Everyone else followed the guideline of the story I
planned, and they avoided getting in trouble. But when it was my turn, I looked at Doug and he was looking at me. He knew. He just knew I couldn’t lie in front of him. So next thing you know, I was like, “Yup, yup. I did it.” I spilled the beans just on myself. And I got kicked out of school. I got kicked out cause I told the truth. I respected Doug too much to lie to him. It’s funny though, as he was driving me home, again, Doug was like “Jesus! Why didn’t you just lie? I wouldn’t have cared if you told a lie. I didn’t want to see you get kicked out of school, damn it.” But I told him, “No, no, no. I respect you too much. No.” It was a respect thing. I still respect him a lot. And I was willing to get in trouble before I would lie to him. So once again, here comes that red truck, rolling up to my mom’s house.

I went back again the following year and I was still in grade 10. It was a tough year. I was starting to feel really old in my classes, but by then I was determined to finish. I didn’t get in nearly as much trouble, and I worked extra hard all year to make sure I got into grade 11. But I still had trouble in math, and no one really... I feel like I didn’t have any support there. I was failing math. Again! So at the end of the year, two options were presented to me. It was either go to summer school to re-do the math in order to go to grade 11, or go to a new alternative program they set up at the high school, Innovate. If I went to summer school and stayed in the regular program, I would have had to stay an extra year longer in order to graduate. And as determined as I was, I just wanted to get the hell out of there. So I chose to go to Innovate.

Innovate was like a GED program, pretty much. Not that I’ve done a GED program, but I’m guessing it was like that, except structured with a little extra. The teachers were supportive, and they inspired me to work hard on my own terms. Unlike the system in high school, where some teachers were nice, but other ones… I guess you could say I just didn't feel welcomed in their class. But at Innovate they really made me feel good about myself. And they made me want… more. They made me want more for myself. More in life, I guess. And they made me feel like it was possible. I really liked going there. Plus it was mixed. Like, not just
troublemakers. There were people who had babies, who didn't want to go back to regular school, and all sorts of stuff. It was nice seeing all that. People who the school just seemed to write-off, finally having the chance to succeed. I just really liked it. I worked hard and for the first time in… well, maybe forever, I felt like I did really well. Like, I was succeeding. And I completed it pretty fast actually. It was amazing.

After that, I knew I wanted to do more school and I went straight into university, into the bridging program here. I wish I could say everything went well and everything was easy from then on, but I can’t. It was tough, and I still had a lot of struggles. It took me a while to find my way.

When I first came, I wasn’t really ready. I came partly just to get out of my mother’s house. I had my own place for the first time, and I was partying way too much. I wasn’t ready to come to school. Then, just as I was starting to get it together—and I was actually doing really good—I got pregnant. The day I found out I felt like someone punched me in the stomach, it just knocked the wind right out of me. I couldn’t believe it. I was scared, and angry, and mostly I just felt so stupid! I was just like “Why!!!! Why would I do that!!?” Ugh. To make things worse, I felt like everyone expected it of me because I’m… well, because I’m Native. Right? I’m Native so I’m the drunk, I’m the troublemaker, I’m the drug addict. I’m… whatever. So why not be the unwed mother? Even my own uncle told me, “Oh, he’s just going to leave you, and you’re just going to be a nobody on welfare.” I don’t talk to him to this day. But I decided to have my baby. I felt like it wasn’t really a decision anyways. But it meant I had to withdraw before second semester started that year. My son was born early and he was in the Intensive Care Unit, and I just had to focus on him. Even when I was withdrawing though, I remember thinking, “Maybe next year I’ll come back. Maybe next year.”

But I didn’t come back that year, or the year after that, or the year after that. I had some troubling times in my life. By then I had two kids, and my boyfriend was away a lot, so trying to
go to school was so tough. I tried to go to one college, but it didn’t really have set hours, so right away I knew I couldn’t do it. I had two kids who were in daycare! I knew it wasn’t feasible with their schedule. I knew I was going to end up quitting. I was set up to quit, you know what I mean? So I worked at a restaurant for a while. Oh, that was so hard! They were mean there! They were always yelling at me, and it was really long hours. But I needed the job, I needed the money, so I always went back. It was really tough making ends meet by myself. And I refused to be... I refused to be on welfare. I refused to give into the stereotypes of an Aboriginal woman with kids.

But things got worse and worse there. Just as I was on the verge of having a complete breakdown, two women from my community came into the restaurant. I knew them pretty much my whole life, and I swear it was fate they came in that day. I had just gotten yelled at by my boss again, and as I went to go serve them I started crying. Luckily we were the only ones in the dining room! We talked and talked, and they were so supportive and encouraging. They even said they would sponsor me to go to this Aboriginal entrepreneur thing. At first I didn’t think it was possible, I had to work. But they are strong women and they convinced me. They got me to go, and it was a really great experience. I was even on the winning team at the end!

After that, I knew I had to go back to school. I completed a college certificate in office administration. I was the only Native in there. Only brown face in that room! But you know, I didn’t let it bother me. I was like, “Ooh, well I’ll show you!” And I worked hard. Through that experience I realized I don’t want to be behind the desk. I want to be outside the desk helping people. So afterward I came back to University to do my degree in Nursing. And you know, still to this day I’m one of the only ones, out of a handful, in my family that’s going to university.

When I talk to kids these days, I'm like, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” And they don’t know. No one really asks them at school, “What do you want to be?” And schools can’t assume they get that at home. Other kids, some are privileged to have parents that
can help them with homework, ask them questions, and then to know, “Well these are your options. This is how you could do this. You need to do this and this.” You know what I mean?

But a lot of First Nations students, they don't have that. *Yet.* I come from a family where my mom supports me in some stuff I do, but on the other hand she doesn’t. And that's pretty common for First Nations. Because our parents, when they went to school, they didn't have that either. They had bad experiences in school, and they don’t know how to navigate the system. So choices are really limited for First Nations kids because they don't have many role models; role models who want to help them, to show them options of what they can achieve through school, and cheer them on in their corner. But it's changing.

That’s why I really wanted to be a part of this. To be that role model for kids today. To hopefully change the future for when my kids go to school. Because I don’t want to have to be the one that has to punch teachers in defense of my kids! But I will if I have too. You don’t mess with my little puppies.
Matt: Growing up fast

The timeline of my life so far, can be easiest divided into *childhood*—up to when I was 13 or so—then from 13 till about 18 or 19—I would classify those years as the years where a lot of things in my life *fell apart*—and then after that is *rebuilding*. I’ve worked really hard to rebuild, to get *here*, so failure is absolutely not an option.

But it wasn’t easy.

Up until I was 13 or so my childhood was pretty normal. My dad, he has French background. He doesn’t speak it, but that’s where his family heritage is from. So my sister and I, she’s a year and half older than me, we grew up in the city. My mom’s Aboriginal though, so I always knew that my family was *not quite* the same as other people. I knew this from pretty young, especially once I started school. Because half of my family lived on the reserve, in Mahsusuwikuk First Nation. It wasn’t like that with *any* of my other friends.

My sister actually started kindergarten at the old school in Mahsusuwikuk. My grandmother on my mom’s side, she really wanted that for my sister. She wanted my sister to attend school on the reserve. But nobody really said anything to me about it, and when it was my turn to start school my parents just enrolled me at Rathburn Public School where I went till grade 6. My sister transferred there, too. She was always two grades ahead of me.

Rathburn was alright. I didn’t mind going. I always had friends, so that was never a problem. I had fun at recess and lunch time and everything like that. I always did *okay*. I never failed any grades, or anything like that. I remember my report cards were never terrible. Actually, in Mr. Knowlton’s class—he was an old military guy and he had this reputation for being incredibly stern. My sister said he was *terrible*. But he was always really nice to me—I got

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35 Mahsusuwikuk (pronounced Mah-suz-oo -wee-goog) is a pseudonym. It is the Wolastoqey word for “the place of the fiddleheads”.

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“student of the month” twice! And he even had a “student of year” too, and I’m pretty sure I got that also. That was really cool.

Basically in school I was just a normal student. I don’t think a lot of teachers knew. Like, I don’t think they knew that I was part Native. There was no difference between me and other students. Until my cousin Dwayne came there in grade 4, and then my cousin Frank transferred in grade 5, I don’t think there were any other First Nations students at my school. At least I don’t remember any in any of my classes. There was definitely never any Native studies units or anything like that. Never. I don’t remember anything like that.

People who knew me though, like, my non-Native friends who knew that I was part Native, they would always share idiot jokes. “Oh, did you hear the one about the Indian who did this and this?” Or the chief, or savage, whatever. I really don’t remember any of them, because it was so long ago, but there were always a lot of jokes. And then on the reserve, when I hung out with my cousins and their friends, someone would always be like, “Well, you don’t look Native?” So I was always kind of offended both ways, I guess. It’s kind of funny, but from my perspective now, of being a mixed breed, I guess I got racism from both sides. But I was kid, so I didn’t really pay too much attention to it.

One thing I remember was that the reserve was really looked down on by non-Natives. Especially by my friends’ parents. Like, my childhood friend, Dave, we hung out every day. So I was over at his house, or he was at my house pretty much every day, just playing Nintendo or whatever. And his parents, like, they used to look down on me quite a bit when I was a kid. They had a problem with me. I could just tell. And they would openly insult me if I mentioned the reserve or my family. Just in their own kind of way. Just things about getting everything for free, being lazy, being drunks, that kind of thing. It wasn’t very nice. I remember not feeling very good around them. But I think… I think I was too young to really be truly offended by it. When I was a kid it didn’t really make sense to me anyways, so I just I shrugged a lot of it off. I just
always had that mentality. When I look back on it now, it really makes me bitter, but then nothing bothered me too much.

I pretty much just lived like a normal kid when I was young. Wake up, go to school, come home, play with friends, maybe do some homework, go to bed. My grandmother on my dad’s side, she was around a lot when we were little, which was awesome. To this day, my grandma and my grandpa are practically the only people in my life I know I can count on no matter what. They are the nicest people in the world. She’s really the one who raised me and my sister, pretty much.

My dad, he worked for a paving company for, like, 18 years. And he worked all the time. Pretty late into the night, too. Usually I’d be going to bed and he’d just be coming home. A lot of nights anyways. I never really saw him that much during the week. And funny thing, he had the weekends off but a lot of the time he would go to his work to clean equipment and stuff, instead of hanging out with my mom, my sister and I. He put in all these extra hours even when he didn’t have to. My dad is like a scary workaholic, to a huge fault. But when he was there it was great. I was always excited to spend time with my dad. But anyways, my grandma, and my aunt, my dad’s sister, they had a huge hand in bringing us up. Cause my mom, she sometimes stayed home with us, but she got bored and was kind of involved in her own thing. Like, she would go out and hang out with her friends. Maybe once or twice a week, probably. So I guess I just got used to them not being there that much. Like, we only did things as a family rarely, but we were still a family, so to me that was okay.

Then the year I went to junior high, grade 7, a lot of things started changing. My group of friends changed quite a bit. I still hung out with Dave, but he didn’t’ really like my other two close friends, Mark and Craig. They were kind of all in different groups. You know what I mean? I also started playing a lot of sports in grade 7. Like, a lot. I played basketball, rugby and wrestling at school. And I played football and was in Taekwondo outside of school. I was crazy
busy. I just loved trying everything. But my parents never really showed an interest in any of those things that I did. They rarely ever went to any of my games. And they never came to any practices. Sometimes my mom would pick me up or drop me off, but most of the time I’d just walk to my practices by myself. Even for football with all my gear, I’d walk for about half an hour and then practice. They just weren’t interested in what I was doing, and gradually I became less and less interested, too.

In grade 8, I started skateboarding. I would go skateboarding all the time after school. And I also started really getting into music. My friend Craig, his brother played bass, and I just became obsessed. I played around with his bass for about 6 months, I picked it up really easily. During that time I begged and begged and begged my parents for a guitar for my 14th birthday. For a long time they kept saying no, that I was just going to drop it two weeks after—which is about the least supportive thing you could say to your kid. But they surprised me that Christmas, three months before my birthday, with a wicked guitar. And despite what they said, I still love playing guitar. Honestly, I don’t know where I’d be if I didn’t have music in my life. That, and skateboarding, became my refuge.

Cause about that same time, my mom was gone a lot. She was always there in the morning, and she was always the one to get us up for school, but in the evenings and late into the night, she was just gone a lot of the time. My dad still worked really late, so it was just me and my sister. Even my grandmother, like, she was around when we were kids, but not once I was in middle school. It was just us. I can remember a lot of times leaving school and not coming home until midnight, just being out with friends and skateboarding the entire time. It didn’t matter. I never got in trouble or anything.

It’s kind of weird because I never really thought that anything was wrong, then. But, um… turns out that was right, um… right towards the end.
That winter, right around my 14th birthday, my parents told us they were getting divorced. I remember feeling like I was going to be sick, like someone had punched me in the gut. Like, my parents were married, and maybe we didn’t have a perfect family, but they were still married and that really meant something to me. I am such a family guy. Family is so important to me. So when they got divorced, um … everything fell apart. Everything. It was the worst time of my life. I took it really, really hard.

Of course after they told us this, my dad moved out. So it was just my mom there, and she wasn’t really there. She was still gone all the time. And I just… I just lost all my ambition. I started skipping a lot of classes. I just didn’t really care about school, I didn’t want to be there anymore. I remember a lot of times leaving at lunch and going skateboarding with friends. Like, we would go down to this skateboard shop all the time. They had a couple of little ramps and rails in the parking lot and we spent a lot of time there. After a while, the people who worked there knew me, and they’d let us sit and play video games and eat pizza in the back room. It was my escape from everything. Sometimes I would stay there all night, just go home at midnight. Because of all that, my grades started dipping really bad. I didn’t fail anything, but I was just passing. That was my ambition at the time. It wasn’t to excel, it was just to pass and get to the next year.

I think it was that summer, my dad got remarried and moved with his new wife close to where we lived in the city. At that time, my sister and I still lived with my mom, but my mom couldn’t handle them living so close. So she decided to sell the house and move to Kilhuswikuk First Nation, where she had friends. But I was 14, just starting high school, and by then I had my band and everything. So I wanted to stay in town with my friends, just to play in my band and things like that. So I moved out of my mom’s and, um, I had to live with my dad. And the one thing my dad said when my parents got divorced, when he met his wife, the one thing my dad
always made clear to us was that he was always there for us and that his house was always our house. That’s how it was supposed to be.

But, um, right from the beginning things… they just weren’t good. One of the things that really upset me when I was living with my dad, was his new wife—I don’t call her my stepmother. She’s never been anything of a mother to me—she set “the schedule” and said every second weekend I had to go to my mom’s. Which was okay. Like I, I didn’t mind. I didn’t mind going with my mom, at all. But, um, like, if we deterred from that schedule even a bit… like, if I had something I wanted to stay for that weekend, it didn’t matter. I would be downstairs—my room was in the basement—and I would ask my dad, “Can I stay here this weekend? My band’s jamming on Saturday, so I want to stay in town.” But dad would be like, “Well, you know what the schedule is. You gotta go.” And I would literally be begging him, “I know. But it’s just a couple of days. Please! It’s important.” Just as I thought he might be swayed a few times, he would go up and talk to her, his wife, about me staying there, and she would scream at him! “No! He has to go!” Like, I was right there. I could hear them screaming. I was right below them. Then my dad would come back down and say I had to go. So they would basically kick me out of the house every second weekend. That’s how it started off.

And all of this was at a time where… like, everything was already so confusing to me. My family had just been torn apart, my mom lived in another town, and my dad had a new wife who just controlled him so much that he was never really part of my life. And I felt like I just needed my, um… my dad.

But instead of getting better, that’s when things started getting really, um… just really bad. I was still 14, almost 15, and the fighting just escalated. My dad… he became really, um… he started to become really abusive. Mentally and physically. He used to call me names all the time. Like, he called me boy all the time. I hated when he called me boy. That was his way to make me feel insecure, and make me think I couldn’t do things on my own, I guess. And uh…
like, about my dad, he quit school in grade 7 and never really amounted to too much. So for him to talk down on me, I didn’t feel like he had any right to. After a while, I started fighting back. Then he started getting more physical with me. We got in full-on fist fights a few times.

So I started trying not to be there a lot. I really tried not to be at his house. I started staying at my friend Mark’s, he lived with his grandparents, or at my girlfriend at the time, Allison’s. I’d stay between their houses a few nights at a time. But all my stuff was still at my dad’s, so I had to go back there every once and a while.

This one time—I hadn’t been there for about a week, maybe even a bit longer—I was in school, in class, and I got a call to go to the office. And, um, my mom was waiting there. She said she wanted to take me for lunch. My mom had picked me up for lunch before, but it was always at lunch time. Not before. But this time it was only around 11:30. So I could tell something kind of weird was going on, but I went with her anyways. The whole drive she seemed tense, and I knew something was wrong. So I asked, “Are you taking me to see dad?” And she… she kind of wouldn’t give me a straight answer. I could tell she was starting to well up, and then she started crying a little bit. At that point I just knew. I started to freak out, “Mom! Don’t do this to me! Don’t make me see him. Just bring me back to school!” But, uh, she pulled into a Tim Horton’s parking lot, and we just sat there. A few minutes later, one of the trucks from the paving company that my dad works for, drives up right beside us and parks. So I locked my door, rolled my window up and told her, “I won’t talk to him.” But he wouldn’t leave. He just kept yelling through the window. After a while I just couldn’t take it. I threw the door open, got out and started walking back towards the school. There was a path there. My dad started following me, yelling the whole time, “Come on, just talk to me!” I tried to explain, “I don’t want to talk to you. Just leave me alone for now!” I just couldn’t talk to him. He followed me all the way up to the football field at the school, and then he grabbed me. He threw me down, and we got into a huge fight, fist fight, on the ground. Literally rolling around punching each other.
remember thinking I was glad it was right before lunch time, because all of the students were still in class. They weren’t out on the grounds. Cause that would have been… well, it probably wouldn’t have happened if there were students out there. But it would have been incredibly embarrassing if there were. Eventually I managed to pull away from the fight and I ran up the hill. The whole time he was standing there, screaming behind me, “Come get your f-ing stuff out of my house!” He had a total freak out episode. So I told him I was never going to see him again. I said, “Don’t ever expect to see me again! Don’t ever expect to meet your grandkids! You’re not a part of my life anymore.” And that was the last of it. Then I went back inside the school, and uh, I didn’t really know what to do at first. I was shaking so bad, and I was trying not to cry, I was so angry. So I called Allison—she was at home sick that day—and told her what had happened. That’s when she talked to her mom and her mom said I could move in with them.

So yeah, I ended up… I ended up taking off from home and moving in with my girlfriend, her mom and stepdad when I was 15. When I look back on that now… it was crazy! But Allison’s mom knew what was going on at home. There had been many times when I’d be over at their house crying because me and my dad would be fighting all the time. Allison’s mom knew how bad things were and she knew I couldn’t go on like that.

I’m not sure how long after that… it might have been that same night, if not, then the night after, I ran in to get some of my stuff. From his house. Allison’s mom drove me over and was waiting in the driveway. I ran in, ran downstairs to my room, and I was gathering my stuff as fast as I could. But my dad came home. He came downstairs when I was gathering my stuff, and I had no way out. He grabbed me and pinned me up against the wall with his forearm against my throat. He was yelling at me so close he was spitting in my face, like, “Where do you think you’re going? What do you think you’re going to do, boy?” I hated him so much in that moment. His face was right there, right in front of my face! I wanted so much to just head butt him and break his nose! I wanted to so bad. But I didn’t. Sometimes I don’t know why, and part
of me wishes I did, but I didn’t. It’s not in my nature. I’m not a violent person. I didn’t want to fight him. He’s my dad. As much as was going on, I didn’t want to fight him. Finally I managed to break loose. I grabbed, like, one bag of stuff, and I started to run up the stairs. But he chased me, and, uh, just like in the movies, as I was running up the stairs he grabbed me by the ankle, and I fell pretty hard. But I kicked at him, shook him loose, and just ran as fast as I could upstairs, out of the house, and slammed the door. By the time I got in the car with Allison’s mom I was bawling so bad, screaming, “Just GO! GO! GO!” That was the last fight we ever had, and that was the last time I talked to him for almost five years.

After that, I lived with Allison for… um, six months maybe. Six or nine months. Then I moved in with Mark and his grandparents. They were nice enough to let me move there with them, because I couldn’t live with my dad. There was no way that I could have. And just… like, the pure generosity of those people—Allison’s mom and Mark’s grandparents—if it wasn’t for them I’m not sure where I’d be now. If it wasn’t for them I’m not sure what would have happened to me. They are the nicest people on Earth. I send them Christmas cards every year and I let them know I am incredibly thankful for them having a little bit of faith in me, and being nice enough to let me live there. I think about that all the time.

Honestly, Mark’s grandparents, I think they were the only reason I went to school during that time. They got us up each morning and made sure we caught the bus. They were really awesome about everything.

By then, like, this would have been grade 10, Mark and I were listening to a lot of punk music and stuff. And our band was really into punk. We had mohawks and everything. Mark even died his hair pink, too! So in school, we were identified as the “punk kids”, I guess. It’s funny because we never really intended that, but by high school “cliques” are developed, and whether you like it or not people will put you in a clique. But our clique was mostly a bunch of people who wouldn’t really be classified as punk. It was really only me and Mark. We were the
only ones who really rocked the patches on our clothes, and had metal studded bracelets, spiked hair, things like that. But we all sat at the same lunch table, so the whole school knew, “That’s the punk table. That’s where all the punk kids are.”

Bit by bit, school just started being a place I didn’t want to be anymore. I was just so full of anger and confusion. Like, I was so full of anger going to school. I couldn’t focus on anything. And I… I didn’t feel like I belonged at that school. I couldn’t talk to anybody there. I know there were guidance counsellors, but… I don’t know, I didn’t feel comfortable going to them. I just didn’t want to be there.

So I starting skipping more and more. Which of course didn’t help my marks. But school just wasn’t that important right then. And none of the teachers cared. Like, the classes that I missed, none of the teachers showed any sign of caring about me. To them it was probably just a normal thing. “Oh, this punk kid is skipping class. Whatever. We’ll fail him.” And that’s it. That’s what the relationship was. It was very… uh, what word can I use? Like, almost binary. You’re either good and you’re going to class, or if you fail, or skip class and you fail, we don’t care. It was just on and off. That’s what it felt like through high school. Nobody really cared. That’s pretty much it.

On top of everything, I had absolutely no confidence. I’m not sure why… I just, I think I was really afraid to be criticized. I might have looked tough, but inside I was really insecure. Like, part of the reason that I failed, other than not showing up, was I was too scared to hand in homework. Any homework that I had, I would do it but I wouldn’t pass it in. Especially in English in grade 9 and 10. I remember doing it and not handing it in a lot. I’d have it, but hide it away. Or say I didn’t do it. I just let it go. I think it was just a fear of judgement or… I don’t know. I’m still trying to figure out why. Even now, that feeling, that fear, it’s still in me. But I’m old enough now to make myself hand stuff in. I know the consequences, and failure is absolutely not an option to me. But then, I just had no confidence.
So because of everything, my marks started to go way down and I had to repeat some grade 10 classes in grade 11. And by grade 11, school was… school was getting really hard. It was getting really hard just to go. I just felt like I had so many bigger issues outside of the school. And I couldn’t focus anymore. Eventually, I got called into the principal’s office because I was missing so many classes. She just grilled me, “What’s going on? Why are you missing all these classes?” At first I tried to kind of fake something. I tried to lie to her. But I’m probably… I’m honest to no-end. Even when I try to lie to somebody, I can’t. And I actually broke down in front of the principal, in her office. I told her everything. About the abuse, about leaving home, about not seeing my family, and just not knowing what to do anymore. I’d always thought she was a mean, mean woman, and it was kind of strange that I got a sense of compassion from her. Cause she did seem concerned… then. But I don’t think she really tried. I think she heard my story, and kind of felt bad, that day, but nothing ever changed after I told her. She didn’t tell the guidance counsellor. I don’t think she really did anything. She just heard it, and was like “Shit. That’s terrible for you, I guess.” And that was it. And I remember leaving her office and nothing really coming from it. It was kind of too late at that point anyways.

That year, grade 11, I failed a whole bunch. I figured I’d probably have to do another year and half of school to get the credits I needed to graduate. And I just couldn’t handle that. So I left. But I knew… I knew I wanted to go back. I just didn’t know when.

I just… I was alone. Those couple of years were spent with so many questions, so much anger, it seemed like I was alone. I never felt like I had anyone to go to on either side of my family. Mark’s grandparents were fantastic, but they couldn’t do it all. They weren’t my family. Those years were the most traumatic in my life. That’s why I left school.

Thank God I had my band and music. That was my way to find peace. Through music and through nature. That’s why I also loved skateboarding so much. It was just a chance to be outside and away from everything, completely on my own terms. It was my idea of peace. And
I… I kind of had the same mentality when I listened to music. That’s why I really love them both. That’s how I got away from everything.

Once I made up my mind to leave school after grade 11, I decided I wanted to move to Ontario. That was the place I wanted to be. I have family in Ontario, an aunt and two uncles, on my dad’s side. I love them, they’re amazing people. And they don’t live too far from Toronto. And I also had a girlfriend in Ontario. We’d met online through a music website – like, a site where you post guitar sheet music to. And this girl, Stacey, she responded to some of my posts and we started talking to each other though webcam and stuff. I eventually went to visit her and she even came here to visit a few times too. I was still living with Mark and his grandparents, and they let her come and stay. So I moved out to Ontario.

First I was staying with my uncle, then I stayed at my aunt’s for a bit. Stacey would come to visit once in a while. It wasn’t that far from where she lived. By then we’d been sort of “together” for over a year. And I don’t know how, or why, but eventually her parents said that I could move in with them. It was amazing. It was… uh, that was just the nicest thing. It was really, really cool. Her stepdad even got me a job where he worked, so I was able to pay them rent for living there.

That Fall I went into the high school Stacey was going to because I’d decided I wanted to finish school out there. I went in, in person, and talked to the principal. And he totally gave me the stink eye. And I… I didn’t even have my mohawk anymore! I had it cut shorter so it kind of blended in with the rest of my hair. So I didn’t look… well, I guess I kind of had some facial piercings then, so maybe that’s what threw him off me! But I remember going in that day, really nervous and trying to look presentable. Cause I know appearance plays a huge role in society. Like, who doesn’t really know that?! So when I went in there, I’m pretty sure I looked not threatening! But he just completely turned his back on me. He had no interest at all.
He tried to say it was because I didn’t bring my transcripts. Like, he asked me if I brought my transcripts with me. And I didn’t have them, so I just asked him if they could get it. “Don’t you guys have a fax machine? Can’t you just call them and get it?” I told them what school I went to and everything. He just kind of hmmed and hawed about it, and didn’t give me a straight answer. But he, uh… he had no intention to do that at all. He just kind of blew me off. So I didn’t go back. Not after that. I was pretty bummed out then. They, um… they denied me education out there.

So I just kept working after that. At the job my girlfriend’s stepdad got me. I lived there, with them, for about three months. And it was really great for a while.

Then one day I found out that she cheated on me.

I was crushed. I was absolutely crushed. I had no contact, really, with anyone back home. And I didn’t really have many friends there either. So I was in another state where I just felt completely alone. I worked early in the morning, and I’d come home from work and I didn’t want to be there, obviously, where I was living with her. I’d grab my book bag with my, like, Sony Discman and my skateboard, and I’d just go. I’d just try to find spots in town where I could skateboard, and think, and escape. There was this bridge in that town, with a nice little stream under it that I went to a lot. I sat under there so many times and just thought and thought and thought. There was probably no other time in my life that I was so angry. Just thinking about all the times where I felt so alone, and all the hurt and pain I was experiencing and had experienced.

I, um… I thought about ending my life out there, countless, countless times.

Just after I found out that she’d cheated on me, there was this one night where all the… all the downfall was, like, to the most extreme. They had—the people I was living with there—they had a pool in their backyard. And one night, really late, probably three or four in the morning, I was sitting on the end of the diving board. I was just sitting on the edge, staring at the
water. I was in one of my deep thoughts. And I said to myself, “I could tip forward and end it. Or… or I could try to make things better.” I just, I felt like there were so many things that weren’t in my control, and I was trying to think of ways I could get them back into my control. Sitting there, staring at the water below me, I started thinking about things like music and being outside, and how much that had helped me to get even to there, from not hurting myself before that. And um, on the edge of that diving board, I just sat and thought until the sun came up. I was able to get myself out of that depressive, kind of suicidal state.

Suddenly it just made total sense: I was completely alone and I realized if anyone was going to dig me out, it was going to be me. And I actually felt good about being alone for the first time ever. It was the first time I really had enough time to think about everything, I guess. For those couple of years, all this stuff was going on so fast, and everything was always changing. But that night, because of all that… misfortune, I guess you could call it, with that girl, I really had time to think about it all. Like everything. To try to get my head around it, I guess. I just kind of looked back on how I’d been able to stay alive through everything, through all the situations thus far. And I thought to myself, “That’s a bit of an accomplishment!” It was the first time I took that into consideration, and it kind of made me feel good about myself.

A few weeks later I moved out of her house and rented an apartment for a few months, just working. But by then I just kept thinking, “I want to move back home. I want to go back to school.” But I didn’t know where I would live if I went back, so I had to figure that out first.

That Christmas, I took some time off work, came back home and got up the courage to ask my grandmother on the reserve if I could move in with her if I came back to New Brunswick. And she told me, “Yeah! That would be awesome!” So that was it. I was moving back. And I was determined that when I got back I was going to finish high school.

Right around my 18th birthday in March, I jumped on the bus and moved back. But when I got here I called my mom from the bus station to make sure that it was still ok that I went to
my grandmother’s, and she told me I wasn’t allowed too! Apparently she didn’t remember saying I could. I guess she had been drinking at the time, and now she didn’t remember. I was so mad cause I was already back here! I didn’t have anywhere else to go. So I just sat there, at the bus station, feeling so let down. I just sat there and sat there, until I figured out a plan. After a while I figured that my grandparents, on my dad’s side, would help me no matter what. They’re the only people I know in my life that would have helped me no matter what. So I called them, and that’s where I went. I lived with them at their senior’s complex for a while. Like, they lived in an old folks home by then, and they weren’t even allowed to have anybody living with them! But they let me live there, to the cost of, like, their own housing. If somebody would’ve found out, they probably could have got in a lot of trouble or something. But yeah, I lived with them until I was able to get a job and move out.

Just a few days after I got back I went into my old high school. I went to the office window and talked to the lady there. She was kind of rude. She just told me to go over to the guidance counsellor’s office which was right across the hall. Then I had to schedule a time to talk to the guidance counsellor, and come back in another day. And when I finally met with him he told there was nothing that they could do! I was already 18 and according to them I was too old. They told me that I wasn’t allowed to finish there. What upset me the most, was I knew a guy who was 21 that was still at that high school! He was 21! I was 18! And they told me I was too old. I felt like they were lying to my face. But what could I do?

Plus, the guidance counsellor, he tried to set me up with a distance education thing online. So even though I was angry, at the same time I had this paper in my hand to do this program. And I really put all my hope into this program. I tried that for maybe two weeks, but it was… it was the most hard-to-understand program that I have ever tried to do. I don’t even know if I was guaranteed a diploma from doing it! It was all online, so you just do it at home, with no support, and it was ridiculous. When I look back on it now, I think the suggestion for me to do
that program was just a way to shut me up and get me out of that guidance office. There was no way I could have done it. It was a huge let-down.

So once again I got a job. I worked washing dishes at a restaurant, and eventually was making enough to move out of my grandparents and rent a room in another house. And I was doing pretty good. I was living on my own, I had a new girlfriend; things were good. But I kept thinking about school.

Finally, about a year later, I went into the Band Hall. A lady I knew through one of my friends growing up, his mom, she worked in the Band Hall at the time. She had some type of education position there. I went in and talked to her and she gave me the GED book. She was like, “Here, study this and I’ll set up an appointment for you in a month.” I couldn’t believe it. I was so happy! It was my chance. So I did that. I studied the GED book. I studied hard for a month. That book was way harder than high school! It’s like three inches thick! I remember opening it up and I was like, “Holy crap! I don’t know if I can do this?” But I tried. There were a couple of tests at the beginning of the book, and you could kind of run through those quick. So I went through some of those. Then I studied. I studied all that month. I was working full-time then too, so I would study in the evenings, weekends, at home, or at my girlfriend’s. Studying whenever, wherever I could. As intimidated as I was at the start, I tried. I just knew that I had to. It was the only way I could see for my future to be any better than my past. I just had to do it. Failure was not an option. I had to do it. I kept telling myself that, over and over. I had to. I didn’t want to end up like my dad, with no education and a job that kept me away from my family all the time and made me miserable. Or worse. So I studied and studied.

And I did it! I passed.

I was always really insecure about not graduating. I used to think about people in my English class, like complete boneheads, that graduated. I always knew, “I’m not any less smart
than they are!” But I felt inadequate. It really bothered me. So when I wrote my GED and passed, that was a huge deal. That was when I was 20.

Since then I’ve worked a pile of jobs. When I got new jobs, I always tried to make sure they were different from ones that I’d had before. I think it was to prove myself, to myself. Because part of my dad’s, like, being abusive was telling me I couldn’t do anything, all the time. So I worked a pile of different jobs just to prove that I could do it.

My favorite, which is why I’m here in school now, was an internship in the forestry industry. I just loved it. It was awesome. It was lab work and field work, and it was really, really cool. Just that connection with nature, like that was… that was it. I knew. I knew I wanted to do that in University.

At first I didn’t think I could get into University, but then I found out about the bridging program for Aboriginal students here. A cousin of mine told me about it. And I was really interested. I saw it as my second chance.

But it took me a while to actually get to University, because I just got my Native status less than a year ago. It’s this big long story, but basically it was all because my grandmother, who’s a hundred percent full-Native, married a non-Native and she lost her status. It’s so stupid because if it was the other way around, if my grandfather had married a non-Native woman, she would have gained status. There was a huge gender difference. My grandma eventually regained her status, but it was only a second-generation status. My mom was the cut-off. Then just a few years ago there was a big court case, I think in BC or somewhere out West. The McIvor Gender Equity case.36. And this new law got passed. And, um, the Chief, called me in to his office and

36 In April 2009, the Court of Appeal for British Columbia ruled in the case McIvor v. Canada that the Indian Act discriminates between men and women with respect to registration as status Indians and certain provisions of Section 6 were found to be unconstitutional based on the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100032433/1100100032434 and http://povertyandhumanrights.org/2011/08/mcivor-v-canada/ and http://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/home/government-policy/the-indian-act/bill-c-31.html
we filled out the paperwork for my status. It was only supposed to take a few months, and it ended up taking a couple years! The whole time, I was like, “Come on! I want to go back to school!” Finally I got it this past summer. Not even a month after that, I applied and I got in. So now I’m here. But that’s why I didn’t try to apply earlier. Without that, I wouldn’t have been able to afford it.

Now I’m working my butt off and doing really well because I feel this is my only shot at getting a University education. I’ve worked really hard to get here thus far, and to me failure is absolutely not an option. Especially now that I have a family of my own. I’m trying to make sure I have a good enough career to provide for my family. Then I won’t have to work like my dad did, and actually be there for my family at night and on the weekends. That’s so important to me. I don’t want my son to end up like me, never seeing his dad.

And, um, I’m happy now. I’m happy of the progress I’ve made since that day where I was either quit, or do as best I can to prove anything that my dad ever said about me was wrong. But it wasn’t easy.

That’s probably why I’m here, sharing my story. I know this was supposed to be about school, but I imagine there’s probably more people like me, out there, who experienced a lot of the same things. What I really want people to know is that I didn’t drop out because I was stupid or because I couldn’t do the work. I dropped out because of the terrible situation I was in. It was just a set of really, really bad circumstances, and an overwhelming feeling that nobody was… that nobody could help. That nobody wanted to help. Looking back, I feel like if I’d had the right motivation in school, then I wouldn’t have left. If I had seen school as a happier place, a supportive place, I would have stayed. Absolutely. A hundred percent.

But despite all of the terrible things I went through, I got my GED and now I’m here. Today, I’m just trying to make life better for myself and for everybody I know.
An Introduction to Yvonne: Earning Trust

I first met Yvonne at the information session I hosted to invite Aboriginal students to participate in my research in September 2012. However, even though we hadn’t met previously, I recognized Yvonne from MWC. She was frequently in the lounge, sometimes visiting with friends, always surrounded by books and her laptop. Following the information session and prior to our first interview together, I learned through conversation and chance encounters what a busy and active young woman Yvonne was. Not only was she in her third year of a sociology degree, she was also completing a business certificate, preparing to apply for a graduate program in Social Work, and working with youth in her community. About three weeks before we had our first research conversation, I attended the New Brunswick Department of Education’s 2nd Provincial Summit in First Nations Education and Yvonne was one of several invited youth speakers. A few months later, she was also very engaged in the Idle No More movement, participating in peaceful protests and publicly speaking on the issues. I have never met another 23 year-old like Yvonne.

Despite Yvonne’s success in University, which she really enjoys “minus the long hours and extreme amounts of caffeine,” her stories of school have not always been positive. Through getting to know her, I learned that her experiences have led her to be wary of teachers and academic professionals she is not familiar with. At the beginning of our relationship, this included me.

After a few weeks of emailing back and forth, trying to coordinate a time meet, I received a surprise message from Yvonne one morning in early November. Her class scheduled for that time had been cancelled and she was wondering if I was free to meet
then. As it happened, I was. Since I didn’t have any time to book another location, we agreed to meet in my office. When she arrived about 10 minutes later, I could feel that she was nervous. She slowly came in, and took a seat in a comfy chair I had moved out for her. She crossed her arms. Part way through the informed consent process, she interrupted me: “But what are you going to do with this information? Who is it for? What do you hope to get out of this?”

These were hard questions, precisely to the point, and told me a lot about this young woman. She wanted to participate, was willing to participate, but she didn’t fully trust me yet, or my reasons for the study or what was going to be done with her words, her stories and the stories of others, afterward.

I had to earn her trust. I slowed down and put the forms aside. I spoke from my heart about the purpose of the work: I hoped the stories shared would provide some insight into the educational experiences of Wolastoqui and Mi’kmaq students in NB schools, and perhaps provide some impetus (if not direction) for change. I also told her that I hoped to present this work not only to academic audiences but also to First Nations communities. That by hearing from recent graduates, communities might experience some hope for the future; that through their stories and experiences, images of role models would be made available to current and future students in the K-12 system. And I told her that her story would remain her own. She could have copies of the interview transcripts if she desired, and she would be given a copy of the story co-constructed from our conversations to keep. As I shared this, and while she watched and listened to me, I felt tension ease from my body. At the same time, Yvonne uncrossed her arms.
After another series of emails and hallway conversations, we met again for a second interview three months later at the main library on campus; a location she chose due to convenience and proximity to her classes that day. As I sipped my coffee and she drank her water in a private basement conference room, I listened to her stories about her life in schools in New Brunswick.

**Yvonne: Doing Big Things**

I wanted to get my education. I wanted to be educated. I wanted to do big things. For our people. That’s my drive. To give back to my community.

*“Good feelings”: Earliest memories of school.*

I remember going to Head Start in Kilhuswikuk[^37]. It was in an old schoolhouse. There was one for Head Start, and one for kindergarten. I went to both of those. My Gram lived right across from the school, so I used to walk there by myself, if you can imagine. Cause “I’m a big kid”, you know! Always looking both ways to cross the street; my mom just watching from the window.

The Head Start had people from my community working there. When we had to take naps we’d get our cots ready and stuff, and they would rub our backs. That was always good. It felt real cozy and homey. I have good feelings, like good memories and stuff from the Head Start program. I liked the feeling there.

Then I moved up the hill, to the old schoolhouse for grade 1. It had grade 1, 2, and 3 in it, I think. I just did grade 1 there, and then they tore that down and built the new elementary school which I moved into in grade 2.

[^37]: Kilhuswikuk (pronounced Gil-hus- wee-goo) is a pseudonym. It is the Wolastoqey word for “the place of the muskrat.”
The teacher who I remember most is Mr. Aubin. He was our Maliseet language teacher and our Math teacher in grade 1. He was so exciting and funny, and it was always good to go to his class. He was just enthusiastic and outgoing, and his personality was kind of… like, he was happy! It was real good to be there. He made it good to be there.

By grade 3 and 4 a lot of our teachers weren’t from the community. And I think the only Native teachers were Mrs. Caul, she’s from our community; Mary, she was a language teacher; and Mr. Tomah. They are the only ones that I remember. But we were right in the community, so that had a big effect in itself. We were surrounded by our culture, even if there wasn’t much exposure to it at the school.

As I listened to Yvonne express her “good feelings” about her early years in school in her First Nation, I began to wonder how her relationship with school changed or shifted when she transitioned into the public system.

“A big change”: Stories of transition.

Our new school went to grade 5, but my mom decided to put me in Deacon public school in town that year. She wanted me to integrate and stuff, so it would be easier when I got into middle school. And, um… it was kind of a big change for me. I remember being scared and stuff going to school. There were only three of us that went there in grade 5: me, my cousin and, um, another boy I grew up with, Denny. And we had to take the bus, which seemed so big at the time. We shared it with the big kids, the high school students, because the schools were close to each other. And, um… I definitely remember being scared. It was a really big change.

