

Students Who Stopped Out: The Lived Experience of Indigenous Students in West-Central Alberta who Temporarily or Permanently Discontinued Their Post-Secondary Education Journey

by

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Abstract

Indigenous people in Canada have lower post-secondary attainment rates than their non-Indigenous counterparts, but these statistics do not explain why. This study examines the barriers to post-secondary completion for Indigenous students by gathering stories from learners who temporarily or permanently discontinued their educational journey. This research employs a Critical Race theoretical framework to examine personal, institutional, and societal factors that impacted participants' educational experience. A narrative inquiry methodology using storywork through conversations gathered stories from eight Indigenous learners residing in west-central Alberta.

Common themes emerged from the inductive analysis of the conversation transcripts. Many findings are consistent with previous research, such as leaving for employment or family obligations. However, their stories offer a richer, more profound understanding of factors that influence their decision to quit school. Findings included the desire to stay in their home community during and following post-secondary education, the unique financial challenges for non-status and part-time Indigenous students, and colonization's ongoing role in their educational journey. Creating cultural safety and ethical space for respectful and honest conversations with Indigenous students, their families, and community leaders is essential to hear and respond to their challenges and needs and work collaboratively to create meaningful and accessible education for Indigenous people.

Keywords: Indigenous, decolonization, indigenization, reconciliation, lived-experience, post-secondary education, stop out, persistence

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Definition of Key Terms

Aboriginal: First Nation, Métis, and Inuit people in Canada.

Colonization: In Canada, colonization began when Europeans migrated to North America, took over the land and began to control Indigenous Peoples. “Colonizers imposed their own cultural values, religions, and laws, and made policies that do not favour the Indigenous Peoples. They seize land and control the access to resources and trade” (Wilson, 2018, p. 28).

Cultural Appropriation: “Cultural appropriation is the adoption or use of culturally significant items by someone from another culture. During this process the original meaning is usually lost or distorted” (Wilson, 2018, p.56).

Cultural Genocide: Cultural genocide is the destruction of those structures and practices that allow the group to continue as a group. States that engage in cultural genocide set out to destroy the political and social institutions of the targeted group. The land is seized, and populations are forcibly transferred, and their movement is restricted. Languages are banned. Spiritual leaders are persecuted, spiritual practices are forbidden, and objects of spiritual value are confiscated and destroyed. Most significantly to the issue at hand, families are disrupted to prevent cultural values and identity transmission from one generation to the next. Canada did all these things in its dealing with Indigenous people (TRC, 2015).

Ethical Space: Ethical space is not a physical space but, instead, a concept and a feeling that is created “when two societies, with disparate worldviews, are poised to engage each other. It is the thought about diverse societies and the space in between them that contributes to the development of a framework for dialogue between human communities” (Ermine, 2007, p. 1). In other words, revealing and naming the intersection between epistemologies is necessary to create a neutral space for dialogue and cooperation by identifying similarities and differences without privileging either.

Eurocentrism: Eurocentrism is a tendency to interpret the world in terms of European values and perspectives, which is unpinned by a belief that they are superior (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

First Nations: First Nations is a term used to describe the Indigenous Peoples in Canada, the original inhabitants who identify neither as Métis nor Inuit.

Indigenous Knowledge (IK): Indigenous knowledge is the traditional and evolving knowledge held by First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples of Canada. IK is specific to place, usually transmitted orally, and rooted in the experience of multiple generations that is determined by an Indigenous community’s land, environment, region, culture, and language (Battiste, 2002).

Indigenous Peoples: In the Canadian context, the term “Indigenous Peoples” refers typically to persons of First Nation, Métis or Inuit descent, regardless of where they reside and whether their names appear on an official register. The term “Indigenous” does

not reflect the distinctions among First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples, who have their own histories, cultures, and languages. Indigenous Peoples commonly identify themselves by distinct nation names such as Mi'kmaq, Dene, Haida, Cree, Saulteaux, etc. In Canada, a similar term, "Aboriginal Peoples," is also used in specific contexts (i.e., by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research and the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada [TCPS2, 2018]).

Lateral Violence: (sometimes also called horizontal violence or internalized oppression).

Lateral violence is damaging behaviours carried out between people within oppressed societies (Bailey, 2020). "Lateral violence can occur within oppressed societies and include bullying, gossiping, feuding, shaming, and blaming other members of one's own social group as well as having a lack of trust toward other group members" (Bombay, 2014, p. 2).

Métis: The Métis, members of the Metis Nation, descended from First Nations and European marital unions and settled the territory beside the Red and Saskatchewan Rivers. They formed a culture that was distinct from both the Indigenous nations and the European settlers. Gagnon (2016) shared that "it is an ethnic and cultural label with no neat boundaries and can refer to Red River Métis or be used as a general term for anyone with mixed European and Aboriginal heritage" (as cited by Auger, 2021, p. 5).

Microaggressions: Microaggressions are "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural or environmental indignities...hostile, derogatory or negative racial slights" (Sue et al. 2007, 271, as cited in Bailey, 2016).

Post-secondary Education: Post-secondary education will include any credit programming at any post-secondary institution, including apprenticeship training, academic upgrading, certificate, diploma, and degree programs.

Settlers: Settlers are white, European, and non-Indigenous people who migrated to North America in large numbers during the colonization period (Schick, 2014) and asserted sovereignty over Indigenous Peoples.

Stop Outs: Instead of being viewed as permanent or a complete withdrawal from the educational system, many Indigenous students experience either:

1. institutional “stop outs” where they withdraw from their institution for periods; or
2. delayed transfers, where they withdraw from one institution to later enroll in another (Pidgeon, 2008)

The term “dropping out” has a lot of negative connotations; the term stop out is used in this study because it acknowledges that individuals may return to schooling.

Student Persistence: Tinto (2010) defined student persistence as “that process that leads students to remain in higher education and complete their certificate or degree regardless of the institution from which the certificate or degree is earned” (p. 53).

Student Retention: Tinto (2010) described student retention as “that process that leads students to remain within the institution in which they enroll and earn a certificate or degree” (p. 53).

Structural Racism: Structural racism is the normalization and legitimization of an array of racist beliefs—historical, cultural, institutional, and interpersonal—that routinely advantage dominant Euro-western people and culture while producing cumulative and chronic adverse outcomes for marginalized groups (Caldwell & Bledsoe, 2019). These institutional policies and practices that disadvantage underrepresented racial groups.

The Sixties Scoop: The “Sixties Scoop” describes an era roughly between the 1960s and the mid-1980s where Indigenous children were disproportionately apprehended by the child welfare system in Canada and adopted into non-Indigenous homes (Sinclair, 2020).

Chapter 1: Introduction

The 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's report summarized the devastating and ongoing effects of colonization, assimilation, and Indian Residential School on Indigenous Peoples in Canada. The report cited 94 Calls to Action to consult and co-create with Indigenous people to reconcile past wrongs and move towards a more just education system. Yet, many post-secondary educators struggle with how to consult and engage Indigenous students, families and communities. This study examines the lived experience of Indigenous post-secondary students who left school, temporarily or permanently, before completion.

For decades, post-secondary institutions in Alberta have been working to increase Indigenous students' enrollment, retention, and completion rates. However, despite these efforts, there remains a disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous post-secondary enrolment and completion in Alberta (Arriagada, 2016). The purpose of this study is to increase understanding of the nature and extent of factors surrounding Indigenous student attrition. In this study, I gathered Indigenous students' stories with the hope they shed light on the reasons Indigenous post-secondary learners leave school. What resulted, however, was a transformational shift to my understanding of how history, economics and politics continue to impact Indigenous Peoples, including post-secondary students. As part of my commitment to a critical lens on scholarship, I share reflections on my transformational journey in the final section of this paper.

The next section of this chapter provides an overview of laws, policies and practices that emerged during colonization and confederation that continue to influence

the lived experience of Indigenous people in Canada. This section contextualizes contemporary Indigenous students' experience within the landscape of colonization and assimilation policies, the Indian Act and Indian Residential Schools (IRS) in Canada.

Colonization in the Canadian Context

During the 500 years since Europeans began to settle in Canada, Indigenous people have been forced to assimilate to the Eurocentric worldview that continues to be privileged by the dominant society. The fur trade initially drove European exploration in Canada; it began with an interdependent relationship between the European fur traders and First Nations people. However, as the economy shifted to agriculture during colonization, the need for Indigenous trappers and traders diminished, and European settlers were encouraged to expand across Canada's new Dominion. Leslie (2002) shared that:

following the end of the War of 1812, the traditional roles for Indian people in colonial society declined rapidly. British and Canadian policymakers were faced with determining a new role and place for Indians in colonial society. Instead of abandoning Indian people to face the harsh, new political and economic realities, the first principle of Indian policy, that of Indian protection, was reasserted. The new approach was simple and direct: place Indian people temporarily on reserved lands, convert them to Christianity, dress them in European clothes, and teach them to become self-sustaining British citizens by becoming productive farmers. (p. 1)

When Canada entered Confederation in 1867, John A. Macdonald's (Canada's first prime minister) goal was to unite Canada from sea to sea. Between 1871 and 1921,

the Crown signed numbered treaties with Indigenous nations to make land available for European settlers. First Nation leaders were compelled to enter into treaty agreements for countless reasons, one of which was to protect their people from starvation. Buffalo and other large game were hunted to near-extinction, which threatened Indigenous Peoples' access to their primary food source and, ultimately, their existence (Rahman, Clarke & Byrne, 2017). While the intent of the signed treaties from the perspective of the First Nations was for Indigenous Peoples and settlers to live in peaceful co-existence, the result was something very different. First Nations that signed an adherence to treaties received small tracts of lands, “reserves,” and resources in exchange for almost all their rights and freedoms (Stonechild, 2006).

During this time, the Canadian government developed an assimilation strategy to convert Indigenous Peoples from their traditional, subsistence lifestyle and absorb them into the socioeconomic culture of Settler society. The British Crown developed “Civilization Policies” in the early 1800s, which “were officially and unofficially implemented by missionaries, teachers, and Indian agents (or state agents), who wanted Indigenous people to become ‘full members of the society’” (Manzano & Munguía, 2011, p. 406). These civilization policies paved the way for the Indian Act and its assimilation policies that changed the relationship with First Nations people. The Indian Act, passed by Parliament in 1876, was an essential tool used to assimilate Indigenous people into Canadian, “civilized” society and a market-based economy. Education was a critical component of the Indian Act to assimilate First Nations, Métis and Inuit people into the European culture and way of life and to prepare them to participate in the newly

emerging agricultural economy (Battiste, 2013; Manzano Munguía, 2011; Stonechild, 2006). Leslie (2002) quoted Deputy Superintendent-General Duncan Campbell Scott's rationale for the Indian Act as stating, "our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department, that is the object of this Bill" (p. 3). In 1876, the Government of Canada created and passed the Indian Act without consultation with Indigenous people, demonstrating its damaging patriarchal and authoritarian relationship between dominant European settler society and Indigenous Peoples (Leslie, 2002). As a result, the Indian Act controlled almost every aspect of on-reserve life in Canada (Leslie, 2002; Rahman et al., 2017; Stonechild, 2006).

Education has had a significant and damaging role in the assimilation of Indigenous Peoples, resulting in the inequality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians. As a result, educators have been called to action (TRC, 2015) to reconcile with Indigenous Peoples and decolonize Canadian post-secondary institutions.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) (2015) reported that misguided beliefs fueled assimilation policies, that "colonizers were bringing civilization to savage people who could never civilize themselves" (p. 46). These offensive beliefs underpinned the relationship between Indigenous Peoples and settlers for centuries. They led to assimilation policies to eradicate Indigenous Peoples' way of life by separating children from their families, language, culture, and traditions (TRC, 2015). Religious missionaries also "played a complex but essential role" in colonization by "spreading the word of god to the heathens" (TRC, 2015, p. 48). Religious education required literacy in

the missionaries' European language, which set the stage for education as a fundamental tool for assimilation (TRC, 2015). After Confederation, treaty commitments placed the responsibility for Western education on the federal government. Unfortunately, the government took its obligation to provide education to “Status Indians” and used it as an instrument of cultural genocide against First Nations people in Canada (TRC, 2015).

Residential schools were the system that the Canadian government used to fulfill its educational commitments to the Status Indians registered under the Indian Act and the First Nations that signed treaties with the Crown. The first Canadian government-sponsored boarding schools in Canada opened in 1883 as industrial training schools to “instruct” Indigenous children on manual skills to assimilate them into Western economy (TRC, 2015). The federal government funded the boarding schools, which were operated mainly by religious orders. However, the government imposed additional control over Indigenous childrens’ education in 1894 in a new regulation added to the Indian Act, making attendance at Indian Residential Schools (IRS) mandatory for children between the ages of five and 16. By the 1920s, all religious and government-run schools became known as Indian Residential Schools (IRS) and left behind their notorious legacy of inhumane treatment of the children in their care (Bombay et al., 2011; TRC, 2015).

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada

“Fast forward” 150 years; the Indian Act and assimilation policies have left a legacy of intergenerational trauma, poverty, and despair for Canada’s Indigenous people. The IRSs separated children from their families, resulting in a widespread loss of language, cultural and Indigenous knowledge, and essential kinship ties. Physical and

sexual abuse, neglect, disease, and death were common tragedies experienced by children who attended these schools. Entire communities were without children, and many parents lost their traditional parenting skills. In 2006, Indigenous people won the largest class-action lawsuit in Canada's history. They sued the federal government for its role in the cultural genocide of Indigenous people through state and church-run schools (Schmidt, 2019). As a result, the Government of Canada awarded IRS school survivors a settlement with included cash payments and the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) to create a comprehensive historical record of testimonies from IRS survivors and share them with all Canadians (TRC, 2015). The TRC (2015) report recounted injustices inflicted on Indigenous people through the IRS system. The resulting "94 Calls to Action" in the report, specifically 10 through 13, address funding for educational reforms to close achievement gaps of Indigenous people "within one generation" (p. 149). Calls 62-64 outline the need for transformational change in all levels of education to create "respectful learning environments" for Indigenous people, done in consultation with local Elders, IRS survivors and Indigenous people, to promote intercultural understanding.

Battiste (1998) argued that "education has not been benign or beneficial for Aboriginal people" (p. 19). Reconciliation starts with understanding and sharing the truth about colonization's harmful effects on Indigenous Peoples (TRC, 2015). However, education continues to play a significant role in marginalizing Indigenous Peoples in Canada (Battiste, 2013; Julien *et al.*, 2017) and, therefore, must contribute to the solution (TRC, 2015). Nonetheless, the educational attainment of Indigenous Peoples in Canada

still falls behind their non-Indigenous counterparts, resulting in a socioeconomic disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians (Pidgeon, 2016).

Attention placed on improving access and educational attainment for Indigenous students is not new. However, there has been a heightened focus since the publication of the TRC's Calls to Action, which called for all levels of government to work with Indigenous people to eliminate educational gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians (TRC, 2015). Many post-secondary institutions are ramping up efforts to Indigenize the academy. Indigenization is a term used to describe reformative actions and systems proposed to increase Indigenous Peoples' post-secondary inclusion and attainment. Bopp *et al.* (2017) defined indigenization as:

a complex adaptive systems transformation problem. It involves student engagement and support systems, relationships with external communities, transformation of academic disciplines and curricula, transformation of institutional governance and management systems - and all of these involve human beings needing to learn, change and grow. As anyone who has ever tried to work within a post-secondary institution will know, the culture of these organizations is most often quite resistant to change, animated as it is by long-standing traditions anchored within the dominant culture's perceptions of how the world is and must be. And yet, there is no escaping the fact that authentic indigenization challenges the deepest culture of the academy and calls

it into the arena of change. Clearly, this is a process that requires enlightened leadership (p.5).

Gaudry and Lorenz (2018) argued that indigenization is a spectrum that includes *inclusion, reconciliation, and decolonization*. *Inclusive indigenization* is described as making the institution more accessible but does not address systemic barriers. It aims primarily to increase enrollment, retention, and completion rates for Indigenous learners without any fundamental adaptation to the institution's overall philosophy or systems without creating space for Indigenous ways of knowing (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018).

Gaudry and Lorenz (2018) defined *indigenization for reconciliation*:

it locates indigenization on common ground between Indigenous and Canadian ideals, creating a new, broader consensus on debates such as what counts as knowledge, how should Indigenous knowledges and European-derived knowledges be reconciled, and what types of relationships academic institutions should have with Indigenous communities. (p.219)

Decolonization indigenization requires systemic change to fundamental underlying values, administrative processes, curriculum, and pedagogy, often seen as too disruptive and destabilizing to pursue. Decolonization involves the deconstruction of underlying assumptions and beliefs that privilege Western knowledge and epistemology. While there is a great deal of discussion in the literature about indigenization and decolonization of higher education, the process is complex and challenging.

During and after colonization, European settlers created institutions based on European worldviews and beliefs. These basic underlying assumptions are still integral to Canadian institutions of higher education. When establishing public education, the dominant culture determines “what content and methods [are] sanctioned” and “ignores or erodes, if not destroys, other ways of knowing or the accumulated knowledge of some groups” (Battiste, 2013, p. 104). By contrast, decolonization provides an “ethical space” where people embrace all knowledges and worldviews. Eurocentric beliefs are no longer privileged or considered “the one correct way” of approaching knowledge and learning. Battiste (2013) argued for the development of “trans-systemic analysis and methods...reaching beyond the two distinct systems of knowledge to create fair and just educational systems and experiences...where both knowledge systems converge and reconcile” (p. 103). Fellner (2018) shared that decolonization is “a tricky concept” and “believe[s] its usefulness in addressing Indigenous agendas is limited” (p. 284). Fellner goes on to concede that “concepts like decolonization can help us understand different ways of engaging with the colonial cages that have been built up around us” (p. 284). Tuck and Yang (2012) summarized decolonization as “offer[ing] a different perspective to human and civil-rights based approaches to justice, an unsettling one, rather than a complementary one suggesting “decolonization is not an ‘and,’ it is an elsewhere” (p. 36). A critical component of decolonization is the goal of self-determination for Indigenous Peoples in Canada, to unravel the centuries of damage suffered by assimilation policies and racism (Battiste, 2013; Stonechild, 2006; TRC, 2015).

The Road to Decolonization

While treaties are nation-to-nation agreements based on each nation's right to self-government, the Indian Act defined "Status Indians" and made them wards of the state, falling under federal government administration and control (Leslie, 2002; Neeganagwedgin, 2013; Stevenson, 1998). Status Indians, as defined in the original Indian Act, were only able to access full rights and freedoms of Canadian citizenship through enfranchisement. Enfranchisement, in this context, refers to Indigenous people either voluntarily or forcibly giving up their treaty and status rights in exchange for their participation in the dominant society. Legislators in the new Dominion of Canada believed that Indigenous people would aspire to assimilate and enfranchise Canadian society as a privilege (Manzano-Munguía, 2011). However, by 1880, it was apparent to legislators that Indigenous people were not seeking enfranchisement. At that time, legislators amended the Indian Act to include compulsory enfranchisement under specific circumstances, such as completing a university degree, becoming a clergy member, or a woman marrying a non-status man leading to the loss of Indigenous rights (Joseph, 2018).

Following World War II (WWII), both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people returning from battle recognized that freedom and liberty did not exist for Indigenous Peoples in Canada who lived under the Indian Act (Leslie, 2002; Stonechild, 2006). As a result of this increased awareness of the inequalities, changes to the Indian Act eased restrictions on the Indian Agents' power over First Nations communities (Stonechild, 2006). However, it was not until 1961 that changes to the Indian Act gave Indigenous

people the right to vote and removed sections on compulsory enfranchisement. The Canadian government is beginning to recognize Indigenous people's inherent right to self-government and self-determination (Stonechild, 2006; United Nations, 2007). Battiste (2013) observed that the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) ignited an interest by scholars and governments to "unravel the effects of generations of exploitation, violence, marginalization, powerlessness and enforced cultural imperialism" (p. 25).

As Canadians become aware of the damage inflicted by policies and laws, resulting in historical and ongoing marginalization of Indigenous people, there is a growing desire to decolonize and transform higher education (Stonechild, 2006; TRC, 2015). Still, deeply seated systemic racism remains within colonial institutions that disadvantage Indigenous Peoples (Pidgeon, 2016). Paquette et al. (2013) questioned whether the indigenization of higher education in Canada is an achievable or "oxymoronic goal" (p. 268). Harris (2002) recounted the paradox and internal compromises she experienced as an Indigenous educator in a Western education system.

So, how does a colonial institution decolonize and reconfigure itself and cast off the basic underlying assumptions and beliefs upon which it was created? Antoine et al. (2013) provided insight into decolonization in higher education:

Decolonization is a component of indigenization because it [challenges] the dominance of Western thought and bringing Indigenous thought to the forefront. Indigenization is part of reconciliation because it involves creating a new relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous

people. But these processes have important distinctions. Most notably, reconciliation is primarily a settler responsibility, and decolonization must be led by Indigenous people. In addition, the emotional work of reconciliation is different from that of indigenization and decolonization, which have less of a focus on making amends for past traumas, and a greater focus on mainstreaming Indigenous thought (p. 7).

Non-Indigenous people have a critical role in reconciliation, understanding how Canada's history of assimilation has had a profound negative effect on Indigenous Peoples (TRC, 2015), and creating ethical space for Indigenous self-determination.

As Canadians, we are all bound by treaties negotiated between the Crown and the First Nations. These were, and still are, nation-to-nation agreements outlining the ongoing relationship between Indigenous people and the Crown (Battiste, 2013; Ermine, 2007; Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018; Stonechild, 2006). In qualitative studies, the researcher is the lens and filter through which all the data passes; therefore, it is necessary to position this paper in the context of my personal history. Therefore, in the next section, I position myself as a non-Indigenous person on a decolonizing journey to understand and hold space for Indigenous worldviews.

Situating Myself in the Research

Sammel and Segura (2020) that “non-Indigenous people need to understand they are inheritors of the colonial regime” (p. 204). Growing up in Saskatchewan in the 1970s as a descendant of Scottish settlers in a neighbourhood occupied by European-descent families provided little exposure to Indigenous peoples and their worldviews. Curriculum

in that era did not include information on contemporary Indigenous Peoples, their worldviews, the Indian Act, and any mention of Indigenous Peoples stopped after our elementary school class trip to Fort Batoche, one of the sites of the 1885 Northwest Resistance. Since the 1990s, I have lived and worked in small communities in northern British Columbia and Alberta alongside Indigenous people. This is where my decolonizing journey began.

I have travelled a considerable distance in my journey to understand and to appreciate Indigenous ways of knowing, culture, and traditions in this study. Hogue (2018) stated that “our interpretation of situations, conversations, interactions, etc., are always influenced or governed by what we bring to the table, our experiences, our assumptions, our own personal ‘baggage’” (p. 98). As a non-Indigenous person and aspiring ally, I am embracing alternative worldviews that are situated between Western and Indigenous epistemologies. Hogue (2018) describes this place between paradigms as the “liminal space,” a space of possibility in a transformation journey towards more profound knowledge and understanding. I have challenged many of my colonial thoughts and beliefs and entered an intellectual state where I can hear and believe colonization and assimilation's profoundly unjust and damaging effects. As I continue my life-long decolonizing journey, I am struck by the feeling of knowing less and less every day. It is this feeling that drives me to deepen my understanding of Indigenous students' lived experiences.

Motivation for Research

My motivation for this research, as described above, and stems from a lack of knowledge and questions that emerged while working with Indigenous students in an academic upgrading program. As I heard my students' stories of their personal and family histories, I discovered how little I still knew about Indigenous Peoples.

As a descendent of settlers, my existence in Canada was made possible by treaties between the Crown and Indigenous nations. Treaties allowed for the European settlement of Canada and brought my predecessors to Saskatchewan. My mother's parents emigrated to Canada from Scotland to homesteaded and farm in northern Saskatchewan. On my father's side, my paternal great-grandfather came west as a member of the Northwest Mounted Police and settled in southern Saskatchewan in Maple Creek near Fort Walsh. As a result, my family has prospered in Canada; but colonization has come at great expense to Indigenous Peoples and their way of life. Understanding the history and effects of colonization on Canada's First People is critical for reconciliation because it increases awareness and understanding of what underpins the socioeconomic disparity of Indigenous Canadians.

As a graduate student completing a Master of Arts Degree in Higher Education Administration and Leadership, I collected stories from Indigenous participants about their post-secondary experience to increase understanding of the factors that influence their decisions to leave school. Education had a significant role in assimilation policies and the cultural genocide of Indigenous Peoples in Canada. It also has an equally important role and responsibility in reconstructing a more equitable and just education

system that embraces diversity, alternate worldviews, and knowledge systems. I am coming to know Indigenous history and learning to appreciate the varied cultures and traditions. I am deeply saddened and ashamed by Canada's treatment of Indigenous Peoples and the vast socioeconomic disparity that has resulted from colonization. Through this journey, I understand and provide the personal insight that *decolonization* is a shared journey between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Canadians. Watson (1985) cautioned, "if you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together" (Watson, 1985, as cited in Johnstone & Lee, 2021). We are all treaty people.

All Canadians, including post-secondary educators, have a responsibility to reconcile our colonial past and work with Indigenous to build a more equitable future. The academy has been trying to make higher education more relevant and accessible for Indigenous learners by increasing access and inclusion in post-secondary education (Anuik & Gilles, 2012; Black & Hachkowski, 2019; Pidgeon, 2016). However, for meaningful change to occur, institutions must create an "ethical space" for engagement and dialogue with Indigenous Peoples to envision a new, culturally attuned, and proud future for their people (Ermine, 2007). Also, Indigenous elders, community members, parents and students must lead the changes to avoid repeating the history of the dominant culture determining the future for Indigenous Peoples (Johnstone & Lee, 2021).

Unfortunately, there continues to be a shortage of Indigenous voices in the academy to lead decolonization efforts. While efforts to increase Indigenous representation in higher education continue, non-Indigenous allies in higher education

can create space for Indigenous *epistemologies* (ways of knowing), *ontologies* (ways of being) and *axiologies* (ways of doing) and ensuring that Indigenous voices are heard. I have chosen my role to be an Indigenous ally to create an ethical space to listen, respect, and share Indigenous voices in my personal and professional decolonizing journey. As such, this study aims to create an ethical space for Indigenous participants to share their experiences, successes, and challenges and provide recommendations to improve the post-secondary system for Indigenous learners.

Place Matters

Hinton and Grande Cache are two communities situated on the eastern slopes of the Canadian Rocky Mountains in west-central Alberta, where Indigenous Peoples have lived for thousands of years. Hinton is east of Jasper National Park with approximately 10,000 people and an urban Indigenous population of 12% (Statistics Canada, 2017a), consisting primarily of Woodland Cree, Métis, and Saulteaux. The Saulteaux, also known as Ojibwa, originated from eastern Canada and migrated west with the fur trade (Peers, 1994). Many Saulteaux came to west-central Alberta to keep their children out of IRS (J. Kelley, personal communication, April 11, 2021). Grande Cache is a community of just over 3,500 people, with an Indigenous population is 13% (Statistics Canada, 2017a).

This study included participants from Grande Cache, and like Hinton, there are no reserves or settlements in the region. However, The Aseniwuche Winewak Nation (AWN) was incorporated in 1994 and represents the six Aboriginal communities in the Grande Cache area totalling more than 400 individuals (<https://www.aseniwuche.ca>) comprised by the Muskeg Seepee Cooperative, Susa Creek Cooperative, Grande Cache

Lake Enterprise, Victor Lake Cooperative, Joachim Enterprise, and Wanyandie Cooperative. These six cooperatives and settlements hold full ownership of seven parcels of land totalling 4150 acres and have the legal authority to manage their affairs. The land is owned communally by members with either an elected Board of Directors or Managing Director. The AWN works and consults on behalf of each community to balance individual groups and the larger community representing over 400 individuals. Many Indigenous families now residing in Grande Cache were evicted and forced to relocate there after Jasper became a National Park in 1907, joining family already there. They lived a traditional, self-reliant lifestyle until the 1960s when resource development increased. In the 1960s, resource development brought additional contact with the western world, impacting Indigenous Peoples' way of life.

Indigenous cultures in Canada share many similar values and beliefs, such as collectivism, the central role of family, and the interrelationship between all living and non-living things (Anuik & Gilles, 2012; Battiste, 1998; Julien et al., 2017). However, Indigenous culture is not homogeneous; there are considerable differences between Nations and individuals within each community (Black & Hachkowski, 2019). Pidgeon (2008) argued that,

Any model developed for Aboriginal student persistence must accommodate the diversity of Indigenous epistemologies, cultures, and languages. Aboriginal students are not homogenous; they may be rural or urban, traditional or modern, reservation or non-reservation, deeply entrenched in their culture or in the process of discovering their Aboriginal identity (p. 354).

Many Indigenous families in Hinton and Grande Cache continue to follow aspects of their traditional Indigenous culture, speak their Indigenous language and participate in ceremonies (L. Higgerty, personal communication, October 1, 2019). Like many Indigenous populations in many communities, those who live in Hinton and Grande Cache are diverse and are an aggregate of many Indigenous ethnicities, primarily Mountain Cree, Saulteaux and Métis.

Indigenous people in Hinton and Grande Cache live off-reserve. More broadly according to the 2016 Census, the majority (63.4%) of First Nations lived off-reserve in Alberta (Government of Alberta, 2017). The Indigenous population in Hinton lacks a formal governance structure as seen on reserves and Métis settlements; instead, Indigenous family groups organize cultural events such as round dances, powwows, and traditional ceremonies. By contrast, most Indigenous people in the Grande Cache area belong to cooperatives and enterprises, and the AWN manages their collective interests. However, Indigenous people living within the Hamlet of Grande Cache may not be attached to cooperative or enterprise governance structures. For effective consultation, understanding each communities' unique governance structure is essential. There is a great deal of diversity in and between Indigenous communities.

The educational needs of Indigenous people also vary between and within communities. Alberta has the third-largest Indigenous population in Canada (Government of Alberta, 2017); however, Indigenous peoples' educational needs or attainment rates are not homogenous across the province. Arriagada (2016) compiled statistics on the academic attainment rates of Indigenous people living on and off-reserve in Alberta, summarized in Table 1. High school completion rates are similar for Indigenous versus

non-Indigenous people in Alberta. However, this data compares people 25 to 64 years old; therefore, it does not reflect that many Indigenous people do not complete high school within three years of enrolling in grade 10; they often complete later in life. Table 2 summarizes Grande Yellowhead Public School Division (GYSPD) (2019) data regarding high school completion rates; Hinton and Grande Cache are two communities that make up the GYSPD. GYSPD reports the high school completion rates within three years of enrolling in grade 10 for Indigenous students at 66.6%, which is higher than the provincial completion rate of 56.6% for Indigenous students but lower than the overall (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) high school completion rate in GYSPD of 71.5%.

Similarly, the dropout rate of 3.4% for Indigenous children aged 14 to 18 in GYSPD is lower than the provincial average of 5.4%. However, it is still considerably higher than the total dropout rate in GYSPD of 2.8%. The information indicates that Indigenous people in Alberta obtain high school diplomas at the same rate as the rest of the population, but overall, they take longer to complete to this level. High school completion affects transition to post-secondary education, and academic upgrading is often required before moving to post-secondary programming.

Similarly, GYSPD (2019) reported high school to post-secondary transition rate of students within six years of entering Grade 10 of 37.9 % for Indigenous students, again higher than the provincial Indigenous rate of 34.2% but lower than 40.9% for all GYSPD students combined.

Table 1

Indigenous versus Non-Indigenous Highest Level of Education Completion Rate in Alberta

	Alberta Indigenous Population	On Reserve Population	Off-Reserve Population	Alberta Non- Indigenous Population
No certificate, diploma, or degree	30.4	54.3	28.9	11.3
High school diploma or equivalent	23.0	15.7	24.7	23.9
Post-secondary certificate, diploma, or degree including:	46.6	30.0	46.5	64.8
Apprenticeship or trades certificate or diploma	<i>14.4</i>	<i>10.1</i>	<i>13.5</i>	<i>12.1</i>
Non-university certificate or diploma	<i>20.6</i>	<i>13.9</i>	<i>20.4</i>	<i>21.4</i>
University certificate, diploma, or degree at or above bachelor level	<i>8.5</i>	<i>3.5</i>	<i>8.8</i>	<i>26.5</i>

Note: Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations compared are aged 25 to 64. This table was adapted from Arriagada (2016)

This data suggests that Indigenous students are just as likely to obtain post-secondary certification as non-Indigenous students in Alberta; however, they are often older when they attend post-secondary programming. Older students often come with more complex lives; many have children, financial responsibilities and jobs which compete for their attention. While the post-secondary completion rates in Alberta for the Indigenous students are on par with the non-Indigenous population for trades and non-university certificates and diplomas, they still lag in university credentials and degree attainment, 8.5% as opposed to 26.5% for the non-Indigenous population (Arriagada, 2016).

Table 2*Grande Yellowhead Public School Division (GYPSD) Indigenous Completions Rates*

	Overall Rate (GYPSD)	Indigenous Student Rate (GYPSD)	Indigenous Student Rate (Alberta)
High school completion rate within three years of starting grade 10	71.5	66.6	56.6
High school students who achieved acceptable standards on diploma exams	71.9	65.2	77.2
High school students who achieved the standard of excellence on diploma examinations	11.4	5.2	11.4
Dropout of students aged 14 - 18	2.8	3.4	5.4
High school to post-secondary transition rate of students within six years of entering Grade 10	40.9	37.9	34.2

Note: adapted from tables in Grande Yellowhead Public School Division (2019)

This study focuses on the lived experience of post-secondary students; however, students' primary and secondary school experience influences their ability and desire to continue to higher education. Indigenous students' secondary school achievement rates are compared to overall student rates in GYSPD and Indigenous students province-wide. These numbers show that dropout rates are lower and transition rates to post-secondary are higher than the overall provincial rates; they still lag behind the overall rates for GYPSD students.

To help close this gap, post-secondary leaders can increase their understanding of local Indigenous students' unique educational needs through consultation and collaboration. The first step in this process is building trusting relationships with Indigenous Elders and community stakeholders (Barnhardt et al., 2001; Hogue, 2012; Michie et al., 2018; Wilson, 2008; Yeo et al., 2019). Having time, resources, and cultural knowledge to connect and engage Indigenous families and communities may be challenging for post-secondary institutions, but it is essential to understanding the needs of Indigenous learners.

Research Question

I have worked with Indigenous learners over the last two decades, and I have come to appreciate how complicated and challenging their lives can be, which often leads some students to leave their post-secondary education pursuits. Higher education can be a critical pathway towards improved socioeconomic outcomes, so leaving before completion has a significant negative impact. To gain a deeper understanding of why Indigenous students withdraw before completion, I asked the research question, "*What is the lived experience of urban Indigenous people who have discontinued their studies for at least one term before completion?*" My sub-questions are:

- What factors contribute to pausing or discontinuing their educational journey?
- How do post-secondary institutions fail to retain Indigenous students, and what contributes to Indigenous students leaving?

- How do participants in this study suggest post-secondary institutions address various factors contributing to post-secondary students' discontinuing their education?

Chapter one situates this study within the landscape of Canada's colonial history, policies that have historically used education to disconnect Indigenous children from their families and culture and to assimilate Indigenous people to a Western way of life. Additionally, I shared my motivation for study as a Western researcher on a decolonizing journey. I discussed the diversity found between and within Indigenous communities. For example, in Hinton, no formal governance structure exists for the urban Indigenous population. Conversely, in Grande Cache, the AWN provides oversight and governance for the cooperatives and settlements surrounding the community of Grande Cache. Finally, I share the questions that I hope this research will answer, “what is the lived experience of Indigenous post-secondary students who left school before completion?”