It was also a really big school! The building was really big and the classes were big. At my old school our classrooms were smaller, so it felt more intimate. And you got to know the teacher. But at Deacon we had a class of 30. So it just felt like I was a number, I guess. I didn’t like it. And I didn’t like my teacher either. She was mean! Like her personality, she was just a mean woman. She yelled a lot. I didn’t really have teachers like that before. I didn’t like her. I
was always quiet and shy, so I never really… at least I don’t remember getting yelled at too much. But Denny—he was in my class too—he was always in trouble. I think he had ADHD or something, cause he would do, like, outbursts in class. And I just remember the teacher yelling at him, and yelling at him. He was always getting in trouble and getting detention a lot. I remember that, seeing that, feeling bad for him and stuff. While we were all outside playing for lunch, I could see him in there through the windows, in detention. It didn’t seem fair.

I did make friends and stuff though. It wasn’t hard to make friends there. Everyone played with everyone.

Although Yvonne was able to make friends at her new school, her stories of transitioning to the public system highlighted how scary this process was for her. She repeatedly makes reference to how big everything was: the new school, the bus, the high school kids they shared the bus with. Amidst her initial stories of being scared by the “big change,” she also shared how her first experiences with her teacher were negative. Her frequent yelling and disciplinary actions, although not directly experienced but witnessed, made Yvonne see her as “mean.” Storying herself as “quiet and shy,” I began to imagine how the big change, to the big school, made Yvonne feel small.

**Feeling different, jigging and pushing through: Stories from middle school.**

Switching schools again for middle school in grade 6 was a bit hard. All my new friends from Deacon were going to Ashton, so I wanted to go there, but I had to go to Gardiner. That’s where we went. The bus doesn’t go to Ashton, and my mom didn’t have a car, so, um, I had to go to Gardiner.

I did pretty good in grade 6, I think. At least I can’t remember anything too bad from that year. But we started being, um, pulled out of class for literacy every day, which… I have
mixed feelings about. Because they would come in to our regular class, and they would pull me out. Like, “Oh, Yvonne, you can go now.” In front of everybody. So everyone would turn and stare. And I’d just be like, “O—kay.” Sometimes I would have one-on-one time, but usually if I was in the same class as another Native student we would both go.

Our literacy teacher, Mrs. MacKenzie, she was real nice though. She was older so she was kind of like a grandmother, and she made it feel welcoming and stuff. I really liked her. We would spend an hour a day with her, just learning about literacy or playing writing and reading games. Sometimes we would play computer games, or we would sit and talk and read books, or poetry, stuff like that. So it felt nice to go with her, I guess.

But, um… just the fact that they would come to our class and pull us out in front of everyone. It kind of made me feel unwelcome. I already knew I was different from everyone else—I was real dark in middle school, and I already felt different. And then they made me feel more different by pulling me out of class for an hour a day. And, you know, school goes all day. They don’t take an hour to do something else. So I’d always be skipping a subject. It was weird that everybody was doing something, and then I’m going off to do something else. And it’s not like it was culturally-based, because she was non-Native.

We did have a Native culture room at Gardiner, but I don’t remember anything really being cultural there either. They just had, like, pictures and stuff on the walls. And the TAs that ran the room were also working with other kids. So there was always a different TA in there. And they weren’t Native. They lived on reserve, and they were from our community, they had even married Native men, but they weren’t Native. And, I don’t know… it didn’t feel that welcoming there.

That’s what I mostly remember about Gardiner: always feeling unwelcome. Like, I feel like I dealt with, um… a lot of racism and stuff, from the non-Natives in middle school. I made friends easily enough, but when I went to invite them over to my house for a sleepover, they all
came back saying they couldn’t come. I remember one girl actually said something like, “No, my mom won’t let me because reserves are real bad. There’s nothing but drugs and alcohol on there. And, like, your parents don’t care and stuff.” So, I couldn’t have any of my new White friends over. I’d have to go their houses. At the time I was just a kid and didn’t think much of it, but a few years later I was like “Okay. What if I go to your house, are they going to think this of me?”

I also had to deal with the teachers just… not knowing, I guess. Their ignorance of First Nations. Like, they didn’t even know what to call us! I remember my grade 7 teacher, Mrs. Baxter, she asked me in front of everyone “Should I call you Indian, or Native, or something else? What’s the proper word?” I couldn’t believe it! I’m a kid! I could feel my face burning, and I just slumped in my seat, thinking “Well I don’t know either. Why are you asking me?” I did not know. So all I said was “Just not Indian, I guess.” So I had to deal with that. Them just not knowing what the proper name to call us is. They just don’t know.

And it doesn’t help that the textbooks are so outdated. Well, I don’t know how they are now, but just looking at them then, like, they were even kind of wrong, too! Because they call us “Indians” or “American Indians” or something like that! I really don’t like that term.

We used those textbooks in Social Studies. We would have these little Native Studies sections. But they didn’t really explain anything. They just talked about random tribes from all across Canada and the States. I actually remembering dreading those sections, because if the teacher didn’t know something, she would ask me! Like, one time we were talking about a tribe from out west, I think it was the Cherokee, and Mrs. Baxter asked me, “Do you know anything about this?” Everyone in the class turned to look at me and they expected me to know. But I didn’t know! I was in grade 7! Like, how would I know what the Cherokee are doing out there, when I don’t even know what our own people are doing here! So I’m like, “No, I don’t know.
What are they?” And she just went back to teaching whatever, just skipped over what she didn’t know.

What you need to understand is I was really shy in school. So that made it even worse when she would put me on the spot, asking me stuff like that. It made me feel junky, and targeted. I hated that more than anything.

We paused in our conversation to wonder about this: how could a teacher assume that a First Nations student would know about the history, culture and customs of another First Nation in another part of the country? For that matter, should teachers’ even assume that a Wolastoqi student, such as Yvonne, know about their own community’s, their own people’s, history and cultural practices? As Yvonne reflected on her experiences of being put on the spot, she tied these questions to issues of identity.

A lot of First Nations students deal with a lot of identity issues. And then, them, to like, put students on the spot, it’s kind of ignorant. It’s actually really ignorant. And it sucks. Especially when you can’t answer questions. Like, why would I know more than the teacher about the Cherokees out there? Really? I didn’t even know about my own Maliseet heritage then! I’m still learning. That’s one of the things I’ll emphasize, I did not know who I was. I knew I was different from everyone else, I knew I was a First Nations person, but I didn’t really know who I was. I didn’t speak my language, I wasn’t submerged in the culture at home because my family had their own struggles. And it’s not taught in schools! They really don’t talk about Native people too much. The curriculum is mostly just general stuff. From what I remember they never talked about anything relevant to our history. Which… at least that meant I wasn’t targeted and expected to know stuff too often, but I also I didn’t have a sense of who I was and
where I came from. I didn’t have a sense of my history. They just had no... they didn’t have any cultural sensitivity. That’s what I found.

At some point in grade 7, I just didn’t want to go to school anymore. I didn’t feel welcome and I didn’t enjoy it. And at the same time, I started to have more problems at home. My upbringing wasn’t that good. My mom had me when she was 17, and when I was a kid and teenager she had some addiction problems. Sometimes things got real bad. So I started bouncing between homes at lot. I stayed at my grandparents quite a bit, but they also had their own addiction problems. So then I’d be at my aunts’ or my uncles’, or I stayed at friends’ houses a lot. It’s not like I didn’t have someplace to go, because in our community you always have family who will take you in, but I wasn’t really home. I didn’t have my mom there to push me. And staying at these other places, I started hanging out more with my older cousins, and I started getting into drugs and alcohol myself. I was only 11 or 12, and I was dealing with big stuff like that.

So I started jigging\textsuperscript{38} and stuff. I’d wake up to go to school, and some days it was kind of easy to just not do anything, depending on where I was or who I was with. But usually I’d go in the morning and then try to jig. It’s hard to jig in middle school though, so I’d end up getting caught and then I would get in trouble. And having to go see the Vice Principal when I was already dealing with so much stuff... I just hated it. He never tried to figure out why I was jigging. He never asked “Why are you acting up? Why are you skipping school?” They never tried to understand anything at that school. They just got me in trouble. It was just, “You’re not allowed to skip, so you’re getting detention for two weeks.” Or something like that. As if that

\textsuperscript{38} skipping school
would make me want to be there more! I don’t know… the way I see it, is they didn’t even care. Like, they don’t genuinely care. They’re just there because it’s their job.

Picturing an 11 or 12-year-old Yvonne shuffling between homes, sleeping on couches, and trying to fit in with her older cousins, I could see how the lure of drugs and alcohol would be hard to resist. Listening to how the Vice Principal responded to her subsequent “jigging” and her perception that he didn’t “genuinely care” about her, I wondered how such a moment might have contributed to her further alienation from school.

I ended up failing grade 7. It felt like my life was over. It sucked. All my friends were going to grade 8, and I was stuck in grade 7 again. But once the year started, I made new friends and it wasn’t too bad. Then about half way through the year, the teacher and the Vice Principal said, “If you do this, this, and this, we’ll move you up to grade 8 so you can be here the regular three years in middle school.” So they moved me up to grade 8 anyways.

As Yvonne recounted this event, I balked, recoiling in my seat: “They moved you to grade 8 half way through the school year after keeping you back in grade 7?” “Yeah.” Yvonne continued, “I really feel like they pushed me through middle school. And I don’t think they should be trying to push people through. I should’ve failed. I should’ve stayed there for four years, not three years.” When I questioned Yvonne about why she thought she should have stayed the full extra year, she revealed she felt this experience was a turning point in her academic career: “That kind of affected me a lot when I got to high school, and actually having the ability to do the work. Just pushing me through the
school system affected my future.” Looking back on this from where she is now, in the third year of her degree, she told me that she still thinks about the decision that was made to push her through middle school. “I mean, I may be okay right now, but like… I don’t know. Sometimes I think I could have potentially done more.” In the next breath, she returned back to her memories and experiences in middle school. “I have to admit, I was really glad to leave Gardiner though. I just didn’t feel welcome there. It didn’t feel welcoming and I didn’t enjoy going to school there.”

**Excitement, culture and advocacy: Initial stories of high school.**

I actually got excited to go to high school. It was so big! It was a lot bigger than middle school. Just figuring out where your classes were was tough in the beginning. But I liked seeing all of my cousins there, some my age, some older. There are only four grades, but some people fail and they’re back repeating, so you see a big range of people between grade 9 and grade 12. It was nice seeing all that.

And high school was way more cultural than middle school, mainly because Doug was there. He was our Aboriginal advisor, and he’s from Kilhuswikuk, too. I practically grew up at his house because I was close friends with his daughter. When I was young he would take the kids on summer camping trips and stuff. That’s where I got introduced to a lot of my culture, like sweats, smudging and learning about medicines. It was from him. So it was really nice having him in the high school. He was a connection to our community. And we were more prone to listen to him than to someone else, because we already had so much respect for him.

Doug was always really good at taking care of everyone at high school. He was funny and cool to be around, and real easy to talk to because he wasn’t judgmental or anything. You could be open with him, and he’d just listen. Which was good. That’s what you need. And you could pretty much find him wherever, whenever, you needed him. Like, he was pretty much
always in his office or the Native lounge, which were real welcoming places. If he wasn’t, I could easily get somebody to find him, by paging him or something, whenever I wanted to talk about anything. And he did ceremonies with us. Especially smudging. If we were having a hard time, or just needed some positive energy, we would smudge in the school. Having him there helped a lot. And it felt good to know someone was there who cared.

There was also more fighting for our rights in high school because of Doug. He was kind of like our advocate. In grade 9, I didn’t feel like I should have to take French anymore, cause I’m not French. They didn’t offer my language, and I didn’t see the purpose for me learning French. So with his help I got exempted out of French. And if we got in trouble for something, like jigging or fighting, or whatever, he would be contacted by a Vice Principal and he would come with us to their office. He usually always came with us when we had to meet the VPs. Which was good. He was kind of like a bridge, so it didn’t feel so… well, um, it just never went well before that. Like, there was one instance where one of my friends punched the Vice Principal and he got kicked out of school, for like, forever. So they made sure Doug was always there after that. To make sure that it was good on both parties, I guess. And it just felt better with him there.

As Yvonne’s storytelling about Doug unfolded, she paused to reflect on her experiences in high school compared with her stories of middle school.

It really felt good having Doug there. We didn’t have that in middle school. We had all non-Natives. And it’s not that there’s anything wrong with that, because obviously everyone’s heart is in the right place, but it’s not the same connection to your community and to your culture. I was exposed to more of our culture because he was there. And it was more open. I really liked that. The fact it was more open. They should really have somebody advocating for us at the middle school too, and, like, figuring out what’s culturally relevant there. Cause there was nothing.

When I asked if Doug taught any classes at the high school, Yvonne nodded:
He taught a Native Studies class, which I would have loved to take. But it was only offered for the older grades. So I wasn’t able to take it. Not while I was there.

“Why are we talking about this?”: Reflections on history class and implications of ‘not knowing.’

I remember grade 10 History. We learned a lot about different cultures. Like, the Mayans, or the Roman Empire. That kind of stuff. We would talk about them, and the structure of their society, who they were. And I remember thinking, “Why are we even talking about this?” Because I didn’t know any of our history. Like, the history of the First Nations people in Canada. Or even Canadian history in general. I didn’t really see it as irrelevant at the time, but I do remember being like “Why are we talking about this?”

Listening to Yvonne recount her experiences in history class, I sensed this was a heated topic for her. When I somewhat clumsily asked if she ever questioned the content they were covering, or asked about First Nations history, she was emphatic:

No! Because I didn’t really know anything else at the time! So why would I question it? Now I know that I didn’t learn too much about any of my culture. Or history. I didn’t read about the residential schools. I didn’t read about the 60s scoop. I didn’t read about the Royal Proclamation. Or the scalping proclamation! Like, I didn’t read about any of that stuff in history books. Other than Christopher Columbus “discovering” North America and all that stuff. And the colonizing. Well, they didn’t even call it colonization, but “new developments” and “Westernizing” Canada! I just learned stuff like that. Pilgrims and Natives. And it’s like, they don’t even specify who, like, what Native tribe that was! It’s just like, the Pilgrims and “Natives.” Thanksgiving. Blah, blah, blah, blah. It’s like, ok yeah. Who were they? Were they Mohawks? Were they Cree? Were they Mi’kmaq? So, that’s pretty much what I remember. They didn’t focus on anything that was relevant to us now, that we should be learning.

Reflecting back, it’s like, oh my God! Cause I didn’t learn about the majority of this stuff until I got to University. Now I know about all of this negative history between the government and the Crown and First Nations. It hasn’t
been good. And they don’t talk about it! They don’t … they talk about
Christopher Columbus “discovering” North America. But they don’t talk
about first contact. Like, nobody teaches any of the bad stuff. They don’t talk
about what happened here. They don’t realize that he brought diseases to the
Indigenous people that were here. They don’t talk about how a big chunk of
Aboriginal people were killed off, and all that. It actually didn’t go well!
There were wars between them, because they wanted to take the land. They
don’t talk about any of that stuff. At least I don’t remember hearing about any
of that. And then they even have Columbus Day in the States! It’s crazy! He’s
represented as a savior! The curriculum sucks!
But then, in high school, I, um… I never thought of it. I never realized, because I
didn’t know. Like, I didn’t personally know. So why would I be asking those
questions when I was in high school?

It really sucked not knowing any of that all through high school, because people are
expecting to you to know! Just like in middle school, the teacher and the students would expect
the Native in the class to know. And I didn’t know. Even though I know now that it makes sense
that I didn’t know, then I still felt stupid because everyone would look at me waiting for an
answer that I couldn’t give. And then you’re getting in fights because people call you names,
without even understanding what that name means. Like, they don’t know, and we don’t know,
so it’s just like, “Ok, I think that’s pretty racist!” And we act out on it. We end up fighting. I got
into fights a lot.

Like, there was this one instance, this guy called me a wagon burner without even
understanding what a wagon burner is! It’s like, “Oh, you’re burning wagons?” I still don’t
know! But I got mad and then I got one of my friends that I grew up with, and he went to beat
him up. We all went up on the hill and there was this big fight. There was a whole group of us,
like Natives and non-Natives. But it’s just like, that’s what we had to deal with every day.

**SPED & In-school Suspensions: Stories of resistance and alienation.**

Honestly, most of high school is kind of a fuzz, cause I jigged a lot. It’s just so easy to
jig in high school. You’re a number there, and you don’t have one-on-one with your teachers
unless you go out and make it happen. Otherwise the only time you see any of them is when you’re in trouble. That’s what I remember a lot of, getting in trouble. I don’t remember attending classes too much at school.

I was also doing a lot of drugs and alcohol then. I smoked weed in middle school, but I didn’t really do anything else. In high school, I still smoked a lot of weed but I also got into more things. Pills were really big in high school. They were really easy to get, too.

Like, I remember being put in “SPED” classes. The lowest level of classes. That’s what they called them. And you can get anything in those classes. It was in my special ed. Math class, and the special English class, where I met all my friends. All my drug dealer friends. I hung with that crowd. That became my crowd. We would go get stoned on lunch break and then come back to school and do class all day!

Thinking about what she’d just shared, Yvonne shook her head.

You know, in high school you can’t pick courses like you can at university. They put you in stuff. And they didn’t put us in regular classes. I really think they would automatically put us in SPED classes. Cause we would all be in them! It was almost all Natives in my classes! Well, and the non-Natives that did drugs and alcohol and stuff. Basically everybody that they knew were troublemakers.

As I started to think about the implications of this, of the potential that level 3 classes had been used for disciplinarian reasons and the subsequent impact on the students in the classes, I hear Yvonne ask: “Why would they put us in stuff like that? They were setting us up to fail pretty much.”

I remember being in in-school suspensions, too, and meeting more people… like that. More people they considered to be troublemakers. We were always together, one way or another.
In fairness, one of the vice principals, Mr. Keen, he was always trying to, like, find alternatives to keep me in school. Because I was jigging a lot. He would meet up with me when I was at school, either right in my classroom or he would call me on the intercom, to figure out my attendance and all that stuff. He’d always ask, “How come you didn’t come this day?” Or like, “You missed period three, Social Studies. Why did you miss it?” Just trying to figure it out. And he would try to find different ways to work with me to keep me in school. Probably because he knew it’s really not the answer to kick students out. He wasn’t bad actually. He just kept trying to find alternatives for me. He could see potential, I guess.

With in-school suspensions, he’d say, “Okay. You have to go to in-school for these days. If you go three days, (or sometimes four or five, depending on, like, how many days I missed, or jigged, or… well, it depended on what I did to get in there), then you can go back into school.” So then I would do that. I remember doing that a lot, actually.

We were in this room, in a cubicle all day. Those stupid blue cubicles! That was… ahhhh, that would make you go crazy! All day in those cubicles. We couldn’t even see each other, really, and there was no talking whatsoever! The teacher—it would usually be the same guy, Mr. Davidson—he’d yell at you if you talked. So it was usually just dead quiet. But I’d go nuts not talking, so instead I’d pass notes to one of my friends in the cubicle beside me. Through the little slits underneath. We’d do that back and forth all day, and it made it a little more bearable. Cause those were long days.

Every period our teachers would send stacks of homework down that they’d done in class, and we’d have to have the work finished by the end of the day. But it was hard to focus and work because I was usually feeling so frustrated and angry that I had to be in there! Cause you can’t do nothing. You’re just stuck in there.

Some days there would only be five, or maybe ten students, but then we also had people who came in just at lunchtime, for detention. (Sometimes I would just be there for detention,
too.) Then it would be packed, and there wouldn’t even be places for everyone. And then they’d be gone again. They got to leave, and we’d be there all day. So just that, day after day, until our punishment was finished. It didn’t exactly inspire me to go to school. They just have bad ways of punishing people.

At that time I still didn’t have any support at home from my mom. I didn’t have someone forcing me to get up. So why should I? Sleep all day. You’re a teenager, you’re not going to be like, “I’m going to do it! Everyday I’m gonna wake up.” I don’t know, you’re not... you don’t... I didn’t develop those skills right away, I guess. When I jigged, there was no way the school could call my house because we didn’t have a phone. Doug would usually end up going out and hunting us down, sort of thing. And if he did let my mom know that I was jigging, nothing would really be done. I moved in with my aunt for a couple of years, but drugs and alcohol were still all around me. I had to deal with all that.

And then I failed grade 10.

At this point Yvonne sat back in her chair, looked me square in the eye and drew on her sociology education to explain: “It was like I had double barriers.” I wasn’t sure exactly what she meant by this, so I asked her to elaborate. “Double barriers,” she reiterated:

You know, because of social issues in your home, your identity’s not taught to you there. Like, who are you, sort of thing. You know you’re different, but what are you? Like, who are you as a person? Like, as a Maliseet? So that stuff isn’t taught to you. And if your home life isn’t good, you don’t have that motivation to go to school. And then coming to school, it has a lot to do with culture and feeling welcome there. You’re just a number to them. And then you have to deal with racism, and feeling like you’re different but you don’t know why you’re different, I guess. You don’t know who you are. Your identity’s kind of lost, because it’s not taught to you there either. Dealing with all that in high school, it’s just...it was just really hard. And there’s just no... like... um, integration program, for people who have issues. So why even bother sort of thing? That’s how I felt. It’s like I was in limbo or something.
Not knowing who I was… So… within the first couple months of the year I was repeating grade 10, I dropped out.

Alternative programs: Stories of finding her way back to school.

The months following my decision to drop out are kind of hazy. But as I got older though, I started to realize I wanted to get my education. I wanted to be educated. I wanted to... I don’t know, do big things. For myself, for my family, and for our people.

So I did some stuff in my community, at their training centre. They offer some alternative classes. But I just did that for a little while, cause then I started an alternative program at the high school. I don’t know when I started it exactly, but the school contacted me and said I could do it, so I did. It was only in the afternoons, but at least I wasn’t fully out of school. The teacher, he would just give us a supplement for the grade you were supposed to be in. I think it was just Math, English and Science. I finished the year that way.

That summer, when I was 17, the Education director from my community approached me with another alternative program, Innovate. He told me, “If you do this program, you’ll graduate in the right year. When you’re supposed to. When you’re 18.” Because, like, after 19 you can’t attend high school. But if I did this, I could graduate the year I would have if I hadn’t dropped out. It’s basically an alternative to graduate, and it’s for all sorts of people that don’t fully succeed through regular high school. People that are pregnant, or that drop out, all sorts.

So I applied, and I had to go in for an interview. Then I was waiting. That whole time when I was trying to get into it, I remember feeling like I was in transition. And I was excited for the first time in a long time. That there was even a possibility of graduating in June, when I would have anyways, fueled my excitement even more. From that moment on, I was just like, “Yes. I really want to do this. I want to graduate high school. I’m going to graduate high school.”

So that September, when I would have been starting grade 12, I started Innovate. And I actually really liked it, and I did good in it. I was excited to do it, so I had more motivation to
participate, to do the work, to finish it. I just told myself, “Do you want to do it? It's up to you if you want to do it.” And I wanted to do it!

Even though it was still at the high school I wasn’t nervous because it was different. Every morning they would welcome you. Like, “Hi, good morning Yvonne.” Stuff like that. And before classes started for the day, we would sit there and actually talk with the teacher. Then we’d start.

We only had two teachers. One for English and Social Studies, and one for Science and Math. We’d do, like, two periods in each class, and then we would switch. But all year we had those same teachers. And I really liked having that consistency. It wasn’t like in high school, where you have one teacher for one class, and then you don’t see them ever again. We actually got to know them, and them us. So, it just... I don’t know... it was good. They would constantly talk to you, help you, and make you feel good, I guess. It was good to be there.

Like the other alternative program I did the year before, we’d get a supplement that would explain everything we had to do. There were four modules in each level, in each class, so you’d get whatever level—like, 1, 2, 3 or 4—you were working on that day, spend the morning doing an assignment, and then you’d go home for lunch. It was only half a day, so we would be there from, like, 8:30 to 12:30. And we didn’t have any homework. They generally wouldn’t let us take homework home. I do remember one time that I really wanted to take an assignment home to finish, and she let me; so they were flexible. But pretty much everything was done in class. And I actually went every day. I don’t think I missed any days that whole year.

I just really liked that everything was at our own pace. We could take as long as we wanted, as long as we were done everything by June. We also had smaller classroom sizes. Maybe 10 in one class, 10 in the other, and then we would switch rooms. Although… I’m not too sure on numbers because some people still struggled with showing up. But they were small,
so there was a lot of one-on-one with the teachers who were mostly there for questions and stuff anyways. I really liked that one-on-one at Innovate. I actually did really good there.

I inquired about the importance of one-on-one time with teachers for Yvonne. She paused before answering, considering where she is now with how she felt about it in high school.

One-on-one time, it really doesn’t matter to me now. Because now I know to make appointments with the Profs if I need them, or have questions, or anything. I know all that stuff now. But back then, I didn’t know how to ask for help. I didn’t know how to go up and talk to teachers. So having that one-on-one really mattered to me back then. That made a big difference for me.”

I think another reason I did really well there, was because of my partner at the time. She’s from Kilhuswikuk too, and she’s older than me. When I was in Innovate, I lived with her. She had already graduated from high school and was doing good things. It kinda drove me. Like, she provided a little motivation, and that really helped.

Plus, I didn’t…. um, I didn’t care for drugs anymore. I only drank on occasion, just socially. That was it. It was never enough for it to interfere with anything anymore. That was just like… it was just a phase in my life. I went through a phase of doing drugs and alcohol when I was younger, and then I… I just knew I wanted something better for myself. Because I’d seen… like, I saw the negative impacts of drugs and alcohol, and the social system, the social income. And I didn’t want that. I wanted to do better things for myself, and for my community. So… I just really wanted to graduate, and kind of start a life up, I guess.

And I did. Spring 2007, the year I was supposed to, I graduated! We had our own graduation ceremony but it was the same day as the high school prom. We weren’t excluded from that, so it still felt like we were part of the school. We had our ceremony in the afternoon,
at a hotel. We got all dressed up, but we didn’t have any caps or nothing. And they gave us our diplomas. It felt so good! And then afterwards I went to prom with my friends.

I was really intrigued about the Innovate program, and how it had enabled Yvonne to change her stories of school from a very negative series of events which had led her to resisting authority and withdrawing from high school altogether, into a powerful and positive story of how an individual can thrive if given the environment and opportunity to do so. When I questioned her about this, she concurred. “Yeah. That program works wonders.” But in the very next breath, she troubled the story I was already writing in my head.

The only thing is, it was pretty, like, basic. They cut a lot of things out. And by then, I wanted to go to university, but I didn’t have the right credits. So I had to come here to upgrade my Math and English.

Making choices and thriving: Stories of post-secondary.

Knowing that there was money for me to do post-secondary education, I was going to do it. I wanted to do big things, I guess. I just didn’t know what. I wanted to be a chef at first. Then I wanted to work with kids, so I did an early childhood program for a couple of months. That didn’t last long though. Then I was gonna go into Nursing. So I came here to UNB. Finally I switched to Business and Sociology. I just wanted to do everything!

Coming here, I met so many inspiring people. Other Aboriginal people. I have made so many new friends, and they all have the same drive to want to succeed and stuff like that. And everyone comes from… well, their upbringing was hard too. But like they don’t… they don’t let it get them down. And that, like, surrounding myself with really positive people, that really helped me too. I think that’s why I’ve done so good here and why I like it so much.
Moving beyond small-minded people: Final reflections and stories of change.

It makes me angry when I think about how it took until university before I learned anything about my history, because it’s not taught in schools. And all that’s portrayed in the media, all that’s portrayed in anything, is just the negative side of being First Nations! Like, when I talk to youth now, they think that Native people are tough and that we fight a lot. That we do drugs and alcohol all the time. Some of these perceptions are coming from non-Native kids, but I think our youth feel we need to live up to that! Where does that come from? That stereotype! It’s all crap. There are reasons why a lot of our people have addictions problems, but that’s not talked about. Like, my grandma was an actual residential school survivor, so finally learning about that, seeing what she went through, explained a lot about the addiction problems in my family. But growing up I didn’t know any of that! I didn’t know why my family had so many problems. I didn’t how to deal with them. Now I don’t have any bitterness or anger towards them, because it’s not their fault.

I really think it has a lot to do with the school system. They don’t teach it. They don’t teach any of this. So therefore you’re developing small-minded people. You’re producing small-minded people in your system of education. That’s how I feel. Even for us. Cause we don’t know either. You can just see all the youth with their Native pride tattoos, but like, ask them, “What does that mean to you?” And they don’t have a good answer for that. They don’t have a clear answer about what that means. We need to teach about how beautiful our culture and our language are.

I think that’s probably the thing to solve.
An Introduction to Amanda: Meeting the “Good Student”

I just wanted to succeed to like prove everyone wrong. What do you mean by that? Can you elaborate?
By the time I entered high school I could see that people, that teachers, didn’t really expect much from First Nation students. … But they did for me. I was different.

I caught my first glimpse of Amanda as she entered the September information session with a friend. With her long black hair, tall frame, and attentive, focused eyes she was not someone you would miss in a crowd. She wanted to participate in this study, and over the next several months we communicated frequently over email to schedule times to meet. Amanda thought I would be interested in her story because I was interested in success stories. For her, sharing her story wasn’t about success despite obstacles such as racism, isolation, and low expectations which she believed many First Nations students experience. For her it was about “proving everyone wrong”.

From early on, it became apparent that Amanda’s busy schedule would not permit her to attend the sharing circles that I hoped to host. Not only was her second year of the Bachelor of Nursing program packed with heavy courses, she had clinical practice hours, and was also scheduled to speak at several conferences over the next few months. In fact, shortly after we met, and before we’d had a chance to book a time for our first research conversation, I saw Amanda speak at the New Brunswick Department of Education’s 2nd Provincial Summit in First Nations Education. She was there as a youth panelist, and she spoke calmly and proudly as she recounted many of her educational experiences and achievements. I remember being awed by her, and greatly looked forward to meeting with her one-on-one.
The day of our first interview in late November I nervously awaited her arrival in my office. We had been scheduled to meet the week prior in a lounge-like room in the building, which I had booked over a week in advance, but at the last minute Amanda had been unable to make it. We had just confirmed our meeting this afternoon two days prior. I offered to meet her somewhere else, but she said it was easy for her to come up the hill to this building after her last class ended. So I was waiting in my office, thinking about the implications of having our conversation here.

Amanda arrived, all bundled up in a warm winter jacket, scarf and hat to protect her from the cold November wind. I welcomed her, and as she took off her outerwear and hung them on the hooks just inside the door, I gestured to the large office space including a meeting nook, fridge, microwave, and expansive windows, and asked,

Do you feel ok meeting here?
Yeah. It’s perfectly fine.

But even as I was asking her, I suddenly knew she wouldn’t respond otherwise. At any rate, she made herself comfortable in a large cushioned chair and helped herself to a bottle of water I had put out. I decided to set my apprehensions aside.

During the informed consent process, I learned that Amanda was 23 years old, had grown up in a Mi’kmaq community in Eastern New Brunswick where she was surrounded by extended family, and had graduated high school in June 2007; more than five years prior, at the time of our meeting. Since then, she had attended another University for a Transition program, and then came to UNB to pursue her degree in Nursing. Equipped with this basic demographic information, I asked if she had any questions for me. She couldn’t think of any. With the digital audio recorder running,
Amanda narrated her life in relation to school for me. She began at the beginning, but moved fleetingly over most of her experiences and in only a few instances told lengthier, more detailed stories. When she finished after only 12 minutes, we went back in, exploring sections and segments more deeply, not in any sort of pre-determined order but according to pressing questions I had jotted down and Amanda’s spontaneous recall of additional stories or details.

While we talked, I began to see how Amanda’s stories of school were nestled within stories of family and community, and were not necessarily as straightforward as Amanda initially let on.

* * * *

**I Remember Always Being Smarter: Amanda’s story of Family Dynamics**

I have four brothers. Justin, he’s two years older than me and was always two years ahead of me, until high school. Then he started *slipping*, and we were in a few of the same classes. He didn’t like that much. He stayed for about two weeks after that and then left. Didn’t come back to school. He probably felt weird having his younger sister in his class. I also have three younger brothers, Troy, Jason and Bryan. Troy’s only two years younger than me, but then Jason and Bryan are 2 and 5 years younger than him, so we didn’t really grow up together, you know what I mean? Troy never finished grade 7. He failed a few classes, then he got kicked out halfway through the school year. When he went back they wouldn’t put him ahead a grade, which really pissed him off, so he acted up and got kicked out again. That happened a few times. Finally he would have been, like, *seventeen* going into grade 8! Or something stupid like that. So he just didn’t bother to continue with school.

Growing up, it wasn’t a big deal to me that they dropped out of school. I knew they didn’t like it. That wasn’t something they saw in their future, I guess. It wasn’t really a big *thing*. 
Like, seriously, my grandmother, my mom’s mom, had 12 kids, and probably only three or four graduated high school. Maybe five… maybe. Not a lot. And out of those, I think two went to University and only one finished. So it wasn’t a big deal in my family. It wasn’t a big thing to graduate in my community, either. Up until the year I graduated, there were only ever a handful of people finishing high school. Like, five was the most ever. I don’t know what was up with my class, but there were fifteen people from my community that graduated that year! It was huge. They had this big dinner for us, with an awards ceremony and everything. Everyone got gift cards, presents, some people got scholarships. I got a bursary for $1000! They really honoured us and made us feel really great, really proud of what we had accomplished. It was such big deal to have 15 students graduate.

Since then, a lot of younger students are following suit. A lot more are graduating. My younger brothers, they’ve had some problems with school, but they might graduate. They might. Jason, he’s 19 now so he should have graduated already, but he’s still trying. Bryan, he’s only 16. So maybe. …

When I questioned her about why she thought her experiences in school were so different than her brother’s, she was quick to respond “Somehow I think I just grew up smarter than them.” But then she paused, thinking, “I don’t know. I don’t know if, maybe, I was treated differently going to school. …”

My dad, well, my stepdad, he always used to read to me when I was really little. And my aunts, too. Even when my cousins and I were playing, we would be reading, and doing puzzles, stuff like that. I always had some book with me. But my brothers… I don’t remember seeing
them with books too much. I think they just preferred to play cards and cars and play outside, stuff like that.

My mom definitely treated me differently than my brothers. I was much more sheltered as a child. I wasn't allowed to go hang out on the reserve with other kids, so I didn’t really interact with other kids my age in the community, just with my cousins and stuff like that. Who all lived on my street, or the next one over. We kind of lived on the outskirts, away from the rest of the people, in a secluded area of the reserve. Which was all my family. So it wasn't easy for me to go and hang out with friends. But my brothers, they were allowed to do what they wanted, hang out where they wanted, with who they wanted. I was jealous of them a lot. I wanted to be able to go and do stuff too. At the time, I didn’t understand why I couldn’t.

Now I see it as a good thing.

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A Second Meeting

Our second interview took place almost three months later, in mid-February. This time we had agreed to meet at the campus library. When I arrived in the foyer, I scanned the crowd gathered near the entrance way spilling into the common area—a public meeting space filled with tables and chairs of various heights and varying degrees of comfort, along with a coffee shop—looking for Amanda. It was fairly busy this Friday afternoon. Perhaps the lunch crowd was still lingering. We weren’t actually scheduled to meet for over half an hour, but I had received an email from Amanda sent on her smart phone about 20 minutes earlier asking if we could meet sooner. She wanted to go to the gym with a friend after our interview, and her friend had to work that evening. As it turned out, I was working in my office, somewhat uncommon for a Friday, and was able to accommodate her request. But where was Amanda? With my
heart pounding a little from rushing to get there, and my eyes rapidly skimming up and
down the rows of tables, I almost missed the tall young woman with the bright red coat
walking right toward me.

Andrea?
Oh! Amanda! I was looking everywhere for you, and I still almost missed you! How
are you?
I’m good. Thanks for being able to come early. I really appreciate it.
No problem. Let me just go see if we can get the key for the meeting room a bit
early, too.

I excused myself to get the key, and luckily the room was currently empty and we could
access it earlier than I had reserved. I returned to Amanda who was waiting near the
coffee shop. “Good news” I said, holding up the key.

Do you want a coffee or tea, or a snack or something before we head down?
No. I have water, and I don’t want to eat or drink too much before working out later.
Thanks though.

We headed downstairs to the meeting room, a small, rather sterile looking space
painted a greyish-white, equipped only with a table, seats for four and a blackboard on
the wall. After sharing a laugh about the décor, I re-explained that the purpose for this
second conversation was to go deeper into her initial interview, so the structure would be
quite different than the first. This time, we both had copies of the initial interview
transcript, segmented into major chronological sections of her schooling experiences, in
front of us. I had flagged certain sections that I wished to explore further, and we read
through these together. After, I asked Amanda additional questions and she was
welcome to share any unprompted clarifications, additional thoughts, or experiences that
surfaced for her while we talked. Over the next hour and half, we immersed ourselves in
Amanda’s stories of school.
Amanda Stories Herself as the Good Student, or Does She?

I started school in my community, Matuwehsuwikuk\(^{39}\), at age three in the Head Start program. I went there until the end of grade 1. I remember catching on to stuff a lot faster than most of my classmates. By grade one I was reading the *thicker* books, chapter books, and everybody was still on those little *tiny* books with, like, six pages in them. Well, not quite everyone. There were a few other girls who were reading at a higher level, too. Each day when it was reading time, the teacher would put us, like three or four of us, in a different part of the class, in the *back*. She kind of treated us differently, giving us little treats and praising us a lot. I guess she was trying to be encouraging.

I didn't really *fit* in at that school, though. I didn't really interact with a lot of the other students. I didn't *click* with them, I guess. I had a few friends, and I did my work and stuff, but I just didn't *feel right* in that school. I just couldn't… maybe I was just really, *really shy*, maybe I just didn't *bloom* until later, but it just didn't suit me. I didn’t like going to that school.

We had different teachers throughout the day, teaching different subjects, you know? A few of them were really nice, but some of them just *weren’t*. Some were *so* strict, and they were *always yelling*. Someone was always getting sent to the principal's office, and getting detention, stuff like that. Every day was *chaotic*. Kids were always talking, throwing things, not paying attention, and talking back, and then the teachers were always really mean and stern. They just… they didn't really have *time* to give everyone *equal* treatment, I guess. They were too busy. I felt a bit invisible there. I didn't like that school *at all*.

Once I left, I was *glad*.

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\(^{39}\) Matuwehsuwikuk (pronounced Mud-oo -wess-u-week-goog) is a Wolastoqey word meaning “place of the porcupine”.

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There was something in the way that she said that, that she was *glad* to leave, which prickled me, making me ask an uncomfortable question.

Is there any other reason you were glad to leave? Other than what you have already shared?
Yeah. I didn’t *want* to go to the school in the community. I kind of felt like they weren’t really that smart there.

The intensity with which Amanda stated this opinion startled me,

Once you were in high school? Once everybody was together again? Or before?
I felt like that *the entire time* I was going to school.
Even from early on? In grade 1, grade 2?
Yeah. And I guess the adults were *always* talking about it. It was just a general consensus: that school wasn’t a good school and it wasn’t preparing kids for high school. Everyone knew that. They saw it. I’m sure they saw the trend long before I did. So many people failed when they went into grade 9 because they were ill-prepared for it. A *lot* of people I knew failed grade 9. I’m not sure if they just made everything easier there, or if they were pushing people through, or they were just under-resourced and didn’t have time for people, but students weren’t learning as much as they should have been. I think that’s why so many people started leaving and switching to the public school in Taylor.

She paused, (I imagine) envisioning her first school in her head.

The community school burned down a few years ago. So now Matuwehsuwikuk has this brand-new fancy school. And it’s a *really* good school. It’s widely *recognized* as a really good school, now. They have breakfast and lunch programs, and students are healthier and doing better overall. But *then*, they didn’t have a lot of *resources* and stuff. It was pretty bare bones. It really wasn’t a great school.

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In grade 2, Justin, my older brother, and I, went to school in Taylor. I think it was just us that year. I’m not sure. Over the next couple of years a lot of people from my community transferred there, but the year I went there weren’t many. There were probably less than ten First Nations students in the entire school. But that didn’t bother me; I made new friends easily.
Justin didn’t stay at Taylor Elementary very long. He ended up going to back to the Matuwehsuwikuk school. I don't know why. … I think something happened. But I was the only one from my family going there after that.

Taylor was about half an hour from Matuwehsuwikuk, but on the school bus it would be more like 45 minutes. Our stop was just one along the route to the school. There was really only one other public school in the area, and it was French. So pretty much all the English people would go to the public school in Taylor. Still, it was a really, really small school. And we had really small classes. There were only 10, maybe 15 people in your class who were in your grade, so they combined grades.

I didn't really like that school either. It was just… it was just different, I guess. They didn’t have much of anything there, either. They didn’t even have a gym! It wasn't really a good school at all. A few years later it was actually condemned. They had to move their school somewhere else. I was glad I only went there for a year.

Her words, “they didn’t have much of anything” and “it was actually condemned” hung in the air like thick fog, gradually giving way to the morning light as I began to understand. Both of the schools Amanda attended in her earliest years as a student were small and operating without many “resources”. Perhaps this is the reason why, to Amanda, at least in her memory, they weren’t “good schools”?