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

This chapter discusses Critical Race Theory, the theoretical framework that underpins my research design and includes a literature review that identifies primary issues related to Indigenous students' lived experiences. It begins with contextualizing the need for this research by examining the scholarly discourse surrounding lower attraction, retention and completion rates of Indigenous post-secondary students, followed by a review of what higher education has been doing to address this disparity. Next, I examined the scholarly discussion in the literature on Indigenous student persistence and why Indigenous students leave before completion. Finally, I checked current literature to understand the effects of racism on Indigenous students' experience in post-secondary education. This literature review provided the background and framework for this study.

Theoretical Framework

I use Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a framework for my research design because it provides a mechanism for examining why Indigenous people have been racialized and marginalized by mainstream society. CRT posits that power relationships present in society are created, manipulated, and applied based on the needs of the dominant society, providing them with economic and political advantage (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Denzin et al., 2014; McCoy & Rodricks, 2015; McLaughlin & Whatman, 2011; Tate, 1997). CRT provides a framework to explain why and how race and racism are constructed and live in the social fabric, laws, underlying assumptions, values, and beliefs

that privilege one group over another. The goal of CRT is to uncover and critique racially oppressive social structures, meanings, and ideas to combat racism.

Delgado and Stefaniec (2017) discussed how CRT evolved from the civil rights and ethnic studies movement of the 1960s and early 1970s, building on radical feminism and critical legal studies to combat racism resurfacing after the advances made by the civil rights movement. First, CRT built on the concept of *indeterminacy* from critical legal studies, which contends that there is more than one correct outcome to a legal case based on multiple ways of interpreting facts. Second, CRT built on radical feminism's assertion of social constructivism that there is a relationship between power and the construction of social roles, assumptions, beliefs, and behavioural patterns. Third, CRT embraced and evolved from the civil rights movement's need to address historical wrongs through action. Finally, it drew on group nationalism from the field of ethnic studies, which argues that minority groups should focus on their own affairs and interests first.

A tenet of CRT suggests that racism is part of social order and benefits the powerful elite, making it challenging to address or eradicate because it privileges those who have economic and political power. For example, the Indian Act favoured the needs and rights of the European settlers, racializing and exiling *Status Indians*¹ to reserves as wards of the state, with the goal of assimilation into colonial society (Battiste, 2013; Joseph, 2018; Leslie, 2002; Palmater, 2011; Stonechild, 2006; TRC, 2015). Racialization is the process where ethnic groups are viewed and stigmatized by mainstream society to

¹ a term used in the Indian Act to describe First Nations people who signed an adhesion to a treaty

legitimize inequalities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). McKay et al. (2020) argued that “racialization occurs when the dominant society assigns racial meaning via perceived differences ... [that rely on] external markers of difference like skin colour, hair texture, facial features, and body type serve to signify internal differences in intelligence and morality for the dominant society” (p.4).

As Canada developed its social and political institutions, they were created based on Eurocentric assumptions and beliefs, privileging and entrenching their bias into the very fabric of social structures resulting in systemic racism. CRT is one theory used to explain the socioeconomic disparity that resulted from colonization and capitalist values to expand and control the natural resources in North America (McKay et al., 2020). Race and racism have affected Indigenous people in Canada and have resulted in a history of marginalization within the education system in Canada (TRC, 2015). CRT is the lens that I have applied to this study to examine Indigenous students’ lived experience in higher education. I will analyze their stories in the framework and backdrop of colonization, assimilation, and racism in Canada.

Narrative inquiry (NI), where stories are examined to understand a phenomenon, is a methodology often employed by researchers who use CRT to frame their research as it allows the participant(s) to share their “counter-stories” and to challenge the dominant society's perspectives of a phenomenon (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Privilege is easier to recognize from the outside looking in, and counter-stories can effectively paint a picture of discrimination. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) defined counter-stories as stories that “aim to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones

held by the majority" (p.171). All cultures use stories to share and pass down wisdom and knowledge from generation to generation. Storywork is also an Indigenous research methodology that is grounded in the relationship between the storyteller and listener to create meaning from stories embrace the whole person, their heart, body, mind and spirit (Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2009). I hesitated to use storywork because as a non-Indigenous researcher new to Indigenous epistemologies I did not possess the cultural knowledge and context required for storywork as an Indigenous research methodology. Instead, I chose NI to acknowledge the importance of Indigenous storywork without appropriating an Indigenous research methodology. NI allowed me to use stories to conduct my research in way that honoured the beauty and power in sharing contextualized knowledge through stories seen in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous research methodologies (Kovach, 2009, p.96).

Racialized people can share their truth through personal experiences that provide a divergent perspective on societal norms (Gilles, 2017; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CRT supports that historical, racialized injustices created during and after colonization are the foundation of the disparity in educational attainment seen today (TRC, 2015). There are endless reasons that may influence Indigenous students' decision to leave school; understanding the lived experience through the lens of CRT and NI provides additional insight into the disconnect between their needs, expectations, reality, and higher education.

Phenomenology is a research methodology that relies on participants' lived experience to illuminate a phenomenon where the research "attempts to build the essence

of the experience from participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 64). Kim (2012) described the “phenomenologist’s main task is to reveal the mystery of the world and of human experiences with attention, wonder, awareness, and intention to seize the meaning of the world and to let the meaning come into being” (p.361). Kim (2012) goes on to argue that “that narrative inquiry espouses phenomenology, and it fits well into the phenomenological tradition that focuses on people’s lived experiences and particularly on the experiences of those who are marginalized in the mainstream education” (p. 634).

Kim (2016) shared insight on the meaning of *experience* in NI, “every experience builds up from previous experiences and modifies in some way the quality of the experience that comes after” (p.70). Kim goes on to say that in NI, “we think of our participant’s experience in continuity of the past, present and future, not in a linear but circular or [intertwined] way...we consider the participant’s interaction with [their] situation or environment...[including] the interaction with the researcher” (p. 71). Thus, collecting and analyzing experience-centred narratives is used to derive meaning about the experience (Kim, 2016). I shared this journey with my participants, and as I heard their stories, this experience changed me.

It was through this experience that I learned the power and beauty of qualitative research, specifically narrative inquiry. Critical reflection, reflexivity, is a qualitative research method often employed to enhance research quality by those framing their research with critical theories, such as feminist theory or critical race theory (Barrett et al., 2020). Delgado and Stefancic (2017) discussed that it is natural for critical race theorists to turn inward and examine the "interplay of power and authority" within the

researcher and within their interpretation of the findings (p. 58). Throughout the research I was continually “checking” my cultural understanding and biases and shifting my perspective to understand the participants’ experiences through their worldview and against my own.

Literature Review

Contextualizing the Need

The first section of this literature review will contextualize the need to discuss the lived experience of Indigenous post-secondary students. Enrolment, retention, and completion rates of Indigenous students fall below non-Indigenous students in Canada and Alberta. For example, Arriagada (2016) reported that "in 2011, 39% of First Nations people aged 25 to 64, 23% of Métis and 24% of Inuit did not have a certificate, diploma or degree. The corresponding percentage for the non-Aboriginal population was 11%" (p.5). The disparity in socioeconomic status between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians is even more troubling, and it is linked to lower post-secondary education attainment (Pidgeon, 2016). While it is conceivable that poverty and literacy challenges account for differences, socioeconomic disadvantage alone does not explain the lower post-secondary attainment rates observed in Indigenous students (Erwin & Muzzin, 2015; Pidgeon, 2008; Rochecouste et al., 2017; Tomaszewski et al., 2011).

In 2015 the TRC's "Calls to Action" brought the need to address Canada's colonial history to the forefront. Recommendations outlined in the 94 Calls to Action appeal for changes to the child welfare system, education, language and culture, health, justice, and honour Indigenous Peoples' rights of self-determination and self-government (TRC,

2015). While the need for Indigenous-led initiatives to transform higher education is a clear recommendation of the TRC's (2015) summary report, post-secondary institutions grapple with answering these calls (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018; Pidgeon, 2016).

Higher education, particularly universities, are colonial institutions built on beliefs and values that privilege Eurocentric worldviews (Battiste, 2013; Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018; Paquette & Fallon, 2014; Pidgeon, 2016; Stein, 2019). Some researchers question if these institutions, which privilege Western thought and ways of knowing, can accommodate alternate worldviews (Harris, 2002; Paquette & Fallon, 2014). Equally challenging is the question of funding that has the federal and provincial governments denying responsibility for Indigenous students' post-secondary funding (Paquette & Fallon, 2014; Pidgeon, 2016; Stonechild, 2006). Pidgeon (2016) argued that because education played a significant role in colonization, education should be part of the solution; however, the dominant culture in Canada has yet to understand and embrace Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing in higher education (Battiste, 2013; Pidgeon, 2016; Stein, 2019; TRC, 2015).

While some qualitative data exist that shares Indigenous students' stories (Milne & Wotherspoon, 2020), few examine the stories of Indigenous students who have chosen to leave post-secondary education. Harrison et al. (2017, as cited by Hutchings et al., 2018, p. 265) stated that "most studies involved [current] students although some used other data sources including supervisors in addition to students." Historically, researchers often collected and examined Indigenous student persistence from student records data using Eurocentric methods, such as statistical analysis, often leaving Indigenous

participants and communities without access or benefit from the data they provided (Kovach, 2009). It is critical to treat Indigenous student persistence data with care because not all Indigenous students disclose their ethnicity when registering at school or do not feel they fit the government definition of *Status Indian* (Anuik & Kearns, 2014; Pidgeon, 2016). This study gathers Indigenous students' stories of their post-secondary school experiences to uncover factors involved in their decision to leave school before completion.

Indigenization of Higher Education

National Indian Brotherhood, now known as the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), began the push for Indigenous self-determination in 1972, in its position paper entitled *Indian Control Over Indian Education* (Pidgeon, 2016). Since then, post-secondary institutions have been striving to increase Indigenous enrolment, retention, and completion rates (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018; Pidgeon, 2016; Schmidt, 2019; Sonn et al., 2000). As a result, there have been improvements in Canadian post-secondary institutions, such as increased access through specialized admissions, bridging programs, Indigenous student cohorts, Indigenous student services, mentorship programs, changes to the curriculum, the creation of culturally safe spaces within and throughout some institutions, and increased consideration in strategic plans and policies (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018; Indspire, 2018; Pidgeon, 2016; Preston, 2016). Nonetheless, while there has been significant movement towards Indigenous inclusion in higher education, decolonization remains a challenging goal (Battiste, 2013; Brayboy, 2005; Gaudry &

Lorenz, 2018; McGowan et al., 2020; Marker, 2019; Paquette et al., 2013; Pidgeon, 2008; Pidgeon et al., 2014).

McGowan et al. (2020) argued that decolonization is a process where educational systems are disrupted and “fundamentally altered” to disrupt “the current arrangement of Canadian higher education, which is characterized by “the dominance of Eurocentric knowledge and cultural production” (pp. 301-302). The transformational journey towards decolonization is challenging because Western epistemology and ontology remain firmly rooted in its post-secondary institutions, and it is not easily unsettled (Battiste, 2013; Brayboy, 2005; Eisenberg, 2018; Fallon & Paquette, 2014; Marker, 2019; Paquette et al., 2013; Yeo et al., 2019). Some scholars recommend a grassroots approach to higher education, where decolonization is lead by Indigenous faculty (although still very few in numbers) and their allies (Anuik et al., 2010; Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018; Yeo et al., 2019), and it aligns with the model observed in a bifurcated structure where decision-making is centred lower in the organizational structure (Hendrickson et al., 2013). Faculty have the most contact time with students, control both what and how their students learn, and some contend that faculty have the most impact on Indigenous student's educational experience (Anuik et al., 2010; Battiste, 2013; Black & Hachkowski, 2019; Michie et al., 2018; Milne et al., 2016). Decolonization of post-secondary education is fraught with challenges; many institutions struggle to develop curricula, institutional policies and processes that embrace and honour Indigenous ways of knowing and being (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018). One reason is the underrepresentation of Indigenous faculty and administrators in higher education (Pidgeon et al., 2014). To include Indigenous

perspectives and braid them into Western policies and practices, you must first have Indigenous people in higher education (Henry, 2012). It is a “Catch-22” situation where the solution to the problem, more Indigenous representation, is denied due to the problem itself: a lack of Indigenous voice and perspective in higher education. Furthermore, not all Indigenous faculty possess Indigenous cultural teachings or know about the damaging effects of assimilation policies during and after colonization in Canada. Additional professional development helps encourage faculty to challenge their Western worldviews to embrace Indigenous worldviews in their curriculum and pedagogy to create space for Indigenous students to persist and succeed (Anuik & Gilles, 2012; Hogue, 2012; Rochecouste et al., 2017; Yeo et al., 2019).

Developing relationships with each institution's local Indigenous stakeholders is a critical first step for indigenization because each community's culture, traditions and needs are unique (Black & Hachkowski, 2019; Fitzgerald, 2006; Hogue, 2012; Gallop & Bastien, 2016; Yeo et al., 2019). An additional justification for stakeholder engagement is supported by systems thinking for transformational change. Systems thinking is a holistic approach to address complex, deeply rooted problems (Stroh, 2015). These “wicked problems” cannot be solved with the same narrowly focused or conventional methods used to create the problem; decolonizing the academy cannot be accomplished without hearing, understanding and incorporating Indigenous perspectives. Davis et al. (2015) defined systems thinking as “an approach that views systems as wholes rather than compilations of individual components and allows one to see the interconnectedness and interdependencies of agents within systems, to frame problems as patterns, and to get at

underlying causality” (p. 335). Stroh (2015) discussed the need to "build collaborative capacity" that enables stakeholders to see a more complete picture of a system, which is required to address complex and persistent problems. McGowan et al. (2020) cautioned against the use of any Western conceived approach to decolonization “without the explicit, respectful and horizontal involvement of Indigenous voices in the entire research process” (p. 303).

Addressing Indigenous learners' unique barriers and needs should not and cannot be done without their engagement and collaboration. Indigenization of higher education is extraordinarily complex and requires transformational change at every level, from basic underlying assumptions held by the institution to its policies and practices. When heard, Indigenous counter-stories can be a powerful transformational tool for decolonization (Gilles, 2017; Blodgett et al., 2011) because they challenge mainstream beliefs. The TRC (2015) calls for full participation and consent of Indigenous Peoples in their education decisions; indigenization of post-secondary institutions must involve Indigenous stakeholders and make room for alternative worldviews (Pete, 2016).

Indigenous Students Persistence

The history of colonization and the legacy of Indian Residential Schools, the Sixties Scoop, and the paternalistic role of the Indian Act has had adverse effects on Indigenous higher education enrolment, retention, and completion rates (Battiste, 2013; Indspire, 2018; Preston, 2008). Scholars support decolonization as a process to redress past wrongs and create an academy that holds space for diversity and alternate worldviews (Battiste, 2013; Mitchell et al., 2018; Tuck & Yang, 2012). However, little

research is available that recounts Indigenous students' lived experiences of leaving post-secondary before completion. Instead, the literature centres on the discussion of factors that led to persistence in higher education (Indspire, 2018; Lopez, 2018; Rochecouste et al., 2017) and recounts obstacles students have overcome to achieve success, but students that discontinue their education are underrepresented in the literature (Preston, 2008; Tomaszewski et al., 2011).

Researchers reported institutions that provide learning experiences that reflect Indigenous worldviews and knowledge in the curriculum and pedagogy (Indspire, 2018) and positive student-faculty interactions (Indspire, 2018; Lopez, 2018; Rochecouste et al., 2017) contributed to better outcomes for Indigenous learners. Furthermore, offering a wide array of Indigenous student support services (Lopez, 2018; Rochecouste et al., 2017), increased mentoring opportunities (Indspire, 2018; Lopez, 2018; Tomaszewski et al., 2011), and academic policies that support cultural obligations (Lopez, 2018; Rochecouste et al., 2017), were also shown to contribute to improved outcomes for Indigenous students. Other factors attributed to Indigenous students' persistence include the availability of adequate funding (Indspire, 2018), the ability to maintain strong family ties (Lopez, 2018), access to emotional support (Lopez, 2018; Rochecouste et al., 2017), and the individual's desire to "give back" to their community (Lopez, 2018).

Additionally, Indigenous people indicated that staying in their home communities for higher education is important, and to that end, some institutions and Indigenous learners have embraced the use of distance learning technologies (Bougie et al., 2013; Fahy et al., 2009; Simon et al., 2014; Rochecouste et al., 2017).

Reasons given for leaving post-secondary education included difficulty being away from the person's home community (Bougie et al., 2013; Tomaszewski et al., 2011), competing family obligations (Bougie et al., 2013; Lopez, 2018; Rochecouste et al., 2017; Tomaszewski et al., 2011), pregnancy (Bougie et al., 2013), competing work obligations or leaving for employment (Bougie et al., 2013; Rochecouste et al., 2017), language barriers (Rochecouste et al., 2017), literacy barriers (Rochecouste et al., 2017), cultural identity, racism or marginalization (Indspire, 2018; Rochecouste et al., 2017; Tomaszewski et al., 2011), the emotional labour of explaining reconciliation (Indspire, 2018), lack of culturally relevant course material (Tomaszewski et al., 2011), financial barriers (Bougie et al., 2013; Indspire, 2018; Rochecouste et al., 2017; Tomaszewski et al., 2011), low self-efficacy (Rochecouste et al., 2017), loss of interest or lack of motivation (Bougie et al., 2013), and difficulty mastering course material (Bougie et al., 2013). Additionally, men had a higher rate of non-completion of post-secondary programming (17%) than women (10%) (Bougie et al., 2013). The difference between males and females also is seen in the type of credentials obtained. The percentage of Indigenous men who obtain trades certification is higher (43%) than for women (14%); and women are more likely to have college or university credentials (52% and 39%) versus men (35% and 17%) (Bougie et al., 2013).

The literature reviewed suggested that colonization and assimilation have had a long-lasting negative effect on Indigenous student persistence in higher education. The studies reviewed suggested ways to improve Indigenous student persistence and many reasons Indigenous students have left school. However, few studies share the lived

experience of Indigenous students in higher education or address the challenges and barriers experienced by Indigenous students in a non-Indigenous educational system.

Racism

Racism affects Indigenous post-secondary students. Lu (2017, as cited by Eisenberg, 2018) shared two types of injustice that Indigenous people face, interactional injustice and structural injustice. Interactional injustice is that which happens between a perpetrator and victim. In contrast, structural injustice “focuses on underlying social, political, and economic structures that have contributed to or resulted from past injustice. Both types of injustice continue to impact Indigenous learners. For example, research on microaggression indicated that Indigenous students still face interactional injustices, such as racism (Canel-Çınarbaş & Yohani, 2019; Clark et al., 2014; Currie et al., 2012). Similarly, many scholars identify systemic racism or structural injustices (Bopp et al., 2017; Neeganagwedgin, 2013; Palmater, 2011) without assessing their impact on Indigenous student persistence in higher education. Godlewska et al. (2017) summarized that more data is required to track the microaggressions, transactional and systemic racism and how it affects their Indigenous post-secondary learners because “most educators have little understanding of the environment faced by Indigenous people in Canadian institutions” (p. 580).

While the factors listed above provide some insight into challenges facing Indigenous students' persistence in higher education, they do not account for how these variables combine to aid or hinder their progress. Very few studies provide a holistic account of the students' lived experiences that resulted in their decision to stop out or

leave. This study attempts to address some of the gaps in the existing literature. This study aims to share the stories of Indigenous students who did not persist, either temporarily or permanently, in higher education and to create a deeper, richer, more complete understanding of their experiences, barriers, and challenges on their educational journey.

Chapter 3: Methodology

In the previous chapter, I identified the theoretical framework and literature review that underpinned the design of this study. This chapter will provide details about this study's methodology and method and how these choices help examine the lived experience of Indigenous post-secondary students who leave before completion.

Additionally, I share how the research design aligns with Indigenous ways of knowing by leveraging relationships with former Indigenous students to collect their stories through conversation.

Overview

This study employed phenomenology and narrative inquiry to examine the lived experience of Indigenous students who discontinued post-secondary education before completion. Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research methodology that analyses experiences collected through stories, text, photography, conversations, journals, field notes, etc., to understand a phenomenon (Clandinin, 2013; Kim, 2016). NI offers a holistic and detail-rich understanding of an event (Clandinin, 2013; Kim, 2016). NI explores the intersection between an individual's life events and the sensemaking of that experience made by telling their story. Narratives, or stories, are the hallmark of NI, which allows the participant to take the listener, reader or observer on a journey that includes mind, body, heart and spirit, providing a holistic version (data) of one person's understanding of a phenomenon. The burden of interpretation is placed on the listener or researcher to find meaning within these stories. Like other qualitative research methods,

this is inductive; it looks for themes or patterns to make meaning (Shank & Brown, 2007).

Kim (2016) suggested that NI engages in “problem finding” through counter-stories (p.47) to challenge “accepted views” held by the dominant majority. The use of NI spans many disciplines, including education, law, and psychology (Kim, 2016; Mello, 2002). Kim (2016) explained that social scientists often use NI to “experience life situations, feelings, emotions and events that we would not normally experience” (p. 12). NI, in this study, honours both Western and Indigenous research methodologies by collecting stories of the participants' lived experience in higher education during a time they decided to leave school. Archibald (2008) coined the term storywork “because I needed a term that signified that our stories [oral tradition] and storytelling were to be taken seriously” (p. 3) and that were critical to examining Indigenous knowledges and Indigenous ways of knowing (p. 5). Kovach (2009) shared that “story and Indigenous inquiry are grounded within a relationship-based approach to research” and is “a decolonizing action that gives voice to the misrepresented and marginalized” (p. 98).

Historically, the divide between Western and Indigenous worldviews has been difficult to cross (Anuik & Gilles, Battiste, 2013; Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018; Pidgeon, 2019). Wilson (2008) shared that in an Indigenous research paradigm, the “reality is in the relationship that one has with the truth” and that “there may be multiple realities” that explain a phenomenon (p. 73). Storywork is grounded in the communication between the storyteller and the listener, where meaning-making is the listener's responsibility, and new meaning can be gleaned from revisiting the same story. In this study, the stories told

to me were filtered; the storytellers only shared the parts they wanted me to know.

Likewise, I listened through the filters of my own life, beliefs and biases. Stories relies on both the teller and the listener to create and interpret meaning. Although I did not use storywork as research methodology there are many similarities between it and my use of NI.

In NI, storytellers share their understanding of an experience, which helps illuminate the phenomenon from many alternate perspectives. Stroh (2015) emphasized the importance of storytelling for social change because "it is a powerful way to make sense of our own experience and the world around us. Stories share our identity, communicate who we are and what is important to us, and move others to act" (p.30). Kovach (2009) asserted that storytelling is a traditional way of sharing Indigenous knowledge "where knowledge and story are inseparable" (p.98) and based upon the relationship with a phenomenon (Wilson, 2008). When we hear stories, we intuitively develop sense from them and sort them into our existing knowledge. It is how we learn.

Understanding the root cause of deeply entrenched phenomena, such as the lower post-secondary completion rates of Indigenous starts with understanding the experience and perspective of those involved (Stroh, 2015). I chose NI as a methodology to understand the lived experience of Indigenous post-secondary students when they withdrew from school. Sharing stories of their lived experiences aligns with CRT as qualitative research methodology, which uses stories to understand a phenomenon. It provided a glimpse into their thoughts and feelings and helped me explore why they left school. Gathering stories of participants' experiences also allowed me to honour and

privilege Indigenous ways of knowing through storywork, to weave together Indigenous and Western research methodologies to ground this study (Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008). In this study, I invited current and former Indigenous post-secondary students to tell the story of their unique challenges and triumphs in their post-secondary education journey.

Tang Yan et al. (2021) argued that “achieving social justice requires us to interrogate and disrupt the ways as individuals, institutions, and even the profession have aligned and continue to align with oppressive systems of injustice rooted in white supremacy, colonialism, and neoliberalism” (p. 2). As part of this research, I listened to the participants stories through my own filters and biases. Therefore, to enhance the quality of the research and to honour a critical lens, I employed reflexivity throughout this project. Barrett et al. (2020) defined reflexivity as a “continual process of engaging with and articulating the place of the researcher and the context of the research” (p. 9). I share some of my critical reflections at the end of this paper describing the transformation I experiences as a result of my learning journey.

Method

Conversations

This research explored the lived experience of eight Indigenous post-secondary students who left permanently or had a semester or more break in their educational journey. Some students returned to post-secondary education; some have now completed a program, while others never returned. The stories I collected in conversation with participants provided insight into these students' decision to leave school. Atkinson

(2012) described that narrative inquiry uses narrative interviews, or conversations, to "bring forth the voice and spirit of the storyteller within a life-as-a-whole context...and allows us to step inside the personal world of the storyteller and discover larger worlds" (p.2). Further, Atkinson (2012) argued that:

a person's life story, the one he or she chooses to tell others, is what is most real, most important to him or her, and is what gives us, the casual reader as well as the researcher, the clearest sense of the person's subjective understanding of his or her lived experience (p.7).

The stories shared by the participants in the study provide insight into Indigenous students' experience in post-secondary education in west-central Alberta.

Participant Selection and Recruitment

Individuals invited to participate in this study self-identified as Indigenous, lived in a rural community of Hinton or Grande Cache, attended post-secondary education (as defined in this study), and discontinued their studies for at least one term. I used convenience sampling to leverage existing relationships from my professional and social networks to identify potential study participants. *Convenience sampling*, defined as "participant selection that is not random" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Shank & Brown, 2007), allows the researcher to narrow participant selection based on specific criteria such as ethnicity, location and lived experience. Convenience sampling is not random, and therefore, by its nature, introduces a bias to the study. In this study, I had an existing relationship with most participants. *Snowball sampling* is a method where current

participants recommend others who align with the study parameters (Emerson, 2015). I used snowball sampling to recruit one participant in this study.

Kim (2016) discussed challenges in determining the optimal sample size. She says that sample size depends on the research design, "...collecting life stories...the sample size will usually be smaller...exploring themes...the sample may be larger, and the interviews shorter" (p. 160). Beitin (2012, as cited by Kim, 2016) offered that the sample size ranges between 6 and 12 participants in narrative inquiry. Saturation in qualitative research design describes the state where additional data (interviews) provide no new information or insights (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Kim, 2016). In this study, eight participants were engaged in conversations ranging from one to three hours and encouraged to share their post-secondary journey in as much depth as desired. During the conversations, similar concepts and factors that influenced the students' decision to leave emerged, indicating that I was approaching saturation.

Ethical Considerations

Royal Roads University Research Ethics Board (RRU REB) approved this study. Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2, 2018) Chapter 9 outlined ethical considerations for research with Indigenous Peoples, which provided guidelines for participant engagement with Indigenous communities and individuals in this study. Additionally, RRU REB policy outlines the process and requirements of RRU to conduct research with humans (<https://policies.royalroads.ca/policies/research-ethics>), which informed participant engagement in this study. For this research, I drew participants from urban Indigenous

people not currently residing on First Nations reserves or Metis Settlements because there are no reserves or settlements near Hinton or Grande Cache (<https://geo.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/cippn-fnpim/index-eng.html>). Each participant in this study provided consent for me to collect and use their stories.

During this study, I was employed by the Hinton Friendship Centre (HFC), which serves the local urban Indigenous population in and around Hinton, Alberta. The HFC is a community-based helping organization serving many Indigenous families in Hinton but does not govern or speak for them. However, I did consult with the local, provincial, and federal Friendship Centre bodies to request permission to conduct this research in Hinton. There were no concerns or objections; however, there was no formal process to obtain formal consent. As I prepared the proposal for this research, I did not encounter any concerns from Indigenous colleagues and friends when I consulted with them to gauge attitudes and opinions regarding the appropriateness of the study. The Hinton Friendship Centre (HFC) staff offered guidance on cultural protocols for engaging various Indigenous community members; protocols vary between families and local cultural backgrounds such as Cree, Saulteaux, Métis, etc.

There was potential for perceived conflict of interest because the research and my work role were very similar. At the time of the study, I was working on a community-based education research project, The Circle of Learning Project (CoLP), a provincial initiative with the primary goal of helping parents and caregivers of Indigenous children navigate the Alberta public school system. Therefore, I did not ask anyone who was a client to participate in this study. However, it is essential to note that through

reconnecting with some individuals as part of my research, some participants who had children in school became clients and received support from the CoLP. It is common in rural and remote communities to have overlapping relationships and to refuse them as clients would have deprived them of needed services in our community. As part of my due diligence for ethical consent protocols, I told potential participants that participation or withdrawal from participation would not interfere with any ongoing relationship.

Ensuring the privacy and confidentiality of participants was a priority. I created pseudonyms for each participant to maintain their privacy while allowing for direct quotes. I will destroy all electronic documents, such as recordings, two years after completing this study.

Data Collection

I invited potential participants from my personal and professional network to provide narratives of their post-secondary experience when they discontinued their program of study. I had discussed my proposed research with many of them, and many had offered to contribute their story. When I received approval to begin, I contacted the potential participants through phone conversations to share additional details about participation and consent (Appendix C).

I held narrative conversations on a video conferencing platform, Zoom; face-to-face interviews were not possible due to gathering restrictions in place due to the Covid-19 Pandemic. After obtaining verbal consent to participate (Appendix C), each participant's session was recorded, which allowed the conversation to flow naturally

without the need for notetaking. Several open-ended conversation starter questions were used and are included in Appendix A.

Following the interviews, I transcribed the conversations and asked each participant to approve these transcripts before analysis. Participants had three opportunities to withdraw or amend their information before I included it in this study: during the initial interview, when they reviewed and approved the transcripts of the conversations, and finally when I shared the analysis with the participant. The goal was to ensure that information used in this study aligned with the participants' intended meaning and to represent their experience accurately. This process also confirmed the validity of the data collected (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Each participant received a 25-dollar gift card to either a grocery store or gas station as a token of appreciation for their involvement. Additionally, each participant was entered into a draw for an iPad each time they met with me to encourage follow-up engagement.

Throughout the study, all interactions with participants adhered to a similar format. First, I spoke to potential participants about the research and inquired if they would be interested in sharing their experience with me in a recorded conversation. If they agreed, I emailed a summary of the study and consent information that I would read to them at the start of the interview (email template is in Appendix B) and provided each participant with a password-protected Zoom link for a mutually agreed-upon date and time. Before each participant shared their story, I offered a summary of the study and consent information. Additionally, I provided time to ask questions and obtained verbal consent before we began our conversation. Finally, I provided participants with a written

copy of their consent as part of the interview transcripts they received. Participant narratives were guided and loosely structured by questions (Appendix A) but primarily driven by the participant's stories of their post-secondary education experience. If the participant needed encouragement, I provided probing questions to encourage them further to share their experiences. I allowed sufficient time for participants to complete their thoughts and avoided interruptions whenever possible. Participants were honoured and treated with respect; their care and well-being superseded the requirements of this study (American Psychological Association, 2020).

Before I used their data in this study, I invited each participant to review a copy of their conversation transcripts. Seven of the eight participants chose to review and approve their transcripts. One participant did not wish to review the transcripts but gave consent to use our conversation in the study because they did not want a copy of the conversation. This participant stated, "I know what I said, and I am good with you using it." The privacy and confidentiality of the participants' identity and contributions is a priority of this research. Therefore, I stored recordings, transcripts, and other information containing personal information or identifiers in a password-protected file on my personal computer. All data remained in electronic form, and I conducted the data analysis using NVivo, a computer-assisted qualitative research software. I will store all participants' contributions for two years after the completion of this study.

Analysis

Kim (2016) described Polkinghorne's two main approaches to NI data analysis; analysis of narratives and narrative data analysis. Through narrative data analysis,

sensemaking is a “meaning-finding” process used to gain additional information about a phenomenon (Kim, 2016). For example, analysis of participants’ narratives, or conversations, was undertaken to identify factors that influenced their decision to leave school. Daiute (2018) argued that “detailed analyses must translate into observations and findings that reasonably describe one or more participants (stakeholders) representations related to a question” (p.18). In an *analysis of narratives*, the researcher uses inductive analysis to identify and sort emerging concepts into themes. Creswell and Creswell (2018) explained that the inductive process is where the researcher distills detailed information collected into themes and categories. Alternatively, *narrative analysis* is a process that requires one to “synthesize the data elements into a coherent story rather than separating them into different categories” (Kim, 2016, p. 634). In this study, I collected the participants' educational experience narratives, analyzed them individually, synthesized them, and summarized them into themes for discussion and recommendations.

I read and listened to the transcripts several times to establish the overall meaning of each conversation. I followed that with two rounds of conceptual coding using NVivo, computer-aided qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). Conceptual coding assigns meaning to words or phrases that capture a broader essence or “bigger picture” (Saldaña, 2016). During the initial coding, I used conceptual coding to identify key messages from each participant’s story using two categories: *expected codes*, which were deductive and drawn from my initial literature review, and *surprising codes*, concepts that emerged during the initial round of concept coding. When I reviewed the first-round

conceptual codes, general themes began to emerge. I also identified emerging codes of interest from the first-round coding and noted them for further consideration (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The second round of concept coding was conducted on each narrative using the codes and themes from the first-round coding. I created a codebook for each coding round, which I reviewed before each coding session to ensure coding was consistent between transcripts. All participants were encouraged to review the coding to ensure that ideas and themes that emerged during analysis accurately described their post-secondary experiences. In total, seven out of eight participants reviewed the coded themes before I included their data in this study. The final participant declined to review the codes but provided consent to use the information. The coding debriefing sessions with the participants were valuable for confirming I had interpreted participants' stories correctly and allowing participants to add information on these themes.

During the analysis of the conversations, the focus was identifying both novel and expected themes and comparing themes that emerged across the eight stories collected. Phillip (1994) shared his idea on flirtation...with the data" is a way to exploit "surprise and curiosity, as we do not know what is going to evolve and emerge until we deal with the data" and is a way to "create space...where we can discover ways to reach and negotiate our research aims with the data," allowing us to "embrace less familiar possibilities...and cultivating ideas for stories we haven't necessarily bargained for" (as cited by Kim, 2016, p.188). As needed, I grouped new concepts emerging from the data with an existing and related theme. As themes emerged, they began to paint a picture of the shared experiences of these students.

Finding meaning within a narrative is not an easy task. Mello (2002) argued that "organizing, analyzing, and discovering theoretical meanings from storied data can be challenging due to the nature of narrative because, like qualitative inquiry itself, it is iterative and evolutionary" (p. 233). The themes and their relationship to each other produce a general knowledge that represents this unique data set. The established method of conceptual coding (Saldaña, 2016) provided a framework for coding and improved the reliability of the study by following data analysis conventions used by researchers in the field.

Limitations/Delimitations

Theofanidis and Fountouki (2018) define research limitations as "potential weaknesses that are usually out of the researcher's control and are closely associated with the chosen research design, statistical model constraints, funding constraints, or other factors" (p. 156). Theofanidis and Fountouki go on to describe delimitations as "limitations consciously set by the authors" (p.157). Qualitative research cannot be generalized to an entire population by design and nature because this type of research emphasizes the holistic understanding of a limited number of participants. Therefore, the results obtained are not generalizable and limited to the lived experience of these participants in this group at this time in their educational journey. However, the themes that emerge from this research add to the body of knowledge of Indigenous learners' lived experience in higher education that informs post-secondary leaders on Indigenous students' barriers to enrolment, retention, and completion.

The method of participant selection, convenience and snowball sampling is another factor that limits this study. Relationship building takes time. I began with participants I had a personal or professional relationship with for this study and met the study's criteria. Relationship building is an essential step in Indigenous research design and contributes to the natural flow and richness of the conversations. I relied on my existing personal and professional network to find and invite most of my study's participants. I also used snowball sampling to expand my participant base. One participant recommended to me was included in the study that did not come from my social or professional network.