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I switched schools again for grade 3. This time I went into the City. I remember taking the bus for over an hour the first day, all the while feeling excited and nervous. There was another girl, Nancy, from Matuwehsuwikuk that I’d been in the same classes with before I switched to Taylor, so we sat together while we waited to get there. Finally, we pulled up to this
huge school. I’d never seen anything like it. It was all greyish stone, four stories tall and it had so many windows; it was like it was watching us with a hundred eyes. It was so big. Nancy and I got off the bus and just stood there, staring back. Eventually we followed the other students inside, but we didn’t even know where we were going! It was nerve-racking.

Luckily a teacher found us standing near the entrance and showed us the way to our class. There we met our grade 3 teacher, Mrs. Ryan. She was so nice! She welcomed us, and really paid a lot of attention to us. I remember she was so approachable. If I was ever stuck on something, I always felt comfortable asking for her help and she would always spend time with me. All the teachers I had there were really welcoming. They were so friendly and encouraging, and they were really interested in what I was doing, how I was doing, stuff like that. They just really cared.

I finally felt like I fit at school. I liked that school so much more than the other two. It was so much better there. The students were nicer, friendlier, and I interacted a lot more. It was easy to make friends with everybody. It wasn’t cliquey or anything. Everyone kind of hung out together. I felt like I belonged for the first time.

Plus, it was a much nicer school. The gym had a big stage at one end, with a curtain and everything. We even had a cafeteria. Since it was a bigger school, there were more activities going on and the teachers really tried to get you involved in things. I got more involved when I was in that school. We actually had a music class there, and a choir extracurricularly. That was a big thing. I was never great… ok, I sucked at singing! But you were in a choir so no one can really hear you! It was so much fun. I also tried soccer and running, but I sucked at those too. But I just loved playing! I wasn’t into competitive sports, or things like that, but I really liked being able to try all those different things. I was always excited for lunchtime so we could go sing, or run, or play, or whatever I was into at the time. We couldn’t do much after school because we had to take the bus home, but we did a lot at lunch time.
Most of my friends there, all lived in the City. There were probably just a handful of First Nations students in the whole school. By grade 5, there were more people from my community attending, but mostly I just hung out with kids from the City. And we were all excelling.

That’s what I remember the most: I always did really well in school. By grade 3 or 4, everyone knew I was really good in math, which was both good and bad. It was nice to be recognized, but if my teacher asked a question and nobody wanted to answer, they’d know I knew what they were talking about, and they’d single me out a lot. They’d always ask me, “Amanda, do you have the answer to this?” “What did you get for this, Amanda.” And that wasn’t great… but I did know the answers!

When she came to this natural lull, I reflected on the fact that this public school had been a safe and positive place for Amanda growing up. What a different experience she’d had in comparison with Yvonne and Emily. As if reading my mind, Amanda continued.

I’ve heard a lot of other people’s stories, about experiencing racism and stuff, even in elementary school, but it wasn’t like that for me. I never felt intimidated, or isolated, or anything at Cityview. I loved that school. I did really great there.

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Amanda continued her story, describing her middle school experiences in positive terms, despite being separated from many of her friends who went into French immersion and were “completely secluded” from the rest of them. Particularly of note, as Amanda talked I learned that middle school was the only time she learned about Mi’kmaq culture in school, with the exception of her earliest years in Matuwehusuwikuk.
Mrs. Stewart, my grade 7 social studies teacher, she was awesome. She was just newly teaching then. For some reason the regular teacher, Mr. Whitfield, was gone for the entire semester, and she came in as a substitute. I loved her. There were about 30 of us in that class. Like, there were four grade 7 classes there, plus at least two French immersion groups, with 30 in each class! And there were only like, 3 or 4… maybe 5, First Nations students in our class. But Mrs. Stewart had a lot of interest in First Nations people, and she completely changed the curriculum so she could teach us about First Nations culture and stuff. Like, she added to the curriculum. Basically she made us go through all the regular curriculum really quickly.

Everything was in modules and we would just read a chapter, answer questions, do a little project, and then that section would be done. It was pretty straight forward stuff, so it didn’t take anybody that long to complete a module. But it wasn’t like we were just speeding through it, we had to really read and research stuff in order to answer the questions. It was a really good way for us to learn. We ended up finishing the entire curriculum in the first half of the semester. After that, she added her own stuff about First Nations culture.

It never seemed like a big deal, then. It was just like, “We’re going to talk about Canadian people. This is where Canadian people came from. This is where Canada started from.” So naturally we talked about First Nations people. We talked about how they were hunter-gatherers, and how they used to live, stuff like that. What I remember most is that she really focused on the local Mi’kmaq communities, including mine, and the history of the area. That was really cool. She even made us learn to spell the names of the communities in Mi’kmaq. Those were hard spelling tests!

As we laughed about the difficulty of spelling Mi’kmaq community names for English speaking people, a question came to my mind.

Do you remember how learning this material made you feel at the time?
It wasn’t really… it wasn’t really a big deal. Back then, I didn’t see the *bigger* picture. I remember that Mrs. Stewart told us she was going out of her way to teach us about First Nations, so we knew we were learning something *different*. But I didn’t really see the big picture, the *value*, in her teaching us all of that. I just thought it was *really cool* we were learning about Native people, and talking about my community in class. I will never forget that class. It has always stuck out to me. She wasn’t even Native, she was just *interested*. She was a *great* teacher.

In addition to this formal learning opportunity, Amanda also talked about opportunities to learn about Mi’kmaq arts and crafts *after* school during her first two years of middle school.

When we first started middle school, in grade 6, the day would end at two o’clock. But we shared a school bus with the high school, and their day didn’t end until three o’clock, so we had an hour to kill. The teachers, they scheduled different *events* and stuff like that, after school. You could play sports, or paint in the art room, or play music if you wanted. There was a variety of things every day, and you could choose where you wanted to go.

There was this First Nations guidance counselor there, Mrs. Marshall. I never saw her during school, but after school she would hold First Nations events in her office. I didn’t always go there, because I went to *everything*. It was a time to socialize, kind of like going to lunch, so I’d just go wherever my friends were going. But she would always announce on her door what she was going to be doing after school. So on our way to art class, we would always check out the sign on her door as we walked by. If she was doing crafts after school, like, making dreamcatchers, doing beading lessons, stuff like that, we’d always go. You *wanted* to go those days.

It was weird because that ended up changing by the time we were in grade 8. They ended up adding the hour back, and extending the day until three-o’clock. I don’t know why.
They just added a couple minutes to every class, made the breaks longer. It wasn’t really a big deal for me, but all of those activities just stopped. I’m not even sure if that guidance counsellor was still there after that. …

Storying herself and her friends as students who continued to thrive and excel in all subject areas, I gradually began to imagine that by the time middle school was over, Amanda’s sense of identity was firmly ensconced in being an “A” student.

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When we arrived at her transition to grade 9, Amanda paused and shifted in her seat.

Taking a deep breath, she continued.

High school, um… it was different. It was scary… and it was exciting. It was both scary and exciting for you? Switching to the high school? Yeah, cause you want to go to high school. You’re excited to go. But…

But?
But then you get there and it’s just… well, it’s a completely different dynamic than middle school, and it was just… it was really overwhelming, I guess. I don’t know, I didn’t like high school. I mean, it was fun. I had some fun times and stuff like that. … But everything was really different in high school.

Central high school, it… well, for starters, it was huge. That’s where everybody had to go to high school. Everyone from all the public middle schools, and that’s when everyone came from the school in Matuwehsuwikuk, too. There were almost a thousand students going there!

In middle school, I really felt like I fit in, but this… well, this was a different school. With different people. So I ended up making a lot of new friends at Central. It wasn't always for the best either.

I remember this one girl, Tina, she was in a lot of my classes in grade 9 and we became close friends. I remember thinking early in the year that she must have just come to the high
school from another middle school, and then I was really surprised to learn later on that she was actually my brother’s age. Like, she was supposed to be in grade 11 but she’d failed a few times, so she was still in grade 9 classes. And I remember that seemed really weird to me, because I wasn’t used to people failing. When I was in middle school, people didn’t get held back. Plus, everyone I hung out with was doing really well in middle school. So I guess that really surprised me. I didn’t really understand why anyone would fail.

But Tina and I were paired up to work together a few times, and we had a lot of classes together, so we just kind of started hanging out. She was almost 17, and I was only 14, so, to me, it was just like a whole different world hanging out with her. I kind of got caught up in it for a while.

I remember in grade 9 English, Tina, and maybe two or three other students who were older, were all in that one class. And since they were older it seemed cool and exciting to hang out with them. Eventually, they started being like, “Oh, you don’t have to go to class. Let’s just go.” At first I was scared. Before, I would not have skipped class for anything! But they knew how to get away with it. They’d say, “Come on. I do it all the time.” And I got caught up in that a little bit. I was 14, I wanted to fit in, and it was exciting! It was fun to just go with Tina and her friends, hang out somewhere cool, and not go to class.

Recalling the pressure to “fit in” during my own high school years, I could empathize with Amanda’s changing behavior.

So grade 9 was a really big change for you?”
Yeah. Suddenly there was a lot of alcohol and drugs going around. I did not like it all. But I got caught up in it. I think a lot of people did.
We suddenly had more freedom, so people took advantage of it. When you’re 14 years old you succumb to peer pressure pretty easily. And there was a lot of pressure to skip classes and to party. Those were the cool things to do.

You could see that a lot of people weren’t really doing that well. You could see it. People just going downhill, skipping more and more classes. I’m pretty sure a lot of people failed grade 9. A lot of my friends were failing. None of my close friends, but friends from my classes. The next year they weren’t in my classes anymore. It really shocked me, seeing people fail. I didn’t understand. I remember asking myself, “Why would they fail? It’s so easy?” Because it was easy for me. Even though I started missing some classes here and there, school just came easy to me. I’ve never failed a grade or even come close. I know people that struggle in math, people that struggle in writing. All of that just came for me. It wasn’t hard. It wasn’t a chore.

Plus, I feel like teachers really expected way more from you in grade 9 than they did in middle school. And that drove me. I got involved too. I was involved in student council, stuff like that. Somehow, despite everything, grade 9 was actually my best year.

Thinking about all of the pieces in Amanda’s story of transitioning to high school, I had the sudden urge to ask about her friend.

What happened to Tina?
I’m not totally sure what happened to her. I remember her being around all the time in grade 9 and 10, and then… I just think I passed and she failed again. So we weren’t really friends after that. I’m not sure when exactly, but I think she ended up just not coming to school anymore. Dropped out. I don’t think she graduated. We just kind of grew apart.

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At one point in our conversations regarding her high school experiences, Amanda surprised me by reintroducing a familiar character: Mrs. Stewart, her grade 7 social studies teacher.

Mrs. Stewart ended up working at the high school when I was there, too. I think she was some kind of First Nations resource teacher, or something, because she taught a class—a level three class—for First Nation students who were really struggling in school. I’m not even sure if it was a subject or if she just gave extra help, but there were always at least 15 people in her class, and they were all First Nations.

I remember I so wanted to be in that class! Mrs. Stewart was one of the best teachers, she was so fun and cool, and you always felt good around her because she was really nice. She was so involved in the school, too. She taught, she was the girls’ volleyball coach, she helped with student council—that’s when I mostly saw her. Plus, her class, it was kind of glamorized. They would have food in there all time, like big breakfasts and pizza parties, stuff like that. A lot of people I knew were in it, so I’d always hear “Oh, we had so much fun in Mrs. Stewart’s class today!” If I walked by, I could usually see in the door, it just looked more informal than other classes. It was smaller, so she did a lot more one-on-one work with them. Everyone loved her, and at the end of the term, she would buy everyone gifts. It looked like the best class ever.

But even though I wished I could be in her class, I never got to. Because I was doing good in school.

Listening to her describe this class, a class that she was never even a part of, I could picture Amanda walking down the hallway of her school, pausing to watch Mrs. Stewart, a teacher she knew and loved, work with a room full of other First Nations students through the doorway. How confused she must have felt to both want to be part
of that class and yet not want to be. Although I felt fairly certain of the answer I would receive, I didn’t want to assume, so I asked:

There wasn’t anything offered like that at level two?
No. I never got to take anything like that.
It was seen as a course specifically for First Nations who were not doing well academically and needed extra support?
Yeah. [pausing] You know, I didn't really have First Nations people in my classes. First of all, there wasn’t that many Native people at my high school. Now, there’s at least 200, I think. Like, a good percentage of the school are First Nations people. But then there wasn’t that many. Plus, the classes I took, they weren’t in them. I mean, there was maybe one or two. But that was it. My classes were just normal. I was in level two classes and doing really good in school, and they were mostly in level three classes. [pausing] I didn’t really understand it at the time. I just felt jealous that they got to be in Mrs. Stewart’s class, and I didn’t. Now I get it. Now I would not want to be in that class. It’s not like I should have dumbed myself down to be in her class. But back then, I was definitely jealous.

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I remember in grade 11, I thought I wanted to be lawyer. And thank goodness I took a co-op course where I got to work in a courthouse, because I hated it! I changed my mind really quickly. After that, I thought I was going to be an accountant or a businessperson, something like that. So I decided not to take any science classes in grade 11, except chemistry, because… well, I think I had to take at least one. By grade 12 though, I realized I didn’t like accounting. It wasn’t that the classes were difficult, they were just boring to me. So then I had to take almost all the science classes—like two physics, two biology, grade 12 chemistry—along with math, calculus, English, everything like that, in grade 12! But the way it worked was they only had one class for physics, for chemistry, whatever, offered each semester. And they were switched. The grade 12 course was offered in the first semester, grade 11 was in the second semester. So I had to do a few of them, including physics, online.
Wondering what it must have been like doing grade 11 and 12 physics online, by herself, I interjected:

So you could just do those courses from home?
No. I still had to go to school to do the online courses. You could do a lot of the reading and stuff when you were at home, but you had to go to class to do all the quizzes and tests and stuff.
Okay. So it was still a requirement that you would go to the school to do them?
Yeah.

I listened as she continued to describe the online courses that she took.

Basically during one period we’d have the online course, and there would be 10, 20 people in your class doing all different subjects. Some people were doing physics, some people were doing Mi’kmaq, some people were doing biology, Spanish, Info-tech, anything that was offered. We would all be in that one classroom, working on our own computers. You’d just read, and then there would be some online games or stuff that you would do, maybe watch some videos, do your homework, and then you’d just ask to do the test. There was just this random teacher sitting there, who didn’t really know anything, but she had to set the quizzes and tests for us. You couldn’t access them until she put the codes in.

It was definitely easier than going to an actual class. You could work at your own pace. Do whatever you want. Sometimes, we would just hang out the whole class. We did that a lot actually. Just kind of did nothing. Until we realized we only had a few weeks left and we had, like, half of the course to finish. Then we’d be like “Okay, maybe we should do it!” And we did. Pretty much finished everything in the last two weeks. But it was still easy.

For me, it really helped having that option to do those courses online. I mean, I had other in-class courses too, and I passed everything and got accepted into University, but… things weren’t always good. Those online courses are probably why I didn't fail, actually.

* * * * *
By grade 11, when I was 16, school just wasn’t my priority anymore. I was more focused on hanging out with my friends, fitting in, and going out. I was hanging out with more people from my community then, and there was always a party to go to. So I kind of fell into the drinking and drug scene a little bit. That was the cool thing to do. And it was fun. That scene was exciting when I was in high school. And school wasn’t exciting. I didn’t really care about school. So I started skipping more and more.

My mom must have noticed it because I lived with her. It was just her, me and my brothers at that point. But she didn't really care. She didn’t make me go to school and I wouldn't get in trouble for missing. She wouldn't be that person who pushed me to do my homework and to excel. She didn't really push me to do anything. She just wasn't there for me.

Recalling how she had talked about her mother previously, how she had protected her and sheltered her as a child, I sensed that something had changed.

Prior to this point, how was your support from your mom?
Prior to that, she was really supportive. In early high school, middle school and elementary school, she really was. …

She would always make my lunches in the morning and wake me up for school. Even the days I didn’t want to go, and I sat there whining, pretending to be sick, she wouldn’t have any of it. She’d always make me go to school. And she would make sure that I had all my homework done and everything. I was pretty self-motivated—I still am—so I would do my homework on my own, but she was always paying attention. She helped me a lot, too, if I ever had any questions. She was really helpful. She was interested, and she’d get really excited when I did well. She would praise me and make me feel like I really accomplished something. But she was always careful not to overly praise me because my brothers weren't doing so well, and she never
wanted to rub it in. Well… sometimes she would be like, "You should be more like Amanda!" If she was mad at them. But mostly she just tried her best to be supportive of all of us.

I don't really know when everything changed. By the time I was 16, we weren’t my mom’s top priority anymore. Things were going on in her life, and she didn’t really care about what was going on in ours. That’s how it felt. She was rarely around, and when she was we would always end up fighting. She didn’t care; so I stopped caring. I wasn’t trying to excel anymore.

Amanda spoke calmly while she relayed this part of her story, speaking in an almost removed, matter-of-fact manner that struck me. At the same time, there was an underlying intensity that made me think this change had been a major turning point in Amanda’s life. Worried that this might be too much for her, I hesitantly asked:

You alluded to things going on in your mom’s life, do you think these things were the cause for the change in the relationship. What do you remember about the time when this started to change?”

[Inhaling deeply] It seemed like all of sudden she just didn’t really pay close attention. I see now that it was more gradual. That she was there less and less for me. I also know, now, that she was in an abusive relationship for a long time. Over ten years. He was really controlling of her, what she did, who she hung out with, everything. So, it was just… it was hard on her. Now, because of my schooling and being a health professional, well, in training, I can see the emotional distress that she must’ve been in, and how that probably made her detach from her children. But then, it seemed like she just didn’t care about us.

In grades 11 and 12, I think I missed almost every Friday. I just decided “It’s almost the weekend. Who wants to go to school on a Friday?” I didn’t want to go, so I just stopped going. I would sleep in instead. That was a big part of it actually, sleeping in. Cause we lived far. I had to get up at six o'clock in the morning, to catch the bus at quarter to seven. And I hated getting up that early in the morning! But you're pretty screwed if you missed the bus. No one was going to
drive me for an hour just to go to school! I remember thinking, even if my mom did get mad at me, which she didn’t, “You can’t say anything, because you’re not going to drive me there.”

After a while, my teachers knew if it was a Friday, I wasn’t coming.

I missed so much school. Honestly, I missed so much school in grades 11 and 12 that sometimes I don’t even know how I graduated. Thankfully I was still really smart, and I caught onto the material we were learning really quickly. And I still did my work. Days I skipped, I would be like, “Ok, I'm not going to school, but I can study for Math.” Or English, or whatever I needed to study for. I would do homework and I would always hand in my assignments. I never, ever skipped out on a test. I always made sure I was there for tests. And it worked. I missed a ton of classes, but I still got A’s. Well… maybe one or two B’s, but mostly A’s. Because of that, I don’t think my teachers really cared that I missed.

Hearing her state, “I don’t think my teachers really cared that I missed” startled me.

Allowing this statement to sink in, it gradually dawned on me,

You never got in trouble for missing all those days?
No. They must have liked me, because I never got in trouble for it. Which is… I don’t know. I don’t really understand. I just think they didn’t really care that I was missing classes, they just cared about how I was doing in class. And I was doing good. I think that was the key. I was doing good in school and I was still a really good kid.
And no one ever said anything to you? Asked you why you were missing so many days?
Well, they would be like, “You know, you should really come back. You should come to school more often. You're doing so good.” But as far as asking why I was missing… I don’t really remember. I think if they had, I probably would have just brushed it off like everything was fine.
And presumably because you were still keeping up and doing well in school, it seemed liked it didn’t bother your teachers that you were skipping at least one day a week? Sometimes more?
Yeah, exactly.
My inner bewilderment must have shown in my body language, or perhaps Amanda could sense that I was hesitant to probe deeper. At any rate, she continued to explain.

Because there were other students I knew who had the same number of absences but they weren’t doing so well, and they got kicked out of classes when they came back. Some got suspended from school, the whole works. But I never even got in trouble. Instead, they really encouraged me to come to class more and motivated me to stay on top of my coursework. They pushed me, and it helped a lot.

Wow.
Yeah. They definitely treated other people differently. I often wonder how that made people feel. From what I remember, they didn’t really pay any attention to them. … But maybe it’s also because I was never a troublemaker and teachers saw that in me? They were never going to kick me out. I see that now.

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By the time the grade 12 school year started, my older brother Justin and I were living alone at our house. My mom took my younger brothers and moved in with her boyfriend. In the beginning, she was only gone a couple nights a week. That was ok. It was kind of fun actually. I was 17 and Justin was 19, and what teenagers don’t like having the house to themselves? We had parties at our house every weekend! But eventually she just never really came back. Like, she would buy us food and fill the fridge—she didn’t leave us to fend for ourselves—but she basically just left us alone.

I remember feeling like we were capable of taking care of ourselves, but… I don’t know. I wouldn’t go to school! Justin, he wasn’t even in school anymore. By then he’d failed and dropped out. So I didn’t have any social support around me to push me to finish high school. And I was always drinking and partying with my friends. All the time. But I was still passing, and my marks were good enough to get into University, so I don’t think anyone at school thought anything was wrong at all.
Curious to know if her truancy rate had climbed even higher in grade 12, I carefully inquired,

So were you still missing a day a week at this point? Or would you say more? I would say a day or two. Yeah. Sometimes two days a week. Which... sometimes I just don’t understand how I even graduated! But then I did have a few online courses, so I didn’t have to be there, in class, everyday. Do you think that if you hadn’t had that option, to do them online, that you wouldn’t have been able to graduate? Umm... I don’t know. I wouldn’t have been able to take physics, that’s for sure. And they were definitely more convenient for me. It really helped having those courses online, but I catch on to things easily... so I don’t know.

Pausing, Amanda looked at me contemplatively.

Thinking about it now, that year was bad. No, it was horrible. No wonder I really didn’t care about school at that time of my life. What do you think kept you going as much as you did? Even when school wasn’t my priority, I knew... I knew that I wanted to go to University. I always knew I didn’t want to just stay in my community. I knew I didn’t want that for myself. And I had those teachers to motivate me to continue going to school, and tell me “Oh, you're doing really well in school, and you could go so far.” They talked to me about University programs and stuff, and all the things I could potentially do. They were really encouraging, and stuff like that. And I went right away, the Fall after I graduated. When I was 18. Moving away wasn’t even a big deal for me, since I was already used to living on my own. But at the time, in high school, I just figured, “I’ll do it anyway. I can have fun, skip school, do whatever, and I’ll still do it.” It was always on my mind, but it just wasn't my top priority.
An Introduction to Eden: Meeting a Blond-haired, Green-eyed Native

I was excited yet apprehensive as I waited in my office for Eden to arrive. After many emails, and many scheduled and rescheduled interview times, we had agreed to meet here, in the afternoon on November 14, 2012. As I waited, in part trying to calm my nerves and in part readying myself for our meeting, I recalled how I had met Eden, the impact she had made on me, and our many email communications that led to that afternoon.

My first glimpse of Eden occurred when she arrived at the information session I hosted to invite students to participate in this study. Her entry was notable because she arrived with only 10 minutes remaining. She also took me totally by surprise. It wasn’t her late entrance that surprised me, she had actually sent an email in response to the announcement that had been circulated to all Aboriginal students on campus to indicate she was interested in attending, but had a conflict in her schedule and would only be able to get there after 12:45pm. So I had been expecting her around that time. What surprised me about Eden was that she appeared White. Very White. She wore a pink toque, but her shoulder length blond hair peeked out from underneath. Hidden yet still visible. I hid my own surprise and finished the info session, taking questions from the rest of the students present. After the session concluded I introduced myself to Eden, shaking her hand, and thanked her for coming. Since we only had a short amount of time until her class would be starting in that very room, I filled her in as much as I could, gave her the information sheet, and said we could speak more by email. I also asked if she had any questions for me. She hesitated and seemed a bit uncomfortable, shifting her weight from foot to foot, but gave me her contact info, saying she would be interested in
learning more about the project and that it sounded like something she would like to participate in. I was thrilled, smiled and thanked her for interest.

That afternoon, I couldn’t stop thinking about Eden. I hadn’t expected someone like her to walk in that day, and the prospect of her participation in this research intrigued and excited me. Eden forced me to begin questioning my assumptions about what First Nations students look like, and from that day forward my perception was forever changed.

When I started emailing potential participants a few days later regarding possible dates and times to hold our first sharing circle, I was a bit surprised when I didn’t hear back from Eden. Then I happened to see her in person on campus. We only spoke briefly, but it was enough of an incentive for me to email her one more time. I provided the schedule for the sharing circle, told her I had really appreciated her enthusiasm about the project when we first spoke, and hoped she was still interested in being involved.

This time, she responded right away:

______________________________________________________________

From: Eden
Subject: Re: Research Opportunity: Stories from the Circle
Date: 10/1/12
To: Andrea

It sounds like a great project. I didn't actually get a whole idea of what it is really about, how it is all going to work/come together in the end? I know we are discussing how it was being an Aboriginal student in high school... (but) not being a full Native, I did not really get special attention, nor put down, however I did get told I wasn't Native or shouldn't have privileges/rights as Natives do and (that) I should not classify myself as one. I also felt Aboriginal students thought the same as the non-Aboriginal students—that I shouldn’t classify myself as Native, being so little…

Not sure if that’s what you’re looking for? … My story would probably be much different then others, haha, (so) not sure if my story would be the kind of thing you’re
looking for, for your study? I feel this study is more about how it was to learn in high
school being Aboriginal, and people telling them they couldn't get through school type
of thing.

Thanks, Eden

I include this email, with permission from Eden, because it really incited me to
rethink the purposes for this work. I hadn’t thought through the ‘implications’ of hearing
from students’ who were ‘part-Native’ versus ‘full-Native’, about how their stories and
experiences might differ, and this new opportunity excited me. Also, I found her email
to be loaded with assumptions about what the project was about, some of which I had
encountered before. Many times while speaking with friends, colleagues, teachers,
family members about my work, I frequently left the conversation feeling that people
thought this work would be all about the problems that Aboriginal students face,
including this notion of “people telling them they couldn’t get through school”. From the
beginning, this work has been about countering stereotypes, and dispelling automatic
assumptions, and this strengthened my desire to include this young woman whom I felt,
in my gut, could offer a different and unique perspective.

I replied:

From: Andrea
Subject: Re: Research Opportunity: Stories from the Circle
Date: 10/2/12
To: Eden

Hi Eden,

Thank you for your response. And you raise some excellent questions. (Which is to be
expected, since I only spoke with you for about 5 minutes at the end of the info
session!).
The aim of the study is simply to hear the stories of students who identify as Mi'kmaq or Wolastoqiyyik (Maliseet) (even partially) regarding their experiences - whatever they were - in school, and how this impacted on them outside of school as well. The only limiting factor is that I am looking to talk with students who graduated high school, or completed their GED through an alternative program - as opposed to students who dropped out and didn't return, or current high school students.

I am not going in assuming or hoping to hear specific types of stories, or only looking for one type of story. Sure there will probably be some stories of struggle, racism, low expectations, but there may also be stories of success, resilience, particularly influential teachers / friends / parents, etc.

I actually think your experiences would be very valuable for both First Nation and non-First Nation teachers (and others) to hear. …

Obviously it is completely up to you. I would love to have you participate. But if you don't feel comfortable, or don't think this is for you, I understand. Also, if you just have more questions or want to meet in person to discuss anything, I would be more than happy to meet with you :)

I hope all is well, and hope to hear from you again.
Andrea

____________________________________________________________________

She replied the next day stating “I’d be glad to be a part of it!”

Although we both originally intended for Eden to come to the first sharing circle event, her schedule did not allow it. Instead, together we decided to meet privately.

Finally the day had come. The location, my office, was agreed upon as she had classes in the building that afternoon and this wouldn’t be out of her way or inconvenient. All the same, I was conscious that we were meeting on ‘my turf’, and this might not be the most equitable or comfortable location for her. However, our multiple attempts to schedule an appointment over the course of the previous month, combined with the convenience factor, outweighed the contextual concerns that I had.
Once she arrived, we settled into the large comfy chairs nestled around a low round table, illuminated by the windows in my office; a side space that felt more like a place to sit and have coffee than a workspace. After some initial pleasantries, Eden and I first read and discussed the letter of informed consent, a necessary step that nonetheless felt, and was, business-like. After this letter had been signed, we proceeded with our first research conversation. Our next two conversations, one which took place in a basement meeting room in the main library on campus—a location chosen due to its proximity with Eden’s other classes and appointments that day—and a follow-up conversation by phone, filled in the details and gave me a deeper understanding of Eden’s experiences.

Although the purpose of our conversation was to explore Eden’s experiences in school, many of the stories she shared centred on her family. On the surface, these family stories seemed separate and distinct from her stories of school, but as I spent time listening and relistening to her audio-recorded interviews, reading and rereading her transcripts, they seemed, to me, to be tightly interwoven.

After many laborious attempts over the course of several weeks to write a concise summary story of the experiences Eden shared, I was dissatisfied. The result was 30 pages of events, some in school, some out of school, without connections or purpose. I was concerned about how many more pages would be added if I continued to work in prose format, adding in the interrelated aspects to construct a more compelling or “emplotted” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p.15) story. I felt I needed to find a way to bring it all together, a way to reduce word count while “illuminating the wholeness and interconnection” (Sparkes, p.113) of Eden’s stories of her life. At this point, I started playing with found poetry, otherwise known as word images, a “highly interpretive
process” (Clandinin, et al, 2006, p.99) resulting in a vivid, poetic representation which demonstrates a temporal sense “of how a participant stories her or himself or a particular experience” (Huber, 2013, p.54). In doing so, I returned, once again to the original transcripts and audio recordings of our conversations, selected Eden’s words, and worked with her rhythms, pauses, and emphases (Butler Kisber, 2002 p. 233) in an attempt to portray her story. The result was the following.

**The Stories of Eden: A Socio-Poetic Collection**

“Why do you want to be Native?” Stories of family and family ties

It’s weird
my mom always asks,
“Why do you want to be Native?”
“Why do you want to be in the culture?”
And, I think…
it all ties back to my Grandfather.
From the moment my mom
told me about my Grandfather.
Everything that I know about him
it’s just stories.
I was told that
he thought I was the last grandchild
he loved me to death
he would ask to babysit me all the time
he would always be holding me
always be singing to me
always be drawing pictures of me.
He wouldn’t leave me.

He passed away before I turned one.

For some reason
my mom always told me
that stuff
and it just made me feel
I wanted to be more Native
or something.
Just to live through him
or live by him.

I guess it was my way
of getting to know him.

I even did a whole project on him
for a heritage fair
in grade 8.

My Grampy was a crazy artist.
He painted
even murals
he would take wood, carve it
they were the best carvings.
He was even inducted into some
Indian Hall of Fame.
But he sold everything to this guy.

Every
single
one
of his artworks.
So I was told.

My Grammy
She married my Grandfather at 15
or something.
She married him super, super, super young.
She was from Ontario.
They met in Ontario
when he was in the army.
He brought her back
and she was the first White woman
on the reserve.

That was a BIG deal.
She used to tell me she was hated by the all Native women they wanted her booted off and called her names.

They had this one room house and she did everything on her own when my Grampy was working.

They had seven children in this home and they were super, super poor. My mom said “I’d be surprised if I even got food on the table.”

My mom and all of them would get into fights with a lot of the Native kids. “You’re not FULL Native!” Because she was part White, part Native.

My mom she didn’t have status for a while because she married my dad. She got her status taken away. She was furious about that. But we won it back.

My mom kind of grew apart from her family when she married my dad because my dad was White upper middle class. She kind of became a bit judgmental of Native people once she got more money and got off the reserve.

But I think my mom likes being Native because she likes telling people she’s Native.

For me, it’s super confusing. I think it’s fascinating the culture. But, I don’t know I feel I’ve just kind of been watching it. I think my whole way of being… of being a Native would have been completely different if my Grampy didn’t pass away.

There are so many questions unanswered.

How they know that we are Native: Stories of appearance

When they were kids my mom and them they were all super dark and they looked super Native. Because my Grandfather, my Grampy, was really, really, really dark. They all look white now it’s like they grew out of it as they got older.

My oldest sister, Leanne dark hair dark complexion dark everything.

My mom’s youngest sister you wouldn’t even guess. Red hair freckles and she’s half Native! It’s super weird.

Me, it doesn’t help that I’m blonde at all. You can tell she has Native in her. When you say she’s Native, “Oh Yeah! I can see it!”
My sister, Heather
dark hair
somewhat dark complexion
big cheeks.
She has green eyes,
like me
but still
“Oh yeah, I can see it.”

And then you look at me “Oh my gosh?”
“Oh? You’re Native?”
“You don’t look Native?”

My mom used to tell me
you could tell I was Native
because of my
big eyes
big lips
big cheeks
big jaws.
My Grampy’s features.

Me and my sister Holly have it the worst.
When we get upset,
our bottom lip just pops
right out.
“Oh! It’s your little Native lip.”
Apparently that is how they know
that we are Native.
I don’t know.

My dad
he just calls us “mutts”
cause we’re just full of
a bunch of different things.
He has a weird sense of humour
he doesn’t mean anything by it.

Me,
I spent like ninety percent of my time
growing up
at my Grammy’s house on the reserve
with all of my cousins.

I didn’t really interact with other Native
kids
just my cousins
and they are all part Native too.
I always liked to go to powwows
and just be like
eyes wide open.
I just loved it.
But the thing is
I remember…
I remember I felt like
I’d be judged.

I remember being a little girl
probably 8 or 9
at a powwow.
There was this pretty, little hair clip
all beaded, with more beads coming down
and I begged my mom for it.
“You sure?”
“Yes! Yes I want it!”
And I wanted to wear it
immediately.
But from the moment
I put it in my hair
literally, from that moment
I felt like I should take it out.
“People are probably wondering
why is that little white girl
wearing a Native clip.”

I still have that clip now
but I don’t remember
ever wearing it out.
I just wore it around my house
and then I’d take it off
when I went out.
Because I didn’t know how people would
react
what they would think.
Obviously they wouldn’t think
I was Native.

---

Not one Native: Stories of elementary school

When I was a little girl
in Elementary School
a new school
just recently built
there was not
one
Native.
There was none.

Only me.

And I was a little blond girl
With big green eyes.

I think teachers knew
that I was Aboriginal.
I think.
It was probably in my records
cause I had my education paid for
by the Chief.
We do a lot of things under
my mom’s old address
my Grammy’s address
for like, all the Native stuff.

We used to have half-a-days
and I always made sure that I hung out
with a friend.
Most of the time we would go
to my Grammy’s
on the reserve.
It was a…
it wasn’t a familiar area of town for them.
You could almost feel a little bit of
tension.

In grade 5
I remember
I got in a fight

with a boy.

It was a stupid game
King and Queen of the Hill
and this boy SHOVED my friend
right in the throat
threw her all the way down!
I was pissed
so I pushed him!
And he punched me
right in the face!
We just had a big brawl
fist fighting.
I had braces
he broke my brackets
cut my mouth up.
My mom got called in
to the school
I was just sitting there.
“What in the hell?”
“What are you doing?”
Sigh, “I don’t know.”
And she starts giggling at me
laughing at me
pee ing her pants laughing
at me!
She thought I was a baby.

She always blamed that on
our background
how Natives stand up for people.
She would always give me
little reasons
for why I was
the way I was.
Stories of middle school

Native groups and SPED

A lot more Natives
the Kilhuswikuk Natives
that’s what I remember.

I don’t know
if they did it on purpose
but every year
my class had all the Native kids in it.
I started being
placed with the Native kids
brought into little Native groups.
We always had a TA
to follow us around
to help us.
They were from Kilhuswikuk too,
and they watch over their kids
like they’re their own
little cubs.

I had Mrs. S for my TA
she was the BEST ever!
Just the sweetest thing.
She knew I was Native
and I think
she knew I liked
being known as a Native.

Sometimes they would just
section us off on the side
in the classroom.
Sometimes we would get pulled out.
We would be in class
the teacher would say
“We are going to do this work.
But, (she would point)
Eden
Dustin
Toby
and
Angela,
you go with Mrs. S.”

So we’d get up
and
go downstairs
to the Native Resources Room
and do our work there.

It was always very random.
When there were more Natives
in my class
we would go more.

And, I LOVED it!
The room was colourful
there was so much Native art
that fascinated me.
I loved my TAs
I loved the kids.
I became friends
with some of the kids.
We always talked there
they always made me laugh.
they were all really good people
and you just saw who they were.

It became one of those things
When we got called down
“Yeah! Awesome!”
cause we didn’t want to be in class
with our teacher
anyways.

But we would be doing the same work
they were doing in class.
We would get a handout.
And honestly,
it was probably a better idea
for them to leave us
in the classroom
because all we did was talk.
We probably would have got more work done in class.

I don’t know why…
I guess they felt that
Native kids needed more help
Native kids needed more one-on-one.
Maybe they thought
Natives kids weren’t smart?

I hadn’t been pulled out of class before
I hadn’t been around many Native students before
so when I was put in there
it was almost like
(not to be rude)
they had a learning disability.

Back then
you called it SPED.
I always kind of thought
a lot of the kids thought
that Native kids got pulled out
because they were stupid.

So when I first got into it
I thought
I was stupid.
I had just switched into English
in grade 5
so I wasn’t very smart at it.
So I thought it was because
I wasn’t as smart as other students.
I didn’t understand.

But then I asked.
My Mom explained
“Oh no, it’s just cause you’re Native
And they want you to be in the same group.”
(I’m sure I could have said
“No, I don’t want to go.
I want to stay in class.”
I’m sure they would have let me.
But whatever
I didn’t really care.)

 Didn’t really fit

Middle school is when I really remember
People looking at me
“You’re Native?”
And having to explain
“Yeah. I’m a quarter.”
“You shouldn’t be classified as a Native.”
“You shouldn’t be getting the credit.”
“You shouldn’t be doing all of this.”

And even though I got pulled out
With all the Native students in my class
I didn’t really fit with them.

One time
in grade 7
my friend, who was also part Native
and I
got called down
to go to the games room.
We walked down the hall

wondering
“What is going on?”
We opened the door
and like 25 Native kids
all from Killhuswikuk
turned
all at once.
Eyes right on us
staring at us.
We just stood there.
“What the hell are you doing here?”
“Who are you guys?”
That’s how I felt.
They invited us to stay
but we didn’t know anybody
didn’t feel comfortable
didn’t feel we were wanted
didn’t feel we belonged.
So we left.
It's super confusing

I remember
a lot of kids were intimidated
by the Native kids
scared of them
thinking they were gonna fight them.

One time
I was a at a basketball game
watching the boys
with my best friend
Brianne.
A few Native girls showed up
one was in high school
and they starting picking on us
wouldn’t leave us alone.
Brianne was very scared
it was written all over her face.
She was nervous
she was in tears
she couldn’t handle it.
Then I told them I was Native
“Oh.”

“Where from?”
“Mahsusuwikuk.”
“Oh.”
They all thought
the worst Natives
the bad Natives
were from Mahsusuwik.

So they stopped.

There were always so many stereotypes.

I was actually friends with the boys
more than the girls.
But for a while
one of the boys
Dustin
he liked me.
I don’t know how he got my number
but he would call my house every night
asking for me.
It was kind of creepy.
And I remember telling my TA
Mrs. S.
She just looked at me
“Don’t you dare go with him.
Don’t you dare go with a Native boy.
You might get more status
but you do not want to be involved in that.
You can do better than that.”
I don’t know why
she was so stern about it.
Especially since she was from
the same community as him.

It’s super confusing.

Heritage fair: Getting to know Grampy

Grade 8
We had a heritage fair.
I could have done my project on anything.
Some people did the railroad
Mr. Dress Up
anything that had to do with heritage.
“Can I do it on my grandfather?
He was old, and he’s a Native?”

Teacher
“Yeah, that would be awesome.”

So I did where he grew up
who his family was
talked about his artwork.
I brought in a big cloak
like my Grandmother would make my mom
before Powwows.
I displayed everything on a big poster board and they were put up everywhere in the school. All over the place.

The school held an event it was a night thing but I wasn’t there. I had a dance show.

The next day at school I was told “You’re a finalist!” There were only 10 of us out of everyone. So we got to present again.

I didn’t win but it was my way of getting to know my Grampy. And it was pretty awesome.

**Starting to hate the whole scene**

Throughout middle school I became really bad for attendance. I would always beg my mom to stay home. I just couldn’t hack a full week of school. I just couldn’t do it.

I started hating the teachers. I hated people being on top of me hovering over me. I hated being talked down to. I hated the drama the kids the girls not liking other girls. I just started hating the whole scene.

So I’d try to skip once a week sometimes twice if I could get away with it. If there was an assembly the next day I’d plead with my mom to stay home. “We’re not going to be in class anyways!” “Okay, if you’re not missing class you don’t need to go.” Or I would wake up and fake sick. If that didn’t work my mom always drove me to school and then would go to my Grammy’s. So I’d fake sick all the way down and I knew the second we got there she would give in “Okay, let’s go to Grammy’s.” I always wanted to go to Grammy’s.

That’s where it all started me getting around stuff me getting out of stuff. I was just really good at it.

**Stories of High School**

I was really excited to go to high school. I knew everybody in grade 12 because of my sister. I wanted to get into the party scene. I did not care about the school stuff. Didn’t even think about it until I got there and realized it might be hard.
Level two all the way through, except...

I was a pretty average student.  
I was always an average student.  
Level two classes  
all the way through.

Except  
Grade 9 math.  
I hated my teacher.  
She was always nice  
to the boys  
and mean, mean, mean  
to the girls.  
I got a C-  
so I got put into a SPED class  
the next year.  
(We still had SPED classes  
but we didn’t get pulled out for them.  
They were level three classes.  
If you failed  
or got less than a C  
you automatically  
got put in SPED.  
No ifs  
ands  
or buts.)

So, Grade 10  
I got put in SPED math.  
You called them SPED  
because (just like in middle school)  
you knew people in there  
weren’t very smart.

As long as I passed

It wasn’t that  
I wasn’t smart.  
I just didn’t go to school.

Grade 9 math  
I missed 26 days  
in one term.

I wasn’t a morning person.  
I wasn’t a socializing person.  
I did not want to talk to people.

I did not want to hear the drama  
about something stupid that happened  
that day.  
I just did not want to be there.  

Cause in High School  
I wasn’t classified as a Native  
not whatsoever.  
I didn’t get the TAs  
or invitations to any Native stuff.
But there were always the comments from kids.
“You’re a Native?”
“You’re not a Native.”
“You’re not a FULL Native.”

As I got older, it wasn’t about being Native or having status. It was about money.

“You shouldn’t classify yourself as Native. You don’t deserve to get that money.”
“You don’t deserve to get taxes taken off.”

Because high school, that’s when kids started knowing more about money, having debit cards, phones, and expenses. And they realized Native people get taxes off, I don’t know where they were hearing it from. Probably their parents.

Surprisingly it wasn’t just White kids. I got it from Natives too. So I was kind of stuck in my own little bubble. Natives would mostly be cool about it but if they knew I was a Weston (And everyone knew who the Weston’s were growing up around here) if they knew I was from a relatively wealthy family, then “You get quota?”
“You don’t need that.”
“You don’t need more.”
“You’re not even really Native.”

It was always about money. “Oh, did daddy buy you this?”

“Daddy’s little princess?”
“And you’re Native?
“And you’re getting money for free?”
“And you’re getting no taxes?”
“That’s not fair!”

And it made me very anxious and very upset. Because it was all super confusing and to me it wasn’t about money.

So sometimes I would just leave school in the middle of the day. Other times I would just not go.

My dad, he was the same way. He didn’t like going to school. He told me “I hated school. I never wanted to go there.” He never went a lot. And my sister, too. My sister, Heather she was worse than I was. Right before graduation she almost got expelled for missing so much time. She would lie to my mom. My mom had no clue.

Me, I was just like “Mom, I’m not going to school.” I would be honest and she’d always write me notes. Because the school wanted notes from a parent, you know? Half the time she’d just make shit up. “Sorry Eden was absent as she was sick.”
“Sorry Eden was late due to a doctor’s appointment.” Same notes over and over again. Always an “as” or a “due to”.
Later on, she let me make her an email account and I created her password. So when I skipped as long as I had her permission I would just email my Homeroom teacher from her account. They never knew it was me.

So grades 9 and 10 I was just off and on always off and on in school. But I always made sure if I missed I came back super prepared. And I never missed tests. That was my big thing I never missed tests. I would skip two days just to study my butt off to ace a test. So I would miss more time in school but I’d ace the test. I’d come back not know what we were doing skip some more learn some more And then ace the test. I never missed tests.

And I don’t think my teachers really cared because I was passing. I wasn’t failing so I don’t think they really cared.

Sometimes they would ask me “How come you missed?” But I was a really good liar I guess. “I was sick” “I was helping my sister” just whatever.

I’m sure after a while they knew I was bullshitting. I could see it all over their faces. But if you’re passing and not struggling they don’t really care. They leave you alone. You know?

Grade 11 I started going to school more because I was more interested in the sciences, and I had heavier courses to do. I would still miss, just not all day.

Actually that’s why I had to upgrade my sciences after high school. Because grade 11 I had chemistry first period. I didn’t show up for a solid week, once. I would be at school every day I just wouldn’t show up the first two periods. I missed 32 days but I passed with a 63.

And it wasn’t that school was hard for me I just didn’t want to be there. I made sure I passed and missed the rest. Honestly, that was my mindset “As long as I pass I don’t care how many days I miss.” And as long as I was passing it was fine with my teachers with my parents everyone.

It didn’t matter if I was there, or not.
Ephany of culture

I was 15 when my Grammy passed away. That’s when it really hit me. The culture.

She had a huge Native funeral and she wasn’t one tiny bit Native. But her husband was and her kids were.

She was in the hospital forever and shortly before she passed they told her they were going to hold a sweat lodge for her.

“What’s that?” I asked. My mom explained “It’s a spiritual ceremony. They are going to pray for Grammy.”

The night of the sweat lodge she saw deer jumping on her stomach saw a merry go round saw kids playing. I didn’t understand.

She believed it was because of the sweat lodge. But she was on medication, too.

We had the wake in her house. It was a whole week long. My cousin, “Are you ready to see Grammy?” “What are you talking about?” “It’s open.” I didn’t understand.

I remember walking up to her I remember smelling the sweet grass burning. I remember all the flowers I remember looking in.

Breath right out of me. It didn’t look like her. There was a weird smell coming off of her like wax, almost because of all the makeup. And I just ran outside.

The last two nights we had big ceremonies. Everybody was there people I had never met before cousins I had never met before. More people in my Grammy’s house than I’d ever seen before all crowded into the living room. We stuffed so many people in drumming and singing and all that stuff. You could hear it feel it right in your chest. Drums hitting heart pounding breath catching tears flowing. You can’t control it.

The day of the funeral the church was so packed people couldn’t even fit in there. It was insane. And I didn’t know anybody.

She was the most hated woman on the reserve to the most loved woman. People I never, ever, ever see crying—my mom, my dad, my sister’s boyfriend—everyone was crying. People just had so much respect for her.

A really, really, really old woman sang at my Grammy’s funeral in Maliseet. I don’t know what she was singing but her singing and the drums playing
and the energy
just everyone crying
it was like an epiphany
of culture.

That was the first time
I really got to see the culture
experience the culture
feel the culture.

After, I started to going
to more powwows
I started getting closer
to that side of my family.

I love my Native family.

Native Studies

In grade 12
we had a Native studies class.
It wasn’t a class full of Natives
it was an elective
it was for anybody that wanted to learn
and a lot of people took it…
because…
it was a slack class.

I took it because I wanted to know more.

Ironically
our Native studies teacher
was a White woman.
We didn’t have an
actual Native
teaching Native Studies.
People were kind of pissed.

She taught us about how Natives
were treated before.
She taught us about the
Mohawk crisis in Quebec.
One day we made a totem pole
out of clay, I think.

And, I remember
she talked to us about
residential school.
She showed us some photos
of what Natives looked like
and then what they looked like
in the school.
That’s when I actually started to know
what it was.

I’d heard of residential school before
but I didn’t really know
what it was.

I was in grade 9
I was 14
I think
when we got, like…
the apology letter.
It was really confusing.
I didn’t understand what it was.
It was under my Grammy’s name.
I remember, we did a bunch
of investigations to see
if they got the wrong person.
But my Grandfather was in there.

They have this value
they’re all together in everything.
They’re a little rough around the edges
but they’re ok with who they are
and they always have a smile
on their face.
They’re always about family
they always make you feel
good about yourself.
We were always all together
adults and kids.
My opinion mattered.

Whereas, with my dad’s family
my white family,
adults were adults
kids were kids.
He was there
and they were trying to take
his heritage away
trying to re-mold him as a…
as a completely different person.

My Grampy’s brother
got taken too.
My Uncle, he won’t talk about it.
Ever.
My mom says
“Don’t bring it up.”
He got the worst of it
I guess.

So actually talking about it
in Native studies
made me think about it more.
I feel bad, and
I feel mad
because it happened
to my Grandfather
and most people
don’t know
other than people that had to deal with it.
And, it made me wonder…
if they didn’t stop it
maybe my mother
would’ve had to go through it, too?

I don’t really know.
I don’t know enough about it.
All I know was that they were trying
to mold them into something
they weren’t
and trying to take away their culture
and stuff.

When my sister took Native studies
an Elder taught it.
But the year I got in
he left.
And I always felt
if he was there
we would have
actually
learned more.
I wanted to learn more.

At least the teacher
invited him in
a few times.

We knew he was coming in advance
and everyone would be super stoked.
Everyone would show up for class
because everyone was intrigued.
He was a Native.
He was an elderly Native
and he brought so much more to the class.
He brought so much of his feeling
and his way.
You could tell it was traditional
and that was what you wanted.
You didn’t want just the facts.
You wanted to see him actually
do stuff.
You wanted that every time
you went to class.

Regular class days
you came in
you kind of do the same thing.
“I know what I’m going to learn.
I kind of already know this stuff.”
People talked.
People put their earphones in.
People just didn’t care.

When he came in
everyone was excited.

He smudged before he started
the discussion, every time.
You felt…
You felt the environment change.
You felt the atmosphere change.
It was fascinating,
and you were, like…
a part of it.

One class
he did our spirit animals.
He had a book, and
he laid out all these cards
on a table.
He laid them out towards the North,
I think.
And he said,
“Your spirit animal finds you.
It finds you,
and whatever card you pick up
was destined to be with you.”
Everyone was picking them up
and I picked up mine.
I picked up a hawk.
He said it meant I was a messenger
a guardian over my family
that I shouldn’t tell people
what not to do,
but guide them.

And it was super ironic
that it said *that*
because I always told people what to do!
Your spirit animal
explained who you were
your personality, and
your spirituality.
And I always think about that
because it had meaning.

Everybody talked about that class
for like, a week
after that.
And everybody wanted him to come back.

Looking Back, Looking Forward

Grade 12
I was really into business.
Every single class, business.
I was in economics,
I was in marketing,
I was in entrepreneurship.
I was in every business class
imaginable.
I graduated
And then I got to university
and I hated it.
I *hated* it.

But I found out about this program
from my cousin.
She came here to get more sciences
and now she’s in Nursing
on the Dean’s list, like
top of her class.
So that’s why I’m here
because I don’t have my grade twelve
sciences.

Thinking about it now
looking back at it now
I wish I had tried harder
in high school.
I wish I had gone to school more.
I could have been *farther* in life.
I could understand more.
I wouldn’t have to…
things wouldn’t be harder
for me.

You know?
But, high school
wasn’t a place
I wanted to *be*.

I still get questioned.

When I registered here
they were like
“You know that’s for Natives, *right*?”
And you can see they are
suspicious, of my
blond hair
green eyes.
But, I’m so used to it
that it doesn’t *really* bother me anymore.

In high school
it bothered me.
Always hearing
“You’re Native?”
“You’re not *really* Native,”
So frustrating.
White kids pick on you
for *not* being full Native
White kids pick on Natives
for *being* full Native.
Natives pick on you
for *not* being full Native.
You can’t say anything good!
Personally,
I don’t think it should
make a difference
if I’m only a quarter Native
and I want to embrace the culture.
I just think it’s fascinating
I’ve just always been into it
for some reason.

I think it all ties back
to my Grampy.
Just not knowing him
and knowing that
he loved me.

If he was there…
I just always wonder
about it.
“Did he want me to do something?”
“Did he know something?”
“Am I destined for something?”
Instead it’s me
finding my own
little discoveries
figuring it out
by myself.
There is a connection that I just
want to know
more about.
An Introduction to Hannah and Nate: Fictionalized Short Stories of Parallel Worlds

Just like the other participants, I met Hannah and Nate during the information session that I hosted in September 2012. But unlike the others, these two came as a package. They came in together, they signed up together, they spoke to me afterward together. I could tell instantly that they were very close by the way they practically finished each other’s sentences and laughed at the same times. During our conversation, it was revealed to me they were also both completing their Bachelor of Education, and part of what interested them in participating in this study stemmed from the fact that they were already reflecting on their own schooling experiences in light of their current involvement working with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students during their practicum placements. As I later learned during our research conversations, Hannah and Nate also attended the same high school; however, despite being only a year apart in age and grade, they did not know each other then, and Hannah had no memories of Nate even being there.

These similarities, along with some stark differences, led me to decide to intertwine their stories. While Nate grew up and continued to live in his First Nation community of Qapituwikuk and his stories, as you will see, reflect this “insider” positioning, Hannah’s family moved off reserve when she was just five years old and her positioning is more fluid and changing. Juxtaposing their experiences, setting up their

40 Qapituwikuk (pronounced Gwa-bid-oo -wee-goog) is a pseudonym. It is the Wolastoqey word for “place of the beaver.”
stories of school in parallel, I believe, showcases their affinities and contrasts, and illuminates their themes and tensions more brightly than each standing alone (Rivera, 2015).

However, intertwining their stories, “chapter by chapter” meant that two character voices would already be present, and writing myself into the text as the researcher/participant, added a third voice (really a third and a fourth, because their interviews took place separately) that interfered with the juxtaposition. Therefore I needed a new form of a representation.

I found my solution in the form of fictionalized short stories, interspersed with reflective sections in the participants’ voices. This literary genre allowed me to more fully represent lived experience, as numerous incidents and events that were told to me were rewritten and represented with rich, descriptive detail, as if I had actually been there to observe the events (Finley & Finley, 1999). The creation of composite characters, who represent the participants’ interaction with many people sometimes over broad spans of time, and the “invention of situations in which those characters can act and interact”—allow me to get at the truth of…their experience in the world, without having to reveal specific details that might tie the story to any one identifiable” fellow student, teacher or situation (Angrosino, 1998, p.41). Sometimes I presented what was given to me as reflective thought in dialogue between characters, other times interview dialogue was presented as reflective thought (Finley & Finley, 1999).

The short stories that follow, “represent an attempt to experiment with ways of writing a kind of social text that show, instead of tell,” (Diversi, 1998, p.134) these First Nations students’ experiences of school. As you read them, I invite you to see yourself
in the “human dramas being represented” (Diversi, 1998 p. 133) and make your own interpretations regarding their significance.

**Hannah: Early Years**

We moved around a lot when I was little. I lived in Polamuwikuk until I was 5, but my Dad was in the RCMP, so we were transferred to the city and then later to a neighbouring town. Because of that I went to four different elementary schools: the Polamuwikuk school for Kindergarten, and three public schools.

My memory is pretty foggy about the first school in the city because I was only there for part of grade 1. My parents pulled me and my brother, Mark, who was in Kindergarten, out part way through the year because they didn’t like that school for some reason.

Then we went to Austin Street Elementary.

* * * * * *

“Look Hannah” my dad said pointing down the hallway. We were standing just outside the office of my new school on my very first day. As I turned in the direction of his outstretched arm, I heard him say, “It’s Mrs. Nicholas!”

Could it be?! I had known Mrs. Nicholas since I was really little, she was always visiting family in Polamuwikuk even though she lived here in the city. She had been friends with my mom and dad for years, and always brought little caramel treats for Mark and me when she came to see them.

I searched through the crowd of noisy kids and their brightly coloured backpacks rushing past us to their classrooms. Sure enough, there she was! Dressed in a long black skirt, and black sweater, as usual.

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41 Polamuwikuk (pronounced Bah-lum-oo-wee-goog) is a pseudonym. It is the Wolastoqey word for “the place of the salmon”.  

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“Hannah! Mark! Welcome to Austin Street School.” She enveloped us both in a big hug, squeezing us to her.

“Hi!” I managed to get out after she released me, smiling shyly up at her. I think I’m going to like this school.

* * * * *

“Hannah, Allison, Ricki, Shawn, it’s time for you to go down to Mrs. Nicholas’ classroom.” Our teacher announced. Yes! I thought. Shortly after I arrived at Austin Street, I started joining the other Native kids in my grade for Mrs. Nicholas’ class. It wasn’t one of our actual classes, but it was definitely my favorite. I wished we could go everyday but had to settle for a couple times a week.

We all got up and tried not to run to the door. We would get in trouble for that. Once we were in the hallway, we starting speed walking, laughing at each other. I knew we were all thinking the same thing: We got out of class!

Mrs. Nicholas’ room was an actual classroom, but it didn’t feel like one. It just kind of felt like this place we could go and learn something new. In a way it reminded me of my grandmother’s house in Polamuwikuk: it was warm and cozy and always smelled so good.

We filed in and sat down in our other desks. On the front wall, beside the colours and numbers we had already learned, there were new pictures of forks and spoons today.
“Good afternoon Hannah, Shawn, Ricki, and Allison. Tan kahk olu kiluwaw?” 42 She always began the class the same, by asking us How are your spirits?

“Mec ote pesqon!” 43 I am one with spirit, we replied enthusiastically, the standard response to her question, letting her know we were well.

“Today, we are going to learn some new words and phrases that you can use when you help your parents set the table, or when you eat a meal together.” She said, pointing to the utensil pictures on the wall. “Repeat after me: Mitsutiye.” 44 She touched the image of the single fork.

“Mitsutiye!” We exclaimed. It just rolled off my tongue.

“Again. Mitsutiye.”

“Mitsutiye!”

“Good. Now, Emqan.” 45 Touching the lone spoon.

“Emqan.”

“Again?”

“Emqan!”

“Excellent. Now let’s try one in a sentence: Mesq ewehkewon mitsutiye, nimcokonik.”

We all sat in silence, staring at her. She’d gone too fast. We didn’t know how to repeat what she’d said. We hadn’t learned all of that yet. Slowly, a grin crept over her face and her eyes sparkled. “That means, before I used a fork, I used my fingers!” And as she brought her fingers to her mouth and made sloppy, gobbling noises, we all cracked up laughing.

*   *   *   *   *

42 Tan kahk olu kiluwaw, pronounced like don-gawk-oh-loo-gill-u-wow, is the Wolastoqey greeting for “How are your spirits?”
43 Mec ote pesqon, pronounced like medge-oh-day-bes-quinn, is the response “I am one with spirit.”
44 Mitsutiye, pronounced Mit-suit-ee-yay, is the Wolastoqey word for fork.
45 Emqan, pronounced Em-can, is the Wolastoqey word for spoon.
Mrs. Nicholas was always finding different ways to teach us words in Wolastoqey. She would make games out of it, make it fun. And, somehow, she always made it seem important. Rather than just telling us, “You need to learn your language”, she had a way of making me feel proud about it, of making me understand why it’s important. Learning the language with her made me see that it was a part of me and who I was.

* * * * *

“Grandma! Grandpa! I yelled as I burst through their front door in Polamuwikuk. The entire three hour drive from the city I could hardly wait to get there. When we finally pulled up to their house, I’d ran ahead of my parents and my brother.

“Hannah!” My grandpa exclaimed, coming around the corner from the living room, and giving me a big hug. “Where’s grandma, Grandpa?” I asked, needing them both to be present to give my demonstration. I was hopping from foot to foot, so excited I couldn’t contain myself.

“Right here, dear. Right here.” Yay! There was grandma, she was holding a dish towel and must have had her hands in the sink when I rushed in the door, because she was still drying them off.

“Come, come!” I led them into the living room, where grandpa had been sitting watching TV. I wanted them seated for this. “Wanna see what I learned in school?!”

* * * * *

Both my grandparents are speakers even though only my grandpa is Native. My grandma’s completely White, but she knows more Wolastoqey then probably most Native people. She could speak English, French and Wolastoqey, all in the same sentence, just like it was nothing. That day, when I rushed in their door, yelling look what I know I recited Oh Canada for them in Wolastoqey. I still remember how they both sat quietly, listening so intently to me, tears welling up in their eyes. When I finished, they gave me the biggest, tightest hugs
and kissed me on top of my head. I wasn’t entirely sure why, but I knew it was a big deal. I felt so proud, and I knew they were proud of me.

The next three years I was at Austin Street every time we came back to Polamuwikuk, which was pretty much every weekend, I made sure I had something new to share with my grandparents.

* * * * *

“Hannah! Come on, we’re going to be late for church.” It was Sunday morning, and I’d gone outside to play in grandma and grandpa’s backyard with Mark, just before we were going to leave for church and I’d gotten my new sweater dirty climbing a tree. Come on, I thought as I wiped at the stain. Not today.

“Ok, Mom, I’ll be right there.” I yelled from the bathroom. Normally I knew better than to risk getting my church clothes dirty, but this morning I was particularly nervous and just couldn’t sit still.

There, I thought. That’s good enough. Maybe no one will notice. And I ran out the door to the car where my family was waiting.

At the church, I made sure to sit right between grandma and grandpa. The whole mass I was on edge, waiting for my cue. Finally it came. We all stood.

“N’siwetuk, k’nukskem’n…” Our Father, who art in heaven. I stood up straight and tall, looking ahead at the alter the whole time I recited the Lord’s Prayer in my language. I knew my grandparents were watching me, and I heard my grandpa’s voice quiver on a few words. Afterward, as we were all leaving, a few other Elders nodded and smiled at me as they passed us. From the pew to the car, my grandpa’s hand stayed resting on my shoulder. It was a really good morning.

* * * * *

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Mrs. Nicholas was the first Wolastoqi teacher I ever had, and she was amazing. She was also the last Wolastoqi teacher I ever had. Those years at Austin Street were the only time I ever got to learn my language or my culture. Once I left there, that was it.

**Nate: The Native Class**

“Nate?” I was sitting at my desk in my grade 1 classroom one morning during the first week of school, packing up my math book and activity sheets to get ready for the next part of the day, when I suddenly heard my name being called. I looked quickly up at my teacher, Mrs. Spencer, but she wasn’t looking at me, she was looking towards the door. I turned my head towards the source.

“Margaret!” I exclaimed.

“Hi Nate.” She said smiling. “Mrs. Spencer and I have talked, and you’re going to come with me while the rest of the class has story time, ok?”

“Ok!” Yes! I thought, I get to get out of class, and spend some time with Margaret. This is gonna be great!

As I headed to the door to join Margaret, my classmates assembled in the back of the class, gathered around Mrs. Spencer. I was too excited to notice a few questioning glances as I left the room.

Walking down the hall with Margaret, I was practically skipping. Margaret was from my community, Qapituwikuk, and I had known her my entire life. She was basically my Auntie.

We stopped at another classroom on the way to her office, and she asked the teacher if David, Toby, and Maggie could come with us. Yes! I thought. I was all alone in my class, so I was excited to see them. It was only the first week of grade 1, but already I looked forward to recess and lunch time when I could see my friends from home.
Not really sure what was happening, but excited to be together, we followed Margaret to her office. When she opened the door, a few more of my friends were there with a TA.

“Nate!”

“Rob!”

“David!”

“Abby!” Instantly everyone was yelling everyone else’s names, jumping up and down, laughing. The excitement was more than we could contain.

“Ok, ok, children.” Margaret interrupted, and we all settled down into our new desks to listen. “Kulahsihkulpa! That means Welcome in Maliseet. And we are going to use this time together to learn about Maliseet culture and language.”

* * * * *

Right from grade 1 until the end of grade 5, a couple of times a week, we would all be together for our Maliseet class. Margaret was such a fun person to be around and we all looked up to her. She was also fluent in Maliseet, so we got to learn some of our language. We would do little worksheets that she prepared, like learning the animal names in Maliseet. I still remember matching the word Qapit to the Beaver picture, Malsom to Wolf, Muwin to Bear. Once we knew enough words, we’d play Maliseet bingo. I loved everything we did with Margaret, but my favorite was when she would do crafts with us, like beading lessons or making little ash baskets. I felt really proud being able to bring something I made home to show my mom.

By grade 3, Dan came in to help Margaret out. He wasn’t from our community, but he spent a lot of time there so we all knew him too. He taught us drumming, and the significance of the drum, stuff like that. And chants too. He taught us so many chants. If I was ever feeling down when I got to their class, drumming and singing the traditional chants just lifted me right up. That class became like a home away from home for me.
For the first few years of school, I just got so used to being pulled out of class I didn’t think much of it. I didn’t question it. I was just eager to see Margaret and Dan and my friends. But, as we got older, leaving for our Native class, as it became commonly known by all the teachers and students, gradually became something I grew anxious about.

* * * * *

One day in grade 3, a student named Tommy was pulled out of class by another teacher. It was the first time I was in class when someone else was called out. I watched as Tommy slowly slunk to the door, his head hanging, and wondered what kind of class he was going to instead. As the door closed behind them, I heard some snickering from classmates behind me.

“Tommy can’t read yet.” One of the girls’ whispered.

“I know. My mom says he’s slow.” Another chimed in.

“He’s s-l-o-w alright!” And with that that, they all started laughing.

Tommy was pulled out of class because he needed extra help, and these girls were making fun of him. They thought he was dumb! Is that what people thought when I left to see Margaret and Dan? I wasn’t really sure, but after that I couldn’t shake the feeling that everyone assumed I was pulled out of class because I wasn’t smart either.

The next time Margaret came to get me, just as my class was settling in for Math, I could feel the hair on the back of my neck prickling as I stood up from my desk. I looked around the room. Everyone was looking at me. Some were just staring blankly, others had questioning looks on their faces, and a few were smirking. I pretended I didn’t notice and headed out with Margaret, trying to smile. She was still the same Margaret, and I did love seeing her. Just the same, the awkward tension that developed the moment she appeared in the doorway followed me, and stayed with me the rest of the day.

* * * * *
I was outside playing H-O-R-S-E with David, Troy, Luke and a few non-Native friends from my grade 5 class at recess. Everyone was laughing as Troy threw a wild ball, completely missing the net, earning himself the big E. Recess was almost over anyways, so we called it a game.

“Hey guys, I have a question” Mike, one of the non-Natives asked.

“Shoot?” I said, chuckling at my own joke.

“What do you guys do in your Native class? Like, why do you get to go there and miss class?” The four non-Native guys were standing together, all looking at David, Troy, Luke and I, waiting for an answer. It seemed they genuinely wanted to know. Trouble was, we didn’t really know what to say, because we didn’t really know either.

“Umm…it’s cause we’re Native.” I stammered.

“Yeah. It’s cause we’re Maliseet.” Troy added.

“So?” Just the question I was afraid of.

“Well… so we go to learn our language, and about our culture and stuff.” I heard David tell them.

“Oh. Say something in Maliseet then?” One of them asked.

“Qapituwikuk.” I stated. I was pretty sure they’d heard this word before, the name of our community, but I doubted that they knew what it meant.

“Gobbit-what?” They laughed, but then recovered themselves. So I continued.

“Qapituwikuk. It means the place of the beaver.”

“Weird.” Mike uttered and then look embarrassed, almost as if he hadn’t meant to say it out loud. Just then, we were saved by the bell. As we made our way back inside I knew they didn’t really understand. But that was ok. We didn’t really understand either.

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Thinking back on that Native class now, I have mixed feelings about it. I mean, I liked it at the time. I loved Margaret and Dan, I loved learning about my culture and I liked getting out of class. But now when I think about it, as a teacher candidate, I don’t think it’s fair that in order to get our culture content we had to leave other subjects and miss out on something else that was important. And it’s still like that in schools today.

I think the whole thing should be structured differently. It shouldn’t be just the Native students that get to go learn about the culture. It should be all the students. That option should be there, not only for us, but for other people too.

**Hannah: Playground Politics**

“HANNAH!” I looked up when I heard my brother, Mark, wailing my name. He was running toward me, his hand partially held over this mouth, covered in blood. We were outside at lunch hour. I had been playing marbles on the asphalt beside the school with the same girlfriends I always played marbles with at lunch. Seeing him, I dropped my marbles and ran to him, my friends following.

“What the heck happened?! Who did this to you?” I demanded. He spat some blood on the ground and in doing so, gave me a better look at his face. It looked like a split lip. “Who did this?” I repeated more urgently.

“Mike St. Clair.” He managed to get out. “We were just goofing around playing capture the flag with a bunch of kids. I made a run for it, when suddenly Mike was there defending his flag. I tried to deke him, and it worked. He tripped and fell. And I got the flag. I won the game! Next thing I know, Mike is standing in front of me and he’s real angry. Then he punched me in the face!” He spat again, his lower lip quivering.

“Where is he?” I fumed. “You tell me where this kid is right now!

“I don’t know. We were playing on the soccer field when it happened.”
“Fine. You go get cleaned up.” I turned to one of my friends, “Bethany, can you take him inside to get washed up?”

“Sure. No problem. Come on Mark.” And with that they headed in.

I looked at my other girlfriend, Shelley. “I’m gonna find Mike St. Clair, and I’m gonna teach him a lesson. Nobody messes with my brother!” Mark was only a year younger than me, but I had always been very protective of him.

“Hannah, what are you going to do? You’re going to get in trouble. Besides, are you going to fight a boy?”

“Maybe! If I have to, I will. I’m not afraid!” Then an idea came to mind. “Don’t worry, Shelley, I won’t go alone.” I stormed away from her, leaving her dumbfounded. I needed numbers, so I went in search of my Native friends. They would back me up.

I had two different sets of friends at Austin Street. I had my Native friends and then I had just, kind of, normal friends. And they didn’t really get along. The Native kids pretty much always stuck together, but since I was in classes with them they accepted me. I found them around the other side of the school, playing tetherball.

“Ricki! Shawn! Stephen! Allison!” I called out as I was running up to them, my long black hair wild in the wind. “I need you guys. Mike St. Clair just punched my brother in the mouth. He’s bleeding and everything. I need you to come with me to scare this kid.” They didn’t question. They didn’t hesitate. They just came with me, like I knew they would. There had been lots of instances at school lately, and the Native kids always had each other’s backs.

We searched the school grounds for about five minutes before we found him with a few of his friends. We could hear him talking about Mark when we approached.

“He tripped me when he deked me out, and I went down hard on my knee and tore my pants. Look! My mom’s gonna to kill me.” I didn’t bother to look at his pants as we rushed
through the group. As my friends formed a semi-circle opposite his, I grabbed the kid by his shirt, leaned over and screamed in his face.

“What the hell did you punch my brother for, you little punk?!” At first, he was too stunned to speak.

“I… I…”

“You what? You just felt like punching someone today?” By now, a large crowd had started to form around us, kids streaming in from all over the school yard, drawn by the excitement. Someone starting yelling, “FIGHT! FIGHT!” At that moment, I knew I was going to get caught and I was going to get in trouble. But I wasn’t done yet. “Don’t you ever touch my brother again! If you ever even go near my brother again, my friends and I will end you. Understand?!” Suddenly the kid burst out crying. We’d scared him big time. “Good!” I yelled one last time, released him, and nodded at my friends, thanking them for their support. As we began to walk away, the bell rang.

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I got in a lot of trouble for that incident.

Of course, as soon as Mike St. Clair got inside, he ran and told his teacher, who brought him to the Principal to tell his story. I was probably in class for 5 minutes, when the Vice Principal arrived in the doorway to escort me to the office. I still remember standing in the corner of the Principal’s office, facing the wall, listening to her calling my parents to come to the school.

After that, my parents, my dad especially, were really big on warning me to stay out of trouble. Part of that warning meant telling me to be careful who I hung out with. It’s funny, cause my dad was Native, but he didn’t want me spending much time with the Native kids, that’s for sure. To him, they were the rougher crowd. I never told him that I already knew that everyone was afraid of the Native kids, because they were supposedly so bad. That’s why I went
and got them to help me that day. I also never told him that I kind of liked it. After all, I was kind of one of them. While they were on my side, no one would ever bother me or my brother again.

**Nate: They Thought We Were Bad**

One of the clearest memories from my childhood, from when I was very young, is of walking over to the mall with my friends. Nowadays, you can’t just let your kids walk over to the mall. But we did all the time.

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“Mom!” I was yelling to her from the front doorway. Toby and Maggie were waiting down on the sidewalk and I didn’t want to take my shoes off. “MOM!” I yelled a second time.

“What Nate?” She answered, coming out of the laundry room, a load in her arms and look on her face that told me ‘You know better than to yell at me young man!’

In a softer, inside voice, I asked “Can I go over to the mall with Toby and Maggie? We just want to go play some video games and get a treat. I have $5 saved up from the tooth fairy and my allowance. Please?”

She hesitated. Oh no, I thought. She’s going to say no. The she smiled. “Ok. Just be safe. Remember to cross Main Street at the cross walk, not just anywhere you want. And stick together. Just make sure you’re home in three hours to help with dinner.”

Yes! “Ok, thanks mom!” I yelled over my shoulder, already running out the door to join my friends.

At the mall, we headed to the convenience store first. I had a bet with Toby, who thought that I couldn’t fit the new jawbreaker in my mouth, and I was going to win. I found the jawbreaker quickly after entering the store, right near the front cash. But Toby and Maggie were already grabbing a pop from the fridge in the back, and I wanted to look around a little bit.
As I headed down an aisle to join them, the cashier yelled out, “Hey you! Yeah, you, the Indian kid! I saw you take that jawbreaker! You better pay for that!”

“I was just going to …” I started, but he cut me off.

“Yeah, yeah. I know what you were going to do. You come and pay for that right now, or put it down and get out!” Sheesh, I thought. I couldn’t even grab a drink to have after I ate the jawbreaker. What’s the big deal? Resigned, I went to the counter.

“Ok, here” I said, handing the cashier a toonie. He looked from the money to me and back again. Finally, he took it and gave me back my change.

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The look of surprise on that cashier’s face didn’t register with me at the time, but over the years, as I encountered similar reactions, it always brings me back to that moment. Since then, I have countless memories of going into stores and having people watch us, sometimes yell at us, assuming we were up to no good, knowing in our guts that they thought we were bad.

When we started school, that stereotype came with us. People thought that we were bad, that we stole, that we swore, that we liked to beat people up. All that stuff.

Our community doesn’t have its own school, just a Head Start, so we all went to the public school in town. I remember I couldn’t wait to get there. When I was little, when my mom would pack me up to drop me off at the Head Start, I’d watch my older sister, Samantha, get ready to go to the real school. I was always so jealous. In the afternoons, when she would come home and do her homework, I always had to have some sort of homework to do too. My mom would make up these little spelling tests, or math sheets, or even just have something out for me to read, and I would do homework. Just like my big sister. So when I finally started at big school, I just loved everything. And I did really good, too. I was a really good student. At least at first.
One of the things that really stands out for me from elementary school, was every once in a while the Principal, Vice Principal, Margaret and Dan would haul us out of class to talk to us all together.

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We filed into the gym, excited to see everyone, but anxious of what was to come. We’d been through this before. They only brought us all together if we were in trouble.

“What do you think it’s going to be this time?” Toby whispered to me. I felt a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach, and glanced over at my best friend Maggie on my right. She was looking down at her shoes. Usually I went into these assemblies knowing they were going to talk about a fight that happened at recess or something like that; something that I knew I was far away from when it went down. This time, I wasn’t so sure.

“I don’t know.” It was only a half-lie. I didn’t actually know. I just had a feeling.

It was the middle of grade 3, and unlike my previous two years of school I was finally in a class with a few other First Nations students, including Maggie. Maggie and I played together all the time outside of school, so we were super excited to be in the same class, and tried to sit together as much as possible. Recently though, our teacher had separated us to opposite sides of the classroom.

Maggie had a TA who worked with her a lot of the time. She was nice enough, but it was weird having someone hovering all the time, and Maggie knew it. The other kids thought that she must have been stupid or something, which made her really angry and sometimes she’d act up in class. I knew she wasn’t stupid, she was the best drawer I knew. She just needed some extra help with other subjects. So day after day, I watched Maggie shrink into to herself when her TA came into the room.

When the TA left, Maggie usually returned to her energetic, hilarious self. That is, until the teacher yelled at her for talking too much, or laughing too loud, or whatever. Then she would
get frustrated and kick the desk, which often resulted in her getting sent to the Principal’s office. The thing is, it didn’t seem to matter how good she behaved. Everyone seemed to see her as bad. That was her label.

After a while, I started trying to stick up for her. At first I’d just try to explain that Maggie hadn’t really done anything wrong, but then I’d get in trouble for talking back. I couldn’t win with our teacher. It seemed like because Maggie and I were best friends, my teacher just expected me to be bad too. Nothing I did was good enough anymore and I’d get yelled at for the tiniest things. Eventually if Maggie was doing something that I knew she was going to get in trouble for, like tapping her desk really loud during a test, I would do it too. At least then we’d get in trouble together, and she wouldn’t be all alone. Besides, the more we were disruptive, the more we refused to do our work, the more we were sassy, the more we were excused. They expected us to be bad, so when we were, they weren’t that surprised.

A week before the assembly we were currently heading into, Maggie and I were walking home after school, and we ran into another girl from our class.

“Hey Nina” Maggie had called out, when we were about half a block behind her.

“Oh, hey Maggie. Hi Nate. What’s up?” Maggie and Nina proceeded to have a conversation. It was about girl stuff, so I didn’t really pay attention, but they were laughing and I know Maggie didn’t say anything mean or bad. The next day at school though, the Principal hauled us into to his office. Somebody had seen us talking to Nina and informed her parents, who had contacted the school. I don’t know if they were saying we were bullying her, or they were worried that we were talking to her, but they made a big stink about it. They automatically assumed that our intentions were bad.

“But we didn’t do anything!” we tried to tell the Principal. “We were just talking to her.”
“Well, there were two of you, and she was walking by herself, and her parents were concerned.”

“But she’s in our class.” We told him, sure he would understand that it would be rude to just ignore her.

“She said that she was a block ahead of you, and that you started yelling at her.”

“No. That’s not what…” Maggie tried to interject, but he raised his right hand to stop her.

“It doesn’t matter. From now on, you have to take the bus home from school. No more walking home by yourselves. Ok?”

“Ok.” We uttered, as we left his office, our heads hanging.

I remember feeling a little upset. We really didn’t do anything but talk to a classmate outside of school. But at the same time, I wasn’t that surprised. That was how they thought of us. We knew that we were seen as bad, so we were sort of able to accept it when it happened. Now, it makes me really upset thinking about it. We should have been shocked by that incident. We shouldn’t have been ok with it, but because of how we knew we were seen and labelled, even at that young age, we could accept it. But I will tell you, we never talked to Nina again. We learned that lesson.

So as we headed into the assembly, I felt sure it was because of the incident between Maggie, Nina and I.

While they didn’t address it directly, they did talk to us about our behavior. Both in school, and coming to and going from the school. That seemed to be the common theme in these assemblies over the years. Looking back, I guess I can’t blame them, because there were a few incidents where we were bad. But we weren’t the only ones. I think it was just easy for them to say that the bad kids were us First Nations because we were a group. Maybe if there was another
common group of 40 or 50 students, they would have pulled them out of class and treated them like they were bad, too. But because the rest of the school had a big population to our small one, it was just easier to say we were the bad ones.

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After grade 3, Maggie and I were separated. The school sent a note home to our parents telling them that we were trouble together. The next year in grade four, I had a really great teacher, who was fun and who really cared about me. She paid more attention to me, in a good way, than other teachers had before, so I really straightened up. I don’t know, maybe I just had a ‘bad phase’. But Maggie, she had a different experience. Maybe she was a bad influence on me. Maybe she didn’t change her attitude, like I did. Or maybe she didn’t have teachers who cared about her. I don’t know. Growing up like that, with people thinking you are bad all the time, it changes you. Some people more than others, I think. Maybe Maggie was labelled bad and became bad. If you have someone drill into your head so many times that you’re bad, and you don’t really have a way to escape that label, you end up living up to it. Maybe that’s what happened with her. We didn’t stay close after elementary school, so I don’t know her whole story. But I do know she didn’t finish high school.

**Hannah: Not Full-on Native**

After Austin Street, I never really learned about my culture, or was around it a lot. My new school, Greenfield Elementary, which I switched to when my dad was transferred to a nearby town half-way through grade 4, was an amazing school and I made great friends there. But there wasn’t anything cultural there. And there weren’t any Native students either. So I didn’t hang around with anyone that was Native anymore. At all.

I still spent a lot of time in Polamuwikuk. Every weekend, every other weekend. Just going all the time to see my family. Loved it. But, you know, it’s funny, you would think that if
we were in Polamuwikuk all the time, we should have learned the culture, but not really. I mean, I’d go there to play with my cousins. They weren’t, like, trying to *teach* me things while I was there, right?! So, starting when I was at Greenfield, not a lot of people *knew* I was Native. And I never really thought much of it.

* * * * *

“So, Hannah, who do you *like* in our class?”

“What?!”

“Who do you *like*?”

“I don’t know!” I could feel my face burning, but in a good way. My cheeks were already hurting from smiling and laughing so much. It was Friday afternoon, and I’d invited my new best friends, Angela and Maya, over to my house after school. We were hanging out in my room, Maya and I sitting on the bed, Angela sprawled out on the floor, her chin propped up in her hands. They were relentless.

“Come on, you must *like* someone by now. You’ve been at Greenfield a whole month already!” Maya pushed, grabbing a pillow and hitting me in the arm with it.

“Yeah. You *must*.” Angela joined in. “What about Jeff? He’s cute!”

“Nope.”

“Kevin?”

“No!”

“Greg?” As Maya got his name out, I paused, just a second too long.

“Oh it’s Greg! *You like Greg!*” Angela jumped up from the floor and bounced on the bed beside us.

“No…” but it was no use. My face was really burning now, and I couldn’t help but laugh.
“Hannah and Greg! Sittin’ in a Tree,” both my pretty blond friends chimed in at the same time, singing as loud as they could, bouncing up and down so hard, I had to grab the comforter to keep from bouncing right off the bed.

Just then, to my mortification, my dad popped his head in my room. “Hi Hannah. Hi Girls” my dad said as we quickly tried to compose ourselves. He almost filled the whole doorway, he was so tall. My friends gawked at him. With his dark hair and dark skin, he frequently got looks when we went out.