At the time of the study, Royal Roads University disallowed face-to-face participant interviews due to physical distancing requirements to control the spread of Covid-19. Additionally, while not ideal, Zoom videoconferencing software allowed me to include participants in the neighbouring community of Grande Cache, thus expanding my demographic. However, two participants required additional assistance to connect to Zoom because they did not have the technology and digital literacy needed to meet with me online. Fortunately, Hinton Employment and Learning Place (HELP), a local non-profit organization, assisted these participants while maintaining their privacy and confidentiality as required by research ethics.

Delimitations are limits to the study determined by the research design and are necessary so that the study's aims and objectives do not become impossible to achieve (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). For example, Critical Race Theory provided a valuable framework to understand and explain factors that have, over several hundred years, led to

the disparity in the educational attainment of Indigenous Peoples in Canada compared to non-Indigenous people. Thus, approaching the research from a CRT framework is a chosen delimitation that influenced this research.

Participation in this study was limited to Indigenous individuals who stopped out for a period or permanently left their post-secondary education program before completion. Post-secondary education included any program offered at a recognized public or private institution in Alberta, including academic upgrading and non-credit, credit, apprenticeship, certificate, diploma, and degree programs. Selecting participants from Hinton and Grande Cache who chose to leave post-secondary education rather than throughout Alberta or Canada is also a delimitation of this study.

All participants self-identified as Indigenous. Consequently, excluding non-Indigenous Peoples from this study is a delimitation. Further research to explore the lived experience of Indigenous versus non-Indigenous students who choose to discontinue their education would provide additional insight into the unique experiences of Indigenous learners.

This chapter discussed how I selected Indigenous participants in this study based on several criteria: their experience leaving higher education, their current location, and my existing relationship with them or someone they knew. Data, in the form of stories, were collected from conversations with the participants, and I used conceptual coding of the conversation transcripts to identify themes. Finally, I framed my research using CRT and selected NI, or storywork, that aligns with Western and Indigenous research

methodology. This research design aims to privilege Indigenous voices and share stories that are alternative to non-Indigenous students.

Chapter 4: Findings

In Chapter Four, I share concepts that emerged from the analysis of conversations with Indigenous students about their experiences when they left school. No single story can summarize all the challenges Indigenous students face on their educational journeys, but common themes emerged as their stories unfolded. The following section outlines the findings from the conversations held with eight Indigenous people from Hinton and Grande Cache, Alberta, who shared their post-secondary educational journey during one-on-one conversations. I have organized the themes that emerged from our conversations into three categories: Individual, Institutional, and Societal Factors to sort the data into factors students bring with them, factors under the control of the institution and factors that emerge from assumptions and beliefs on a societal level. I used these categories to provide a framework to discuss themes, but, in reality, these concepts intertwine in a complex system that is interdependent and not easy to untangle.

Their Stories

The following summarizes each participant's learning journey to introduce the eight people I had the good fortune to engage in this study. I have not included many personal details in these summaries to protect the privacy and confidentiality of my participants because, in small communities, people are often recognizable from their stories. Therefore, I used pseudonyms rather than participants' names throughout this document.

When she left her first program, Rachel was a young single parent and needed to put her financial security ahead of her education as the sole income earner. The program

she left was a community-based, non-credit program, and as she neared the end of the program, she realized that it was not going to result in employment. She accepted an employment opportunity that required her to start immediately; therefore, she could not complete the program. Rachel did go back to school to complete a diploma and continues to explore additional educational opportunities.

Grace attended post-secondary programs twice as a young adult, attending college in Calgary, and more recently, online from her home community. However, she did not complete any of her programs, and she indicated a lack of support from family and her post-secondary staff and faculty as reasons for leaving school. Additionally, she identified being academically unprepared to succeed and left the program when she could not keep up with the class. Currently, financial and family obligations impact her return to post-secondary education, despite having an educational and career goal.

Cheryl attended university straight out of high school. She received bursaries and scholarships based on her academic achievement to help fund her education and was encouraged by high school educators to pursue post-secondary education. However, Cheryl was unprepared for the loneliness and community disconnection encountered while attending university in a large urban centre. Early in her academic journey, she became a young parent; although very capable academically, she wanted to remain in her home community to support her children, extended family, and community. She continued to take university classes at the local learning site but could only complete the first two years locally and did not want to move to Edmonton to complete her degree.

Cheryl talked about career aspirations but did not share any future educational goals during the conversation.

Ruth attended post-secondary at the local community college. She attended academic upgrading and a non-credit certificate program but currently is missing one high-school prerequisite for the university program she would like to pursue. Ruth could access provincial grants when upgrading, which provided financial support for her and her child. However, she did not have grant or scholarship funding to pursue college or university programming. After meeting a new partner and having more children, Ruth shifted her priorities from pursuing an education to raising her young children. Now that Ruth's children are getting older, she is, once again, looking for educational opportunities that she can use to help her Indigenous community.

James attended academic upgrading and pre-employment trades post-secondary programs offered on his reserve when he was a young adult. He lived both on reserve and in cities while growing up. James shared having difficulty in school starting in grade one. He could not see the board and did not get glasses until the end of grade one. Despite English being his first language, James still had trouble understanding his teachers; limited vocabulary is common with offspring for first-generation English language learners (Life, 2018). James had difficulty understanding his teachers and preferred hands-on learning to a classroom-based approach seen in Western pedagogy. He indicated that he left both the pre-employment program and academic upgrading for financial reasons. The living expenses provided through grant funding were inadequate to support his lifestyle and meet his family's financial obligations. In addition, James shared

that he was involved with drugs and gangs as a youth and young adult, which interfered with his education. James indicated that he might return to a General Equivalency Diploma (GED) preparation course once the provincial government lifts Covid-19 gathering restrictions.

Sophia attended university in Edmonton directly from high school. Although she lived in the city during high school, she indicated that the culture shock of moving from an all-Indigenous high school to a large university was overwhelming. Sophia was eligible for provincial funding through the Advancing Futures Bursary (<https://www.alberta.ca/advancing-futures-bursary.aspx>), which provides educational grants to former youth in the care of Children's Services. However, she felt she would have a better chance of academic success attending part-time, which reduced available funding. Since living in the city and returning to her home community, Sophia completed an online diploma program and is currently pursuing a degree. As a non-status Indigenous person, she struggles to access grant funding; therefore, she works to self-fund her education, slowing her progress. Nevertheless, she is determined to complete her degree and is close to finishing.

Alice returned to school as a mature student enrolling in a degree program where the first two years were available in her home community. As a young adult, she did not believe that she had the academic prerequisites to enrol in post-secondary programming because she did not complete high school. Additionally, Alice did not see value in Western education for her and her career path when she was younger. Alice had strong family and financial support but struggled with being away from her home community,

but it was not why she put a pause on her post-secondary journey. Alice took a year off to pursue another potential career path but returned to university to complete her degree. She values the knowledge and experience she gained but does not think it has affected her career trajectory. However, Alice did indicate achieving a degree has changed how she feels about other degree holders; she no longer places *educated* individuals “on a pedestal.”

Joseph completed a post-secondary certificate taken entirely online in his home community. Although he completed a certificate program, he would like to continue his post-secondary journey and indicated that he is not done his formal education and is looking for more programming to supplement his certificate. Joseph relied heavily on his academic advisor to help create a full-time online schedule which opened doors to funding. Full-time student status was important because it provided more opportunities to access scholarships. Unfortunately, the community learning site closed near the end of his program, and Joseph had to finish his last class from his home rather than at the local learning site. Joseph is very connected and involved in his community; therefore, he wants local student services support or program delivery to consider future post-secondary programming.

Individual Factors

Many of the participants in this study have a deep connection to their traditional Indigenous culture, which is a source of strength, pride, and hope for the future. In hearing the stories of their academic journeys, a range of themes emerged across participants. Individual themes affected a student in uniquely individual ways and were

not directly influenced by the post-secondary institution. Table 3 summarizes the individual themes and key concepts from participants' stories that I will discuss in the section.

Table 3

Summary of Findings: Individual Themes and Key Concepts

Themes	Key Concepts that Emerged
Individual Factors	
Impact of Life Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • gaining life experience helps buffer the effects of culture shock when attending a large post-secondary institution • historical and ongoing transection between education and the child welfare system impacts the ability to ask for help • racism affects some participants' ability to ask for help • connecting new students with Indigenous peers would help the transition to post-secondary institutions
Relationship with Personal Support System	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • every student comes with different levels of family and community support • where supports systems are robust, attending school in their home community is beneficial • being away from their personal support system negatively affects feelings of personal safety and security • lack of cultural safety inhibits speaking freely and asking for help
Belonging to a Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • there is comfort and ease being with other Indigenous people who share a common history and culture • there is safety in being part of a group • racism is ongoing • peer pressure can affect persistence in education both positively and negatively • lateral violence is a reality for many • Indigenous role models and mentors are important • safe spaces where Indigenous people can gather help build a post-secondary Indigenous community
Local Access to Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • many benefitted from programming in their home community • in-person faculty and staff make it easier to ask questions • family, community and employment responsibilities are significant barriers to post-secondary education when students attend outside of their home community
Student Funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • funding programming is a significant concern for most • being non-status is a considerable barrier in our region • maintaining full-time student status increases funding but can be challenging for several reasons: lack of available distance programming to maintain a full-time course load, personal responsibilities, managing stress levels • debt aversion

- delinquent student loan repayments affect access to future student loans
-

Impact of Life Experience

Life experiences impact us all; some participants felt better equipped to navigate the post-secondary system as they matured and gained knowledge, skills, and life experience. For example, Cheryl went to university directly out of high school. She stated, “at that point in my life, I wasn't open to different cultures, other than what I was exposed to...now, if I went, I would experience everything that they would offer because I'm just a different person now.” Sophia shared, “I've gained some skills... at that time, at such a young age, I don't think I was prepared, socially, to just reach out to anyone.” Many participants spoke of “culture shock” when moving to a new community to attend post-secondary programming. Cheryl confirmed:

I just don't know if I should have went right out of high school...I hadn't really any life experience. I was kind of just thrown that way and said this is what you're supposed to do; all my friends were doing it.

Sophia pointed out that:

I first went to the university straight out of high school when I was 18, but I didn't do well there in terms of...kind of getting involved into the university community there, so I wasn't there very long, about a semester and a half, before I dropped out...you have to reach out to [Indigenous youth] because you can't ever expect them to reach out to you...there's *fear* instilled in every one of us.

When asked to explain this fear, Sophia responded, “not being, like, good enough for society.” Sophia confided that “we have an emergency plan, so our kids don't get taken away. Like today, that's how we have to operate as a community.” Other participants shared concerns about fear of the state and government institutions.

The level of anxiety about having their children taken away is something that many non-Indigenous people will never experience. Yet, for so many Indigenous families and communities, it is an ongoing reality. This fear makes it more difficult to ask questions and advocate for oneself, and this theme emerged in many of our conversations. Ruth shared:

I'm just gonna say, for myself, it's hard to ask for help...in anything, right...school, home, everything, it's hard to ask for help...because it's instilled in my head that...you shouldn't ask for help.

James divulged that as early as grade one, where teachers used unfamiliar vocabulary, he was already conditioned not to ask questions to avoid drawing attention to himself or as he says, “being labelled a dumb Indian.” When he was attending elementary school, children who were not progressing were sent to the nearby IRS. Sophia provided the following advice for post-secondary educators:

I just know that when I went to [post-secondary], I didn't initially get reached out to, and as a young person, at that time, I didn't have the courage to reach out myself. I know there's going to be a lot of students that if they make it that far by walking into the doors on the first day, that that's a huge step, you know...I think

that's important is to get other Indigenous students to reach out to other Indigenous students and not to just get an email.

Many Indigenous students do not get the help and guidance they need to succeed because of the often foreign and complex post-secondary system and difficulty advocating for themselves.

Relationship with Personal Support System

student cohort will have great diversity, and Indigenous students are no exception. Some will come with the support of their family and community, with mentors to help and encourage them, while others will not. Every participant spoke of the importance of family and community connections and vital to their well-being. For example, Alice, who attended post-secondary ten years ago, asserted, “there's just not a lot of supports for people...for Indigenous people who [are used to] see[ing] their family every day, there's not a lot of supports for that.” Rachel shared that “I had to leave my kids for nine weeks...that was a big conversation between me and [my support system] because that's the only way I could do it.” Cheryl stated that:

My marks [when I attended in my home community] were far better than they were in the city because I had my parents around, I had my siblings, I had my culture, I had everything here...if I would have had that option to do the whole thing here, I probably would have gotten it done, but I had no desire to ever go back to [the city].

Sophia added, “Most of my family, my extended family lives here, and it's just natural; I don't even think about actually moving, or living anywhere else, because why would I? My family's here.” Alice affirmed that “it was harder to go back, once I quit because then you're back, you know you're back, you feel comfortable, you're connected again... it's harder to go back so I can see why a lot of them don't.”

Living with family and in their home community provides more than social connection; it provides safety and security. Ruth shared that:

I'm happy where I live because we're in a sheltered community, and we're looked at as equals, but if I was to go out in the city I would be, I've already had the... the names called at me, being in the city, that I was [called] “dirty native.”

James told of his experience going to secondary school on his reserve:

There wasn't no hate, or nothing, no beefs, or nothing, everybody knew everybody, everybody knew where everybody lived, everybody used to go to everybody's house, everybody used to walk with everybody...you hang out with anybody you want, there was no discrimination.

Similarly, Joseph shared this about his primary school, “it was a really small school everybody knew who everybody was and ... for the most part we were all related to each other.” Cheryl described, “coming from a big family ... I have like hundreds of cousins just in town... a huge family where you're never alone. Then you go to [university] ...you're all by yourself.” Cheryl continues, “there was nothing memorable, I don't even

think about that year of my life except for outside of school when I moved in with my family, and then I had good memories.”

Many Indigenous people live in close-knit social circles with family and friends.

Consequently, it is vital to provide opportunities for Indigenous students to connect with other Indigenous students, faculty and staff to recreate a community of support when away from home.

Belonging to a Group

Connection with others who share a similar history and worldview provides comfort, support, and security. However, personal and cultural safety concerns were also expressed by Sophia when she spoke about the importance of knowing her audience when she spoke to strangers:

Our systems and having access to equal opportunity - that doesn't exist yet, but people who have that privilege fail to see that, and when you question them on it, they don't like hearing it. So, you can put yourself in a vulnerable situation if you don't watch who you're talking to.

As James stated, “there is safety in numbers.” Ruth affirmed that “you connect when you see an Indigenous person, for me, I connect, when I see oh there's an Indigenous person, I'm not alone.” Grace confirmed, “if I see Indigenous teachers - oh my god, I want to learn, it's my own kind, it's my people, that's a really big one. Even in like personal life...if you see an Indigenous person, like, succeeding, you're gonna be like, oh yeah, I want that too!”

Sophia shared that:

every time I go into an area that's non-Indigenous, I get scared away, and I come back to my comfort zone, with people I know, I can relate to and can understand, you know it's something that we don't even have to discuss or talk about you just know because we're all living in the same reality.

However, belonging to a group also had its drawbacks. Ruth shared her high school experience, “back when I was a teenager; it wasn't cool to be smart... so that played a factor in my dropout; we mostly all dropped out at the same time.” One participant also expressed that lateral violence was an issue. Sophia shared:

I get a lot of division, even within my communities now. ‘Oh, you talk real White,’ and to me, I'm like “well, I went to school” “oh, cause you want to be like them” ... things like that, that just sort of belittling who you are, and it kind of creates that ... loss of who you are as an Indigenous person.

For some, attending post-secondary can negatively impact their relationship with their family, friends and community; this impact may, for some, be too great to overcome. Fortunately, that was not the case for Alice, who completed her degree despite stopping out. She stated, “My mom was super proud; I'm the first one to get a degree in my family, right. My dad was already passed. [My husband] was super supportive, right...everyone was happy.” Grace didn't experience this level of support “I didn't have anybody to give me direction ... about my life and where to go, and what to do...I just did whatever, I guess, my friends were doing because they were always a big influence.”

Having family and friends that support and encourage the pursuit of higher education can be an enabler for persistence.

Local Access to Education

Participants in this study benefited from post-secondary programming in their home communities. For example, access to in-person post-secondary education and services has been available in Hinton since the 1980s and Grande Cache sporadically throughout the last four decades until spring 2020, when these sites closed permanently, leaving behind a post-secondary vacuum in west-central Alberta.

During interviews, many participants spoke positively of having a local Learning Site that provided programming and post-secondary services in Hinton and Grande Cache. Cheryl said, “I did one [full] semester [in Hinton]...I did good...my marks here were amazing.” Alice shared that, “I started university in Hinton at [the Hinton Learning Site] ...I did probably my first year of my BA remotely.” When Alice was asked if she would have gone to university if she had to leave Hinton for her first year, she replied, “No, especially as a returning adult student [attending in Hinton allowed me] to get used to being back at school.” Joseph disclosed that “to go to post-secondary school, I always thought I'd have to leave [and] I don't want to leave.” However, when he found out he could take online courses in his home community, he decided, “I should give it a go!”

Having a regional learning site classroom to attend online classes can help students who have busy households. Joseph shared that having a class space to go to helped eliminate family interruptions, “having that site away from home, that I had to get

up to go to, and that I could walk into a room, hop on Zoom and not have my dad walking in the door midway through” was vital.

Online learning is flexible. Although Joseph preferred to attend classes at his Learning Site, he completed his program from home after his site closed. However, one participant stressed the importance of local course delivery where instructors and peers shared the same classroom space. Rachel stated, “I couldn’t have had my schooling by distance education. I wouldn’t have done it...[education] to rural communities is so important.” Ruth agreed:

they gradually went into the v[ideo] classes, and I still don't know why they went that direction, especially with the courses that they were, they were doing over v-class ... I [took] pure math ... it didn't work for me because of the v[ideo] classes... that's one of those higher classes that ... requires instruction in person.

Many participants benefited from in-person instructional support through local faculty or other community-based support staff, such as Instructional Assistants or Student Services Staff available at community-based learning sites.