“Hey Dad.” My dad had never met my new friends before. “This is Maya, and this is Angela. They’re the girls I’ve been telling you about.”

“Nice to meet you Maya and Angela. Hannah, remember we are going to Polamuwikuk first thing tomorrow morning, so you need to pack some stuff tonight. Ok?”

“Ok. I will.”

“Ok. Have fun. But try not to be too loud. We could hear you from downstairs.” Oh no! They could hear us. How embarrassing! I was about to start laughing at the thought of my parents hearing them bug me about Greg, when I turned and saw strange looks on my friends’ faces.

“Wh…what?” I asked.

“Um… what’s Ba-lum-oo… well, whatever your dad said?” Maya asked first. They were very quiet now. Almost serious. What was the big deal?

“Polamuwikuk. That’s where my dad’s from. Most of my family is there.”

“Oh.” Silence.

“I’ve never heard of it.” Angela finally said. “Where is it?”

“Just a few hours north of here. It’s a Wolastoqey reserve.”

“A reserve?” Maya gaped. They both just stared at me now.

“Yeah.”
“Oh.” Comprehension started to dawn on them. “You’re Native?” Angela asked.

“Yeah. Well, sort of. My family is Native. But my mom’s not. And we don’t live there. So I’m not really full-on Native.”

“Oh! Ok. Right.” Maya stated.

“That’s cool.” Angela chimed in. They were both smiling and nodding again, and I felt a sense of relief as they relaxed back into their former lounging positions on the bed.

“So” Maya began, staring right into my eyes, her lips starting to curl up at the edges ever so slightly, “back to Greg.”

* * * * *

I remember being a little worried they might make a big deal out of the fact that I was Native, but in the end it was pretty much, “Yes. My family is Native. Moving on.” It didn’t really change anything in our friendship. I think the fact that my family was so normal helped. I mean, I was growing up in a White community, just a couple of blocks away from where they lived. All of my friends were White. No one else at school even knew. So after that, it was just nothing I really even thought of.

It wasn’t like I was denying who I was. At that time I don’t think I even considered myself to actually be Native. Or at least full-on Native. Like, I didn’t know enough. I didn’t understand enough. I didn’t grow up there. I didn’t live on reserve. We lived off-reserve. And it’s completely different to grow up on a reserve, and to grow up just normal. To live on a reserve, it’s just, things are different. I mean, I didn’t live there, so I don’t know for sure. Just from what I see and what I hear from my own family. Some of my aunts and uncles aren’t around for my cousins. They kind of raise themselves. If they went to school or not, it didn’t really matter. Whereas, we had rules, we had bed times, if we didn’t go to school, look out! And my mom was home. All the time, my mom was home. So that’s how I grew up. Just normal. So I
didn’t want to run around and pretend, “I’m Native”, when I didn’t really have anything to do with it.

Hannah: The In Crowd

I loved school in middle school. Loved going with all my friends. We had a really great crew, and we had a great time in middle school. We ran that school, and I was on top of the world there. It was amazing.

But I have to admit, I was kind of a mean girl in middle school.

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“Don’t look now, here comes Ashley.” Our usual crew were sitting at our usual table in the cafeteria at lunchtime. All except Ashley. She approached kind of sheepishly, cautiously even, her shoulders slumped, head lowered, trying to focus on the tray in her hands, only looking where she was going periodically. Just as she was about to pull out a chair, I snapped at her.

“What do you think you’re doing?” The nerve she had to think she could still sit with us.

“Um… uh… I just thought…”

“Well you thought wrong. Go find somewhere else to sit. God.” As she slumped away, my friends and I started laughing.

“That’s what you get when you cross us!” one of them yelled after her.

“Yeah, what was she thinking!” Another joined in. Up until yesterday, Ashley would have been right there in our circle. She was one of us. But she went and did something stupid. Her brother had gotten in an argument with my brother after school, and Ashley stuck her stupid neck into it and started yelling at my brother. Of course I heard about it later from Mark. What did she expect? He wasn’t going to tell me? Of course he did, and of course I got angry. He’s my little brother. All it took was a few phone calls to the rest of my friends, and that was it. She was out. Everyone knew that if you made me mad or did something I didn’t like that you would be
out of the group, so it shouldn’t have been a surprise to her that we didn’t want her to sit with us anymore.

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My dad passed away when I was in grade 7, and as hard as it was for me, my brother had a really hard time. He had a hard time just leaving home in the mornings because he was scared that something was going to happen. So I basically had to take over the role of taking care of him.

Since he was in grade 6, we had different lunch times, so I was always being pulled out of class on his break to go see him because he was upset, or having a rough day and just needed to see that I was still here. Sometimes he would come find me when I was on lunch, so my friends just got used to him hanging around us.

And I admit, I was really, really defensive and protective of him. I might have tortured him and been mean to him once in a while, like sisters do, but absolutely no one else could. **No one.**

Ashley just kind of got caught in that. It wasn’t my fault that everyone excluded her from everything after that. That’s just kind of the way things were in middle school. No one else wanted to be out of the group, so once someone was out, they were out for good. When I think back on that now, I think it’s horrible. I mean, after everything you hear about bullying and how it affects people! It kills me that I was like that. But if you were mean to my friends, or especially if you were mean to my brother, it was just… **chaos.**

**Nate: The Turning Point**

Middle school wasn’t really a big change from elementary school. We still had to miss classes, or at least parts of them, because we were still pulled out. It wasn’t as much, maybe only two or three days a week, but we were still pulled out. I remember more and more people
started asking a lot of questions. Like, “Why do you have to go there?” or “Why do you get to go there.” and “What do you there?” And I still didn’t have an answer for them. Other than “I am Native.” But I never really felt like people thought bad about it… well, maybe the worst was feeling like people thought we needed that extra support because weren’t smart. But… I could be wrong. Maybe that’s just a memory.

Still, I remember in grade 6 I didn’t really like my regular teacher, and I misbehaved quite a bit. Not listening to her. Not paying much attention. Not doing my homework. I hated doing homework. And my attendance wasn’t awesome either. But somehow I must have done enough, because I passed with a C.

That summer, I remember I was thinking about careers and stuff and I didn’t think I could stay a C student and do those things. So I just decided I was going to change. I remember so clearly thinking I was going to have a better attitude, that I wanted to be a good student again, like when I was much younger. And I was determined to be an A student. I don’t know where I got it from, but I just decided I was going to be a good student. From there on, I was. So grade 7, I started paying attention in class, doing all my homework, reading all the stuff we got. And I didn't miss a single class.

A lot had to do with the friends that I was with that year. They were doing good in school, too, so they motivated me even more. Plus, I really loved my teacher that year. Mrs. Simpson. She was one of my favourite teachers ever. She would always praise you if you did something good, and she just made me feel good to be in her class. I wanted to be there. I was really lucky, because she was also my homeroom teacher in grade 8. Looking back, I credit her a lot for helping me to stick to being a good student. She made it easy.

Other than that, I just changed my attitude and my priorities and it worked. I think.
Hannah: Everyone was scared of the Native kids

My middle school, Bridgeport, didn’t have any Native students. But unlike Greenfield Elementary, we did see them everywhere. There was a reserve close by, and all those students went to the other middle school, which really wasn’t that far from ours.

There was a store that we all used to go to, kind of in between. Closer to us, but they would walk over, too. And there were always Native kids hanging out there. Like, every time I went, they would be standing around. Bit by bit, there were more and more problems. Fights started happening between people from our school and Natives from their school. It seemed like there were always fights happening. That was a big thing in middle school. Any time I went down to that store with my friends at lunch, like if we needed to buy food, or just wanted a break from school, or whatever, it was always in the back of my head, “Are they going to be there? Is there going to be a fight?” And I never went there alone, ever. That’s when you’d get people yelling at you. It was the worst. The store became a place that you were scared to go to.

We also used to have middle school dances at one of the community centres. So students from both schools would go. All the kids could come. And it seemed like something always happened there.

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“C’mon Hannah. Let’s get out of here.” Maya yelled, straining to be heard over the loud music rippling through the hall.

“What time is it?” It had been such a fun night, I didn’t want to go yet.

“It’s nine-o-clock already. My mom will be here soon.” Oh, wow, I thought. My mom was going to be here to pick me up soon, too.

“Oh, I just gotta get my jacket.” I found my jacket where I left it, on a chair in the corner, and then Maya and I said a quick round of goodbyes to some of our friends. The dance
was going on until 10pm, but my curfew was still 9pm and so was Maya’s. Normally I would have just gotten a ride with her, but tonight my mom was going to take me for ice cream after.

We headed out the front door, and were waiting by ourselves in the parking lot, when suddenly a group of Native girls starting marching right towards us. I didn’t even see where they came from. Were they at the dance? I asked myself. I don’t think so. They must have been waiting. We tried to back up, to go back inside, but they blocked the entrance. Don’t make eye contact, I kept thinking to myself, over and over.

Finally one of the girls who seemed to be running the show said, “You’re Maya, right?” Instantly, I felt some relief. They weren’t here for me. But then I started to worry about my friend. What had she done, why did they want her?

“Uh, yeah.” Maya managed to get out. I glanced over at her and saw she was trying to look down, avoid eye contact too. But the girl in the lead stepped right up in front of her.

“I heard you’re the bitch who was going around saying Jasmine is a slut.” She pointed with her right arm to a stern looking girl standing just off to the side of her, without ever taking her eyes off of Maya. Holy crap, did she say that? I’d never heard Maya say that, but where was this coming from? More of the Native girls had started to move in close. How many were there? Five? My eyes scanned the parking lot. No, there’s one over by the garbage can too. Six. There’s six of them and only us two. And they looked mean. Where is everyone? If only someone else would leave the dance now. My mind raced, I felt like I was going to start crying.

I glanced over at Maya. She took a deep breath and looked up, right at the leader. “I swear, I never said that. I wouldn’t. Not in a million years.”

“Yeah? That’s not what we heard. We heard you were going around bad-mouthing her, bitch.”
“It wasn’t me. I never said that. I swear!” Maya’s voice rose and cracked a little, I could tell she was scared too, even though she was standing straight and tall and staring right at the main girl now. “Just leave us alone.”

“Leave you alone?” The girl started laughing, and glanced around at her friends. “Leave us alone she says. Wah, wah, wah. What are you going to do cry baby? Go cry to mommy?” More laughing.

Just then a few of the girls took a step closer. My chest felt tight and my knees were shaking. I couldn’t breathe. I didn’t want any more of them to get close to me. I couldn’t handle that. I just had to get away.

“I’m sorry Maya” I whispered, lifting my hands, palms upward, shrugging, trying to say I don’t know what to do. You’re on your own. And then I ran. I ran as I fast as I could toward the road and down the sidewalk to the left; the direction I knew my mom would come from. I heard laughing at first and I thought I heard footsteps behind me, which made me run faster than I’d ever run before in my life. Finally, after I’d ran about 5 blocks, I realized I couldn’t hear any footsteps anymore. They must have stopped and gone back. I slowed my pace to walk and tried to catch my breath which was coming in ragged, short bursts at this point. I took a deep breath and on the exhale I collapsed to the curb. Sitting there, shaking, I brought my hands to my face. It was all wet. I hadn’t even been aware that I was crying. I brought my knees to my chin and pulled my jacket around me, legs and all, as tight as I could, and cried big heaving sobs.

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I still remember that day like it was yesterday. I couldn’t tell you their names, but I was so scared. When I took off, I just totally panicked. Thank God nothing bad actually happened to Maya. They just got in her face and yelled at her a bit more. Then a bunch of people apparently left the dance, and the other girls took off. Luckily she was fine. My mom found me sitting.
rocking and back and forth on that curb a few blocks from the community centre. That was about 10 minutes after I abandoned Maya.

I didn’t go to another dance for a while. Probably over a year. I was pretty scared to go to any kind of event like that for a while. But eventually I went again. Believe it or not, there’d been so many instances they usually had cops around for the last few hours of the dance after that. Which seems a bit crazy now, cops at a middle school dance! Honestly though, it made me feel better. I still heard the rumors, “Oh, so and so is coming after the dance because they want to beat someone up”, and sometimes there would still be fights as people came out. But I made sure when I went not to leave until after my mom was in the parking lot. She’d text me. I never waited around in the parking lot again.

So you see, by the end of middle school, pretty much everyone was scared of the Native kids. We had good reason, too. Things they’d done. Things we’d heard.

**Nate: The Native Room**

“Can all the Grade 9 students from Qapituwikuk First Nation please come to the main office. That’s all the students from Qapituwikuk First Nation, in Grade 9, please come to the main office. Thank you.”

As the intercom announcement ended, I looked around my homeroom English classroom. A few heads had turned, but mostly people seemed to be oblivious. I slowly got up from my seat, as I saw three of my friends doing the same. I made eye contact with the teacher, she just nodded, then looked away and carried on with the class. Together, the four of us made our way to the main office.

It was the second day of grade 9, and as we slunk down the hall in silence, we exchanged glances with one another, wondering. In the main corridor we saw some of our
friends making their way to the office, too. As we rounded the corner, I felt the lump in my
throat disappear.

“Dan!” I exclaimed, and heard several others yell out, too. Standing there, wearing a
traditional Wolastoqey leather vest over a white shirt, his trademark braid down the centre of his
back, stood our Aboriginal Advisor. I knew Dan was working at the high school now, but I
hadn’t seen him there yet. I was the first to reach him. Pulling me in for one of his infamous bear
hugs, Dan smiled.

“Nate! It’s great to see you buddy. Welcome to high school.” He repeated that ritual
greeting with everyone else, while we all laughed and chatted feverishly. Dan had that effect on
us.

I had known Dan since I was little. He used to work at the elementary school and
frequently did stuff in our community. We all looked up to him, and it was really awesome to
see him at the high school.

After he finished greeting everyone, he pointed down the hallway to the right. “Come
with me. I want to show you guys our room.” When we got there, he opened the door so we
could take a look around. It was just a big classroom, but it was decorated with a lot of Native
artwork and stuff, which was cool to see. I could tell he’d done a smudge there earlier, the scent
of sweetgrass lingered in the air. I inhaled deeply, enjoying the familiar smell, as a few others
did the same. Then I noticed all the computers in there, which made me wonder what they were
for.

As if reading my mind, Dan explained to us, “This is a resource centre for you. I’m here
to help you. You can come here on breaks, you can do class-work in here, if you have an
assignment, you can come work on it here. You can even write your tests in here if you want.
It’s for you. That’s what it’s here for.”
Right from that first day it just felt *comfortable* there. It was nice knowing that there was a space *for us* in the school. Pretty much from that day on we went there to eat lunch, play on the computers, and just hang out.

* * * * *

I’m not sure when exactly, but gradually the resource centre grew to be something *more*. The longer we were at the high school, the more obvious it became that some people had a problem with First Nations people. For me, I had a lot of friends who were non-First Nations, so I didn’t experience too much myself, but I would always hear my friends complaining that someone had called them a derogatory name, or someone had been *judgin’*. Some of my friends were angry a lot of the time at school, and a bunch of times it escalated into physical fights.

I remember a lot of students seemed to be scared of us, too. *Cause we’re so bad,* you know? Like, at break time, there was an area outside, near the back of the school, near one of the doors, where we would all go and just stand around, basically. And if someone else needed to get by, like, in or out that door, and we were in their way, they wouldn’t say anything. They’d just kind of hang their head and try to find a way around. Some would even go back the way they came from, avoid us altogether. There were some guys who would just push their way through, start trouble just for the sake of it, but for the most part, judging by how they reacted, people were kind of scared. It’s terrible thinking about it now, but back then I have to admit it was kind of a good thing. People kind of left us alone when we were in a big group like that. But I hated feeling like they thought we were *all* bad.

The *Native Room*, as it was called by everyone, became a place where we could go to escape *all* that. Like Dan had told us, it became *our* space. And I remember many times going there and being comforted to see Dan, talk to him about stuff that was going on. It was just nice to have someone there who could relate to me. Someone who had been in the same boat, you know?
But it wasn’t always great, though. There were a lot of people who looked down on that room, including some teachers. By then, a lot of students would go to the Native room to write their tests, cause Dan had said right from the beginning that we could. And I think for some people that was really important, because they’d get really stressed out writing tests in the classroom but the Native room was more relaxed and they could concentrate better. It was not as much pressure in there. I had no problem writing my tests in the regular classroom—I could write a test in *any room*—but sometimes I would go to support my friends. It wasn’t because I was stupid, which I know is what some people thought.

* * * * *

“Hey Nate, are you going to come with us to do the Math test in the Native room today?”

“I don’t know. I hadn’t really thought about it.” I was standing at my locker after lunch, about to head to Mrs. Bolduc’s class, when David and Luke approached me. We had a test that afternoon. I wasn’t really worried about it, but I knew they were a bit stressed.

“Come on, Nate. The option’s there for us, and it will help our case if you come too.” They had a point. It was always better if we went together.

“Ok, sure. Why not.”

“Wicked! Thanks man.” We got to class just as the first few students were arriving. Asking a teacher for the first time was always a bit nerve wracking. You never knew how they might react and it was better if there wasn’t a crowd.

“Um, Mrs. Bolduc?” I started.

“Yes Nate?”

“Can we go do our test in the Native room today?” She paused, frowning. Looking from me, to David, to Luke, she scrutinized and then questioned our intent.

“*Why? It’s my* test. Why can’t you do it in *my* classroom?”
By then, most of our classmates had arrived and were getting settled in. I could feel their eyes on the three of us as we talked with Mrs. Bolduc at the front of the room.

David tried to explain, “Well, we feel more comfortable there. It’s not as stressful.”

A few more people pushed past us and took their seats. After another long, awkward pause, which seemed to attract even more attention than our exchange of words had, she finally uttered a slow, drawn out, “O-kay.” We’d gotten our wish, but as we took our test and walked to the Native room, I had an uneasy feeling deep in my gut.

Sure enough, while we were writing the test, even though Dan was there supervising, Mrs. Bolduc came in unannounced.

“How’s everything going boys?” She questioned, as if she were there to offer clarifications and answer any questions we might have.

“Fine.” We answered in unison. I looked back down at my test and continued my work. My skin prickled, and goosebumps raised on my arms. I could practically feel her stare.

“Fine then. I’ll be back shortly.” As she left, I took a deep breath and looked up at the others. David and Luke were doing the same. We glanced at each other, and at Dan, who was looking at us and shaking his head from side to side.

She didn’t trust it, and she didn’t trust us. That’s how I felt. That’s how we all felt. And I knew, I absolutely knew that she wanted to find us cheating. I just knew it. And even though she didn’t catch us doing anything wrong, the next time we asked, she said no.

* * * * *

After that, I mostly just went to the Native room on breaks and at lunch. For me, it was just a nice space to go and relax, maybe do some work, and hang out with my friends and with Dan. But I think it was really, really important for some people. Like, some people used it differently. In the morning before classes started, when they first got to school, they’d go in there, and only leave when the bell rang. Then, break times, straight there. Lunch time, same
thing. They’d only go back to class if they had to. If they could stay and work in there instead, they would. They couldn’t stay there all the time, because you had to be in your classroom the majority of the day. But as much as they could, they would be there. I think it just felt safer for them.

By the end of high school, I seemed to know a lot of other people who… well, who weren’t First Nations, but were something else that had bad stereotypes. I remember feeling awful for them because they had no supports, no place to go, no one to talk to. We were definitely lucky to have Dan and the Native room.

**Hannah: Where The Native Students Go**

“So here’s the cafeteria.” I yelled over my shoulder, the din of scraping chairs and hundreds of hungry kids chattering making it hard to be heard. “The food is ok. But I’d avoid the hamburgers if I were you. They’re nasty. Do you need to buy food?”

“Um, yeah. You?”

“Definitely. I’ll go with you, then I’ll show you the layout.” I was showing the new girl, Cassie, around during lunch. Mrs. Brookes, our grade ten Math teacher, had asked me too, but I didn’t mind. She seemed cool. So far anyways. After we’d paid and had our trays, we headed back into the chaos.

“We sit over here” I told her, leading us to a large cluster of tables, right in the centre. Prime real estate. “You can join us today.”

“Ok, that would be great. Thanks.” We settled in with my friends, and I introduced Cassie to everyone. Then I continued the tour.

“Over there” I said, discreetly gesturing to a couple tables beside ours, “that’s where all the hockey guys sit. They’re cool, I’m good friends with most of them. A bunch of us volunteer
at their games, working the canteen, taking tickets, whatever. Just to help out. You should come sometimes. It’s really fun and the games are great.”

“Yeah. That sounds cool.” Cassie replied, her eyes still lingering on the boys.

“Then there’s the kids from Belmont over there, in that section.” She turned her head slowly to glance over my shoulder, following my pointing thumb, toward the back corner, trying not to be obvious. A bunch of kids wearing plaid shirts, floppy toques, and old jeans sat huddled together, laughing about something.

“That’s a little place just outside of town, they’re all bussed in together, and mostly stick to themselves. Unless they’re outside smoking, then they hang out with the Native kids. That’s their thing. Smoking.” Cassie nodded.

“That’s the Natives over there,” I lifted my chin towards the small group of kids in the front corner, a few tables down from the Belmont kids. Both groups were well away from the hockey section. They did not get along at all. There were a few guys and girls with real dark skin, and black, black hair, but I was always surprised by how many were fairly light. Like me, I thought for a second.

Shaking my head almost imperceptibly, I brought myself back to Cassie. “If you stay in regular classes you probably won’t see many of them much. A lot of them are level threes.” She looked a bit confused but nodded anyways. She’ll figure it out eventually, I thought.

When we finished eating, we left the cafeteria so I could show her around a bit more before we headed to our next class.

“Thanks for letting me eat with you at lunch. I was afraid I was going to be sitting by myself my first day. And thanks for touring me around.” She glanced at me, smiling shyly.

“No worries. You gotta know the layout, right. Besides, my friends and I usually do laps around the school after we eat anyways. I know, that sounds weird, but that’s what we do. So it’s really no big deal.” We headed toward the main office. That was as good a starting point as any.
“So you probably already know this is the office.” She nodded, so we continued walking past. “Unless you get in trouble, you probably won’t come here much. These doors here” slowing beside another set of double doors, just past the office, “these are for guidance. Mrs. Arsenault is pretty cool. She helped me sort out what classes I should be taking this year. Like, what classes will be most beneficial for university, you know? And the library is just down that hall. But let’s go this way.” I led her up the main staircase to the second floor. “Do you have a locker yet?”

“Um, yeah. I got one first thing this morning.”

“Where is it?”

“It’s on the first floor, kind of in the back corner, near the Art room, I think?”

“Oh no. That’s not good. You don’t want to be in that corner. That’s where all the stoners hang out. That’s their corner. We need to get you a locker up here. It’s the best.” My section really was the best area of the school for lockers. Second floor, main corridor. The best lighting for checking your make-up in a mirror real quick, close to most of my classes, and near the best bathroom in the school. And definitely not near any weirdos.

“Plus the hockey guys all have lockers here too.” I added, smiling slyly at Cassie. She blushed instantly, and tried to look away from me. But I saw her grinning ever so slightly.

“Speak of the devil” I said as we got closer to my locker. A bunch of hockey players were just down the hall from us, standing on either side of the hallway. In order to pass them, people had to walk right through them. Just then, a small grade 9 boy wearing glasses and carrying a bunch of books in his arms starting coming toward us, keeping his head down so as not to make eye contact with the guys. They were watching him intently, like predators after field mice. Just as he was almost through them, one of them reached out and slapped his books out of his arms.
“Better watch where you’re going four-eyes.” The younger student looked mortified, and bent down to pick his books up while the guys around him all laughed.

“They’re always doing stupid stuff like that, but I swear they’re not bad guys.” I tried to tell Cassie, as the niner finally stood and passed us on his way down the hall, his face red with humiliation. I could tell Cassie was affected by the incident. Why did they have to go and do something like that right then? Arrgh. They were always up to something, and they were pretty rough on some people. But what was I supposed to do? If I said anything, they’d probably start ripping on me.

“Come on. Just forget about it” I told her. If you thought too much about all the stupid things that happened at this school, it would drive you nuts. So I just shook it off, and walked right through those guys like I owned the place. “Hello boys!”

“Hannah! What’s up fine thang?” Chris, the captain was the first to greet us.

“Not much, Chris.” Bumping my hip into him. He hugged me and draped his arm over my shoulder. The other guys crept in around us. “Fellas, this is Cassie. She’s new. I’m just showing her around.”

“Ah, we were wondering when we’d get to meet the new chick. Welcome Cassie. Mi casa es su casa.” I rolled my eyes at Chris, as if to say gimme a break. These guys thought they owned the place. But they were hot. Cassie’s hand had unconsciously moved to her long brown hair, and was twirling a piece around and round, nervously.

“Hi.” She smiled, peering at them from under long, thick lashes. The guys took her in, looking her up and down. Fresh meat.

“Ok, ok. Leave her alone guys.” I pulled away and gave Chris a playful shove in the side. “I’ve still got to finish the tour, and then we’ve got to get to class.”

“Yeah, yeah. Later Hannah. Bye Cassie.” Chris yelled after us, and others echoed, as I practically pulled Cassie down the hallway. We turned left off the main hall, and I was just
starting to think, *What else am I going to show her?* When suddenly a loud racket sprang from a classroom up ahead.

“What’s going on in *there*?” Cassie asked.

“Oh, that’s where the Native students *go*.” I told her.

“What?”

“That’s the *Native classroom.*” I reiterated, holding up my index and middle fingers and making air quotes for emphasis. By now we were passing the open doorway. As usual, students were sitting on top of the desks, eating, laughing having a great old time. Some were talking on their cell phones, others were playing on the computers.

“Students just go there for lunch?” Cassie asked as we continued our stroll.

“For lunch, during classes, whenever.”

*During classes?*

“Oh yeah. You’ll see. If you walk by there on your way to the bathroom or something during class, there will still be a bunch of students in there. There always seems to be. There’s usually a teacher in there too, but it never really looks like they’re doing much of anything. “

“But there’s a class in there, then?”

“I don’t think so. I don’t know exactly what goes on in there, but I’ve seen them leave other classes to go there.”

“What?” We rounded the bend, passing the main computer lab, and Chemistry room. So much for my tour, I thought.

“Yeah. You’ll see. They’ll be in class with all of us, and all of sudden just get up and be like, ‘I’m going to the Native room.’ And they’ll leave.”

“They just get up and leave?”

“Sometimes. Or they might *ask*, but teachers don’t really say no to them. They kind of come and go as they please. Teachers don’t really want to deal with them anyways. So they just
go there instead. To that room. That’s where all the Native people go.” We were back at the main stairwell. “Here, we’d better get your stuff from your locker, classes are going to start soon.” We headed back downstairs.

“Ok. Thanks.” She paused, thinking. “All of them go there and get out of classes?”

“Pretty much. Well… I mean, there are a few that are doing fine. Like, I am friends with some who are really good students. They don’t take off to that room. So I guess maybe it’s just a certain group of them.”

Just then, my friend Joe dashed passed as we were rushing around the corner, on our way to Cassie’s locker. Joe was in grade 12, and we’d been friends forever because my mom and his mom were best friends. Spinning around, he ran back to us, “What’s up Pocahontas? Who’s your new friend?” I punched him in the arm, trying to laugh his comment off, but I could feel my cheeks burning.

“Doofus, this is Cassie. Cassie, Doofus.”

“It’s Joe. Nice to meet you Cassie.” He reached over and shook her hand. I glanced at Cassie and could immediately tell she was a little awestruck. With his six foot frame, blond hair and blue eyes, a lot of my friends had that reaction around Joe.

“Okay, Cassanova.” I gave him a slight shove. “We gotta get to class. Come on Cassie.”

“Bye Joe,” she finally got out, looking back over her shoulder as I pulled her along the corridor. Glancing back at me, she asked, “Why did he call you Pocahontas?” Here we go again, I thought. Stupid Joe. Fine, no biggie, I can deal with this.

“Because my dad was Native. Wolastoqey actually. So I’m half-Native.”

“Oh. I didn’t know.”

“No. Most people don’t. Unless they know my family. Joe and I practically grew up together, so that’s why he knows. He’s kind of a like a big brother, always teasing me.” By now we were at Cassie’s locker.
“You have Science next, right?” She nodded. “Me too. What do you have after that?”

“History.”

“Me too! May as well grab your books for that, too. You can store them in my locker. They’re both upstairs. We’d better hurry.” As we rushed back through the hallway and up the stairs, Cassie kept staring at me. Not again, I thought. Why did everyone have to stare once they found out I was half-Native? Did they think they were suddenly going to find some evidence?

Finally she said what was on her mind, “Have you ever gone to that Native room?” Well that’s a new one, I thought.

“Me? Never. Well, early on in grade nine Mrs. Arsenault, the guidance counsellor I was telling you about earlier, she brought me in there. Told me if I was ever having a bad day or just needed a break, that I could go there. But I’ve never gone in there since that day.” We were at my locker now. One minute till class starts. Cassie was still looking at me strangely.

“Look Cassie. You seem like a really nice girl and I hope we can be friends. But you need to know something. I don’t tell a lot of people that I’m Native. You see how the other Native kids are around here, and you’ve only been here a few hours. I’m not like that. I do my work, I do good in school, I have lots of friends, and I don’t need any kind of special treatment because I’m half-Native. Ok?”

“Ok, Hannah. I get it.” I knew she didn’t really get it, but as we rushed to our Science class she switched the topic to ask about our teacher, and slowly the tension that had been creeping up my back and shoulders eased away.

* * * * *

That Native room really stands out in my memories from high school. I always remember I never wanted to go there. I mean, it looked like they had a great time in that room! But I never wanted to go there. That was probably one of the main reasons I never wanted to tell people that I was Native, because I didn’t want to be to be thrown in that room. I mean, God! I
don’t like being babied or treated differently just because I’m Native. I hate that. I mean, I’m me. I’m still me. I’m a human.

And the students who went there, a lot of them anyways, they were always disruptive in class. They would just walk in late, the teacher would say something to them, and they’d just be like “I’m out of here.” The rest of us would always be sitting there, looking at each other, thinking “Ugh. Here we go again.” They had no respect for anybody, and they didn't have to. They could be nasty, they could swear. They didn't have their work done, it didn't really matter. They could walk out of the classroom. If anyone else did that, you’re going to go see the principal, and you’re going to be dealt with. You just didn’t do that. Native students, they just got away with it. If they were having a bad day, they’d just get up and be like, “I’m going to the Native classroom.” Can’t say no. Teachers couldn’t say no to them. So basically they could come and go as they pleased.

And teachers didn’t want to deal with them anyways, that was obvious. They were just like, “By all means, go.” It just seemed like teachers were glad to have them out of their classrooms, so someone else could deal with them. That's what it seemed like. They were treated like these little special cases. Why? Oh, because you’re Native, and I'm sure you have problems. And you must have family problems. And so on, and so on. So what?! Don't baby it. It's not going to change anything.

So that’s what I was surrounded by in high school. Everyone basically just thought ‘Native kids aren’t smart. They don’t have any potential. They’re not going to do anything with their lives.’ That’s just always the impression that I got. That’s what everybody thought. Myself included. I had those nasty opinions. Absolutely. I saw it. I grew up with it. How could you not think that? They were thrown into this classroom. They didn't have to go to class. So what do you think they're going to do? They’re just gonna sit around. They’re not going to learn anything. They're not going to go to university. Most of them were in level 3 classes. You’re
literally just setting them up to fail. You can't do anything with a level 3! That's pretty much, well... I think that's why a lot of them dropped out. Because what's the point in going if you're just going to sit in that classroom all day?

That's why I was always really scared to, well, be classified like that in high school. I mean, my good friends knew, there were always the occasional Native jokes. They'd call me chief, or Pocahontas, or whatever. It was funny. I didn’t mind. They still do it. But, like, stupid stereotypes are everywhere.

There was one day I was out with a friend of mine who was also Native and I met this man. I don't even remember who he was exactly, but he was older and was Native too. Somehow he knew the girl I was with. I think they were from the same community. And, um, he looked at me and asked “How old are you?” So I told him I was 16. And the next thing he asked was, “Oh, do you have any kids?” And when I said no, he reached over, shook my hand and said “Congratulations!” I think he thought it was funny, but I just stood there. Totally shocked. I will never, ever, ever, forget that moment. “You’re Native, 16, and you don't have a child? Congratulations!” And it’s just like, UGH! God! Stupid stereotypes. Like there’s no white people that have kids at 16!?!?

But maybe that's partly why I didn’t really hang around many people who were Native in high school. We didn't really talk much. We didn't really have anything in common. I was in my own little world, and they had theirs. I liked different things than they did. So we just never really connected or talked. Like, we probably just had different goals. They didn’t care about school and I did. They liked to party and smoke, and I didn't. And I didn't want to be stereotyped and looked down on. So I had different friends.

But, it's kind of weird because I feel like whenever I thought of Native people, I just completely separated them from my family. When I thought about how they were in my high school, I always thought “Native students aren't smart.” That’s the way I saw it. Then I’d also
be like, “But my family is not like that. They're different.” I mean, my family is incredibly intelligent. Like, my cousins who live in Polamuwikuk, they’re very intelligent. They might not be book smart. But they're very intelligent. Just life skills and things they know. Cause they kind of had to raise themselves and do everything on their own, so they're smarter that way. Barely anyone has gone to University in my family, and a lot know more than I do! So even still, I'm like, "Well, my family’s different.”

But are they really?

Nate: Goodie Goods

“Hey nerds, we’re heading over to Timmy’s, you coming?” Toby and I had just gotten outside, to our spot, where all the kids from my community hung out on breaks, just as everyone else was piling into cars to take off. I hated leaving school with them, even if they did plan on coming back, we were always late, and I had to try to sneak into my classroom, which never worked.

So Toby and I just looked at each other, shook our heads, and I yelled over,

“No. You guys go on without us. We’re going to stay here.”


*    *    *    *    *

I started high school with 10 other First Nations students from my community. We’d been friends for years, and for the most part we were a pretty tight knit group, always hanging out together both inside and outside of school. But in high school we also started to hang out more with some of the older students from our community, and I always felt a little bit on the outside of this big group.

Right away in Grade 9 people starting skipping school. I always felt really weird about it. Like, I didn’t want to skip, but they were my friends, so when we all got together on break if
everyone else wanted to leave school it was hard for me not to, you know. Eventually I started saying “No, I don’t want to miss classes”, or I’d make up an excuse about something being due that was worth big marks or something.

As we got older and people started getting their drivers licenses, the new thing became making a run to Timmy’s for coffee on break. At first, that didn’t seem too bad. We weren’t leaving. We were coming right back. Or so they always said. Sometimes we would, but sometimes I’d get there with them and they’d decide not to come back. Not right away anyways. Then I’d have to walk back by myself. And even if we did come right back, we’d almost always be late for class, which I hated. I was doing good in school, and I hated annoying the teachers or having them mad at me, or getting behind. I just didn’t feel right skipping, or being late, or any of that.

Thankfully Toby, one of my closest friends, he was really serious about school, too. So we just decided we weren’t going to skip anymore. We were going to focus on school together. We even became a little competitive with each other. We’d sit together in classes, and we worked together on projects and stuff, but we always studied separately to see who could get the best marks!

I really credit Toby a lot. Not only did he help me keep my marks up, but without him, I would have been on my own. Once we decided we weren’t going to skip anymore, we were going to concentrate on school, a lot of our friends started making fun of us. We were still friends with most of them, but it was different. It was really nice not to have to face that by myself.

**Nate: Mrs. White**

“Oh crap!”
“What?” my mom, Laurie, asked looking up from peeling potatoes, surprised at my sudden outburst. I was sitting at the kitchen table opening my mail from the school to see my grade 11 course schedule, while she was beginning to prepare supper for that night.

“They put me in Mrs. White’s class for Grade 11 Math.” Slowly placing the peeler down beside the sink, my mom turned to me.

“You need to get out of that class.”

“I know mom. I’ll try. I’ll go talk to the Guidance Counsellor as soon as I can.”

My mom had worked as a teacher at the high school I attended until the previous year, and she knew Mrs. White. She had told me before that she seemed friendly enough in the beginning, smiling politely and making small talk in the staff room, but something about Mrs. White had always bothered her. Then, during my mom’s last year at the school, a fellow teacher, Mr. Smith, disclosed some unsettling information to her, about things that he had overheard Mrs. White saying while attending the staff Christmas party.

“Laurie, I don’t think you should let any of your students be put in Mrs. White’s class.” Mr. Smith had stated, during a private conversation outside of school.

“Why? What’s wrong?” my mom had asked, uneasy about what his response would be. Mr. Smith paused, perhaps worried about the repercussions of what he was about to say, knowing full well that there was no taking the words back once they were spoken aloud.

“Well, I think… I think she might be racist, Laurie.” That word hung in the air between them, separating them. Although Mr. Smith had had his reservations about approaching Laurie, he couldn’t get the frustrated rant that Mrs. White had engaged in at the Christmas party out of his head.

“She was mocking your students, talking about them as if they were all the same. She even went so far as to call them lazy and stupid, and was really angry that they get ‘special privileges’. I don’t know… I really hate using the ‘r’ word, but if I were you I would try to steer
“your students clear of her.” By “your students” Mr. Smith was referring to all the students from Qapituwikuk First Nation, my home community. Since my mom had been employed at the high school to teach Native Studies and act as a resource teacher for First Nations students, her peers frequently referred to “all of them” as “hers”. She was ok with that, but sometimes she would tell me it felt like a lot of weight was on her shoulders. So when I found out I was to be in Mrs. White’s Grade 11 Math class, my mom wanted me out.

A few days before the start of the school year, I went in to see the school guidance counsellor to request a switch to another section.

“Hi Mrs. Randall.”

“Hi Nate. What can I do for you?”

“Umm… I’d like to request a change of section for Grade 11 Math.”

“Well, Nate, we only offer 2 sections of that course and they’re both full. Why do you want to switch?” Sitting there in Mrs. Randall’s office, I wasn’t sure what to say. How could I explain what I’d heard? How could I articulate what I was afraid of? How would she react? I decided to start with things I heard about Mrs. White from other students and friends.

“Umm… well, I’ve heard from some students, like, from my community, who have had her before, that she isn’t very fair towards First Nations.”

“What do you mean? I know Mrs. White. She’s always very fair to me.”

“Well, um, I’ve just heard that she’s said some things about First Nations people that weren’t… well, they weren’t very nice. And I just think I will do better in someone else’s class.”

At that, Mrs. Randall, who had always seemed friendly and open-minded, started to get angry.

“Listen Nate, I’m sorry. Mrs. White is a good friend of mine. I can tell you right now that she’s not prejudiced in any way. And I’m sorry, there’s nothing I can do. The sections are full.” Not knowing what else I could say or do, I left Mrs. Randall’s office with a foreboding, heavy feeling in my chest.
By the time the course started, I was determined that Mrs. White would never get the best of me. Whatever she dealt out, I was going to give back. That was how it had to be. I was on my own.

Right from the beginning, coming into that class, we knew we weren’t going to get along. I knew I wasn’t gonna behave for her. And she knew that. Mrs. White was committed to maintaining order in her classroom, and anyone who challenged her, especially me, it seemed, was removed. For half a semester I think I spent more time in the hallway, or being sent to guidance or the principal’s office, than I did in class! When I was in class, I wasn’t really paying attention anyways, because I didn’t like her, and I knew she didn’t like me.

I’d had good marks in Math before that, always at least a B, sometimes even A’s, but I just couldn’t focus in her class. Finally after my marks had dropped to a C-, they switched me to another section. Unfortunately, that section was ahead of where Mrs. White’s class was, and I was lost. That was the first time since I started school that I failed a class. The following semester, I ended up being placed in the level 3 Grade 11 Math class. And because of that, just because of that one course, one stain on my academic record, I had to take an upgrading course in University. All because of that.

**Hannah: The Bird Course**

In grade 11 I took a Native course. Grade 12 Native Studies. But I took it in grade 11. *Great* course. And a lot of people took it. White people *and* Aboriginal people. And it didn't matter, it wasn't like, “Oh, what are you doing in *this* course?” That type of attitude. It was just… it was *cool*. Everyone wanted to take it.

And a lot of people did take it. Partly because it was the *bird course*. That’s what we called it. Everyone called it that in high school. That’s partly why everyone wanted to do it,
because it was seen as an easy course to take. There wasn’t a lot of work, and it was easy to get a good mark. So a lot of people took it.

Still, everyone enjoyed it, I think. I did. It kind of brought back memories of Mrs. Nicholas’ class at Austin Street. And I did learn a little bit, a fair bit, about the culture and the history of First Nations people there.

* * * * *

“Tomorrow we have our first test of the course, on Woli Pomawasuwanol46. The Medicine Wheel Teachings we’ve been covering,” Ms. Sherman told us from the front of the room. I wasn’t worried about the test. I’d been so into this unit, I remembered most of it. An hour or two of review, and I’d be set.

We’d covered the symbol of the circle, why it was so sacred in First Nations cultures, how it connected to the circle of life, the seasons, everything. We’d learned about the sacred medicines and their uses. And we’d even created our own Medicine Wheels, something that was really hard at first because I wasn’t used to sharing really personal information with that many people. But afterward we all felt closer together because of it. We even learned to make dream catchers, which was awesome. I’d always wanted to make my own dream catcher ever since I was a little girl watching my Aunties in Polamuwikuk make them. Our creations were currently hanging all over our classroom, dancing in the sunlight.