Student Funding

The ability to fund their education was a concern voiced by most participants. In this study, seven of the eight participants were non-status and did not have band or federal funding access. In addition, four of eight participants began their post-secondary journey while supporting dependent children; balancing the financial responsibilities with their education was a concern. Family responsibilities also influenced whether students

attended school part-time or full-time and identified part-time study as a barrier to financial aid.

Joseph shared that maintaining full-time student status was a factor in how much funding he could receive because it affected his eligibility for grants and scholarships. His program advisor was instrumental in helping him identify classes he could take by distance to maintain full-time student status. Many students prefer to attend part-time as a strategy to increase post-secondary success; however, this impacts loans, grants and scholarships and ultimately their ability to fund their education. Sophie discussed how part-time student status affected her funding, “I only started on a part-time basis because I was trying to ease into university ... there was also a bunch of personal stuff going on at the time that distracted me.” As someone who had been in the care of Children’s Services in Alberta, she was eligible for the Advancing Futures Program (<https://www.alberta.ca/advancing-futures-prospective-students.aspx>), which provided tuition and living expenses for post-secondary education. Sophie’s course load determined the amount of funding she would receive, and “because I was only part-time, I was only getting half of [the funding support].”

Several participants expressed uneasiness about accumulating debt, unsure if their investment in their education would translate into a good-paying job. Rachel left her program to take a job because “[it] became very clear to me prior to the course ending [that the program would not lead to employment] ... which made the decision to leave to go to a different job worth it.” Joseph explained, “the last thing I want to do is dig myself

into a hole. It is really important for me to finish without debt, in case anything would happen to me.” Sophie shared:

throughout the entire time I was working, you know, part-time or full-time, different jobs, and a lot of that time I did get some random supports from other places, but mostly it was out of pocket to pay for [post-secondary courses] ...when you're working full time it's really challenging to take more than three courses at a time.

Even if students are willing to take out a loan, they often have concerns about repaying the loans, especially if they do not complete their program and find employment. In addition, delinquent student loans can follow someone for a lifetime and interfere with future program funding. Grace explains how an outstanding student loan, taken when she was younger, prevents her from pursuing her current education goals:

I'm non-status; where am I going to get that money to pay for my courses? That's the other thing that always stops me from trying to pursue anything...because I still owe my old student loan, I'm still behind owing on that, and that's the other reason that's why I don't go ahead and try to enroll in anything is because I still gotta pay that out.

For Ruth, funding became an issue when she moved to post-secondary programming following academic upgrading. She stated that:

[Funding] was never an issue with me upgrading because I was getting [provincial grant] funding...it was when I started trying to get into post-secondary. That's

when it started being an issue. I was a non-status, so I didn't belong to a band and back then, the government didn't have monies for Indigenous learners... it's expensive to go back to post-secondary ... trying to support your family and going to school.

Sophie spoke of her frustration with Indspire, an Indigenous registered charity that provides funding for Indigenous students. Indspire had previously funded her as a non-status student but denied subsequent applications because her Indigenous community was not “recognized” by the funder. Sophie discussed that:

For a person...to be so bold, to approach, and try and figure it out, not everybody's going to do that. As soon as [the funder] closes the door on you, a lot of people just walk away.

In Hinton and Grande Cache, where most Indigenous people are non-status, accessing funding was reported as a significant barrier. Additionally, limited access to employment and an aversion to debt makes student loans an unattractive option. I spoke to the Manager of Student Awards and Financial Aid at the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology to better understand Indigenous student funding. She shared that “there are many misconceptions about Indigenous student financing options and policies. Programs are constantly changing, and without access to student finance advisors, many individuals are basing decisions on old and outdated information” (S. Hamilton, personal communication, April 23, 2021).

Knowing how and where to access funding for education is important for students. For example, loans may not be viable for some because of credit issues or concerns repaying debt because of limited employment opportunities. In addition, accessing grants and scholarships can be more challenging for non-status students who have to “prove” their indigeneity.

Institutional Factors

Institutional factors were those categorized as being under the direct influence of post-secondary institutions, at least to some extent. The participants interviewed shared that post-secondary institutions are complex, foreign, and often challenging to navigate. For example, Cheryl said, “I felt like a fish out of water when I walked into those doors.” Participants spoke about institutional factors that affected their educational outcomes, from choosing an institution and program to interacting with faculty and support staff. Table 4 provides a summary of institutional themes and key concepts that emerged from participants' stories.

Table 4

Summary of Findings: Institutional Themes and Key Concepts

Themes	Key Concepts that Emerged
Institutional Factors	
Navigating a Complex Landscape	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • post-secondary systems and processes are challenging for most, and without supports, it can be overwhelming to navigate • admission requirements are unclear, and concerns exist that lack of a high school diploma will block admission • high school staff and teachers are an important source of information for recent high school graduates • there is a lack of career, program and student aid advising for mature students who are unfamiliar with the post-secondary system or how to connect with institutional supports
Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • positive and negative experiences with peers, faculty and staff impact students

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • participants found faculty who were flexible and helped them overcome barriers improved their post-secondary persistence • relationships with classmates, when they exist, help students feel connected • without relationships with post-secondary peers, faculty and staff, there is a disconnection that influences persistence
Access to Programming and Delivery Method	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • access to community-based on online programming is important (as demonstrated by participants in our region pursuing post-secondary) • one participant noted the importance of scheduled assignments and deadlines for completing coursework • technology issues and internet access is a concern for online program delivery
Indigenous Programming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • most students wished to use their education to benefit their Indigenous community • Indigenous content and teaching methods encourage students' connection to post-secondary learning • participants appreciate being able to tailor their course content to incorporate an Indigenous focus

Navigating a Complex Landscape

Many in this study were the first to attend post-secondary in their family. Ruth confided that “when I think of university, I think, oh my god, you know, like, oh my god, this is too much, right!” Every participant in this study accessed college programming delivered in their home community at some point in their post-secondary journey. For many, identifying available education options is an essential first step. Alice, who completed a BA, was not confident that post-secondary education was “in the cards” for her:

When I applied [at the Hinton Learning Site], I honestly was like, ‘I’ll never get it in, I don’t even have my grade 12’ ...I thought it was like this pie in the sky. I was doing it because everyone was bugging me to get more education. I was like, ‘I’ll never get in anyways; I don’t understand what the big deal is.’

Many Indigenous students do not have friends and family with post-secondary experience to reach out to for guidance and encouragement. Cheryl explained, “I kind of got guided into [post-secondary] from the guidance counsellors at [high] school, from my teachers, and being, like, one of the first people in my family to graduate, and even have the marks to be accepted in post-secondary.”

Once accepted into an institution, additional support is critical for students to choose the right programs, courses, and funding options. Sophie received a university acceptance, but “I had no idea what I wanted to do.” Student funding is an integral part of the discussion. Joseph’s program advisor told him that “we have a whole dedicated financial aid department. They will keep in touch with you; they’ll tell you when you can apply for [funding], and ... if you have any questions, they’ll help you.” As a result, Joseph was able to access financial services and support. Although there were systemic funding issues (the need for full-time student status), the program advisor provided *workaround* solutions by identifying additional online to achieve full-time student status.

Understanding the many and varied educational pathways can be challenging and confusing. For example, Rachel explained how she took a funded training program that did not lead to a recognized credential:

that course was made because there was a gap in services in Hinton at that time ... it was kind of a grassroots, Hinton, sort of program. I am not so sure that program would have resulted in me getting any jobs after that...but for me, it was wonderful.

The post-secondary education system is incredibly complex and foreign to many new students. Many Indigenous students are the first in their family or community to attend higher education and often do not have personal support. Participants indicated that challenges accessing help at all stages of their learning journey were a concern. They also told me that having student service supports in their home community was helpful and often instrumental for accessing post-secondary programming.

Relationships

Post-secondary faculty, staff and classmates play a critical role in Indigenous students' connection to post-secondary learning. For example, Joseph shared that “if I ever had any questions, [his program advisor] would either answer them right there, or she would send me to somebody who could.” Alice shared how a faculty member helped her find her academic path “he was like ‘you should be an English major... you can *write, like you can write!*’ ...so I flipped to an English major because of him.”

Indigenous students often have limited financial resources; paying for computers, internet access, printing, photocopying, etc., can add to economic challenges. Relationship with Indigenous Student Services, faculty members and peers can assist by providing access to resources. Cheryl spoke of the support she received from the Native Studies faculty at her institution to access computers and the internet to complete assignments and described it as “very helpful.”

Relationships with faculty impact persistence. Rachel explained how one instructor allowed her to tailor her political science assignments, critical to her program completion. She explained that she could get high marks on her assignments because the

topics interested her. Rachel shared, “I got the highest marks I possibly could, [in] the high 90s. I focused on Indigenous government and all these different kinds of things.” She divulged that if the instructor had been rigid and not allowed her the flexibility to tailor her assignments, she might have failed that course and not completed her program.

Some participants were frustrated by faculty and staff that were rigid. Ruth shared her frustration with one faculty member “[the instructor] had [course programming and curriculum] set in [their] mind, right, and rolled with it, but never took the time to ask us if it was okay... he never listened.” Other participants spoke positively of the support received from Learning Site staff. Joseph reflected:

It was really nice to have [a Program Advisor] there because she would check in with me on a regular basis. She would meet with me in person when travelling was good to do, and if she couldn't travel, she would send an email, or she would call.

Joseph also spoke of the flexibility of his instructors:

There were a number of deaths in our community ... I'm really connected to everybody here, and so for me, attending the wakes, attending the funerals, being there to help out in whatever way I could was important to me. So, I would email my instructors... and they were really understanding...and they said, ‘look at the PowerPoint before next class and if you have any questions, let me know.’

Attending ceremonies, such as wakes, is vital for their spiritual wellbeing and the wellbeing of their communities. Attendance policies that do not embrace and accommodate the social and spiritual needs of the people they serve are barriers.

Peer and staff support also influences students' post-secondary experiences. For instance, Joseph continued, "I didn't just get the support from the employees or the instructors; I got support from the other students." He went on to say, "I had classmates that supported me...they would take me out and walk me [during a video call] around the college, and they kind of gave me a little tour that way and, you know, I got to be a part of stuff.

Joseph's comments above highlight the importance of good relationships in a learning environment; however, not all the relationship experiences were positive. Sophia shared a sense of disconnection from other students:

My experience personally was a lot of people congregated ... in their racial groups, like you know, for lack of better words ... it kind of just naturally happened like that and because there wasn't a lot of Indigenous students on-site, I kind of was like 'Where's my group?' 'Where do I go?' I know that there was an Indigenous Center, but at that time, when I went, there weren't many Indigenous students my age. There was a lot of that had gone back to school, that was quite a bit older than me, but the ones that would make it to [university] straight out of high school, there was not a lot.

Cheryl shared a similar experience:

I did not even engage with people at the school... there was not very many Indigenous people at my school...when I was at [university], there was maybe five of us that would show up to the Indigenous stuff...there was not a single Indigenous person in any of my classes...so I didn't make any friends, I didn't care to.

Joseph identified the challenge of being the only online student when the rest of the class was together. He appreciated the one time he had a classmate share his classroom space and recollected:

It happened once a week for six weeks. We could do, you know, those little activities with each other. It was nice to have somebody there too, kind of, you know, bounce ideas back and forth to each other, and interact with somebody who was, you know, doing the same thing, and it was nice.

Joseph discussed his ability to persist in the online environment and attributed part of his success to being introverted:

I think, you know, if you're a person that is an extrovert, you get your energy by being around all kinds of people, you're going to have a hard time with doing stuff at a distance. For me, I'm kind of; I can be a little bit of both, but, you know, because of the way that I think pulled myself away to be, you know, more involved with the culture, you know, [being an] introvert is the way to go. So, I had no problem being on my own...who gets the energy from being around everybody else; they would have a hard time.

Joseph's comment highlighted that learners come to post-secondary programming with a wide range of learning preferences and experiences that influence their success and persistence.

Most participants' comments on programming focused on rural and regional access to programming. While some voiced challenges, many said that online programming allowed them to balance their family commitments while pursuing post-secondary education. Sophia credited her success in a diploma program to online delivery, 'it was a completely distance program, so I was able to do that one start to finish.'

However, other factors, such as the course structure, impact persistence in distance education programs. Sophia described a personal barrier experienced in another distance program:

I applied to Athabasca University for my degree in Management, and that would have been in Indigenous Organizations and Nations. That program really appealed to me because you know I always feel I'm going to be working with, and for, you know, Indigenous communities, Indigenous Peoples, that's where my passion is, it's where I feel I relate the most. However, when I started that degree, I felt that Athabasca University just wasn't a good fit for me. I'm a person that requires deadlines, and they just give you six months to do it, and because I have a bad habit of procrastinating ... [I] got to the point where I wasn't able to do everything, I needed to do, to finish the course in time. So, then I looked for another program.

Grace discussed her plans for post-secondary “there's a program in Edmonton that I'm hoping I will be able to do online, and it's the Indigenous Social Work program.” She explained that online delivery was the only option that worked for her.

Participants shared the benefits and challenges of online learning. Delivering courses online is a mode that allows students to stay in their home community while accessing post-secondary programming. Grace indicated that “I think it was a little tougher [online] because [the instructor] wasn't there in person, and you couldn't really connect with what she was trying to do or to ask for help.” In addition, technical issues can interfere with online learning. For example, Joseph spoke of internet instability that occasionally hampered connecting to his online classes, “when the weather was off a little bit or, you know, the audio would cut out, the video would freeze sometimes.” Being physically separated from the instructor and classmates was also challenging. Joseph said that being the only distance student in an otherwise face-to-face class was hard “they would kind of forget I was there, so there were times when instructors forgot to...connect [online].” Joseph implied that remote learning was the only option for him when he discussed plans to go back to school, “I just don't know what I would go back for ... I imagine that you know, everybody's kind of gotten a distance thing somewhat figured out now, so I'm sure there are more options.”

Indigenous Programming

For some participants, having a link to Indigenous culture in the curriculum or pedagogical approach was vital. For example, Ruth spoke of the importance of culture in the program she recently applied for, “the program that I do hope I get accepted for, it's

Indigenous-based, so [it will have] a lot of cultural components in it.” Rachel remembered fondly a program instructor who “came out to teach us cultural teachings, like Indigenous cultural teachings, and she was incredible... it wasn’t specific to cultural awareness ... it was really personal, intense work.”

Some participants shared ways in which Western teaching styles differed from how learning happens traditionally. James, a self-professed hands-on learner, talked about his frustration with academic upgrading “it was all math, English, science, social studies... it was all academics...there was no options, there was no other things.” James shared how experiential learning was more meaningful and effective for him, “I liked hands-on stuff...most of the stuff I read, I don't remember anyway... but, when I do it ... how my dad taught me, he taught me how to do mechanics... I did it hands-on, so I learned it.”

Sophia described how the relationship between learning and deadlines is different between Indigenous and Western pedagogy and how it impacts learning:

If we just took our time, put the teepee up, and it was up when it's up. All that teaching happens in between; that’s the stuff that really sticks. So that's where, like, that real difference happens, is where it's like we're forced to try and learn so much within this short period of time, and then we get tested on it. It's terrifying.

Ruth shared her relationship with Indigenous teachings:

In my culture, in my tradition, it's not good to ask questions. I mean, you can ask the basic questions, but sometimes it's just not good to ask questions because

you'll get that teaching later, and if you pick it up, and it stays with you, then it's meant to be yours.

Sophia also shared that:

There have also been different Indigenous stories that I've read, where every time I read them, I've taken something different from it, and that's just a part of our culture. You don't go to school for four years, and suddenly you know everything, you know, learning is a lifelong journey.

Sophia explained the interconnection between all things that underpins her Indigenous worldview:

There's nothing more powerful than Mother Nature. As humans, we can't overcome her, you know, we keep building cities, but if we left those cities alone, the trees would overtake it, you know, the weather would overrun it, and by understanding that we have to understand there's *a respect* involved when it comes into our interactions with nature... and everything is connected, you know, everything will affect one thing... Natural Law is the laws that are set for us in this world, based off Mother Nature and that relationship. That's why consultation is so important because our teachings come from that relationship with Mother Earth...we need to understand the impact, and what's the best way we can go to have a respectful relationship, moving forward, with everything that we're impacting, not just to benefit humans. Indigenous people struggle with this, especially as we move into a more Westernized way.

Rachel discussed how she tailored her assignments to include Indigenous content to make it more meaningful when the Indigenous Social work program was not offered at the regional learning site:

I tried my hardest to pay attention in that class, it was political science... I've never been a person to pay attention to politics ... so I focused all of my social work on my own Aboriginal studies anyway.

Rachel provided an example of how instructors and students can collaborate to make course material meaningful based on their interests. In Rachel's class, she tailored her political science class to study Indigenous political structures so that the learning was relevant to her.

Societal Factors

I used Critical Race Theory to underpin my research design; therefore, it is important to examine the role that race and racism have on Indigenous student persistence in higher education and if it impacted their learning journey. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (2015) Calls to Action and the 2019 National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (NIMMIWG) are two glaring examples that mainstream Canadian society has a great deal of work to do to reconcile with Indigenous Peoples. Participants in this study shared how colonization and assimilation policies continue to affect their daily life. For example, Cheryl summarized, "Being Indigenous is beautiful and worthy, but being an Indigenous person in a non-Indigenous world is hard." Table 5 summarizes societal themes and key concepts that emerged from participants' stories about societal factors.