About five minutes before the end of class Ms. Sherman announced, “I’ve prepared a practice test for you to work on tonight. Go through it with your books and notes. If you complete this, you shouldn’t have any problem on the test tomorrow. Ok? Good luck studying!”

46 Woli Pomawasuwanol (pronounced Wool-ee Bum-ous-soo-wog-on-o) refers to the Medicine Wheel teachings, but literally translates as “good teachings” or “sacred earth walk” (D. Perley, personal communication, October 29, 2018).
Sweet, I thought, as I grabbed it on my way out the door. This would help structure my time tonight.

The next day, I came in totally prepared. The practice test had been a good review of everything and I’d known almost all the questions without even looking them up. After the bell rang and everyone was there, Ms. Sherman distributed the test face down. I was near the front of the room so I was one of the first students to get mine. I just stared at the blank back page, dying to flip it over.

Finally everyone had a copy, and Ms. Sherman gave us the go ahead. “You have 30 minutes. Use it wisely.” I flipped it over, my pen ready. I balked. The first page was identical to that on the practice test the night before. I turned page after page. Each one was exactly the same as the corresponding page in the practice test. I glanced around the room. Most people were just writing away, smiles on their faces. A few of my classmates were looking around like me, confused expressions on their faces.

“Heads down please,” Ms. Sherman interjected. So I looked back down and started writing.

* * * * *

I remember writing that test, and others like it so vividly. At first I just thought, Ok great. This is going to be super easy. I can probably get 100%! But as I filled in answer after answer, I remember starting to get a bad taste in my mouth. I mean, it’s one thing to expect an easy course, and it’s another thing to be given the test the day before! Now, it really makes me angry. It sends a bad a message. You know? It was a Native course. Native students are slow. They don’t learn as fast. They can’t… they’re just not smart. So of course the Native studies course had tests like that. I guess that’s why everyone called it the bird course.

It was kind of shame, because otherwise it was a really great course.
**Nate: Grade 12 Native Studies**

My mom taught the Native Studies course at the high school for 10 years. When I was little, like, 5 or 6 years old, she use to bring me and my sister whenever she took her class on field trips into First Nations communities.

* * * * *

“Ok, Nate, Samantha, you sit together right here at the front of the bus with me.” My mom said, slowly releasing my hand as she steered my sister and I into the front seat of the school bus.

“Ok.” I muttered, struggling to pull myself up onto the seat and turn around.

After we were seated, my mom stepped back off the bus and spoke with her class. My sister was already watching out the window, and I leaned across her to get a better view. Some of the students were so big and grown up, they looked as old as my mom. I felt a bit nervous but also giddy to be going on this adventure. I loved watching my mom in her teacher role.

I don’t even remember where it was that we went that first time, but when we got there we pulled into the driveway of this house and this grandmotherly woman came out to greet us right away. My mom let all of the big kids get off the bus first, and then, taking my hand, brought me and Samantha off.

“Kulahsikhulpon! Welcome.” The Grandmother exclaimed. She was wearing a long turquoise skirt, holding a drum in one hand, and had a small leather pouch around her neck.

“Today, we are going to have a sweat lodge ceremony. Has anyone ever been in a sweat lodge before?” My mom had told me about sweat lodges, but I had never been in one. As I slowly shook my head from side to side, I looked up and around at the older students. I was surprised that most of them were also shaking their heads no. Only one or two were nodding.

“Well, then, we are going to have a special day.” She smiled at all of us. “But I have to teach you about the sweat lodge first.”
I remember vaguely how she started by saying that a sweat lodge was a like a mother’s womb, that the drum she would beat, was like a mother’s heartbeat, and that when we came out we would be renewed. But mostly I remember the heat. And the darkness. I definitely remember the darkness. My mom made sure to sit between Samantha and I, even though I don’t think she was supposed to, because normally you enter by age, and at first I held tightly onto her hand. But as I looked around the sweat lodge at everyone’s faces before the last tarp was secured and the darkness came, I remember suddenly feeling very calm. I don’t think the Grandmother made the sweat lodge very hot that day, probably because it was so new to everyone, but I know I stayed in there until the end.

When we emerged from the sweat lodge, shiny with perspiration, everyone had big smiles on their faces. I stood there watching everyone embrace and laugh, just like a family, as my mom draped a towel around me.

I think there were some other activities with Grandmother teacher that day. I think she showed some students where she grew and stored her medicines, sacred medicines, and I think she might have taught about their purposes in ceremony. But I was too little to remember it all. I wasn’t too little to feel the energy that day though, or to know that everyone had a great time.

Unfortunately, my mom left the high school after my grade 10 year, and since Native Studies was a grade 12 course I couldn’t take it until grade 11. Maybe most people would have been glad to not have their mom working at their school anymore, but I was happy to have my mom there. It felt good growing up to have a mom who was a teacher, a *holder of knowledge*, I
guess. She has a lot of knowledge on culture and our history, and I was proud to have her there. But I missed having my mom as my teacher by one year.

Still, when it was finally my turn to take the Native Studies course, I was eager to learn.

* * * * *

I rounded the corner of the main hallway and saw a stream of students flowing into the classroom I was heading to. Wow, I thought. All kinds of students are heading in there! Even though I knew the course was open to everyone, and had heard from my mom over the years that a lot of non-Native students took the course, it was the first time I was going to be in a course about my culture that had a lot of people—Native and non-Native people—in it. That they had signed up for the course and wanted to learn about First Nations stuff was really exciting to me.

As I entered the classroom, another pleasant surprise greeted me.

“Hi Nate!” The teacher said, as she looked away from another group of students she was speaking with when she saw me.

“Hi Ms. Sherman! I didn’t know you were going to be teaching this course?” I responded.

“Yes. I probably won’t be quite like your mom, but I’m going to do my best.”

* * * * *

Ms. Sherman had been a substitute teacher when I was in elementary school and I’d always really liked her. She was a kind, caring teacher. After my mom left, the school hired her for a long-term substitute placement to teach the course until they could hire someone else. I was a bit disappointed, because she wasn’t Native, and I don’t think it was quite as good of an experience as when my mom taught it. She did do her best though, as she said she would that first day.

She did a pretty good job, too. Right from the get go, she started bringing guests in: elders to tell stories and do ceremony, and crafts people to teach us how to make stuff. That was
the best for me, because I already knew how to make a bunch of things, and my classmates started turning to me for help.

* * * * *

“Um, Nate?”

“Yes?” I answered, looking up from the dreamcatcher I was beading. It was Veronica, we hadn’t spoken much before, but she was always friendly to me in classes and when I passed her in the hallway or at lunch.

“I’m really stuck on how to do this. Do you think you can show me? You seem to be really good at this stuff.” It was true, I was pretty good at it. I’d had exposure to it before, whereas the majority of my classmates had not.

“Sure. Here let me see what you’ve done so far, and maybe I can figure out where it went wrong.” I said, taking her partially made dreamcatcher in my hands. It was kind of a mess, but I didn’t think everything needed to be scrapped. “I think if you just undue these parts, and redo this, I think it can be salvaged. Here, I’ll show you with mine.”

* * * * *

I remember feeling resourceful when people started coming to me for help. Once I showed a few students, a few more would come. Some days I was the last one finished, but I didn’t mind. It was kind of nice to feel like the top of the class. Like, when we were in a French class, the French students who could already speak French fluently could always help you out if you needed it, and they were always the stars of the class. So it kind of felt like that, I think. It was a good feeling to be seen as knowledgeable and be able to help people out.

It helped that it was such a good atmosphere in the classroom. Everyone was respectful and it was really, really nice to see other people interested in Native studies. It felt like they cared to learn about our culture and we could finally show it off.
By the end of that class, Ms. Sherman was almost like a friend to me. She was open and honest with all of us about the fact that she was learning, too. (Which was kind of obvious to everyone anyways, but it was nice that she admitted it). And she really spent a lot of time talking with me, Toby and Rob, who all lived on the reserve before and after class. She would ask us a lot of questions if we were going through something in class that she didn’t know, and even though we couldn’t always help her, sometimes we could and that was pretty cool.

I’m pretty sure Ms. Sherman only taught the course that one semester. It wasn’t long. After that, they got somebody Native in there. He was really, really cultural. So that would have been good to take his course. But she tried hard and I always respected her for that.

**Hannah: An Unexpected Award**

The last two years of high school were definitely the best. Everything was just so good. I had fantastic friends. I was involved with a lot. Volleyball was my big one. I loved playing volleyball. I was on both the junior and senior girls’ teams. And I was on the grad class committee, which was so much fun. I got along with my teachers. I really liked most of them.

Basically, I just loved school and always wanted to excel in everything. And I did. I was lucky that way. Once I got into grade 11 and 12 classes it was more important to me to excel. I was no longer satisfied with a 75%. I’d made up my mind that I wanted to go to university. To make my mother proud. Make my family proud. So I got the best marks I could.

And by then, everyone got along. We were all friends. No matter who you were, or what group you were with, everyone got along. It was so cool. Like, all of that fighting and bullying and stereotyping that were so prominent in grades 9 and 10, were pretty much just gone. We all hung out together.

But, weird thing, I think the fact that we had such an amazing graduating class had a lot to with the fact that a lot of the ones that were causing trouble earlier on, were gone. I don’t
know if they got expelled, or switched schools, or dropped out, I just know they were gone and the rest of us were having a great time.

*     *     *     *     *

The day after Graduation, I went back into my high school for the last time. Already it was a weird feeling being there, even though I’d just been here writing my final exams a few days prior. I’m done, I smiled to myself. I had some good times here, but I’m so ready to move on.

“Hannah!” Hearing my name broke me out of my reverie. Turning, I saw my Vice Principal, Mr. Taylor, coming out of the main office. He must have seen me through the glass as I’d walked by on my way to the guidance office to return my grad gown.

“Hey Mr. Taylor.”

“Hi Hannah. Congrats again on graduating.”

“Thanks.”

“Listen Hannah, we had no idea you were Native.” He handed me an envelope. “If we’d known, we would have given this award to you.” Yesterday at the ceremony, my friend Morgan got some kind of Native award. It was an academic award, and I knew I’d done just as well as her, if not better, but I hadn’t really thought much of it. I was just happy for her.

“Oh. Ok.” I laughed kind of awkwardly. “Thanks Mr. Taylor.”

“You’re welcome, Hannah. You deserve it. You’ve done extremely well and you should be proud of yourself.” His words made me flush, and I looked down at my shoes.

“Um, thanks.”

“I’m sorry we didn’t give this to you yesterday.”

“No. No problem. It’s fine.”

“Ok. Take care Hannah.”
“You too Mr. Taylor.” With that, he retreated. What? That was unexpected. Whoever picked the awardee mustn’t have known. I placed the gown over my left forearm and I opened the envelope. Wow! I stared at the enclosed cheque for $500. All this time I’d avoided being categorized as Native and now I was staring at an award for being the Native student who had achieved the highest (or at least tied for the highest) marks academically. How ironic.

Nate: Reflections on Quitting and Succeeding

Overall, I did really good in high school. I even did some extra credits! I did some online courses really fast, so by half-way through grade 12 I had enough credits to graduate. But one of the requirements at the high school was you had to be there full-time. So I did a few more courses in the final semester and graduated with a few more credits than most people.

There were ten of us from Qapituwikuk who started school together, and we were all pretty close. All of us. But once we hit high school we started losing people. Only three of us graduated together. Since then, one other person completed her GED, but the rest still haven’t graduated. Watching my friends drop out like that really weighed on me in high school.

Sometimes when things were hard, I felt like it would be easy to just not go anymore… but then, in some ways it made me want to keep going even more. I didn’t want to be one of those people that ended up quitting. But not because I judged them, or even because I saw them as quitters, it just really bothered me that they thought they couldn’t do it anymore. And I never wanted to see myself like that. If I had, I think I probably would have quit, too.

Although I don’t think my mom would’ve let me quit, anyways! She definitely stayed on top of me and I credit her as being the one to inspire me to go all the way.

Of the three of us who graduated together, we all went to university right away. First I did my BA. And I admit, there were definitely times I felt like quitting. University gets hard! I felt really alone in my program and hated it for quite some time. But the whole time I told
myself, “No. I’m doing this degree for her. For my mom. Then I’m done.” That was in my head for most of that degree. I did it for her. To satisfy her, so she’d be proud of me. I was going to finish my BA and never come back.

And then I came back! I didn’t even take time off in between. But I came back for me. To do my Education degree. To be a teacher, like my mom. By then I just knew that’s what I wanted.

Hannah: Stories from Post-Secondary and Looking Back

I went to university to do my business degree right after high school. But during my first semester I found out about an Aboriginal business program that would give me a certificate after two years, and the courses could still be applied to the degree program. So I switched into that. It just made sense.

At first I was really worried. It’s a program for Aboriginal students, so I thought I was going to put in classes that were super easy. And I hate to admit it, but in some instances they kind of were. Like, we’d have a deadline but if students wanted to hand in their assignment a week late, even a month late, it was no big deal! That used to make me so mad. That was not what I wanted or needed.

But mostly, I really liked it. I started meeting new people who were Aboriginal, which was really great for me. For the first time in a long time I started feeling really proud to be Wolastoqi. My classmates became my family, and my classes started to feel like home. There is something about being in a classroom full of Aboriginal people. It is incredible. First day, you walk in and… it’s just different. Aboriginal people, they’re so forward they just start talking to you. They’re just, ‘Hi, how are you? Who are you? Where you are from? What do you do?’ They’re so accepting. And they’re always encouraging. Before you even know it, it’s like you’ve known them your entire life.
“Ok, any questions?” Hands from about two thirds my class shot up. Thank goodness, I smiled to myself, bringing my arm back down and joining in the laughter that erupted around the room. Our Prof had just finished a complex explanation on entrepreneurship and the legalities of setting up a business within a First Nation. If this had been one of my regular classes last semester, even if 90% of the students had no clue what was going on, no one would have raised their hand. They wouldn’t want anyone else to think that they don’t get it. Here, everyone feels free to admit it and ask questions.

Scanning the classroom, the Prof spontaneously declared, “I tell you what, let’s divide up in groups and take some time to discuss everything and then we’ll reconvene again.”

We all started scooting around, moving chairs and desks, while Abby, a tall outspoken student started yelling out, “Ok, who gets it? Put up your hand?” About 10 hands instantly flew up. “Make sure you split up. We need some of you in each group.” Within about a minute we were all organized. 15 minutes after that, everyone was on the same page. I friggin loved this class.

That’s the way it was in nearly all of my Aboriginal classes. Everyone was willing to help each other. If some people didn’t understand what was being covered, we would all drop what we were doing and help them. That’s it. There was no judgment, no questioning, just working together to figure it out. I could pretty much say anything, ask anything, without feeling embarrassed.

That’s completely different from my other classes where you don’t even want to ask questions, or ask someone for help, because you’re scared people are going to think you’re stupid. Students roll their eyes at you, and they definitely don’t want to help you. Basically everyone gives off the vibe that if you don’t understand it’s not their problem. It’s that
competitive world where it just doesn't matter what you do, someone's going to knock you down.

But when I’m around Aboriginal people, they just want everyone to succeed. And everyone’s so excited for you when you do. I'm not saying it's completely like that everywhere, but in school, with the people I’ve been with, absolutely I feel that way.

And I’ve taken a lot of classes. I mean, after the Aboriginal Business certificate, I finished my BBA. Then I enrolled in the First Nations Teacher Education Program, and switched into the BEd program. So I’ve taken a lot. Put me in a regular class and tell me to go present something, oh man, I’m just terrified! It’s so stressful. You can feel people judging you. But the classes I’ve taken with all Aboriginal people, they’re amazing. I have no fear because there’s no judgement. Everyone is just happy for each other and supportive of whatever it is you’re doing. I looked forward to going to class every single day just to be with those people.

If only I knew then, in high school, what I know now. It would've been a different ballgame. I would've been out there making it known how well I'm doing, shouting from the rooftops “I am Native, so what! I don't go around and drink! I don't do drugs! I don’t smoke! I don't miss class! I don't...” whatever else it is that Native people supposedly do. I think I would have made a big deal about it. Probably would've voiced my opinion a lot more. Been involved with local Native communities a lot more. My community, Polamuwikuk, was a few hours away, but there were also a few communities close to me.

But I didn’t really start to get involved until I got to university and started meeting more Aboriginal people. Like Nate. We went to high school together, but I don’t even remember him! At all. Now he’s one of my greatest friends. I work in summer camp programs in his community now. They’ve just totally accepted me. And it’s terrible to say this, but I think if it was the other way around, if I had stuck with most of my high school friends in university and Nate, or others
in my classes, had been in a program with all of us, I don’t think we would have been so accepting.

So now I’m just trying my best to educate myself on everything I didn’t learn in high school. Like, high school history class. Ironically, I hated history because of that class. I had no desire to ever take it again. Ever. What did I learn about? The capitals of whatever provinces? We have Google now. I can look that up on my phone in two seconds if I ever need to? I remember so many lessons, sitting there with my elbows propped on my desk, chin in my hands, bored to death. It was awful. Sure learning about Sir John A. MacDonald might be important to someone, but I felt like it had nothing to do with me, or anything that would ever affect me. We may as well have been talking about Pyramids. We probably did for all I remember.

And like, it was Canadian history. Why didn’t we learn about Canada right from the beginning? Like, where it started, who was here first, and what happened to all the Native people? Like, they put us onto these little pieces of land and basically said, “Stay.” As if we were dogs. Our people couldn’t really leave. They were stuck on these reserves. If people left for work, or hunting or harvesting without permission, they wouldn’t get any funding. And there were all kinds of ways that their status could be stripped away. Like the government could decide who was Native and who wasn’t? Seriously?! Then there were residential schools. I didn’t even know about residential schools until a year ago! How is that possible?! They practically just happened, and still affect so many communities today. And Aboriginal Affairs, which you think would be helping us out, isn’t really at all.

That’s what we should have learned about. Cause, there’s so many stereotypes about Native people, and no wonder! All that history is hidden. People are like, ‘Oh, Native people don’t do anything with their lives’! And you know what, I thought that about the students in my school, too! I hate that. I absolutely hate that I thought that. But I did.
Now, I just… I get so angry when people make those kind of comments. And I hear them quite a lot because, still, a lot of people don’t know that I’m Native. You can’t really tell just by looking at me. If I have my hair braided or have a feather in it then apparently it’s more obvious. Who knows? But most of the time people in general don’t know.

The difference between now and then, is nowadays I don’t stay quiet about it. I’m proud of being Wolastoqi. It’s who I am. When people find out, they’re inevitably like, “Really? You’re Native?” And then I always have to hear things like “Do you get everything tax free? Do you get cheap cigarettes? Do you get all your schooling paid for?” As if that’s all there is to being Native. Getting stuff. That’s what people think! And it’s so frustrating to deal with. I just want to tell them, “Why don’t you go back and learn about what happened here!”

There are so many little things, and big things, that people don’t know. How about all the amazing things Native people have done? Or how beautiful our cultures are? So I’m taking it upon myself now to learn as much as I can so that when I get into classrooms I can teach my kids everything I wish I was taught in school. If people knew… well, the truth really, that would be huge for everything else.
Chapter 6:

Narrative Threads of Connection: A Thematic Analysis and Discussion

As participants’ stories were told, retold, read and reread, unique problems, situations, and shared experiences that were unknown at the beginning of this research endeavour began to capture my attention. In part because I am a novice narrative researcher, and in part because of scholarly expectations of a doctoral dissertation, I felt that these emerging themes warranted further discussion. Nevertheless, I am hesitant. While the stories in the previous chapter have room to be messy, complicated, and emotional, leaving room for a multiplicity of interpretations, here, I am challenged to be clear and succinct. Writing this, I am reminded of Law’s (2004) question and warning, …what happens when social science tries to describe things that are complex, diffuse, and messy. The answer, I will argue, is that it tends to make a mess of it. This is because simple clear descriptions don’t work if what they are describing is not itself very coherent. The very attempt to be clear simply increases the mess. (p.2)

Therefore, I want to be transparent about the fact that I view the analyses and interpretations offered in this chapter as incomplete and partial. They are meant to start conversations, but they are only a few of the possible conversations to be had.

In this chapter, I shift my attention from the complexities and uniqueness of each participant’s life and experiences in schools to look across the interview transcripts for common themes about the impact of schooling experiences on the lives of these First Nations students. As noted in Chapter 4, looking across the seven participants’ raw data involved an inductive thematic analysis approach; yet I also organized the emergent themes into three overarching “threads” (Clandinin et al., 2013) which were influenced
by the underlying holistic Indigenous Research Paradigm and the narrative methodology framing this study. Specifically, these three narrative threads comprise: personal narratives, institutional narratives, and familial-communal narratives. While the threads that I have chosen as the backbone for this analysis and discussion are interwoven with each other and it is impossible to truly separate them (Clandinin et al., 2013), I attempt to do this in order to begin new conversations around the multiple themes and factors that were important in shaping these First Nations students’ experiences in schools and in their lives. In addition, at the close of this chapter I discuss themes I inferred as contributors to their academic success which overlap all three narrative threads.

**Personal Narratives: Telling Stories of Who They Were and Who They Were Becoming**

The personal, social and cultural narratives that arose all spoke to how these students were trying to understand their positioning and their identity in relation to others around them, particularly in their school environments. As such, I begin by offering a narrative understanding of identity as described by Clandinin and Huber (2002):

> identity is a storied life composition, a story to live by. Stories to live by are shaped in places and lived in places. They live in actions, in relationships with others, in language, including silences, in gaps and vacancies, in continuities and discontinuities (pp.161-162)

This identity is based on personal, cultural, social, historical, familial, and institutional factors in specific places and times, that come to bear on an individual’s definition of who they are and who they see themselves becoming (Clandinin et al., 2013; Sable, 2005). However, issues related to First Nations identity, and who can and does identify
as a First Nations person, have additional layers of complexity due to a history of
colonialism that has attempted to control, assimilate, and in many ways, eradicate First
Nations peoples and communities.

Often when researchers speak about “First Nations identity”, they assume
homogeneity, “a sameness and continuity that belies the fluidity and change that [First
Nations] people experience and demonstrate” (Restoule, 2000, p. 103). In addition to
coming from five different Wolastoqey and Mi’kmaq communities, the notion of a
uniform and static First Nations identity is not commensurate with the stories the
students in this study told about themselves and their lives.

Throughout this section on personal narratives, I present several themes that
highlight issues related to identity, including how the participants spoke about: a)
normality, generally positioning themselves outside the “norm”; b) dominant
perspectives or narratives of First Nations students; and c) additional cultural narratives.
As you will see, my research interest was not with formal theories about how identity is
forged, nor what it is and is not. Rather, I decided to allow the issue of identity to
emerge in its own way, as told by the participants through their stories.

“Normal” narratives. As I reviewed the completed participants’ stories, I
realized that my attention was often drawn to narratives of what counted as “normal”.
Each of the participants composed their stories with attentiveness to what was
considered normal in the dominant narratives in the schools they attended and the
society in which they lived, and each of them located themselves, albeit in varying ways
and degrees, outside this normal. It is important to remember that, as Smith (2010)
states, “‘[n]ormal’ is, of course, decided by the dominant members of society” and
Indigenous peoples have been located outside the norm since the time of contact. That the schools these participants attended sent them messages every day that their families, communities and lives were “not normal” in comparison to the dominant majority, was a significant source of tension for the participants.

Having said that, the degree of tension experienced by feeling different and the associated reactions exhibited by participants varied. For Yvonne and Emily, the experience of feeling different started very early, stayed with them throughout their schooling, and eventually led them to withdraw from the “normal” school system and seek alternative ways to graduate. Both women were aware from a young age that their dark skin and home address on reserve were outside of what was considered “normal” at their schools. Yvonne specifically spoke of how the school environment increasingly made her feel like an outsider: “I knew I was different from everyone else. …And they make me feel different.” This led to more severe reactive behaviour, including increasing absenteeism, early experimentation with drugs and alcohol, and oppositional conduct. In both cases, I came to see how these participants constructed their life stories in contrast to the dominant narrative of what “normal” students experienced, and that this had been a significant area of struggle for them.

Plotlines of normalcy were woven throughout other participants’ stories as well. While they still appeared to me to be sources of tension, the tensions they created presented themselves in less obvious ways. While Yvonne and Emily saw themselves as firmly located outside the norm, participants like Nate, Amanda and Hannah saw the construct of normalcy as something they could negotiate, distancing themselves in various ways from other First Nations students. It was Hannah’s stories from elementary
school that first brought this to my attention when she described having First Nations friends and “just normal friends,” already seeing the distinction between the two groups. As Hannah progressed in school, being seen as normal became akin to “fitting in,” and she increasingly described herself as different from First Nations students and more like her normal, non-Aboriginal friends. For her, fitting into the normal crowd could be seen as a survival strategy, conscious or unconscious, that helped her get through school, but it was not without repercussions. The strategies of “passing” or “acting” as part of the mainstream (“normal”) school population have been identified in the literature as a common experience for many successful First Nations students (Brayboy, 2004; Lavell Harvard, 2011), albeit an often costly one. In Hannah’s case, later on in life she experienced much guilt and struggled with her previous negative perceptions of First Nations students and her active resistance not to be categorized as one of them.

While these are just a few examples, each of the students shared stories that demonstrated this awareness of what counted as normal and as different in their schools and the society around them. These understandings figured into how they made sense of their lives, their identities as Wolastoqi and Mi’kmaq youth, and what they saw as possible for themselves.

“First Nations” narratives. Just as all students negotiated their lives and told their stories in relation to what was seen as normal, they similarly composed their stories with attentiveness to how First Nations students were perceived in the dominant narratives surrounding them. From their early elementary years, and certainly by middle school, all participants were attentive to the dominant narrative that First Nations students were supposedly “not smart.” That this narrative was prevalent in all of their
stories, sadly, did not come as a shock to me. Over a century and a half of enforced colonial education and devaluing of Indigenous peoples and cultures in mainstream schools led, for decades, to poor academic achievement and high drop-out rates. As previously discussed in Chapter 3, the belief held by colonizers that Indigenous peoples were of limited intellect was a foundational cornerstone of early “Indian” education policy. Since then, generations of research focusing on high dropout rates have perpetuated the continuance of this belief, producing a rhetoric of failure which has made the link between Indigenous and incompetent seem natural (Little Bear, 2009; Smith, 1999). So what is shocking to me about this narrative, this continuance of an “antiquated learner profile” (Goree, 2015, p. 57) for First Nations students, is how prevalent it was early on for all of these participants. Their stories reflect how their developing identities were shaped by this perception that First Nations students were “stupid.” They recognize it as a perception that follows them or exists around them within their educational settings. Some actually accept that they fall under this persona, at least for a time, while others actively resist it or disregard it as something that exists but does not apply to them, personally.

Nate’s story of watching another student being pulled out of class for extra help and witnessing other students make fun of him in his absence, highlighted how many of these First Nations students came to realize that their non-Aboriginal peers might be thinking and saying similar things about them when they were pulled out for “Native classes” during their elementary and middle school years. Many of them described seeing smirking faces, and feeling unwelcomed or targeted in those moments, even
though they generally all enjoyed their Educational Assistants and especially time spent learning their culture.

Amanda’s and Hannah’s stories contrasted with the rest of the participants’ narratives, yet they also demonstrated to me just how prevalent the narrative was about First Nations students’ presumed limited intellect. Both of these young women storiéd themselves as quite different from other First Nations students. From her earliest years, Amanda remembered “always being smarter” than her brothers and “catching onto stuff a lot faster than most of her classmates”. She described being acutely aware that by high school most teachers did not seem to expect much from First Nations students, and in many ways Amanda seemed to accept the narrative that most First Nations students were not smart. This narrative was reinforced by the fact that the majority of First Nations students in her high school were enrolled in level three classes. She was able to distance herself from this perception of First Nations students because she was “different”. Teachers held high expectations for her. She was a “good student”. Hannah similarly seemed to accept the dominant narrative that most First Nations students were not smart. She admitted to me that “everyone”, including herself, thought “Native kids aren’t smart. They don’t have any potential. They’re not going to do anything with their lives.” As a result, she distanced herself from them, and made sure she was never classified as a First Nations student in high school.

From these participants’ stories, it can be seen how the persistence of the narrative that First Nations students are not smart continues to surround and impact students today. In many ways, it limits the opportunities available for Aboriginal students, particularly with regard to the practice of streaming First Nations students into
levelled classes (which I will discuss in greater detail in the Institutional Narratives Section). For other First Nations students who were faring better academically, awareness of the “assumed limited intellect” (Lavell Harvard, 2011, p. 128) of Aboriginal students led them to disassociate themselves from their First Nations peers; a move that may have helped them in the short-term to navigate and succeed in the system, but which also holds complications and consequences for their burgeoning sense of identity, sense of self-worth, and pride in their heritage.

The participants also described another disconcerting stereotypical script. Multiple participants spoke of being aware that First Nations students were seen to be “the bad ones” or “the troublemakers”. Narratives of Indigenous peoples exhibiting behaviours that are viewed to be in direct opposition to those of the mainstream connect back to the earliest days of settler-Indigenous contact, and largely stem from a lack of understanding of different lifestyles and a sense of Eurocentric superiority. These attitudes became more deeply ingrained with the introduction of the Indian Act which outlawed many traditional ceremonial practices; a move that made the continuance of cultural practices “criminally Indigenous” (Palmater, 2017). Following this colonial logic, any form of resistance by Indigenous peoples against laws and systems meant to oppress them, and eradicate their cultures and ways of life, is dismissible—since they are “troublemakers” anyways. Therefore, that these narratives were present in participants’ stories was not that surprising. What is surprising, again, is how early these students were aware of these narratives and how they chose to either use them, accept them or resist them.
In Nate’s case, he was aware of this stereotype before he even entered school. His experiences of being watched and being the target of racial slurs in public places because people assumed that he and his friends “were up to no good”, illuminate how prevalent this stereotype was. In his stories of school, I saw how this perception surrounded and influenced him. In his own words, “…the more we were disruptive, the more we refused to do our work, the more we were sassy, the more we were excused. They expected us to be bad, so when we were, they weren’t that surprised.” By high school, even though Nate had restored himself as a model student, he described that he and his First Nations peers were still viewed as troublemakers when they were together in large groups. In his words,

a lot of people were scared of First Nations. Like, at break time, there was an area where we all went and just stood. ... And, um, I know that a lot of people were scared. Because they thought we were bad.

Although he had mixed feelings about this at the time of our interviews, he admitted that “it was kind of a good thing.” He, and other students, found a sense of power and relief in knowing that people would leave them alone if they were scared of them.

Similarly, I saw through the other participants’ stories how they all had this clear sense that First Nations students were stereotyped as “the bad ones.” Several of them decided to accept this and use it to their own advantage. Unfortunately, the power they experienced by sticking up for themselves and others also led to self-defeating behaviours that made their life in school increasingly difficult. These experiences are similar to findings in other resistance research that focuses on oppositional student behaviours as a form of personally liberating, although ultimately self-defeating, conduct which cements their position as troublemakers and helps to reproduce the
existing social order (Ogbu, 1987; Ogbu & Simons, 1998; Willis, 1981). In contrast, for some participants, such as Hannah and Amanda, this perception of other First Nations students as the bad ones and as the troublemakers, led them to distance themselves further, I believe, out of a sense of disdain and fear of being perceived and treated similarly.

At the time of our interview, Yvonne also expressed her frustration that so many young First Nations people she worked with held the belief that Native people have to be “tough”, that they have to “fight a lot.” While she recognized that these perceptions may have originated from stereotypical views held by outsiders, she wisely inferred that they also influence First Nations youth who feel they need to live up to these stereotypes. For First Nations youth who are searching for their identity and their sense of belonging in society, if healthy representations of their history, their ancestors, and their people are not available to them, this artificial construction of identity through abiding by stereotypes is quite likely to continue (Eigenbrod et al., 2003).

Cultural narratives.

*Stories of pride and yearning.* Stories that dealt directly with culture were not as prevalent as I imagined they would be when I started this study. Part of this reason, I think, is because I was hearing reflective stories from young adults about their childhood and adolescent experiences in schools, times when their cultural knowledge and experiences were limited, if present in their life stories at all. Due to over a century of colonial interference and disruption, not all First Nations youth have access to cultural knowledge holders in their communities, if they even live in a First Nations community. Yet, where cultural narratives were present they were very powerful. Hannah’s stories
from Mrs. Nicholas’s class in elementary school were ones of coming to know and being proud of one’s culture. They also demonstrated intergenerational values and connections. She knew learning her Wolastoqey language was something that would make her grandparents proud, and she was ecstatic to share her new-found knowledge with them. Unfortunately, when these opportunities ceased in school, we no longer heard stories like these from Hannah.

Eden similarly storied herself as someone yearning and searching for cultural information through school activities and classes in order to learn more about her grandfather and her Wolastoqi ancestors. Since her mother had distanced herself from the culture after getting married, and her father was white, Eden spent many years trying to figure out what being First Nations could mean for her. She told stories of being enthralled with Wolastoqey culture and when this culture was present and honoured in her classes she was much more engaged in her learning.

Nate was the only participant who described himself as someone with a deeper access to cultural information growing up since his mother was recognized in their community as a “holder of knowledge.” During his Grade 12 Native Studies class, Nate described feeling resourceful and proud. This demonstrated how important it was for him to see that his culture and history was valued by his school and his classmates. His stories also provided me with a sense of wonder and allowed me to glimpse the richness of knowledge that is shared through culturally important and sacred ceremonies.

*Not the First Nations student I had in mind: Stories of appearance.* Many of the participants in this study reminded me that “cultural narratives live in our skins” (Clandinin, et al., 2013, p. 230) and although culture goes far beyond skin deep, issues
regarding appearance abound when it comes to culturally identifying and / or being identified as Aboriginal today. This issue of “who looks Native” and who does not was a very real and prevalent matter for participants in this study. It is also a dominant theme in the body of literature examining Aboriginal identity today. Restoule (2000) writes, “[t]here is a constructed image of what Indians [sic] are supposed to be that has to be played into or against in order to make advances in Canadian institutions” (p.110). This constructed image is connected to issues of “Indian” status, and whether or not individuals are full or part Native – issues introduced from outside the communities of Aboriginal peoples by Euro-Canadians with the enforcement of the Indian Act. This image has also been reinforced and engrained in the minds of the dominant society by Hollywood movies and other media representations of the savage or stoic Indian. (Roles ironically often played by non-Indigenous actors.) (King, 2003).

In the context of a society that “has long been, and remains, a zone of white privilege” (Kobayashi, 2009, p. 60), those who appear “more Native” face more racism from outsiders. For some students with dark skin who are automatically and visibly “othered” by the culture of the school, “a significant amount of time and energy is exhausted just trying to remain in the institution much less actually succeed” in it (Lavell Harvard, 2011, p. 160). This was seen in the stories of Emily and Yvonne, who both spoke of how their “brown skin” always made it obvious that they were Native, both in their schools and in their lives outside of school. Correspondingly, their stories also described the greatest degree of awareness of, as well as experienced, racism. However, I think it is important to mention that Amanda’s stories problematize this narrative. In sharp contrast to Yvonne’s and Emily’s experiences, Amanda—another
participant with long black hair and dark skin, fitting the stereotypical image of a First Nations woman—barely spoke of her appearance at all. In fact, hers was the only story where narratives concerning appearance were noticeably absent.

On the surface, Indigenous people who appear “more White” may seem to have an easier time getting by in a racist society. The Aboriginal education literature contains several examples of individuals “passing” as white, or at least strategically avoiding being identified as a First Nations individual, and some researchers claim this has proven to be an effective means of avoiding unwanted conflict and discrimination, and succeeding academically (Brayboy, 2004; Lavell Harvard, 2011). In this study, Hannah spoke many times of how most people did not really know she was Native and how she didn’t feel the need to tell them. Although she never uses the words “able to pass”, Hannah’s stories are similar to those of other Aboriginal students in the literature who consciously or unconsciously blended in with white students and kept their Indigenous identity to themselves in order to avoid difficulties and be successful (Lavell Harvard, 2011).

There are, however, many unique challenges for Aboriginal people who “do not look it.” These individuals are more likely to have their Aboriginality questioned, both by outsiders as well as insiders who have come to internalize imposed stereotypical images. Eden’s stories most clearly spoke to these challenges. As a blonde child of a white Father and a Wolastoqi Mother, Eden had felt that she did not fit in, in either world, since she was very young. In her own words:

I never felt I fit with my family, like my [dad’s side of the family]. Because they are very high maintenance and judgmental, and schooled, and all this stuff. And they look down on you. … I do enjoy and want to be Native and stuff, but I feel like [I was
always] judged. … Because I wasn’t a ‘purebread’ type of thing. .. People [were always] like “You shouldn’t classify yourself as a Native.”… I wasn’t just getting it from the white people, I was getting it from the Natives too. So I was just kind of stuck in my own little bubble.

Throughout her stories of schooling, she spoke of her whiteness and green eyes as being something she constantly struggled with when she wanted to claim her First Nations identity, predominantly amongst peers. Even at the time of our meetings together, she continued to face difficulty when she had to establish her identity as a First Nations woman for university administrative purposes. I also feel I must confess that when she first walked into my information session with her pink toque pulled down low, almost completely covering her blond hair, she made me realize how many problematic assumptions I had been holding about what First Nations students look like. Borrowing from Thomas King’s (2003) chapter title, “You’re not the Indian I had in Mind”, Eden was certainly not the Wolastoqi student I had in mind.

It is because of this experience with Eden that I began to consider the implications of First Nations students’ appearances for education and schooling. It seems to me that much of the conversations taking place across provinces about improving Aboriginal education is based on the erroneous notion that administrators and teachers can look around their schools and classrooms and tell who is Aboriginal and who is not. While many First Nations students who live in a First Nations community enter school as a cohort, receive funding directly from their community for various programs and supports, and are thereby “identified” by school administration as First Nations students throughout their schooling career, other Aboriginal students are not. These students include status First Nations students, like Matt, Hannah and Eden in this study, as well as non-status First Nations, Métis and Inuit youth. Some of these students
may fit the stereotypical image of Aboriginal students, but many more will not. As we saw through Matt, Hannah and Eden’s stories, these students chose not to officially identify themselves as First Nations by the time they got to high school, but that does not mean that they were not impacted by narratives about First Nations students or the lack of content about First Nations histories and peoples.

**Personal narratives: A summary.** Listening to these participants describe how their schooling experiences impacted their personal, social and cultural identities reminded me that their “stories to live by” (Candinin et al., 2013, p. 225) are far more complex than just their stories of school. Participants began to ask questions about their identity at an early age. For these youth, issues of normalcy, negative stereotypes and perceptions of First Nations peoples, yearning for more information about their culture, and issues of racism and racialization, all impacted their conceptions of themselves and the degree to which they identified as a First Nations student. Despite the many differences in these seven participants’ personal and cultural stories, all were on a journey of discovering who they were and who they were becoming, including a process of discovering their First Nations identity to greater and lesser extents. It also seems clear to me that the provincial schools they attended did little to facilitate this exploration of identity and were generally in direct opposition to the fostering of a healthy, positive, and proud Indigenous identity.

**Institutional Narratives: Stories of Schools, Places within Schools, and School Practices**

Every day schooling experiences were intricately intertwined with the participants’ self-image and contributed to their beliefs about who they were and who
they were becoming. In some of the participants’ stories, particularly Hannah’s and Amanda’s, schools were at times defined as places full of opportunities, friends and excitement, yet this was also precarious and recognized as being apt to change at any moment if they did not “fit in”. For Yvonne, Emily and Matt, schools were narrowly defined, even hostile places that typecast students and limited opportunities for their future. It is to these types of institutional narratives—narratives of schools, places within schools and school practices—and how these affected participants, that I turn my attention now.

**Having a sense of belonging and feeling welcome.** As I listened to participants telling their stories, and then later read and reread through their narrative data, I realized that my attention was often drawn to narratives about the atmosphere of the school, classroom environment, and relationships with teachers. Whether or not students felt they belonged in their schools and whether or not they felt welcomed in their classrooms, greatly impacted their schooling experiences. While measuring things like “belonging” and a sense of feeling “welcome” may be fairly elusive, these are precisely the kinds of things that are possible to ascertain through personal narratives.

All of the participants shared stories about whether or not they felt like they belonged in the schools they attended. Some of these stories were positive, recounting experiences about school environments and teachers who were welcoming. For example, Amanda relayed how her public elementary school and middle school were places of opportunity, where she was encouraged to succeed, and where, in turn, she thrived. Yvonne and Emily’s stories of the alternative school program they attended to finish their high school careers similarly described teachers who encouraged them, whom they
felt cared about them and their wellbeing, and a classroom setting where their presence mattered.

Unfortunately, more often, participants shared stories about feeling unwelcome. Some of these stories started during their elementary years and were particularly present following the transition into public schools. Both Yvonne and Emily recounted experiences with “mean” teachers who yelled a lot, events which left them feeling ridiculed, scared, small and unimportant. Even when they were not the target of this yelling, the act of witnessing other First Nations students being disciplined in front of others made them question their security at school. Yvonne, Emily and Matt explicitly made comments about the fact that they believed teachers and administrators did not care about them. Several participants also used the word “racist” to describe school personnel, particularly teachers, and this was sometimes associated with stories regarding teacher ignorance of First Nations histories, cultures and peoples. Further, all participants, either directly or indirectly, relayed stories describing a hostile school environment in which either they or other First Nations students were made to feel “different” and “unwelcome”.