Table 5*Summary of Findings: Societal Themes and Key Concepts*

Themes	Key Concepts that Emerged
Societal Factors	
Colonization and Assimilation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the effects of colonization and assimilation continue to impact Indigenous post-secondary student persistence • some participants feel shame and embarrassment to be Indigenous because of the way society and history lessons portray Indigenous people • assimilation policies and IRS continue to influence the value Indigenous people place on educational attainment; many participants express that they did not see improved employability or income from post-secondary education
Indigenous Communities Are Diverse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the unique needs of Indigenous communities need to be explored by the post-secondary institutions to tailor programs and delivery methods to align with community needs
Culture and its Role in Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • understanding local history is important • many Indigenous families in our region came here fleeing IRS and the Reserve system resulting in powerful ties to culture and lack of Indian Status • without connection to culture, Indigenous people can feel lost or disconnected from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous society • students will have vast differences in their relationship to their Indigenous culture
Change is Happening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • currently, there is an increase in high school graduation and post-secondary transition rates • support for post-secondary Indigenous students is urgent

Colonization and Assimilation

Colonization continues to impact many Indigenous post-secondary students' educational experiences. Participants in this study expressed the ongoing and adverse effects of colonization in their stories and how it has negatively affected how they, those around them, and dominant society preserved their indigeneity. Ruth explained her experience in elementary school and learning about worldwide colonization has affected her:

How they portrayed us in school...that was really hurtful ... when I would hear about what our people had done... I was embarrassed to be a Native. I didn't know we were that 'savagery' ... I had no idea we were even like that... [then I started reading and discovered that colonization] happened everywhere...it happened all over the world and ... I had no idea until I started reading.

James spoke of his father's experience, where the nearby IRS did not close until 1988, "My Dad lived through [IRS], my dad quit school when he ... [finished] grade six... he worked ever since. He never went back to school." Although James did not complete high school, he proudly shares that all his children have graduated:

We [his generation] were all pretty bad...drugs and drinking was the thing in my family... and going to jail, a lot of people didn't learn...my kids don't drink or do drugs, that's why they all finished school.

Rachel also spoke of the trauma IRS had on her father's family:

Dad's family was very poor and very large...none of that generation graduated high school. [They] ran from Saskatchewan to somewhere between Robb and Edson [other towns in west-central Alberta near Hinton] when they were little to escape the kids being taken to IRS. Grandma called it "welfare coming to take her kids." My grandmother feared authority and institutions because of [fear of them] "taking her kids."

Rachel continued:

For lots of people, there's not value in education...depending on how old you are, or when this happened, or when you came, or what circumstances are...there's lots of value in employment and getting out and being an adult, I guess, and some people don't see education as that ... link, and there's lots of Indigenous families that don't.

Alice echoed a similar thought, “I didn't go back to the Western school system [for a long time] because I just didn't think it had any benefit to me.” There has to be a tangible benefit for students to pursue higher education, and for many Indigenous people, this pragmatism was a theme that echoed through all the participants' stories.

Each Community has a Unique History

Over 600 unique First Nations in Canada speak 70 different languages (Statistics Canada, 2017b), and each community has a unique history, culture, and connection to traditional lifestyles that are constantly evolving. For example, Joseph shared the rapid change from the traditional lifestyle in Grande Cache over the last 50 years:

Fast forward a little bit when there was the first phase of town being built [in 1969], you know, people went from living off the land where you're hunting to get the food, to get the clothes, you know, living off the land. Now, all of a sudden, you need money; the animals aren't around anymore, and there's a grocery store.

He goes on to further explain the history of his community and how this history helped to preserve his Indigenous culture:

That's kind of part of the unique thing about our history is that, you know, that we were missed [were able to maintain their Indigenous culture] this way... I remember asking my grandma about it, there's a place far in the mountains that they used to go to do ceremony, to tan hides, there's a place over there, and that's where they had to go to do this stuff in secret ... I often hear that they went underground with their ceremony... I asked about it one time with my grandma, and she said, and I quote, "You know, we were told we were never allowed to talk about it," and that's all she said... I could tell I had plucked a really sensitive string there, right. So, I don't know what exactly happened in those days... when I meet other people from other communities now, they say, "holy man, like, you guys still have a lot here!" Yeah, we still have people who know how to tan hides; we still have people who are fluent in Cree.

While there are many similarities between Indigenous communities, there are also many differences. Additionally, each community evolves with time and circumstances; therefore, creating and maintaining relationships with the Indigenous communities is critical to understanding their *current* needs.

Culture and its Role in Education

Rachel and Cheryl both shared that many Indigenous families fled this region to flee IRS and reserves. Due to this unique history of Indigenous people in our area, many families have held tightly to their traditional culture and ceremonies. However, racism and negative stereotypes still affect them. Sophia explained:

As Indigenous people, especially like the generation that my mom and my kokum grew up in here, and being treated, as they were, and being called things like, you know, “a dirty Indian” or “a savage.” You want to fit in, and you want to belong in society, and in order to do that, there's this idea that we have to become like white people ... I wasn't given my language or wasn't taught my language, because there was the belief that it wasn't needed for me to know. It was more important for me to do well in English because then I would do better ... life wouldn't be as hard as it was for them. And now the script has flipped, and it's like, *we need to hold on to our languages*... But this idea that being rich, having a lot of money, living, you know, this different way of life that isn't inherently ours, that was like the goal. But the more that ... they tried to achieve it, the further away it took us from ourselves, and the more lost we became. And now, like with me and my generation, I'm working to reverse all of that, you know, to get all of that back, to go back to ceremony, to practice my language, to hold on to these teachings, because they're getting lost. A lot of our Elders are passing away, and a lot of these teachings are going with them, and that's our way of life, and the more lost we become, like in terms of not having a sense of belonging or identity, the harder it is to feel like you even belong on this planet.

The damaging effects of assimilation policies continue to be evident. Sophia shared her goal to learn and embrace her Indigenous culture and how necessary this cultural knowledge is for her to position herself within Canadian society. Education that includes the history of colonization and assimilation in Canada provides insight for Indigenous

and non-Indigenous Canadians alike and helps to provide context for contemporary issues facing Indigenous people. Participants in this study valued formal education and are proud when their children achieve academically.

Rachel explained how each generation is achieving higher levels of formal education:

I am proud to say that all four of my kids graduated [high school], not without difficulty. We have the opportunity to change through the generations, and hopefully, it makes a difference to future generations... all of my kids have seen me go to school, right. Both [my son] and I graduated last year ...he [said] watching you do your stuff made me want to try hard at my stuff.

Joseph explained how his parents' participation in traditional Indigenous culture helped shape his life and decision to live a healthy lifestyle. Joseph speaks proudly of his parents and grandparents being sober, hardworking, engaged in traditional culture, respected, and always caring for others in their community. He shared how his connection with culture kept him from using drugs and alcohol:

I started a lot earlier than other people would getting involved with the culture. I started at seven years old, that was when I had learned how to smudge... there's a number of protocols with smudging, and one of the things that I was taught was, "If you want to do this, you need to stay away from drugs and alcohol." And at seven years old that's not a problem, because nobody's doing it. My dad said, "You know, you better make sure this is what you want, you're making a commitment here." I said, "I'm in, I'm gonna do it!" So he said, "I'm gonna give

you some time, make sure it's what you want.” I thought about it for about three weeks or so and said, “Okay, well, I'm still gonna do it.” ... as I started getting older, I started to see some of my friends, they were starting to experiment with [drugs and alcohol], and I thought, “Oh geez, well, if they're doing this, I can't hang out with them anymore.” I pulled myself away from a lot of people, you know, that way.

James shared how he wishes he would have chosen a different path when he was young:

I've had a lot of medicines, like, my grandmother used to do that... I wish I really paid attention when I was young, instead of getting high and drinking and partying and running with the gang life all the time, in jail and everything. Like, she [was] trying to teach me some stuff that I should have learned, but I didn't.

James credits his wife and her connection to Indigenous culture with his following a healthier path, “My wife is what helped me stop everything. Before her, I didn't know much about my culture and everything, like it was always there right, my grandma... would try to teach me, but I always wanted to get high.” Grace explains her reasons for wanting to pursue an Indigenous social work program that infuses Indigenous culture into its practice:

I really want to help the youth because I find it's the youth that are in critical stages now because they're the ones that are going to be leading the future. But you have so many youth that are so lost and I really want to help them...to understand.

Connecting to Indigenous culture teachings supported many of the participants in this study on their educational journey.

Change is Happening

The drive towards Indigenous educational achievement to break down socioeconomic barriers is growing, and many are anxious to see progress for future generations. Cheryl commented on the improvement to high-school graduation and post-secondary transition rates, “I do see in some of our kids ... are going on to post-secondary.” Ruth shared:

I look to the future now, right, and I want my grandkids to walk and be successful ... we need that support, and we need it now ... we were told, like, to be quiet, stay quiet. We've been told that for what seems to be centuries, right, but now there's a shift; change is happening.

This study explored the lived experience of eight Indigenous post-secondary students who discontinued their studies, temporarily or permanently, using narrative inquiry to collect counter-stories to examine factors that positively and negatively influence their post-secondary experience and journey; and as articulated in this chapter, inductive analysis of conversation transcripts produced insight into barriers to persistence. Many of the obstacles shared in their stories are the same as those identified by other researchers. However, there were a few notable differences, such as asking for help, funding for non-status learners and the desire to remain in their home community, that I will discuss in the Interpretation of Findings.

Chapter 5 - Interpretation of Findings

Emerging Themes

In the previous chapter I shared excerpts from the participants stories that exemplified concepts that surfaced from our conversations that I sorted into categories based on spheres of influence: individual, institutional and societal. In this chapter I tease these apart and discuss them as themes that emerged from the data that influenced the participants persistence in higher education.

Difficulty Asking for Help

Some participants shared that they had difficulty or had to overcome their resistance to asking questions or asking for help. Ruth shared that:

in my culture, in my tradition ... it's not ... it's not good to ask questions. I mean you can ask the basic questions, but sometimes it's just not good to ask questions because you'll get that teaching later, and if you pick it up, and it stays with you... then it's meant to be yours

A recent study by Walton et al. (2020) shared that for some Indigenous students, “approaching faculty went against cultural teachings about not asking for help” (p. 451).

Walton et al. noted that:

one female interviewee said that as a child, she was taught to watch and listen and do the best she could. She explained, “I was raised up believing that you don’t ask for help, you do it yourself, to the best of your ability” (Interviewee C), which runs counter to universities expecting students to ask for help when they need it (p. 441).

Participants also shared how their life experiences impacted their ability to ask for help. For example, the damaging and lingering history of education and its role in assimilation has left a legacy of fear and mistrust of government and social institutions for most Indigenous people. Ruth observed:

we just don't ask questions, right, we don't ask too much questions ... we don't really ask for help ... We wouldn't talk about [IRS]. We would just leave it at that and be done and shoved under the rug...it's called intergenerational trauma.

IRS has left a lasting legacy of Indigenous people who equate schooling with assimilation and racism that affects subsequent generations. Milne and Wotherspoon (2020) argued that this ongoing fear and mistrust interferes with many students' ability to ask for help. The legacy of IRS, the Sixties Scoop, and persistent over-representation of Indigenous children in the child welfare system (The Office of the Child and Youth Advocate Alberta, 2016, as cited by Milne & Wotherspoon, 2020) and this mistrust of institutions continue to mar the relationship between Indigenous people and education. Such intergenerational trauma and fear may result in extreme self-reliance. In the complex post-secondary landscape, asking for help from instructors, student support services, and peers is critical for success. Sophia confirmed, “you have to reach out to them because you can't ever expect them to reach out to you because there's fear instilled in every one of us.”

In summary, public education in Canada has separated Indigenous children from their families, contributing to fear and mistrust of educational institutions. Asking for help from educators may be difficult if previous life experiences reinforce fear and

suspicion. Developing systems that result in good relationships between Indigenous students and Indigenous Support Services during recruitment and throughout their academic journey is a strategy that will increase Indigenous student persistence.

Funding for Non-status Indigenous Students

Funding Indigenous education is not a new or surprising theme; however, the extent to which it affects Hinton and Grande Cache students was a central finding of this study. Seven of the eight participants identified themselves as Non-Status Indigenous students, which means they do not fit the definition of Status Indian as outlined in the Indian Act and do not receive federal funding through bands or reserves for post-secondary education. Status Indian is a legal term used and defined in the Indian Act as First Nations person registered and entitled to receive benefits under the Indian Act. However, according to the Indian Act, the Canadian government has a fiduciary responsibility to fund education, as agreed upon in treaties, for Status Indians, although the discussion continues as to whether this responsibility extends to financing post-secondary education (Paquette & Fallon, 2014).

Many Indigenous people came to this region to escape IRS and the reservation system; they do not belong to bands or live on reserves. Additionally, other Indigenous people in the Hinton and Grande Cache are Métis or women who lost treaty status through marriage with a non-status man. Non-status Indigenous and Métis students do not receive special funding through provincial or federal student aid (S. Hamilton, personal communication April 23, 2021). However, students who do possess Indian Status also experience challenges funding post-secondary education. Paquette and Fallon

(2014) explained that the federal government does not recognize post-secondary education as a treaty right but as a social policy, vulnerable to change. Sophie stressed that “as soon as [the funder] closes the door on you, a lot of people just walk away.” Thus, lack of or restrictions to funding is a barrier for both status and non-status students. Identifying funding barriers specific to Indigenous students may provide post-secondary institutions insight into funding channels available to them.

An aversion to debt, noted by participants in this study, was also mentioned by other researchers (Tomaszewski et al., 2011), limiting financing options. Other participants discussed difficulty paying back students loans, especially if their education did not lead to higher-paying employment. Walton et al. (2020) argued that:

Financial challenges were mentioned repeatedly by Indigenous students as their greatest source of stress and were sufficient reason for students to leave the university. The intersecting factors of financial challenges (funding issues with their Indigenous community, childcare, housing) and having family supports far away were problematic, especially for single parents, most of whom were female.

Participants in this study provided a deeper, richer picture of financial barriers experienced by Indigenous students. Such challenges contributed to many of the students in this study leaving post-secondary programming.

Desire to Remain in Home Community

Three participants in this study who attended post-secondary programming in Edmonton, rather than locally, identified that being away from friends, family, and peers

contributed to their decision to leave school. The third participant also experienced difficulty being away from home but was able to persist. Culture shock is a significant factor in Indigenous student persistence, especially for younger students or those coming from rural or remote communities (Black & Hachkowski, 2019). Yeo et al. (2019) shared one of their participant's perspectives:

Having a safe space where we can talk about these things, especially when you are talking about Indigenous issues and we all have our preconceived notions, we all have our base understandings, but some of these issues are really challenging, and to be able to say something out loud that you know people aren't going to jump all over you and freak out, I think was really helpful.

Participants in this study indicated that being away from their home community, family, culture, and personal support system was a barrier to persistence. Cheryl shared her dislike for being away from home, "coming from a big family, right? I have, like, hundreds of cousins just in town and a huge family where you're never alone. Then you go to [to a city], and you're all by yourself." Learning to navigate a new community, a new culture, and an unfamiliar and complex education landscape can be difficult. It can be even more challenging for someone alone and not comfortable asking for help. Sophia also shared a similar sentiment, "even though I'm very sort of independent in the sense that I get things done for myself, my family has always been there, by my side...we all took care of each other." Finally, Rachel argued, "distance ed[ucation] to rural communities is so important...number of graduates cannot be the way you define success." Online course and program delivery options continue to increase, but having a

learning site and staff in their community opened the doors to higher education for many of this study's participants.

Participants indicated that they were more vulnerable to microaggressions when away from their home community and personal support system, which reduced their feeling of personal and cultural safety. Several participants expressed reluctance to leave their home community and would only take programming if available by distance. They highlighted many reasons for this, including family support, financial barriers, and personal and cultural safety concerns. Conversely, Walton et al. (2020) argued that the data examined in their study showed no relationship between home location and Indigenous student persistence. However, in Walton et al. (2020), data collected from student records "ran counter to the stories [they] heard from Indigenous students, many of whom spoke about the challenges related to moving from a small Indigenous reserve to a large university in an urban centre" (p. 445). Most study participants preferred programming delivered locally (either face to face or online) because they did not want to move to another centre. Additionally, students benefited when student support services were available in their home community as a starting point to access information about post-secondary programs available.

Access to a Community College learning site that provided services, programming and supports enabled persistence for Indigenous learners in this study. Pidgeon (2008) argued that "college is seen as a less threatening environment than university and often geographically closer to students home communities" (p. 345). Fahy et al. (2009) concluded that, for residents in four northern Alberta Indigenous

communities, “access is the pivotal issue...leaving the local community to attend training programs elsewhere is often disruptive and unsuccessful” (p.1). Leaving families, jobs and the familiarity of their home community can be a significant barrier for many Indigenous post-secondary learners (Tomaszewski et al., 2011).

The shift to online learning in the wake of the Covid-19 global pandemic in March 2020 may have improved post-secondary accessibility for rural and remote Indigenous learners where the internet was already accessible. However, participants shared that internet service has been limited and often inadequate in the Grande Cache region.

Participants in this study preferred online learning opportunities because they allowed them to stay in their home community while taking post-secondary programming. For example, Joseph took all his courses online and benefited from a community-based learning site where he could attend his online classes and access academic and financial advising and technology support services. Walton, Byrne, et al. (2020) noted limited research on online Indigenous student post-secondary persistence. Although courses and programs are more available to regional and remote learners, they still require student support services. Post-secondary institutional leaders need systems to ensure Indigenous rural and remote learners are aware of the programming and support. As noted by participants in this study, often, it is not easy to take the first step into the complex landscape of higher education without face-to-face support from someone in their community.

Summary of Recommendations

In reviewing the findings, a range of recommendations emerged for post-secondary institutions from stories shared by participants in this study. The following outlines a summary of the most salient recommendations:

1. Participants indicated the importance of the initial connection *in person* from an Indigenous peer, staff, or faculty; sending an email invitation is inadequate. Developing systems that result in good relationships between Indigenous students and Indigenous Support Services during recruitment and early in their first term is a strategy that may lead to increased Indigenous student enrolment and persistence.
2. Funding continues to be a barrier to post-secondary education for Indigenous students. Postsecondary institutions, funding bodies and Indigenous stakeholders must explore the impact of full-time versus part-time student status on student persistence as it intersects with academic success and financial support. Some students are more academically successful with fewer courses to balance their time between school with other responsibilities in their life. However, part-time student status affects loans, scholarships and bursary eligibility and can impact funding. Examining course load requirements attached to funding may impact funding challenges for some students. Also, non-status Indigenous students are often barred from grants, scholarships, and bursaries for Indigenous students because they cannot “prove” their indigeneity. The need to prove “indigeneity” for post-secondary funding is a topic for further research and policy development.