As a result of feeling that they did not belong, many participants, particularly Eden, Yvonne, Emily and Matt, explained that they started “jigging” or skipping school. Their increasing truancy and, often, associated experimentation with drugs and alcohol, frequently resulted in escalated disciplinary actions. This in turn enhanced their feelings of not belonging and cemented internal narratives of school administration and teachers as being people who did not care about them. While Amanda claimed that she did experience a sense of belonging at her high school, she also spoke of frequent and
chronic truancy. Although an in-depth examination of the research literature on absenteeism and poor attenders is outside the scope of this dissertation, studies which specifically examine school attendance rates of Indigenous students generally agree that absenteeism rates are much higher amongst this population than among their non-Indigenous peers (North West Territories Department of Education, Culture and Employment, 2011; Purdie & Buckley, 2010). Although much of the early literature addressing issues of Indigenous student engagement and educational failure took a deficit perspective and focused largely on individual and family-based factors, in the past decade or so there has been increasing recognition that “school-based factors are of primary importance in relation to the non-attendance of Indigenous students” (Purdie & Buckley, 2010, p. 19). Further studies have also reported that if Indigenous students perceived their school environment to be non-supportive, they were less likely to stay engaged and motivated to attend (Bourke, Rigby, & Burden, 2000; Lamb, Walstab, Teese, Vickers, & Rumberger, 2004; Purdie & Buckley, 2010). Supporting this conclusion, both Amanda and Eden made it clear that they knew it really only mattered how they performed academically, and not whether they were physically present. If schools are sending a message to students that it does not matter if they attend, how can they simultaneously be fostering a welcoming environment?

The participants’ stories also indicated how misunderstandings and ignorance about local First Nations cultures, histories and peoples are not benign. As Starnes (2006) writes, it can be extremely difficult “for even the most skilled and dedicated white [sic] teachers to teach well when we know so little about the history, culture, and communities” (p.385) of local First Nations. She continues, admitting that “in such
cases, solid teaching skills, good intentions, hard work…just aren’t enough. There is too much we don’t know…and what we don’t know definitely hurts them” (p.385). Teachers’ lack of knowledge about Indigenous peoples and issues can have real consequences for students, particularly if they perceive that they are being targeted or attacked. Under these conditions, students who feel unwelcome and are fearful at school are likely to be more concerned with their personal security and less with learning (Benedict, 1993). In these situations, as was illuminated in the participants’ stories, students are also likely to start distancing themselves from the school environment.

Unfortunately, the literature on First Nations education indicates that teacher-student relationships are often characterized as antagonistic, driven by some combination of teachers’ ignorance of First Nations cultures, history, contemporary circumstances and negative stereotyping, and the students’ resultant construction of the teacher as a hostile entity (Benedict, 1993; Cherubini & Hodson, 2012; Richmond & Smith, 2012). For educators, the majority of whom are non-Aboriginal, the importance of acquiring greater knowledge and awareness of First Nations history and culture to foster a more welcoming classroom environment and improve their relationship with First Nations students cannot be overemphasized.

From some participants’ stories, developing a sense of belonging at school appears to start very early in students’ academic journeys, is interrupted and particularly vulnerable at transition periods, but may carry forward and offer protective factors if strongly engrained. On the other hand, for students like Yvonne and Emily who felt targeted and as if they did not belong early on, the sense of alienation may have a high
likelihood of intensifying through middle school and high school years\textsuperscript{47}, when reactionary, oppositional behaviours are likely to start manifesting, making them more of a target for disciplinary measures.

I believe that having sense of belonging and feeling welcomed in one’s school should be a fundamental foundation for every student, a belief that the New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development also recently espoused in their \textit{10-year Education Plan: Everyone at Their Best} (2016). The Department published that their \textit{number one} objective for the next decade is to “Ensure all learners value diversity and have a strong sense of belonging”, stating “[w]ithout feeling a sense of belonging, learners can experience difficulty” (p.8). Put simply, the desire for belonging and acceptance cannot be overestimated, especially in childhood and adolescence (Whyte, 1986). As early as the 1940s, Maslow (1943) identified the social need to experience belonging and love as the third basic need of all humans, coming after only basic physiological and safety needs. Current research on positive youth development, resilience, and self-determination similarly identifies the need to belong, and experience of connectedness / relatedness with others, as a \textit{basic requirement} for psychological well-being (Breندtro, Brokenleg, \& Van Bockern, 2005; Deci, 2009; Deci \& Ryan, 2008; Morrison \& Kirby, 2010). Focusing on ensuring a welcoming environment where each student feels that they matter, that they are important and cared about, is a key area to focus on in terms of improving First Nations students’ experiences in school and

\footnote{This hypothesis is supported by a recent perception survey of all high school students in New Brunswick which indicated that students’ engagement (interest and motivation to attend) decreased during the course of a student’s education (as cited in New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2016).}
likelihood of graduating successfully.

The next subsection closely intertwines with this one and includes several examples of students who felt that certain teachers went above and beyond to foster acceptance, belonging and create a welcoming classroom environment. I have chosen to include these in the next subsection rather than this one because the vast majority of these stories are set within specifically dedicated “Native classes”.

“Where the Native students go”: Stories of safe spaces or segregating practices? Another major theme that I began to see throughout the participants’ stories of school had to do with particular spaces, places and practices designed specifically for First Nations students in New Brunswick public schools. Several individuals shared detailed narratives about attending “Native” language and culture classes, receiving remedial English literacy support, and going to specially designated “Native rooms.” The stories these participants told trouble many assumptions about what “Aboriginal education” means and raise many questions about the distinction between safe spaces versus segregating practices.

Native classes. Four out of seven participants shared stories about being “pulled out” of their “regular” class in elementary and middle school in order to attend either First Nations language and culture classes or receive extra English literacy support as a group of First Nations students. In all of these cases, the teacher or teacher’s assistant who conducted these “Native classes,” as they were known colloquially by both attendees and others in the school, was someone with whom the students had great rapport. As examples, Yvonne and Hannah described this teacher or assistant as a grandmotherly type, Nate said “she was basically my auntie,” and Eden stated “I loved
my TA.” All four of them described warm, welcoming environments, often adorned with Wolastoqey artwork or other elements of their culture, and the narratives they told reflect the excitement that they felt when they went to these classes. Hannah and Nate also recalled the pride they felt when they shared with their families what they had learned about their culture and language in school. They also described knowing that they were learning something important. In somewhat of a contrast, although Yvonne and Eden both enjoyed the time spent with their teacher’s assistants and First Nations peers, they also questioned these sessions more because they were not culturally based but were designed to receive remedial instruction for English literacy or simply to work on “regular” course work in “the Native resource room.”

As the participants grew older, as was most evident in Nate, Yvonne and Eden’s stories, they described a growing awareness of how students were perceived when they were pulled out of class, and because of this they expressed “mixed feelings” about their Native classes. The process of being pulled out of class in front of everyone else was something that was recalled with distaste: they described being aware of everyone turning to stare at them, feeling their faces flush with embarrassment, and being made to feel “more different,” “unwelcome,” and even “stupid.”

In nearly every province, First Nations, Departments of Education and individual school districts are working together “to mobilize policies and programs in schools to develop more culturally competent, relevant classrooms” (Toulouse, 2014, p. 20) for First Nations learners. However, at least in New Brunswick, programs and services to support First Nations students, if they are offered at all, have been generally implemented specifically for them utilizing segregating and remedial practices. At the
same time, school-wide inclusive initiatives have been largely lacking. While additional supports for First Nations students have been and continue to be necessary, implementing them *solely* in a segregated fashion may be simultaneously beneficial and harmful to students. This fear is validated by the vast inclusive education research literature, which, despite many debates on how inclusive education may be best realized in practice, seems to consistently point out that the pull-out model is contested. While pulling students out of the regular classroom for additional support is “highly valued for its educational benefits” it is also simultaneously “less appreciated for social reasons…[particularly] feelings of segregation from the other pupils” (Hannes, Von Arx, Christiaens, Heyvaert, & Petry, 2012, p. 1711) amongst affected students.

Although an in-depth conversation on the philosophy behind inclusive education for students with special education needs (let alone how problematic it is to compare practices for First Nations students with those for students with various disabilities) is outside the scope of this dissertation, I draw on this literature because several parallels became apparent to me. First, while the participants in this study described numerous benefits, the process of pull-out practices also inflicted embarrassment and a sense of being ostracized within their classrooms. Second, for students who already felt that they did not belong in their school and classroom environments, being pulled out of class seemed to intensify their alienation. Third, the fact that both Eden and Yvonne invoked the term “SPED” to refer to their classes, a derogatory term for special education classes, made it apparent to me that the practice of pull-outs perpetuates the dominant negative stereotype that First Nations students are “not smart” amongst teachers and students, including First Nations students’ themselves.
I am not suggesting that all pull-out practices be abandoned; that is not for me to say. I am more concerned with how pull-out practices are implemented and what teachers and school administrators are doing to change the narrative regarding special education and “Native classes”. Perhaps the solution is to ensure that all students receive some type extra support and learning opportunities outside the classroom. Maybe then the stigma against students who are pulled out would diminish.

I also worry if the focus on separate “Native classes” for First Nations students overshadows the bigger picture. As Marie Brant Castellano, a Mohawk mother and grandmother, Professor Emeritus of Trent University, and a leader in Aboriginal Education in Canada has stated, “a major barrier to Aboriginal students’ success is …a society that appear[s] to have no place for them or their people” (Castellano, 2014, p. 10). Therefore, broader reform initiatives that infuse the curriculum with Indigenous content, perspectives and approaches to teaching and learning, that “address the bias and omission in the educational system” (Castellano, 2014, p. 10), and teach non-Aboriginal, settler and immigrant children about their country’s history and the unique status of Aboriginal people, might be a more just approach. While some separate classes may be desired by communities and necessary to address language revitalization, I believe the overall focus should not remain on separate and segregating practices. As long as separate classes are the primary mode of providing more appropriate cultural content, they may also be utilized in order to absolve teachers, administrators and policy makers of working together towards developing more inclusive strategies for truly integrating Aboriginal content and culture in schools.

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**Native rooms.** At the high school level, the most glaring institutional narratives concerning specific spaces, places and practices for First Nations students were about “Native rooms”. The most profound stories about Native rooms were told by Nate and Hannah, whose experiences with these spaces could not have been more different, yet their stories indicate a common underlying dominant narrative. Nate told stories about the Native room in his high school from the position of an insider who found comfort in having a safe space that was for him and his First Nations peers. In sharp contrast, Hannah spoke from the position of an outsider whose perspective of these spaces, I believe, was congruent with the dominant narrative held about them within the high school. From this prevailing perspective, the Native room was mainly used by First Nations students with disciplinary issues who were often disruptive and disrespectful in class, whom teachers did not “want to deal with”. That Hannah actually used the phrase “that’s where the Native students go” as a common reference for the Native room, spoke volumes to how this particular space came to represent a physical divide between First Nations students and the rest of the school community, a geographical separation that mirrors the divide between First Nations reserves and the rest of Canadian society.

The presence of the Native room also perpetuated negative stereotypes about First Nations students. Hannah was quite emphatic when she stated that everyone thought Native kids aren’t smart. They don’t have any potential. They’re not going to do anything with their lives;” … That’s what everybody thought. Myself included. I had those nasty opinions. … They were thrown into this classroom. They didn't have to go to class. … Most of them were in level 3 classes. … a lot of them dropped out.
This dominant narrative and the presence of the Native room, therefore, presented another challenge to Hannah: it represented something with which she never wanted to be associated. For Hannah, the presence of this room became the ultimate factor in her decision to conceal her First Nations identity. She saw the division it created and chose to stay hidden amongst the majority of the school population rather than risk being ghettoized herself. It instilled a fear in her that if she was seen as a First Nations student, she would also be viewed through the lens of all of the “nasty” stereotypes about the First Nations students who utilized “the room”. For her, this was an unacceptable risk.

Even within Nate’s stories, in which the Native room was mainly portrayed in a positive light, I still saw glimpses of the dominant narrative and how this impacted him and other First Nations students who utilized this safe space. As the years went by in high school, Nate described a growing awareness of the hostile school environment around them and increasing negative attitudes towards First Nations peoples. In this environment, the Native room was a place where they “could go to escape all that”. Nate described that despite the growing awareness that the space was looked down upon by others—students and teachers—the Native room “just felt safer” for many students.

Hearing, reading and reflecting on both Nate’s and Hannah’s narratives about the Native room set alarms bells off in my head. My main concern was not with the presence or absence of the Native room itself; it was that the overall atmosphere of the school was so toxic for First Nations students that they needed to escape it, that they needed to retreat to a safe space. As I have already discussed, the need to feel that one belongs is crucial for all students. Establishing a sense of belonging is clearly difficult to obtain in an environment where many First Nations students feel they are marginalized.
and persecuted, where racist perceptions and comments are commonplace. According to Hill-Collins (2000), within this type of context, having a safe space is critical for providing security and serving as a sanctuary for students. It was clear from Nate’s stories that the Native room offered a “small space of safety” (Lavell Harvard, 2011, p. 232) for users, a place where they felt they ‘fit in’ and could be themselves in the midst of a larger, alienating environment.

Their stories also illuminate that the creation of physical, Indigenous specific, spaces and places within school settings is not sufficient. As Lavell Harvard (2011) explains,

> Such a space must be connected to an overall institutional commitment to embracing and supporting Indigenous knowledge and tradition, as well as Aboriginal faculty, staff and students, lest Aboriginal specific [places] become either colonized or marginalized within the larger institution (as is often the case). …such Aboriginal focused initiatives often only create pockets of acceptance and, apparently do little to change the overall hostile environment of the larger institution: in essence they create *pseudo reserves* within the academy. Reserves are simultaneously protective and oppressive, reinforcing the exclusion of Aboriginal people from the larger society. (pp.238-239, emphasis added)

Although Lavell Harvard’s (2011) work focused on Aboriginal safe spaces and programs within university settings, her sentiments about the danger of them creating pseudo-reserves within the larger academic setting fits very well with the stories Nate and Hannah shared about the Native rooms within their high schools. While they offered a safe and protective space for users, they were viewed with contempt by the wider school population and did little to make the overall school environment less hostile towards First Nations students.

*Devaluing of First Nations culture and knowledge: Stories of levelled classes,*

*Grade 12 Native Studies, and First Nations language courses.* In addition to stories
about separate Native classes and rooms, several students shared stories demonstrating the devaluing of First Nations students, their culture and their knowledge. Accounts about levelled classes, First Nations language courses, and Grade 12 Native Studies were particularly highlighted.

Like Nate and Hannah’s recollections about the Native room, participants’ stories about levelled classes were told from both inside and outside perspectives. Yvonne emphasized that in her high school she was not able to choose which courses she was enrolled in, but rather was “put” into level three courses. While these courses—which Yvonne referred to as “SPED classes”—were not specifically designed for First Nations students, Yvonne was adamant that it was “almost all Natives” in her classes, along with a few non-Natives who were known to be “troublemakers”. She recognized that these classes were viewed as inferior to others and felt that the school was writing off her future. In her own words, she strongly believed that “they were basically setting us up to fail.” Amanda also vividly recalled a level three course in her high school but, in contrast to Yvonne, Amanda told her story from an outsider position. At first, she wistfully told me about witnessing this class specifically for First Nations students having a joyous time as she happened to be walking by in the hallway. She fondly remembered the teacher—whom she had classes with in middle school and later on in high school—and spoke of her with reverence. While she was relating her account, I perceived that Amanda felt somewhat jealous of the students in this particular class. When I inquired into the reason behind why she was left out, she explained that it was a level three class and that she never would have “dumb[ed] myself down” to take it.
Both stories raise many concerns about the expectations held for First Nations students and the value placed on First Nations culture and knowledge. The practice of streaming of First Nations students into level three classes has been identified in the literature to be disproportionately applied to Aboriginal students (Egbo, 2009). According to Egbo (2009), many teachers, particularly novice ones, tend to see social and cultural difference as a problem rather than a resource. Since the majority of educators do not understand the languages, cultures or particular circumstances of their Native students, they may equate these differences with other types of difference including intelligence, learning disabilities and personality types (Levine-Rasky, 1998).

If First Nations students continue to be streamed into lower level courses and are not only discouraged but actively blocked from enrolling in the kind of courses that would enable them to go on to post-secondary education, that is a barrier that may be extremely hard to circumvent. Further, Amanda’s institutional narrative illustrates how a class specifically for First Nations students, that incorporated First Nations culture, history and perspectives, was designed from the outset for students who were struggling academically. Although this class was a place where students enjoyed themselves and felt that they belonged, it was considered “less than” other classes, and students who were performing well academically had no opportunity, nor did they want one, to take such a course.

In a similar narrative, Amanda mentioned to me that her high school offered Mi’kmak language courses online, but when I questioned whether she had ever taken one, she replied “No.” She was focused only on academic classes that were required for university entrance. What was the point of taking anything else? This showed me that
Amanda was aware of the dominant narrative that the Mi’kmaq language courses were not important; they were merely extra electives and, therefore, not to be taken by “serious” students who were bound for university.

Eden, Hannah and Nate spoke about their experiences taking Grade 12 Native Studies. Notably, all three participants enjoyed taking this class, especially since it was their first opportunity to learn about First Nations culture and history within a “regular” course, that is, a course full of both Native and non-Native students. Nate distinctly remembered and related how good it felt to have some previous knowledge that was valued by the teacher and other students alike. However, Eden and Hannah also told a troubling narrative about this course and how it was viewed as a “slack class”, a “bird course”, and a lot of students took it simply to get an easy mark. Hannah was particularly critical of this and drew my attention to the problem that this posed: by making the “Native course” easier than other courses Aboriginal content and knowledge were devalued. It sent the message that Native studies was not an academic course. Further, as Hannah pointed out in her reflection on this course, it perpetuated the negative stereotype that First Nations students were not smart.

When First Nations courses are only offered at level three or are only suggested to students who are mainly enrolled in level three courses, students are taught that the content is not academic and not necessary for students who are performing well academically. When popular grade 12 Native studies courses are “dumbed down” or made easier, this message is reinforced. If school administrators and teachers want to work at improving the academic experiences of First Nations students, re-evaluating
these types of practices and the messages they send about how First Nations cultures, histories and perspectives are valued is a good place to start.

**Where is the First Nations curricular content?** Outside of Native classes, Native rooms, and grade 12 Native Studies, First Nations curricular content was largely absent in all the participants’ experiences. Where it was present, it was contested. For example, Yvonne remembered First Nations units in middle school social studies as something she came to dread because of the spotlighting she experienced and because the textbooks presented First Nations people in negative ways while celebrating the achievements of settlers. She also recalled that these units always concerned First Nations from the West. Local First Nations were never discussed.

Participants also spoke to the absence of First Nations curricular content. Both Yvonne and Hannah, as examples, voiced their frustrations with the content of their high school history courses. While they admit that they were not really aware of the omission of First Nations contributions to Canadian history at the time—why would they be, they were children—they both distinctly remembered thinking at various times, “Why are we learning this?” While this might be a common complaint of many students, as they do not always see the relevance of curriculum content in their lives, from these participants’ unique vantage points when I met with them, they were angry. They were both aware that for First Nations perspectives and knowledge to be absent, someone—teachers, curriculum makers, textbook writers—made a conscious or unconscious choice to ignore Aboriginal contributions. With a profound sense of insight both Yvonne and Hannah suggested that greater respect and understanding, on the parts of both Indigenous and
non-Indigenous people, could be achieved if the history and *beauty* of First Nations culture was strongly incorporated in the mainstream curriculum.

As discussed at length in *Chapter 3: Entering the Research Landscape*, past research has also recommended that integrating Indigenous knowledge and perspectives into curricula must be a priority for provinces and territories. Despite the rhetoric of respect for diversity in multicultural, racially diverse school systems, provincial curricula, as well as the textbooks chosen to teach the curricula, continue to emphasize ideas and information that reflect Eurocentric knowledge and belief systems (Mason, 2008). When this material is accepted unquestioned and is not deconstructed, the broad assumption that “Eurocentric knowledge represents the neutral and necessary story for ‘all’ of us” (Battiste et al., 2002, p. 83) becomes entrenched in the minds of administrators and teachers. This myth of neutrality has far reaching implications for all students, particularly those from minority groups whose cultural histories and traditional knowledges are either misrepresented, scarcely mentioned or altogether ignored. According to Cherubini and Hodson (2008), Aboriginal students taking courses such as Canadian history and social studies in provincial public schools may become increasingly disengaged as they continue to encounter white-washed versions of history and unsuccessfully search for cultural representation and relevance. Further, Cherubini, McGean and Kitchen (2011) reported that the lack of representation of Aboriginal peoples in the curriculum impacted on Aboriginal students’ identity and was associated with a creating a “self-fulfilling prophecy of failure” (p. 149).

According to Mason (2008), the de-emphasis and omission of the history of non-dominant groups in society serves two purposes:
“First, it normalizes their oppression and makes that oppression seem natural, insignificant, or even nonexistent. Second, it denies people who identify with these groups a role in history: it silences the histories and experiences of them and their communities.” (pp. 130-131)

How schools and provincially sanctioned textbooks and curricula represent Aboriginal people affects how they are seen throughout the school community as well as in society at large, and is therefore at least partially responsible for their continued racial, economic and political marginalization in Canada as a whole (Orlowski, 2008). Further, as Yvonne wisely stated, the lack of this content in the curriculum continues to develop “small-minded people”. By keeping generations of Canadians in the dark about Canada’s colonial history and the contributions of Indigenous people to the foundations of this country, schools have contributed to maintaining the ignorance of the population, which, in turn, has continued to perpetuate the poor relationship between Canadians and Indigenous peoples. As the participants’ stories in this study demonstrated, this omission and the resulting perpetuation of misunderstandings and ignorance clearly impacts the lives of First Nations students in schools, as well.

Some hopeful news is that across Canada, Indigenous peoples, departments of education, and individual school districts are starting to work together to mobilize policies and programs “to develop more culturally competent, relevant classrooms for Indigenous learners” (Toulouse, 2014, p. 21). Much of this mobilization is in response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s final report (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015b) and Calls to Action (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015d). Specifically, call to action number 62 section (i) states,

We call upon the federal, provincial, and territorial governments, in consultation and collaboration with Survivors, Aboriginal peoples, and educators, to:
i. Make age-appropriate curriculum on residential schools, Treaties, and Aboriginal peoples’ historical and contemporary contributions to Canada a mandatory education requirement for Kindergarten to Grade Twelve students. (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015d, p. 7, emphasis added)

Further, in order to support these proposed mandatory education requirements, call to action number 63 section (i) adds,

We call upon the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada to maintain an annual commitment to Aboriginal education issues, including:

i. Developing and implementing Kindergarten to Grade Twelve curriculum and learning resources on Aboriginal peoples in Canadian history, and the history and legacy of residential schools. (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015d, p. 7)

While the attention being paid to the TRC’s Calls to Action and the prospect of change signifies hope for the future, experts monitoring the implementation of these are concerned that changes are happening very slowly across the country, including here in New Brunswick (KAIROS Canada, 2015).

Institutional narratives: A summary. The institutional narratives that participants shared demonstrate that everyday schooling experiences intertwined closely with their personal narratives and beliefs about who they were, how they believed they fit into their school community, and influenced who they were becoming. Whether or not students felt that they belonged in their schools and felt welcomed in their classrooms greatly impacted their overall schooling experiences. The stories that these participants shared with me also highlighted how specific spaces, places and practices that are put in place to particularly support First Nations students may be simultaneously beneficial and harmful to students, and when implemented in isolation often contribute
to the perpetuation of negative stereotypes. While some classes designed specifically for Aboriginal students, particularly language courses, will continue to be needed, an institutional commitment to school-wide reform rather than segregated, safe places is necessary to create a school environment that values and supports the success of all students. Part of this institutional commitment to change includes providing more opportunities for all students to access First Nations perspectives on history and society, and opportunities to learn from knowledges unique to this place. As seen through the participants’ narratives and supported by the literature, integrating Indigenous knowledge and perspectives into the curricula should be a top priority for education reform.

Familial and Communal Narratives

Throughout the participants’ stories of school, familial and community-based narratives threaded their landscapes in different ways. Sometimes families were forefront, and sometimes they were less visible. Overall, through listening to and carefully culling through their storied data, I became aware of how very intricately familial and communal narratives were intertwined with the participants’ stories of school.

Family stories about school. Family stories, which were often formed inter-generationally or communally, shaped the participants’ experiences in school in both conscious and unconscious ways. Without explicitly stating so, several participants shared stories that demonstrated how the legacy of education for First Nations peoples in this province continued to impact them personally. For example, in Emily’s early stories about transitioning from her community school into the public system, she recalled
vividly how she did not want to go to the particular elementary school to which she was assigned. As she explained this to me, she drew upon communal stories about the mistreatment of previous students there. These commonly known rumors interlaced with the adverse experiences of her own family members at this school, and perpetuated mistrust. As a result, Emily was apprehensive to attend long before she entered this school. The anxiety associated with these negative perceptions put her on guard right from her first days attending and may have contributed to some of her interpretations of teachers’ harmful behaviours towards her and her First Nations peers. I write this not to discredit any actual harmful behaviours and discriminatory attitudes that teachers at Emily’s school demonstrated, but to show how communal and familial mistrust and resentment towards schools primed Emily to be wary of teachers and educational institutions.

Emily’s experience is not uncommon amongst First Nations people. Other research has similarly found that past negative experiences, whether due to racism, mistreatment, or physical abuse, compounds more recent injustices and maintains the mistrust that parents and communities often have towards public schools and school officials (Cherubini & Hodson, 2008; Pearson, 2008). While most First Nations today are working hard at repairing the relationship with provincial schools to which they send their youth, and value education as a way to improve the lives and livelihoods of their community members (Brade, et al., 2003), mistrust lingers close to the surface for many individuals.

Another powerful familial and communal story that deeply affected several participants concerned residential schools. As already discussed in Chapter 2, the legacy
of residential schools haunts First Nations communities across the country. Generations of Aboriginal peoples who were separated physically and/or culturally from their families and communities suffered tremendous physical, psychological, linguistic and cultural losses in educational institutions which drastically affected entire communities (Ing, 1991). According to Regan (2010), “much of the social dysfunction, violence, and poverty that exists in communities today is part of the intergenerational legacy of Indian residential schools” (p.3). Further, the separation of children from their families and the lack of parental role-models severely affected survivors’ own child-rearing practices. The use of “punitive discipline” a fear of touching or difficulty showing physical affection, and high substance abuse rates amongst survivors all greatly impacted second and third generation family members (Cote, 2001; Hull, 1982; Knockwood, 2001).

Until recent years and the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which saw thousands of survivors bravely come forward with their harrowing stories, most survivors suffered in silence. As a result, family members did not often know where their parents’ or grandparents’ rage and substance abuse came from. They did not understand the source of the problems affecting their families and communities.

In this study, Yvonne’s story closely aligned with the literature. It was not until she was in university that Yvonne learned her grandmother was a residential school survivor, and she was finally able to understand the source of her family’s dysfunction. Speaking with wisdom beyond her years, Yvonne explained,

There are reasons why a lot of our people have addictions problems, but that’s not talked about. Like, my grandma was an actual residential school survivor, so finally learning about that, seeing what she went through, explained a lot about the addiction problems in my family. But growing up I didn’t know any of that! I didn’t know why my family had so many problems. I didn’t know how to deal with
them. Now I don’t have any bitterness or anger towards them, because it’s not their fault.

Yvonne’s family struggled with addiction problems on a multigenerational level. Both of her maternal grandparents suffered from addictions, and her mother, who had her very young, also significantly struggled. In Yvonne’s stories from middle school, she related how drugs and alcohol were something that were easily accessed and widely used by young people in her family and community. As a result of the disruption substance abuse caused in her family, Yvonne spent many years staying with different relatives, and these stories of family dysfunction shaped the background of her stories in school. Now, as a young woman, Yvonne is able to connect the addictions and dysfunction in her own family to her grandmother’s time at residential school. To me, she shows a level of understanding and forgiveness that are rare, especially for someone so young.

Hannah also spoke about residential schools from her new position as a teacher candidate. Like Yvonne, she had only recently learned about residential schools in university, and she was quite angry about this. In her own words,

I didn’t even know about residential schools until a year ago! How is that possible?! They practically just happened, and still affect so many communities today. …That’s what we should have learned about. Cause, there’s so many stereotypes about Native people, and no wonder! All that history is hidden.

As Hannah related, the history of residential schools is a major stain on Canada’s past, and it is a history that until very recently has been hidden from most Canadians. Teaching about and raising awareness of residential schools is a key factor in moving towards reconciliation between Canadians and Aboriginal peoples, and education systems clearly have a large role to play in this endeavour. During the course of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s extensive consultations, they reported that,
Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth of our country have told the Commission that they want to know the truth about the history and legacy of residential schools. … They understand that reconciliation involves a conversation not only about residential schools, but also about all other aspects of the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015c, p. 239)

Incorporating curriculum on residential schools (along with education on treaties, the Indian Act, and the many contributions that Aboriginal peoples have made to this country), must be a priority for our education systems. Indigenous youth “need to know why things are the way they are today”, including how residential schools “affected their families, communities, their people, and themselves” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015c, p. 239). At the same time, and equally important, non-Indigenous students need to know how notions of European superiority and Aboriginal inferiority have tainted mainstream society’s ideas about, and attitudes towards, Aboriginal peoples in ways that have been profoundly disrespectful and damaging. They too need to understand Canada’s history as a settler society and how assimilation policies have affected Aboriginal peoples. (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015c, p. 239)

This knowledge and understanding is a key piece for laying the groundwork for reconciliation and a mutually respectful relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in this country and would go a long ways towards improving educational experiences for Indigenous students.

**Stories of support and dysfunction.** In addition to narratives that families and community members told about schools and schooling, participants told other tales about their parents and extended families that intertwined with their stories of school. Some accounts demonstrated strong parental role models who pushed them to do well in school. Some illustrated dysfunction that hindered their academic engagement.
Occasionally, participants’ descriptions of their relationships included both supportive and hindering aspects.

In both Hannah’s and Nate’s experiences, family support of their academics was very important. Their parents held high academic expectations for them to meet and exceed, and held them to this high standard. In Nate’s case, his mother, who was a high school teacher and was recognized as a knowledge carrier in his community, also provided a strong role model for him to look up to. He saw how his mother was respected and this made him proud of her. In turn, Nate described being inspired to do well in school and, eventually, to become a teacher himself.

In contrast, other participants shared stories of family dysfunction and breakdown and related how this drastically impacted their ability to focus on academics and their desire to continue attending school. That said, some individuals also spoke of how their drive to succeed in school was influenced, in part, by a desire to break free from the cycle of dysfunction and provide a better life for themselves and their family. In Matt’s case, his parents’ divorce and subsequent abusive relationship with his father were so traumatic that he felt he had no choice but to leave school for a time. However, by the end of Matt’s story, I was able to see how the importance of providing for and being there for his own young family sustained his resilience and determination to find an alternative pathway to successfully complete high school and pursue more educational options for his future.

According to the research literature on parental engagement, the degree of familial support a student receives is generally related to the combined result of parents’ own educational experiences, including level of education achieved, socio-economic
status, and their prevailing attitudes towards school for their children (Lavell Harvard, 2011). Nonetheless, the relationship between mainstream parental involvement and the academic achievement of children suggests that students’ grades improve when parents are involved regardless of parent education, socio-economic status or race (Desimone, 1999; Edwards & Warin, 1999; Griffith, 1996; Hara & Burke, 1998; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Ho Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996). Additionally, students with involved parents have generally been found to be more likely to graduate from high school and to enter a post-secondary institution (Pearson, 2007).

Less well understood, however, is the relationship between Aboriginal parent involvement and student achievement. While much research has compared Indigenous families with mainstream families on factors influencing parent engagement and the associated outcomes of such involvement, other research has troubled this comparison. Both Rindone (1988) and Davis (1992) reported that although the majority of Aboriginal students who leave school early came from homes with low incomes and parents with little education, the majority of successful Aboriginal students also came from such home conditions. According to Lavell Harvard (2011), this observation comes as little surprise given the historic legacy of colonization, subsequent low levels of academic attainment, and the corresponding low levels of employment for Aboriginal peoples in general. The persistent blaming of Aboriginal families for the academic failure of their children, continues to ignore the complicated, historically and politically situated reasons for why issues such as poverty, substance abuse and low-parental education levels are such wide-spread issues in many Indigenous communities. Making my own inferences from the stories that participants shared in this study, I believe, as Emily
stated, that sometimes families are simply doing the best they can with what they have. Sometimes the crises facing families are so great that parents are just not able to be involved in their children’s schooling.

Clearly, First Nations familial engagement with their children’s education are complex and multi-layered. While it might be easy to look at Hannah’s and Nate’s stories as evidence that successful students generally have involved parents who encourage and support them, and who enforce rules in order to protect them, determining what makes a student successful is not as simple as that. Amanda is an example of a student whose success cannot be explained by the research trends on engaged parents. Also, while their pathways might have been more complicated and more challenging due to familial dysfunction, Yvonne, Emily and Matt are also examples of students who were eventually successful, albeit on their own timelines and in their own ways.

**Other Supportive relationships.** Whether they had supportive family members or not, all of the participants credited other supportive relationships as being influential in their academic journeys. This is consistent with a vast and well established field of literature supporting the finding that school-based, peer, and non-familial supports can play crucial roles in the educational achievement of youth (for examples see Croninger and Lee, 2001; Gallop & Bastien, 2016; Hamre and Pianta, 2001; Muller, 2001; Murray and Malmgren, 2005; Schaps, 2005). Several participants spoke about community members in positions of power who urged them to continue with their education and presented opportunities to them which aided in their journeys. Yvonne credited the Education Director from her First Nation for her eventual academic success since he was
the one who informed her about the alternative high school program and helped her to apply. Occasionally, participants attributed their success to a particular teacher whom they remembered to be supportive and perceived as someone who genuinely cared about them. In Emily’s case, having a strong relationship with her teacher at the Innovate program made her excited to attend and motivated to succeed. Positive teacher-student relationships have particularly been found to have important, long-lasting implications for students’ overall well-being and academic performance, and are highly influential on students’ desire to learn (Rimm-Kaufman and Sandilos, 2018).

Friends and romantic partners also played an influential supportive role in the educational journeys of the participants, which is also consistent with other literature (Domene, Schneider and Pye, 2013; Gallop and Bastien, 2016). For example, Nate related how having one close friend in high school who also wanted to perform well academically and stay out of trouble, helped him to focus on his academics and withstand peer pressure from others to skip school. Yvonne also attributed some of her achievements to her girlfriend with whom she was living while she attended Innovate. This girlfriend, who was also from Yvonne’s community, had already graduated high school and was described as a positive role model who “was doing good things”, which provided Yvonne with extra motivation to succeed as well.

**Familial and communal narratives: A summary.** Family and community narratives were tightly intertwined with participants’ stories of school. In some cases, stories of family were the predominant focus while narratives of school fell into the background. Several participants revealed how familial and communal stories about schools impacted them during their own educational journeys, often priming them to
anticipate negative experiences. Other participants reminded me, on a very personal level, how the legacy of residential schools continues to impact students today. Another theme that emerged was related to the degree of familial support participants received. Given that this was a study examining the experiences of successful students, I anticipated the number of participants to share positive stories about parental support would be greater. This study has taught me that the reasons for First Nations familial engagement with, or disengagement from their children’s education, are complex and multi-layered, and that student success cannot be narrowed down to this factor alone. For the most part, those participants who shared stories about an unstable family environment that threatened their security, also experienced many problems in school. Nonetheless, all of the participants I spoke with found ways to succeed. One of those ways was developing supportive relationships with others who could provide encouragement when their motivation waned.

Stories of success: How were these students successful while others were not?

At the beginning of this study, I posed a question about how these students were successful in obtaining their secondary school credentials while others were not. This question is still difficult to answer. There was no single, critical factor that stood out amongst the narrative data that could directly account for the participants’ success. The stories they shared reflected complex educational journeys. Although at times participants described factors that contributed to their ability to persevere, other times they discussed conditions which negatively affected their well-being and hindered their progress.
Participants’ personal stories highlighted how dominant narratives of normality and difference, and longstanding, negative stereotypes of First Nations peoples in the schools they attended impacted how they understood their lives and what they envisioned was possible for themselves in the future. Whether they told stories of directly experiencing racism or choosing to distance themselves from other First Nations students, it was apparent that the schools they attended sent them messages that were generally in direct opposition to the fostering of a healthy, positive, and proud Indigenous identity.

The participants’ institutional narratives demonstrated how every day schooling experiences were intricately intertwined with their self-image and their beliefs about themselves. Whether or not students felt they belonged in their schools and welcomed in their classrooms, was generally tied to their experiences of racism which greatly impacted their academic journeys. Participants’ stories of how segregated “Native classes” and “Native rooms” may have offered safe spaces, but simultaneously caused feelings of ostracism and reinforced negative stereotypes of First Nations students, sounded many alarm bells for me regarding the overall hostile environment many participants experienced in New Brunswick schools. Provincial and institutional commitments to change should be a top priority. These changes should encompass the integration of Indigenous perspectives and knowledge into all levels of K-12 curricula and significant professional development for teachers and administrators. This would go a long way towards creating a more supportive and welcoming environment for First Nations students and rectifying the misunderstandings and ignorance that pervade the mainstream school population about First Nations peoples, cultures and histories.
Familial and communal narratives were also tightly intertwined with participants’ stories of school and impacted their educational journeys. This study taught me, however, that the reasons for First Nations familial engagement with, or disengagement from, their children’s education are historically influenced and complex, and that student success or failure cannot be narrowed down to this factor alone. Nonetheless, having some type of supportive relationship was essential for these participants to achieve success.

While the themes identified in the three narrative threads are interwoven with each other, it was still possible to speak about them separately for this discussion. However, I also interpreted three additional themes which also relate to the participants success, and these cut across the overarching personal, institutional and familial / communal threads.

First, there were two main groups of successful students in this study. Hannah, Nate, Amanda and Eden were (mainly) always successful in their education. They had linear pathways to educational success and they graduated from high school via the regular route. In contrast, Emily’s, Yvonne’s and Matt’s pathways to success were not so linear. They experienced significant struggles for much of their schooling, chose to drop out of school for a time, and eventually succeeded in obtaining their high school credentials through alternative means. In another study, at an earlier time in their lives, these participants might have been labelled as high school dropouts. In this study, however, they were self-identified and viewed as successful graduates. Although all three of these participants shared stories of choosing to leave high school, their time away from school was a temporary phase. All of them were determined to find a way
back to school that worked for them, a way that didn’t write them off as “being and doing nothing with their lives”. In other words, they chose to finish high school on their own terms, in their own way. This determination and resilience in the face of many obstacles, as well as the availability of alternatives to graduate, largely contributed to their eventual success.

Although less attention has been paid in the research literature to the importance of a non-linear approach to graduation and educational success for Aboriginal students than other factors influencing educational attainment, it has been documented since at least the mid-1980s. Platero and colleagues (1986), who focused predominantly on Navajo student drop-out, introduced the need to redefine Aboriginal student failure, and by consequence, Aboriginal student success. These researchers found that most drop-outs had not given up on their education; 46% planned to return and 45% thought they might return, while only 8.8% had no plans to return to school at all. In a similar study, Jackson, Smith and Hill (2003) reported that none of the successful Aboriginal students in their research of college students experienced a linear path; many reported taking breaks from their studies and several attended different institutions. Further, in contradiction to what they expected to find, Brade and colleagues (2003) found that an increase in the number of high schools Aboriginal students attended was actually associated with an increase in educational attainment. Taking these studies into consideration, Lavell Harvard (2011) comments,

it may be contradicting popular opinions on the subject, [but] such findings may indicate that when the numerous barriers are taken into consideration and the linear definition of educational success is abandoned, Aboriginal people are actually more persistent than non-aboriginals in education. Despite increased
barriers to success and frequent periods of absence, Aboriginal students continue to return to school and pursue their studies until they achieve their goals. (p.78)

The stories that Emily, Yvonne and Matt shared with me demonstrated that non-linear educational journeys can still lead to academic success. Their pathways might have been filled with more bumps and barriers, but their determination and resistance to being seen as someone not going anywhere in life, helped them to persist in obtaining their educational goals.

Second, all of the participants also described a time when they remembered wanting to succeed, to graduate from high school, and to do more with their lives. This theme has previously been found in the research literature examining influences of Aboriginal student success. Whitley (2014), who conducted an in-depth literature review on proximal (student-level) as well as distal (family, peer, and institutional) factors influencing success, reported that Aboriginal students’ volition (their will to make decisions and carry them out in order to succeed), along with their academic expectations and aspirations for themselves, were important personal factors along students’ successful educational journeys. Bazylak’s (2002) study on the perspectives of five successful female Aboriginal high school graduates similarly reported that developing volition and a personal desire to obtain their diploma, graduate and plan for their future were significant factors in participants’ pursuit of academic success.

The stories and experiences of all participants identified a volition and educational aspirations that inspired them to succeed. The majority ascribed their success to a time when they suddenly realized that they wanted to do well in school, get their education and do something important with their lives. Nate described this moment
as a “mental shift”, a pivotal moment in his life when he decided to be more engaged in school. Yvonne similarly described realizing that she wanted to get her education and “do big things” for herself and her community. Other participants described always knowing they would graduate and always wanting to go to university. Even when some of these participants experienced temporary set-backs and chronic truancy, they related how keeping these goals in mind kept them on track.

While a few participants seemed to believe they developed this volition on their own, for many a supportive environment where they felt believed in and valued was key to this personal growth. A quick search of the research literature supports that relational and institutional factors such as fostering a positive and welcoming environment for Indigenous students, including a curriculum that values and respects Indigenous cultures and perspectives, positively influences students’ beliefs about what is possible for themselves academically (Bazylak, 2002; Toulouse, 2014; Whitley, 2014).

Unfortunately, stories of these types of institutional factors were often lacking in the participants’ narratives of their mainstream high schools.

Third, combining all themes and threads drew my attention to one word which describes each of these participants: resilient. Each participant shared stories with me about their schooling experiences which demonstrated a great deal of resilience—the ability to positively adapt despite challenges, obstacles and risk (Morrison & Kirby, 2010)—and this ability directly contributed to their success. Although a detailed review of the resiliency literature was beyond the scope of this study, according to Murray (2010) youth use many strategies to avoid potential risks imposed by peers and others, including thinking about their future, avoiding offending peers, and “othering”
offenders. Even though, Matt withdrew from high school for a period of time due to a violent and unstable home life, he persistently and continuously strove to find a way to complete his high school education. Despite repeatedly encountering barriers, he maintained his focus on the future. He explained:

I wanted to finish school [in Ontario], and they wouldn’t let me. They tried to say it was because I didn’t bring my transcripts. …they denied me education out there. …So I decided I was going to move back here and try to go back to [my high school] and finish. [They] told me that I was too old, that I wasn’t allowed to finish. [Then he found out about the GED] I just knew that I had to [do it]. It was the only way I could see, of my future being better than my past. … Failure was not an option. I had to do it. And I kept telling myself that.

As another example, Amanda also exhibited resilience through her stories of being able to continue to focus on her schoolwork even when her home life began to deteriorate. Despite missing more school, she wanted to do well and was aware of the consequences of poor grades. Youth also demonstrate their resilience by resisting offending behaviors that have the potential to change their life trajectory (Murray, 2010). When many of Nate’s peers started prodding him to skip school with them, he chose to resist this peer pressure and concentrated on school, even though this resulted in being labelled as a “goodie-good” and distanced him from his friends.

Although these are all examples of how these individual participants’ demonstrated resilience, others exhibit this trait in other, contradictory ways. For instance, both Yvonne and Emily shared stories about engaging in oppositional behaviors in response to school environments they found hostile. According to Bottrell and Armstrong (2012),

A fundamental assumption in (much resilience research) is that there is nothing positively adaptive in offending or school-related problematic behavior, and that all these behaviors are not part of “normal development.” Yet, these assumptions
are challenged by empirical evidence that young people’s problematic behavior and peer group “delinquency” may be health enhancing ways of coping in problematic environments. (p.249)

Since Emily and Yvonne experienced situations in school which they found threatening (ie. bullying, racism, ignorance) to their well-being, their “school resistances may be reframed as resilience” (Bottrell, 2012).

In addition to these individual characteristics, resilience also has communal dimensions. While resilience used to be “reified in psychological discourse as something intrapersonal…[focusing] on the individual as the locus of change” (Ungar, 2012, p.14) in recent years the field of resiliency research has shifted to a more dynamic, systemic, ecological understanding that fits very nicely with the relational worldview espoused by Indigenous peoples—that reminds us we are all interconnected beings. In Social Ecologies and Their Contribution to Resilience (2012), Ungar defines resilience “as a set of behaviors over time that reflect the interactions between individuals and their environments” and explains that resilience is particularly influenced by an individual’s “opportunities for personal growth that are available and accessible” to them (p.14, emphasis added). From this perspective, resilience is as, or possibly even more, dependent on an individual’s physical and social ecology to “potentiate positive development” (p.15) than the capacity of individuals themselves. In other words, if the surrounding environment is supportive and makes resources available and accessible to individuals, the likelihood of these individuals being able to positively adapt to stressful situations is increased.

In the school context, even though children and adolescents face many personal and relational risk factors that threaten their development and wellbeing, the
maintenance of school attachment (and a supportive school environment which makes this attachment possible) contribute to positive development regardless of the risks individuals face (Ungar, 2012). In contrast, when students perceive their school environment to be hostile it can trigger dysfunctional reactions which impede personal and educational growth.

In this study, participants like Amanda and Hannah demonstrated that even when stressful life events took place—a mother moving out of the family home, a father dying—having a strong sense of belonging and attachment to their school provided a protective effect. In contrast, other participants who perceived school personnel to be uncaring or even hostile towards them had a more difficult time when they faced additional challenges. For Yvonne, Emily and Matt the only way to become more resilient was to first remove themselves from a noxious school environment. Their stories illuminate that the most important thing educational systems can do to improve First Nations students’ resiliency and academic experiences is to remove conditions that threaten their personal wellbeing and development.

I offer the narrative threads and themes presented in this chapter as some of my interpretations of the significance of participants’ narrative data. They are not meant to be conclusive and definitive, but rather are intended to be conversation starters for those interested in exploring issues that affect the schooling experiences of First Nations students in New Brunswick. I hope that many more discussions will be stimulated by the areas I have begun to explore, and, particularly through reading of the narratives presented in the previous chapter. Nonetheless, the themes identified do present opportunities for action. If teachers, administrators, curriculum writers, policy makers,
as well as families and First Nations communities focus on addressing the contributors
to success and the challenges identified by these successful students, schooling
experiences and academic outcomes would likely improve for First Nations students
overall.
Chapter 7: Looking Back, Looking Forward

I undertook this dissertation research in order to gain an understanding of “what school was like” for successful First Nations high school graduates after I was confronted with an abundance of Indigenous education research literature that predominantly focused on the failure of Aboriginal students. As Leroy Little Bear (2009) iterated, decades of reports and studies have created a “rhetoric” of failure that goes like this: “Aboriginal peoples are not succeeding…; Aboriginal students have the highest dropout rates; Aboriginal students consistently are at the bottom of performance scales.” (p. 6). After several conversations with current New Brunswick teachers and reading through recent education plans and policies, it seemed to me that this rhetoric of failure was also functioning in the public sphere and, problematically, at the school level.

A mutual appreciation of the impact of the colonial history of education for Aboriginal peoples (as discussed at length in Chapter 2: Entering the Historical Landscape), is essential for education systems and Indigenous partners to move forward together into the future. However, as I have explored in Chapter 3: Entering the Research Landscape, when research and reports continue to predominantly explore and document the failure of Aboriginal students, the rhetoric of failure is perpetuated. Where does this leave First Nations students who want to, and are, succeeding?

I chose to focus on stories of successful Wolastoqi and Mi’kmaq students for two main reasons. First, it became my contention that the principal focus on the failure of Aboriginal students was part of the reason why desired educational reforms had not yet taken place despite literally decades of awareness and supposed attempts to improve
Indigenous students’ educational experiences, engagement and outcomes. This belief was strengthened by previous research and theories (Pratt, 1986; Sikes, 2005; Tuck, 2009) which posit that the realities of such students are too far removed from the lives of mainstream educators, administrators and policy makers to resonate with them, and therefore do not invoke the attitude shift required for action. Instead, such research reinforces and perpetuates stereotypical representations of Indigenous peoples in the minds of those who have the power to enact change (Tuck, 2009). Following this line of reasoning, the realities of successful students may reside closer to home for decision makers. Further, I chose to re-present stories rather than solely presenting my interpretations and analysis of the narrative data because I believe that only stories help one to know what it is like to walk in someone else’s shoes (Worth, 2005). It is my hope that the stories presented in Chapter 5: What was school like? Narrative Analyses are able to transport readers into the storyworlds of Emily, Matt, Yvonne, Amanda, Hannah, Nate and Eden. Their stories demonstrate that even successful First Nations students often struggle in mainstream schools, and thereby aid in conceptualizing the kind of reforms that are necessary to improve schooling conditions and outcomes for First Nations students in New Brunswick.

Second, even though the majority of First Nations students in New Brunswick are graduating, it does not mean that they are not vulnerable. The perpetuation of a rhetoric of failure and negative stereotypic representations of First Nations students carry with them the very high cost of maintaining Indigenous youths’ vision of themselves as “depleted” (Tuck, 2009, p.409). We heard from Amanda that dropping out wasn’t a “big deal” in her community; but I assert that dropping out of high school
should be seen as a big deal. The three participants in this study who chose to drop out for a time did so in order to escape a school environment that was not supportive of their well-being. By providing portraits of role models who graduated via both linear and non-linear means, the participants’ re-presented stories offer hope to communities, educators and current and future generations of First Nations youth by demonstrating volition and resilience, and that academic success is possible.

**Looking Back**

Although the narratives were verified by participants as being representative of their experiences, and the themes and narrative threads were validated by my advisory committee and my Elders, this study is not without its limitations and I cannot help but ponder the impact of several factors. First, I regret the length of time it has taken me to complete this dissertation – almost an entire decade of my life. During this time, my life has been greatly impacted by several losses, including the sudden death of my first Elder, Gwen Bear, my father’s battle with cancer and his subsequent death, as well as the death of my friend and mentor, former Dean of the Faculty of Education at UNB, Ann Sherman. In the past few years, I have also given birth to two beautiful children. Although I have not been able to control the significant delays these life events caused, I acknowledge the possibility that the participants’ stories may no longer reflect the current day-to-day experiences of (successful) First Nations students in New Brunswick schools.

Although narrative research does not strive for generalizability as it is traditionally understood, a degree of transferability or verisimilitude (Bruner, 1987) is desired, so that others might read the stories and experience something that reflects their
own lives. The year I met with participants (2012-2013), some of these students had already been out of high school for six years. Now, (2018-2019) all participants graduated 7-12 years ago. Some critics may point out that changes have taken place in New Brunswick schools over the past decade and suggest that these stories and my analyses are no longer relevant. However, given the incredibly slow pace of change in First Nations education over the past several decades, and the fact that despite recent promises substantive changes to include Indigenous perspectives and content have yet to take place, I believe they are relevant today. Across the country, reforms are starting to occur in Indigenous education. Although there have been many calls for change for several decades, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada’s final reports and Calls to Action (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015d) have gained attention. Departments and Ministries of Education in every province are starting to respond, and more and more citizens have been made aware of the colonial history of Canada. People are starting to listen. Perhaps this is just the right time for these stories to be shared.

Second, I must acknowledge, once again, that my positioning has influenced my choices, interpretations and understandings throughout this research. Although this is generally not considered a weakness in narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), the fact that I am not Wolastoqi or Mi’kmaq may have limited my interpretations of the participants’ unique experiences. Throughout this research I have been transparent about who I am, why I conducted this research and have striven incredibly hard, as demonstrated through my actions, to learn about these cultures. I can only hope this is reflected in my interpretations.
Looking Forward

This research was by design an exploratory study, intended to allow participants’ unique personal stories to be heard. It was not conducted in order to prove anything. The narrative analyses of participants’ stories of school—that is, the re-presented stories of the experiences they shared with me—were specifically intended to allow interpretations beyond and in contrast to my own (Diversi, 1998). In Chapter 6: Narrative Threads of Connection: A Thematic Analysis and Discussion, I chose to explicitly offer my interpretations, rather than letting the choices I made in the narrative analyses stand alone, in order to directly discuss certain factors that I believe were important in shaping these First Nations students’ experiences in schools and in their lives. These themes were organized into three overarching narrative threads: namely, personal narratives, institutional narratives, and familial-communal narratives.

Childhood and adolescence is a time filled with wonder, a time to grow and explore and become, a time to begin figuring out who you are in the world and how you fit in and belong. In a world surrounded by Euro-Canadian versions of history, values, and widespread, systemic racism, Indigenous children are faced with even more questions and struggles as they sort out their multiple identities. The participants in this study all spoke of ways that that their schooling experiences impacted their personal and cultural identities, and their identity negotiation. Themes of normalcy versus difference, prominent negative stereotypes about First Nations peoples, yearning for more information about their culture, and issues of racism and racialization, impacted all participants’ conceptions of themselves and the degree to which they identified as a First Nations student.
From participants’ stories, it is apparent that the provincial schools they attended were not places that fostered a healthy, positive, and proud Indigenous identity. I keep coming back to the idea that some of the participants chose to hide their Aboriginality if it benefited them. Issues related to First Nations identity, and who can and does identify as a First Nations person, are “far more complex than simply drawing lines between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people” (Palmater, 2011, p. 22). Questions of identity are directly related to colonialism and how the Canadian government has assumed the power to legally define who is recognized as having “Indian status”. While outside the scope of this dissertation, an understanding of this legislative context, including the Indian Act, its amendments and Bill C-31, is important in understanding how complicated it can be to identify as a First Nations person today, especially for youth. Further, as Jean-Paul Restoule (2000) has previously written, “understanding what influences …pride or shame in identifying as Aboriginal people is important” (p.102). A study looking specifically at how schools influence whether or not students’ claim or hide their Aboriginality, as well as what is gained or lost in attempting to blend in with the dominant population, might provide important informative data on how schools can work towards being spaces that foster healthy First Nations youth development. Additional research after teacher professional development and curriculum revisions—including Indigenous perspectives, Treaties, and a critical discussion of the Indian Act—investigating the impact on First Nations student identity negotiation would also be beneficial.

The institutional narratives that participants shared demonstrated how the school environment and everyday schooling practices intricately intertwined with their personal
narratives and greatly influenced their academic journeys. The participants who graduated following the usual, linear route generally all felt a sense of belonging at their school. Those who followed a non-linear path to success revealed that they not only felt unwelcome, but they also perceived the school environment to be hostile towards them. Their stories illuminate that the most important thing educational systems can do to improve First Nations students’ resiliency and academic experiences is to first remove conditions that threaten students’ personal wellbeing and development, and then work to create communities that value Indigenous peoples and cultures. Previous research has shown that a basic requirement for psychological well-being is the need to belong (Brendtro, et al., 2005; Deci, 2009; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Morrison & Kirby, 2010). Focusing on ensuring a welcoming environment where each student feels that they matter, that they are important and cared about, is a key area to focus on in terms of improving First Nations students’ experiences in school and likelihood of graduating successfully. This can only be accomplished if educational systems commit to decolonizing and incorporating Indigenous histories and perspectives. A longitudinal study examining First Nations students’ school connectedness, engagement, sense of belonging and academic outcomes before and after substantive educational reforms have been made is another indicated direction for future research.

The participants’ stories also revealed how familial and communal past experiences with schools impacted their own educational journeys, often priming them to anticipate negative encounters. Formal education for Indigenous peoples has historically meant the education of Indigenous students by non-Indigenous peoples, in non-Indigenous schools, with non-Indigenous methods, and imposed assimilation into
non-Indigenous cultures (Battiste, 2013; Lavell Harvard, 2011). Their heritage, knowledge systems and languages were rejected and suppressed by education systems, and their hope and sense of self-worth, in many cases, were severely damaged. As a result, “[m]uch of the current state of troubled relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians is attributable to educational institutions and what they have taught, or failed to teach, over many generations” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015a, p. 117). Despite all of this, the TRC and many other Indigenous scholars believe that education is also the key to repairing the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the rest of Canadians, since education alone can “remedy the gaps in historical knowledge that perpetuate ignorance and racism” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015a, p. 117). Working towards reconciliation, therefore, is the key to moving forward with families and communities respectfully, to rectify past wrongs and build trust for the future. Indeed, all of the studies investigating facilitators of Aboriginal student success reviewed in Chapter 3: Entering the Research Landscape, support this claim. However, if school officials continue to view First Nations students, families and communities from a deficit perspective, and if students and families continue to be distrustful of schools and personnel, we will not move forward.

I also keep coming back to the stories of Yvonne, Emily and Matt. At an earlier time in their lives, these participants might have been labelled high school dropouts. In this study, however, they were successful graduates. Although all three of these participants shared stories of choosing to leave high school for a time, dropping out did not leave them fixed in place with no way forward. They continued to demonstrate
volition—a desire to obtain their education and the agency to succeed. When the
dominant pathway through high school was no longer working for them, they found a
way to re-imagine possibilities and moved their lives forward (Clandinin et al., 2013).
They chose to finish high school via non-linear, alternative means, on their own terms.
Their determination to succeed, resilience in the face of many obstacles, as well as the
availability of alternatives to graduate, largely contributed to their eventual success.

Further research investigating the relationship between these three factors—non-
linear pathways, volition, and resilience—and the educational experiences, enjoyment
and outcomes of First Nations students is an intriguing possibility. Both Yvonne’s and
Emily’s stories of the alternative school they attended contrasted sharply with their
experiences in mainstream provincial schools. They described finally feeling welcomed
and cared about, and in turn, they thrived. Although I believe educational reform should
primarily focus on making mainstream schools places which foster resilience and high
academic expectations and desires among all students, thereby increasing the percentage
of students who are able to graduate via the regular, linear route, the reality is this will
take time to achieve. In the meantime, investigating First Nations students’ non-linear
stories of success—including how and why they came to leave their mainstream school,
the type of alternative site in which they found success, as well as relational factors, such
as who supported them on their journeys—could yield informative data. In addition,
another study interviewing students who have left high school about their intentions to
return might even have the possibility of being transformative. Previous research
(Platero et al., 1986) found that a high percentage of Indigenous students who leave high
school prematurely planned to, or thought they might, return. As we saw in Matt’s case,
often students who have left school face numerous barriers when they attempt to return. If we focused more on making opportunities “available and accessible” and decreased barriers to success, the proportion of Aboriginal students achieving their academic goals would be even higher.

**Closing Words**

Navigating my way from a position of naivety and ignorance to where I am today took patience, a willingness to listen with an open heart as well as an open mind, and quite a lot of time. I believe this is what it is going to take to make the kind of educational reforms that this dissertation indicates are necessary to improve conditions and make schooling more equitable for First Nations students. The process of decolonizing and Indigenizing our schools will require that those who are currently considered “experts” reposition themselves as learners and be willing to work with First Nations communities as partners in the spirit of reconciling past wrongdoings to create educational institutions of which we can all be proud. It is my sincerest hope that this research might contribute to disrupting and shifting the narrative surrounding First Nations students so that current students, and those who teach them, might start to see that succeeding is the norm, not the exception.
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Appendix A - Glossary

**Aboriginal.** The inclusive term for the Indigenous peoples of Canada, referring to all First Nations, Métis, and Inuit individuals, families and communities (National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2011).

**Aboriginal rights.** Under the Constitution and the Supreme Court of Canada aboriginal rights are considered to be “an element of a practice, custom or tradition integral to the distinctive culture of the Aboriginal group claiming the right” (Littler Bear, 2009, p.25).

**Ally / Settler Ally.** A member of a dominant / oppressor group who strives to learn more about a marginalized group and then works to end the oppression/marginalization, even if it gives her or him privilege. (Bishop, 2002).

**Assimilation.** The social process of absorbing one cultural group into another. When colonized people “melt” into the dominant society and become indistinguishable from dominant society members, they have been assimilated” (Bishop, 2002; Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski, 2004).

**Axiology.** The philosophy or study of values. In a research paradigm, axiology refers to the moral and ethical dimensions or guidelines to consider when conducting research. (Given, 2008, Wilson, 2008)

**Band.** This is an Indian Act term imposed upon Aboriginal people. This term reinforces the image that Aboriginal people were described as “wandering, nomadic, band of savages” by writers of the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries. Terms such as “First Nation community”, “First Nation administration office”, and “First Nation citizens” are preferred rather than “band”, “band office”, and “band members”. (Perley & Perley, unpublished document).

**Colonial subjugation.** The establishment of settlements in populated foreign lands through social control by domination or by overcoming or subduing by force, whether physical or moral. (Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski, 2004, p. i)

**Colonialism.** An integral part of imperialism, refers to the transfer of people as settlers to a new land who continue to maintain their political allegiance their country of origin (Kohn, 2008). Colonialism has historically meant the subjugation of Indigenous peoples, as Europeans gradually took control of lands and resources.

**Constructivism.** An overarching paradigm that posits that reality, and therefore knowledge, is constructed, not discovered (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In research, this paradigm recognizes relativist ontologies (multiple constructed realities), interpretative epistemologies (the knower and the known interact and shape one another), and utilizes interpretative, naturalistic methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008).
Culture. A way of being of a group of people that is passed on, that grows and changes from one generation to the next (McLeod, 2002, p.3). It encompasses a people’s traditions, history, value systems, beliefs about reality, and languages which cumulatively contribute to their united and individual identities. In essence, culture is a “collective agreement” (First Rider, 1994) that dictates ways of being and doing that are acceptable to the group as a whole, and therefore strongly influences the thoughts and behaviours of individuals.

Damage-centred research. Research that tends to document peoples’ pain and brokenness in order to hold those in power accountable for their oppression (Tuck, 2009).

Decolonization. A process of deconstructing dominant, hegemonic structures of a colonial society and reconstructing them to include the viewpoints, values and ideologies of traditionally oppressed or marginalized groups (Battiste, 2004; Smith, 1999).

Elder. An Elder [with a capital E] does not have to be a certain age to be called an Elder and just because someone is older does not mean they are an Elder. An Elder in First Nations communities is someone who is recognized by the community as an Elder, someone who passes on traditional ways, teachings, and ceremony, and who provides guidance to others, particularly spiritual guidance (Lavallee, 2007).

Epistemology. The theory or science of the method and ground of knowledge (Given, 2008). In a research paradigm, epistemology refers to the beliefs and theories one has about what knowledge is and how one can come to know something or someone.

Essentialization. The assumption that a group of people are a coherent, homogenous group with identical traits.

First Nations. This term came into common usage in the 1970s to replace the word “Indian,” which many people found offensive. The term First Nations peoples refers to one of three formally recognized Aboriginal peoples in Canada, and excludes the Métis and Inuit peoples. It applies to both Status and Non-Status Indians; the former are registered under the Indian Act, while the latter are not (Lavallee, year; Information Centre on Aboriginal Health, 2006). First Nation is also used in the names of specific communities, and there are currently 615 First Nations communities in Canada (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2011).

Historic Trauma. A cumulative emotional and psychological wounding across generations resulting from massive tragedies affecting whole communities (Lavallee, 2007).
**Ideology / Ideological.** What people believe, value, and understand to be true and real, right and wrong, accepted limits. Ideological power is the ability to shaped what people think, believe, and value (Bishop, 2002).

**Imperialism.** Coming from the Latin term *imperium*, meaning to command (Kohn, 2008), involves one country’s power over another usually for economic expansion, exploitation of lands and resources, and subjugation of indigenous peoples (Smith, 1999). Colonialism is an essential element of imperialism.

**Indian.** This term was imposed upon Indigenous people in Canada. The Indian Act required the Department of Indian Affairs to identify First Nations peoples as “Registered Indians”. The term does not recognize the uniqueness of First Nations peoples across Canada; it assumes that all “Indians” are the same.

**Indian Act.** The principal statute through which the federal government of Canada administers “Indian status”, and deals with local First Nations governments and the management of “reserve” land and communal monies. It was introduced in 1876 as a consolidation of previous colonial ordinances that aimed to eradicate First Nations cultures in an attempt to assimilate Indigenous peoples into Euro-Canadian society. The Act has been amended many times, and is still highly controversial (Henderson & Parrott, 2006).

**Indigenous peoples.** Refers to “the original inhabitants” (Wilson, 2008) of a land or region and their descendants. In Canada, this term is often used interchangeably with Aboriginal peoples or First peoples, but it is usually used in a global context to refer to people around the world with historic ties to a country or nation prior to the arrival and intrusion of foreign colonizers (Smith, 1999).

**Internalized oppression / colonialism.** Occurs when oppressed people come to believe the negative things that are said about them and even act them out (Bishop, 2002).

**Inuit.** The predominant Aboriginal people in the northern parts of Canada including Nunavut, Northwest Territories, Northern Quebec and Northern Labrador. The Inuit are one of the formally recognized Aboriginal peoples in this country, and excludes First Nations and Métis people (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2011).

**Liminal Space.** The term *liminal* comes from the Latin word *limens*, which literally means *threshold*. A liminal space therefore refers to a place of transition, of waiting, not fully knowing, or, in other words, the “in-between” (DeWaal, 2011).

**Maliseet.** This term is the exonym attributed to Wolastoqi people of the St. John River region by the Mi’kmaq who referred to them as *Malisitchik*—literally “the broken talkers”—in conversation with early European colonizers (Chamberlain & Ganong, 1899, p.8). Wolastoqey First Nations are commonly known in English as Maliseet First
Nations, and many Wolastoqi people still refer to themselves as Maliseet. However, many others are currently in the process of reclaiming their own name for themselves. (See also Wolastoq and Wolastoqiyik).

Mi’kma’ki. The traditional territory of the Mi’kmaq, consisting of Atlantic Canada (Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Newfoundland) the Gaspé peninsula of Quebec, as well as parts of Maine.

Mi'kmaq. The Mi'kmaq are the largest group of First Nations people of Mi’kma’ki. This includes, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, the Gaspé peninsula, Newfoundland and parts of Northwestern Maine. Their traditional tribal territory and current day First Nations communities in New Brunswick are along the Eastern, coastal parts of the province. The English translation of Mi'kmaq means "the family" ("Mi’kmaw Resource Guide", 2003, p.2).

Métis. One of three formally recognized groups of Aboriginal peoples, the Métis people are of mixed First Nation and European ancestry, and identify themselves as distinct from First Nations people, Inuit or non-Aboriginal people. The Métis have a unique culture that draws on their diverse ancestral origins, such as Scottish, French, Ojibway and Cree (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2011).

Native. Has similar meaning to Aboriginal. Native peoples is a collective term to describe the descendants of the original peoples of North America. The term is commonly used and mostly supported by Aboriginal peoples, however some would argue that it is increasingly seen as outdated and is staring to lose acceptance (Information Centre on Aboriginal Health, 2006; Lavalle, 2007). Participants in this project used the term Native quite frequently when referring to themselves or other Aboriginal people.

Non-status First Nations peoples. Individuals who consider themselves First Nations people or members of a First Nation but whom the Government of Canada does not recognize as First Nations, or Indians, under the Indian Act. This is usually either because they are unable to prove their status or have lost their status rights. Non-Status First Nations peoples are not entitled to the same rights and benefits available to Status Indians (Lavalle, 2007).

Ontology. In classical philosophy, ontology refers to the science of being and is concerned with questions about reality and existence (Given, 2008). In a research paradigm, ontology refers to ones underlying beliefs about being and reality which influence and inform how a researcher conducts their work.

Othering. When a predominant preoccupation with certain traits of an individual from a specific ethnic / religious / gendered / sexual orientation group come to represent everyone in the group, homogenizing them into a “collective ‘they’” in the minds of other groups (Fine, 1985, p. 139).
**Paradigm.** A set of underlying beliefs and assumptions involving interrelated ontologies (beliefs about being and reality), epistemologies (beliefs about knowledge and knowing), and methodologies (strategies for gaining more knowledge about reality) arose in the social sciences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Given, 2008; S. Wilson, 2008). Ultimately, a paradigm shapes a researcher’s worldview and influences how they act in it.

**Relational Accountability.** As a researcher, acknowledging and taking responsibility to and for relationships that are formed during and after the research process. This includes following ethical guidelines for conducting research and being accountable to research participants, but also extends to choosing topics and methodologies that are relevant and respectful of Indigenous communities, being responsible for the interpretations that are made, and ensuring that the benefits of the research and results are reciprocal (Wilson, 2008).

**Reserve / Reservation.** Terms originally utilized for wildlife, “reservations” were later established for “wild savages” and Aboriginal people in both the United States and Canada were forced to live in these “reservations”. Today, First Nations community is the preferred term. (Perley & Perley, unpublished document).

**Status First Nations peoples.** Officially referred to as “Status Indians” by Aboriginal Affairs, this term refers to First Nations people who are registered under the Indian Act.

**Traditional Teachings.** Traditional teachings are oral stories passed down generation by generation. “They reflect the values, beliefs, and customs of Aboriginal people” (Lavallee, 2007, p. x)

**Treaty.** An agreement between sovereign nations, including between a government and a First Nation. It defines the rights of the nation’s members with respect to lands and resources over a specified area, and may also define the self-government authority of that Nation. Note: Wolastoqey and Mikmaq First Nations have Peace and Friendship Treaties with Canada that share but do not cede or surrender their land. (Mi’kmaq Wolastoqey Centre, 2018).

**Turtle Island.** Turtle island is a term used by Aboriginal people when speaking about North America. The term originates from traditional teachings of creation. (Lavallee, 2007)

**Tribe.** This term was imposed upon Aboriginal people by anthropologists during early contact period. Like “band”, this term reinforces the image of Aboriginal people as wandering, nomadic people. It refuses to recognize the historical fact that Aboriginal people established nations, towns, villages, and communities. European explorers and settlers came into contact with Maliseet, Mi’kmaq, Penobscot, and Passamaquoddy nations rather than “tribes”. (Perley & Perley, unpublished document).
**Wabanaki.** Literally meaning "the people of the dawn" (Wabanki Curriculum Development Project, 1982, p. 14) (or commonly as people of the *dawnland*) is a collective term that refers to the First Nations peoples of the Canadian Maritimes and the New England states, including the Mi'kmaq, Wolastoqiyyik, Abenaki, Penobscot, and Passmaquoddy nations.

**Wolastoq.** The traditional name for the St. John River of New Brunswick and Maine. Translated into English, Wolastoq means “the beautiful and bountiful river” (Schneider and Perley, 2012).

**Wolastoqey.** An adjective that used to describe inanimate subjects and objects of Wolastoqiyyik. (Example: Wolastoqey baskets, Wolastoqey language).

**Wolastoqi.** An adjective that is used to describe animate subjects and objects of Wolastoqiyyik. (Ex. Wolastoqi students, Wolastoqi Elders).

**Wolastoqiyyik.** Commonly known in English as the Maliseet people, Wolastoqiyyik are reclaiming their own name for themselves after the Wolastoq River (the beautiful river). Wolastoqiyyik translates in English to the "people of the beautiful and bountiful river" (Schneider and Perley, 2012).

**Worldview.** Worldview is seen to encompass both ontological components, or beliefs about the nature of reality, as well as epistemological elements, that is, beliefs about knowledge and how one can come to know that reality (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). An individual’s or peoples’ worldview, which is a primary component of their culture, reflects their underlying philosophy of life.
Appendix B – Research Protocols

The following documents were provided to the individual participants to help explain their participation in the project.

Invitation to Participate

Are you interested in sharing your story about what high school was like for you?

My name is Andrea Schneider and I am doctoral student in the Faculty of Education at the University of New Brunswick (UNB). I am conducting a research project to develop a better understanding of what attending a New Brunswick public high school is like for Wolastoq and Mi’kmaw First Nations students in this province. I am particularly interested in the personal stories of First Nations students who have recently graduated from high school.

As you may know, much of the literature on First Nations students focuses on those who have made the decision to drop-out of high school. I would like your participation in this research because I believe the perspectives and stories of First Nations students who have recently graduated from high school have much to contribute to the discussion regarding improving education for First Nations youth today.

I am honoured that Elder Imelda Perley, has agreed to be involved in this research, and she will lead us in a series of sharing circles to reflect on and share personal stories of high school experiences. At this time I anticipate hosting 3-5 sharing circles, however the exact number of sharing circles will be decided together by the group, once we meet. After finishing the sharing circles, participants will be asked to meet with me individually to review transcripts of their stories and any interpretations that are made.

All participants in this research will be treated as collaborators and partners, and you will have an active voice in how this research proceeds, how interpretations are made, and how the final results will be presented. In addition, a copy of the experiences and stories that you share will be provided for you to keep after the study is completed. If you are interested in collaborating in this research project and would like to explore and share your experiences of attending a public high school in New Brunswick, please contact me by phone or via email. I will provide you with more detailed information about the research project at that time.

Thank you, Woliwon, Wela’lin!

Andrea Schneider
Phone: (506) 206-2178
Email: andrea.schneider@unb.ca

This project has been reviewed by the University of New Brunswick Research Ethics Board and is on file as REB 2012-002.
Letter of Information & Informed Consent

Study Title: Stories from the Circle: Exploring the reflective secondary schooling experiences of Wolastoqi (Maliseet) and Mi’kmak young adults

Researcher: Andrea Schneider, Ph.D Candidate, Faculty of Education, University of New Brunswick

Contact info: Andrea can be contacted at (506) 206-2178 or andrea.schneider@unb.ca

I understand that I am being asked to participate in a research project being done by Andrea Schneider, a doctoral student in the Faculty of Education, at the University of New Brunswick. The purpose of this research is to explore my personal experiences of high school through a series of sharing circles and individual validation interviews. The information I provide will be used to assist in the development of a better understanding of what attending a New Brunswick public high school is like for Mi’kmak and Wolastoqi (Maliseet) First Nations students in this province, particularly from the perspective of recent graduates.

I understand that participation in this research study is voluntary. I may withdraw my participation from the study at any time. I will be asked to participate in a series of 3-5 sharing circles approximately 2-4 weeks apart. The sharing circles may last up to 3 hours, but I am aware that as a group we will negotiate the duration of these sessions. According to sharing circle protocols, when it is my turn to hold the sacred object I may choose to pause in silence and pass the object to the person to my left rather than speaking if I so choose. I am aware that after each round of the sharing circle an opportunity to end the circle and leave the group will be available. I also understand I will be asked to participate in approximately 2 validation interviews in order to review transcripts, clarify information and provide feedback on emerging interpretations.

The sharing circles will be conducted in Marshall d’Avary Hall at UNB, at times that will be negotiated as a group. Individual validation interviews will be conducted in a place and at a time that is convenient for me. Both the sharing circles and the validation interviews will be recorded using a digital audio recorder. However, I may request that the recorder be turned off while I am sharing if I so desire, and I may request for anything I have said to be removed. The digital recording of all my sharing circle contributions will be typed and both paper and electronic copies of these transcripts and a summary of my story will be provided to me to keep. Andrea will also keep a paper copy in a locked filing cabinet, and an electronic copy on a password protected computer. My name and any identifying information (hometown, family member’s names, school names, etc.) will be removed from the printed and electronic files, unless I specify that I wish to be acknowledged for a particular contribution to this study. I am aware that all recordings will be deleted at the end of this research project, and that transcripts (with identifying information removed, unless otherwise specified) will be kept securely for up to 5 years.

I understand that complete anonymity is not possible in this project, because a sharing circle method is being used. However, I also understand that all information I share during this research project will be kept confidential, and I vow to keep other group member’s contributions confidential as well. At the beginning of the study, I will choose a fictitious name, or pseudonym, to be used in the report writing, and my real name or any other identifying information will not be used in any report or presentation that may occur as a result of this study, unless I specify that I wish to be acknowledged for my contribution.

I understand that the personal benefits of participating in this study include the opportunity to share and reflect on my secondary school experiences in a supportive group environment, and the chance to help contribute to research and knowledge in the field of First Nations education. I also understand that

This project has been reviewed by the University of New Brunswick Research Ethics Board and is on file as REB 2012-002.
reflecting on personal experiences may be stressful, and that I may withdraw from the study at any time, for any reason.
I know that I may ask questions at any time during the study. I may contact Andrea Schneider directly (at the contact info provided above). I may also contact her supervisor, Dr. William Morrison at (506) 292-3178 or someone not involved in the study by calling Dr. Dave Wagner, Dean of Graduate Studies for the Faculty of Education, University of New Brunswick at (506) 453-4862. In addition, if I am feeling distressed for any reason I know can seek support from Elder Imelda [(506) 460-8351, iperley@unb.ca, office 332-2 Marshall d’Avray Hall].

**Participation Consent:** I have read the above information explaining the project and my questions about the study have been answered by Andrea Schneider. I understand what the project involves and I agree:

- [ ] to participate in the sharing circles and individual validation interviews in support of the project objectives as outlined in the letter
- [ ] to have my interview recorded and transcribed for my review and approval

**Confidentiality:** I understand that all information generated in this project will be kept strictly confidential and I will have the option to be identified/acknowledged or remain anonymous in any reports or presentations. In the interest of confidentiality, I will follow the confidentiality requirements within the sharing circle and therefore agree that:

- [ ] I will not reveal the identity of other group member(s)
- [ ] I will not discuss outside the group anything that has been discussed in the interview

**Intellectual Property rights:** I understand that my original thoughts, stories, knowledge (my intellectual property) will belong to me and will be protected.

- [ ] I understand that I will retain intellectual property rights on any information, stories and knowledge I share with the project, and I will receive a copy of my cumulative transcript with my contributions to the project to keep should I desire it
- [ ] I understand that Andrea will consult me before using any of my information, stories and knowledge in any reports or presentations that go beyond the final dissertation, educational publications and presentations within the scope of this project.

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Name (Print)  Signature  Date

Address:

Preferred contact phone #:

Email address:

This project has been reviewed by the University of New Brunswick Research Ethics Board and is on file as REB 2012-002.
Researcher's Statement:

As the researcher in this study, I, Andrea Schneider am grateful for your participation and collaboration in this study and I oblige to honour your contributions and use your words, experiences and stories in a negotiated and agreed upon manner as discussed and decided upon during the one-on-one validation interviews. If data collected during this research study are to be used in any other projects, I will seek your consent, and your identifying information will never be given, unless you specifically request to be acknowledged for a particular contribution. I view this research project as a partnership and could not do this work without you.

Andrea Schneider
Researcher

_____________________________________    _______________________________    __________
Signature                                           Date

This project has been reviewed by the University of New Brunswick Research Ethics Board and is on file as REB 2012-002.
Question guide for sharing circles and individual interviews

1. Background questions regarding elementary school to temporally, personally, and socially contextualize high school experiences:
   a. Can you describe a particular day that stands out in your memory from your early school days?
   b. What was it like at your elementary school? What did you experience—see, smell, feel, hear—there?

2. Questions designed to elicit experiential stories from each individual regarding their time in secondary school:
   a. What was high school like for you?
   b. What do you remember most about your high school (physically, socially and academically)?
   c. How was culture represented in your high school?
   d. How did you feel in your school?
   e. How did school fit into your life?
   f. Can you describe a particularly memorable day, or instances that stand out in your memory?

3. Questions to delve deeper into participants’ perspectives on the state of our public education system, specifically regarding how they serve First Nations students:
   a. What do you attribute your academic success to?
   b. What do you wish had been different?
   c. What advice would you give, if any, to current students, teachers, administrators, policy makers from your experiences in high schools?

Overall, these questions are meant simply to elicit stories, experiences and perspectives from participants and are not intended to direct their responses in either a positive or negative manner. Additional questions may be generated as sharing circle data is transcribed and analyzed in an ongoing manner.

This project has been reviewed by the University of New Brunswick Research Ethics Board and is on file as REB 2012-002.
Non-disclosure Agreement for Interview Transcribers:

I understand and agree to maintain the confidentiality of all the participants in Andrea Schneider’s research study. At no time will I ever disclose the identity of any of the participants involved in this research. I will not share or discuss any information the participants share during the interview with anyone, now or in the future.

____________________________________  _______________________________
Signature                                               Date
Curriculum Vitae

Candidate’s full name: Andrea Lauren Trenholm

Universities attended (with dates and degrees obtained):

2008 – 2019  Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Studies, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, NB.
Dissertation Title: *Stories from the circle: Exploring the reflective secondary schooling experiences of Wolastoqi and Mi’kmaw recent high school graduates.*

2003 – 2006  Master of Science, Psychiatry, (Dean’s List) McGill University, Montreal, QC.
Thesis: *Switching antipsychotics in the treatment of schizophrenia: A two-year comparison study of patient characteristics and psychiatric service use.*

1996 – 2001  B.Sc. (Honors), Human Kinetics, University of Guelph, Guelph, ON.

Publications:

Accepted Manuscripts:


Refereed Publications:


Trenholm, A. (2014). *Process-Oriented Qualitative Research: What it is, what it looks like, and why to consider it.* 2013 Atlantic Education Graduate Student Conference Proceedings. Fredericton, NB.


Conference presentations:

**Refereed presentations**


**Invited and non-refereed presentations**

May 2017 Invited speaker. Cross-listed 3973: Introduction to Narrative and Narrative Research, St. Thomas University, Fredericton, NB.

May 2014 Invited speaker. Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network (UAKN) Atlantic Knowledge Mobilization Workshop. St. Thomas University, Fredericton, NB.

Feb. 2014 Coordinator. Building Research Capacity and Partnerships: Connecting First Nations,
Universities and Urban Communities. A workshop developed in partnership with AAEDIRP, UAKN and UNB. Kingsclear First Nation Training Centre, Kingsclear, NB.

Sept. 2013
Invited speaker. *SSHRC Lunch & Learn*. Graduate Education Society, Marshall d’Avray Hall, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, NB.

Feb. 2012
Invited speaker. *Qualitative interviews: A panel discussion*. Graduate Education Society, Marshall d’Avray Hall, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, NB.

Nov. 2010
Professional Development Workshop Co-presenter. *Connecting communities workshop: Learning about learning disabilities – Tips for tutors*. Frontier College, Fredericton, NB. I was contracted by Frontier College to deliver this professional workshop to their volunteer tutors as well as community educators.