To understand the unique financial barriers experienced by the students in your region, institutions must engage with current and former Indigenous students to understand their obstacles.

3. Additional research would provide insight into community-based learning sites' role for Indigenous student enrolment and persistence. For example, families and communities often provide significant cultural and personal supports; Indigenous people may find moving to a larger centre overwhelming and lonely. Additional access to community-based programming, especially for new students, can help them get accustomed to post-secondary education before leaving their home community's safety and security. In addition, student support services are critical to first-generation post-secondary learners who may not have family or friends with post-secondary experience to help them.
4. Developing Indigenous-specific cultural leave policies for Indigenous students supports continued cultural participation. For example, students from large families and closely connected communities may have significant community obligations for ceremonies and wakes. Understanding the cultural commitments through conversations with students, faculty, and staff can help identify gaps in policy.
5. Several of the participants recommended increasing the presence of Indigenous faculty and peers. Creating an optional Indigenous student cohort may improve Indigenous students' experience by helping build relationships and connections between Indigenous faculty and students. It may also allow for increased use of

Indigenous ways of knowing and learning in their programming and pedagogy.

Some institutions in Alberta already promote Indigenous cohorts, such as

MacEwan University's pimâcihisowin Foundation Program

(https://www.macewan.ca/wcm/MacEwanNews/STORY_PIMACIHISOWIN_19,

and University of Lethbridge's Indigenous Student Success Cohort

(<https://www.uleth.ca/artsci/indigenous-student-success-cohort/about>).

6. Increase understanding of the historic and ongoing effects of colonization and assimilation policies amongst faculty, staff, and students. Sharing the history of Indigenous Peoples' struggle to maintain their culture and traditions in a non-Indigenous world is essential for faculty, staff and students in higher education to help create cultural safety for Indigenous students in the classroom and on campus. Additionally, each community evolves with time and circumstances; therefore, it is critical to develop and maintain relationships with the Indigenous communities to understand their current needs. Indigenous students are not responsible for educating faculty, staff, and peers on colonization and reconciliation; this is an institutional responsibility that requires engagement and input from local Indigenous stakeholders. Postsecondary institutions are responsible for providing faculty, staff, and students with information about the harmful effects of colonization and assimilation policies on Indigenous Peoples to help promote cultural safety and respectful dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, staff and faculty.

Limitations and Strengths

Qualitative research, by design, allows the researcher to explore complex, multi-faceted phenomenon to provide insight into an issue or problem. In this study, eight participants provided insight into barriers and enablers to Indigenous post-secondary student persistence in two rural communities in west-central Alberta. Narrative inquiry methodology allowed the participants to share their post-secondary experiences when they left school before completion. The narrow focus of this study limits its generalizability, but storytelling provided more richness and depth of understanding of some students' experiences. However, the study results aligned closely with expected themes and contributed to understanding the lived experience of Indigenous post-secondary students in Canada.

It was critical to ensure that the themes that emerged from the conversations represented the participants' intended meaning. Therefore, I designed this study to provide participants several opportunities to engage to ensure the accuracy of concepts interpreted from their stories. As a result, seven of the eight participants reviewed the results and confirmed their accuracy. The final participant declined to review the results but provided consent to use their contribution.

Study Implications

The findings of this study provide additional insight into the lived experience of Indigenous post-secondary students that identify barriers and enablers experienced by the participants in this study. Leveraging existing community relationships to engage in narrative inquiry with Indigenous post-secondary students provided an effective method

for exploring barriers to persistence and is a methodology that post-secondary institutions could use to understand the unique needs of their Indigenous learners. This study adds to the body of knowledge of Indigenous post-secondary students' experience in higher education but is specific to communities and learners in this study.

Chapter 6 - Conclusion

Creating culturally safe places to engage with Indigenous students and stakeholders is vital to understanding their unique needs. Narrative Inquiry provided an effective tool for this researcher to understand local Indigenous learners' needs and challenges. This research included a small sample of Indigenous learners in west-central Alberta and is not generalizable; however, the findings from this study allowed for a richer and more complete picture of the post-secondary experiences for Indigenous students in Hinton and Grande Cache, Alberta. My comprehension of their unique lived experiences, barriers and needs deepened through this process. Additionally, my relationship with each participant has also grown and will continue and inform my decolonizing journey both personally and professionally.

Open dialogue to understand the unique needs of the Indigenous Peoples served by post-secondary institutions is critical. In this study, participants highlighted that access to community-based programs and services improved persistence because students could remain in their home community connected to their support system, culture and family obligations. The post-secondary education landscape is challenging to navigate for first-time students in general, and particularly for Indigenous Peoples, particularly if they do not have family or friends to guide them. Community-based post-secondary services helped improve access to post-secondary education for students in this study who were unfamiliar with programming and funding options. In addition, many post-secondary institutions are creating safe spaces for Indigenous learners that provide a home away from home. A few participants in this study attended school at a large urban campus.

Although these initiatives were not in place when they attended school, they indicated that increased access to Indigenous supports and services, faculty, staff, and peers would have positively impacted their post-secondary experience. However, many still feel disconnected as Indigenous people living in a non-Indigenous world.

Significant damage remains in the relationship between Indigenous Peoples and formal education, and there is still a long road ahead for reconciliation. There are no easy answers; however, some scholars suggest that the first steps in this healing journey are to create ethical spaces for dialogue and engagement with Indigenous students, staff, faculty, Elders and their Indigenous communities (Black & Hachkowski, 2019; Fitzgerald, 2006; Hogue, 2012; Gallop & Bastien, 2016; Greenwood et al., 2017; Preston, 2016; Yeo et al., 2019). Ethical space is a concept rather than a physical place; it is “a theoretical space between cultures and worldviews” (Ermine, 2007, p.1). Thus, people of different epistemologies (ways of knowing), ontologies (ways of being) and axiologies (ways of doing) can come together to establish common ground for discourse and action.

Much work remains to close the education attainment gap and the socioeconomic disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians. Decolonization is a complex and challenging problem steeped in disparaging cultural worldviews, underlying assumptions, beliefs and damaging history of colonization, assimilation, and racism. Many studies have expressed concerns about the oxymoronic concept of decolonizing a fundamentally colonial institution (Harris, 2002; Paquette & Fallon, 2014). This study used existing relationships to hold conversations about unique challenges facing Indigenous post-secondary students who leave. However, one fact is clear; reconciliation

is only possible with the input and direction from Indigenous people themselves; anything less is simply a reconstruction and continuation of colonialism.

Chapter 7 - Final Reflections

It was impossible for me to embark on a two-year experiential journey without it affecting me. At the beginning of the master's program, I wanted to explore the indigenization of higher education as a topic critical to higher education leaders serving rural and remote northern communities; what resulted changed me forever.

I come from an academic family. I am a third-generation university graduate on my mother's and second-generation on my father's side of the family. I also grew up with political, social, racial, educational and economic advantages; I knew what privilege felt like before I knew what it was. I also come from intergenerational parental loss, and this dichotomy of privilege and trauma created a tension that had threaded throughout my life. I understand the effects of trauma on myself and can recognize it in others. However, I know now that my race, class and socioeconomic status and healthy community buffered me from the severity of my trauma.

Cultural genocide and the trauma associated with it permeate the Indigenous worldview. I have worked with many Indigenous learners and clients throughout my career in foundational learner support and social services and heard many stories along the way. Some left me puzzled, not able to incorporate their reality into my understanding of the world. For example, until recently, I did not understand why a non-status Indigenous person living in Hinton would express that they felt they did not belong to any nation, Canada or First Nation. I heard a story from a woman who was sure her mother's death was suspicious and angry that police refused to investigate. I did not realize until recently that many of my Indigenous colleagues had a deep-seated and

visceral fear of losing their children. In every case, I heard their truth and believed them but did not have the historical context of Indigenous history of colonization and assimilation to frame my understanding. I was never taught about history from this perspective when I was in school.

As mentioned earlier, my immediate and extended family adhered closely to a Eurocentric worldview and ways of generating knowledge. I completed an undergraduate degree in analytical chemistry; when I started the master's program, I understood quantitative research, but I recall wondering how "qualitative research" was research. As I grew to understand the role of qualitative research in addressing why a phenomenon occurred, it resonated deeply with me. I recognized it as a way to explore tensions and questions I had about the indeterminate and relative nature of truth. Therefore, at the intersection of curiosity and circumstance, I decided to pursue research exploring the experiences of Indigenous post-secondary students.

To find out more about the lived experience of Indigenous students, I asked some of my Indigenous friends, colleagues and acquaintances to share their stories with me. Narrative inquiry proved to be an effective research methodology to understand the needs of Indigenous post-secondary students. I was drawn to Indigenous Research methodologies but was concerned, as a non-Indigenous researcher adopting storywork and using it as my research methodology would be a form of cultural appropriation. The research did not happen separately from my life; it was part of it. My learning and understanding were greatly enhanced and influenced by working at the Hinton Friendship Centre on a project helping parents and caregivers of Indigenous students navigate the

public school system. I was working for an Indigenous organization with Indigenous colleagues and assisting Indigenous clients. This experience provided me with a deeper, richer understanding of Indigenous education, and these new experiences layered on and expanded my worldview.

In preparation for my research, I spent a lot of time reviewing the history of colonization and assimilation in Canada. Kovach (2009) stressed that “going forward means looking back” (p. 76). Becoming familiar with Canadian history related to colonization was a critical component of my research journey and, sadly, I found my knowledge in this area to be lacking. However, learning about treaties, the Indian Act, assimilation policies and the role of Indian Residential School and the cultural genocide of Indigenous Peoples combined with my participants' stories to paint a picture that had a powerful and decolonizing impact. This process invited me to unearth unconscious bias, shed light on my Eurocentric assumptions and beliefs, understand a phenomenon from an alternative perspective.

This profoundly experiential research journey transformed not only how I see Canada's history but enriched my understanding of the unique challenges facing Indigenous students. Cheryl stated, “being Indigenous is beautiful and worthy, but being Indigenous in a non-Indigenous world is hard.” I no longer question why Indigenous parents may resist engaging with schools and their children's learning. For multiple generations before now, Indigenous parents were not allowed to educate their children. I no longer question why Indigenous Peoples see themselves as stewards of the land and protest industrial projects that damage the environment without considering long-lasting

effects. I have come to understand the uniquely vulnerable position of Indigenous women where race and gender intersect. I also understand that not every society adheres to the assumed superiority of a market-based economy; other ways of being in the world are different and equally valuable.

I have learned to recognize that there are many ways of "being" in the world. How we seek knowledge and understand truth is firmly rooted in our worldviews and our cultures' basic underlying assumptions and beliefs. I believe in many truths; I believe that all societies have strengths and weaknesses and that we have much to learn from each other when we listen. These beliefs were reinforced and expanded during this decolonizing journey. Additionally, I continue to learn how to be a better Indigenous ally and support culturally safe communication; my role is to raise Indigenous voices, open doors and walk beside Indigenous people, as a treaty partner, as they determine and control their future. In this way my research both influenced my personal growth as an Indigenous treaty partner and allowed me support and share new knowledge by gathering and sharing Indigenous students' thoughts, feelings and reflections about their post-secondary education experience in west-central Alberta.

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Appendix A - Narrative Conversation Script and Guiding Questions

Thank you for agreeing to talk to me today about your post-secondary experience. The goal of this conversation is for you to share your educational journey in as much depth as possible, sharing with me the aspects of your journey that were memorable, and impactful, as well as factors that lead to your discussion to quit school. Many people do not complete post-secondary, there is no judgement attached, the goal is to understand how factors influenced your decision and any thoughts you have now, looking back, on services and supports that may have been helpful to you at that time.

As a white researcher, I want to stress that I although I am not Indigenous I am empathetic to the issues of racism, both transactional and systemic, that still exist today and I want you to know that the experiences you share will be deeply valued and respected.

1. *Where are you from? (has you and your family resided in this area always or do you come from somewhere else)*
2. *Tell me about your experience as a post-secondary student.*

Prompts

- Tell me about your favourite or least favourite class or instructor.
- Tell me about the community where you attended post-secondary?
- Can you describe how the classes were delivered? (online, face to face, blended, other)
- Share with me some memories of your classmates.
- Tell me about how your family, and how they reacted to you going to school.

Tell me about how you decided to go to post-secondary.

3. *Tell me about what lead up to your decision to leave school?*

Prompts

- Prior to leaving school, was there any services, organizations or other, that helped you overcome your barriers?
- What can you see, looking back, that may have made a difference in your ability to continue?

4. *Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience?*

Appendix B - Template of Email Sent to Each Participant

Dear Participant:

I am honoured that you are sharing YOUR educational journey with me through a recorded conversation. To ensure accuracy, I ask every participant to review the conversation transcripts before I use them in the study. Currently, due to gathering restrictions to reduce the spread of COVID-19, all interviews will be held virtually using Zoom (the link is above).

Once you approve your transcripts, I will re-listen to each conversation to develop themes regarding the information shared. Themes cannot be pre-determined; it will emerge from the information you choose to share with me. Once again, I will ask you to meet with me to review the ideas and themes I have gathered from our conversation to ensure your experience is accurately reflected and honoured. Some of your experiences, ideas, and opinions will appear in the report itself; however, no personal information, such as your name or personally identifiable information, will be used to attribute those comments to you.

As soon as I have your transcripts ready, I will set up another meeting to review them. This should take 30 to 60 minutes to review and make any necessary changes.

Finally, after I have had time to reflect on our conversations, I will share with you the themes that emerge; this meeting is expected to take between 20 minutes and one hour.

While there is no expectation of risk to you, you are asked to point out immediately to the researcher if any questions or comments are making you uncomfortable.

The information you provide will be kept electronically in a secure, password-protected file. Once the interview information has been reviewed and approved by the participant, all personal information will be destroyed once the findings have been integrated into the main document.

As a token of appreciation for your participation in the study, you will be given a \$20 gift card for a local grocery store. Additionally, every time you meet with me, your name will be put into a draw for a new iPad, which has been generously donated. So, each time you meet with me, I will put another entry into the iPad draw for your initial conversation or review transcripts and findings.

Those who choose to participate may refuse to continue at any time with the study. There will be two opportunities to review your data before it is made anonymous and integrated into the overall study findings. If you choose to withdraw, your data will not be used in the analysis; however, once the data has been added to an anonymized and analyzed data set, it will be too difficult to remove.

At the start of the interview session, I will be sharing consent information orally. With your permission, this will be recorded along with the entire interview.

The following highlighted section is the consent information that I will share again with you at the start of our narrative interview session:

- some of your experiences, ideas, and opinions will appear in the report itself. However, no personal information, such as your name or personally identifiable information will be used to attribute those comments to you
- you can withdraw from the study at any point during the final thesis report preparation, and your information will not be used in the study. If you choose to withdraw, your data will not be used in the analysis; however, once the data has been anonymized and integrated into the thesis, it will be too difficult to remove it. You will be reminded periodically throughout the conversation, and anytime we meet to review transcripts and findings, of your right to withdraw from this study. Additionally, you will be asked if you wish to continue if you seem distressed or uncomfortable at any time during the interview or follow-up meetings.
- your information will be kept private and confidential both during the preparation of the thesis and afterwards. It will be saved in a password-protected file on my personal computer that only I have access to. If there are any, paper documents will be scanned and stored electronically, also in a password-protected file, and then shredded.
- the Zoom session may be recorded, and the data is stored in the USA. Data stored on servers in the USA may be subjected to examination by the US government under the USA Patriot Act. While this likelihood is small, I must let my participants know this is a possible risk.
- you will have the opportunity to read the transcripts of the interview and approve them before use in the study

- you will have the opportunity to review the information collected out of your interview to ensure it matches your intended meaning
- you can decline to answer any question and continue to participate
- will be provided with a referral to local Elders and counselling services, if this conversation results in the unearthing of difficult emotions or feelings that you feel you need support for.
- You will receive a written copy of this conversation.
- Do you have any questions about your consent to participate? At this point you will be asked to provide consent to continue our recorded conversation.

If you have any questions about this study, please my thesis supervisor contact:

Dr Kathleen Manion

Royal Roads University

If you have any questions regarding possible ethical issues, please contact:

Gina Armellino

Research Ethics Coordinator

Royal Roads University

If you have any questions, please give me a call. Thank you very much for your time, and I look forward to our conversation!

Donna Christensen

Appendix C - Consent to Participate in Study

At the start of the interview session, I will be sharing consent information orally. With the participants permission, this was recorded and included in the participants transcripts. Each participant was offered a copy of their conversation transcripts.

The following section is the informed consent information shared at the start of the session with each participant. It was read verbatim to ensure the consent information was identical to the emailed version.

- some of your experiences, ideas, and opinions will appear in the report itself. However, no personal information, such as your name or personally identifiable information will be used to attribute those comments to you
- you can withdraw from the study at any point during the final thesis report preparation, and your information will not be used in the study. If you choose to withdraw, your data will not be used in the analysis: however, once the data has been anonymized and integrated into the thesis, it will be too difficult to remove it. You will be reminded periodically throughout the conversation, and anytime we meet to review transcripts and findings, of your right to withdraw from this study. Additionally, you will be asked if you wish to continue if you seem distressed or uncomfortable at any time during the interview or follow-up meetings.
- your information will be kept private and confidential both during the preparation of the thesis and afterwards. It will be saved in a password-protected file on my personal computer that only I have access to. If there are any, paper documents will be scanned and stored electronically, also in a password-protected file, and then shredded.
- the Zoom session may be recorded, and the data is stored in the USA. Data stored on servers in the USA may be subjected to examination by the US government under the USA Patriot Act. While this likelihood is small, I must let my participants know this is a possible risk.
- you will have the opportunity to read the transcripts of the interview and approve them before use in the study
- you will have the opportunity to review the information collected out of your interview to ensure it matches your intended meaning

- you can decline to answer any question and continue to participate
- will be provided with a referral to local Elders and counselling services, if this conversation results in the unearthing of difficult emotions or feelings that you feel you need support for.
- You will receive a written copy of this conversation.
- Do you have any questions about your consent to participate?
- Do you consent to being part of this study?