

**Healthy Pregnancies and Beyond: Exploring the Experience and Teachings of Indigenous  
Grandmothers to Promote the Health of Future Generations of Indigenous people in  
Alberta**

by

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## Abstract

Damaging colonial practices have disrupted the intergenerational transmission of culture to Indigenous children in early childhood. Culture and cultural identity play a central role in Indigenous peoples' well-being. Despite their remarkable resilience and deep reserves of wisdom about healing traditions, Indigenous cultures have been severely impacted by colonization (Kim, 2019). Pregnancy and early life are critical periods in children's developmental trajectories (Barker, 2007). By promoting healthy environments through intergenerational cultural engagement during the child's early years, we can positively affect the health of future generations of Indigenous peoples.

Indigenous Grandmothers play vital roles in promoting healthy environments in early life by providing a connection to kinship networks and passing on Traditional Knowledge. This research follows the lead of five Indigenous Grandmothers from Alberta, who collectively represent the Grandmother's Wisdom Network. They aim to pass on Traditional Knowledge and practices for the preservation of Indigenous cultural identity during a child's early life.

Using an Indigenist research framework, this work draws on participatory approaches to explore the roles of Indigenous Grandmothers, their experiences of Grandmothering, and the challenges that they have faced in carrying out their roles. This work also explores sacred Ceremonies and Traditional Teachings about pregnancy, childbirth and early childhood. Sharing circles that facilitate Indigenous storytelling were used for data generation, and data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

The results of this work illustrate how supportive early environments, including connection to kinship and culture, can promote children's social, emotional and spiritual wellness. Indigenous Grandmothers, as keepers of culture and caregivers, play a key role in this

connection to kinship and culture. We found that Indigenous Grandmothers provide a sense of belonging to children in early childhood that increases their sense of worthiness. Additionally, Grandmothers serve as mentors for children in their physical, mental, emotional and spiritual journeys through life. They guide children on the correct path so one day they, themselves may be the Elders of the next generation. Grandmothers carry out these responsibilities for biological grandchildren and adopted or informal grandchildren within their communities. Furthermore, caregiving for children by Grandmothers was found to be protective in keeping children out of the child welfare system. The Ceremonies and Traditional Teachings that this work captured included lessons on easing the child's journey from the spirit world to the physical world and how to protect a baby's spirit from harm. Teachings about sacred items, like the Moss Bag and the Swing were also explored. Welcoming and cherishing children as a gift from the Creator was an important teaching from the Grandmothers recorded within this work. The Grandmothers provided lessons about pregnancy, childbirth, the treatment of the umbilical cord, baby showers and giving children spiritual names. Finally, the results discuss the challenges Indigenous Grandmothers face, which include the diminishing respect for Grandmothers and intergenerational trauma that continues to affect Indigenous families. The Grandmothers call for forgiveness and reconciliation from within Indigenous families and communities to heal and bring up healthy, thriving children that will predict the well-being of the future seven generations.

By understanding the roles of the Grandmothers in cultural transmission, policymakers can gain better insight into how a child's early years affect their development and use this knowledge to help close the gap in health equity and life circumstances between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. The findings from this research also point to a need for changes in

institutional practices to support and celebrate the preservation of traditional Indigenous cultures, and the reversal of policies that are contributing to the disappearance of cultural practices, knowledge and languages.

Following the wishes of the Grandmothers, the teachings recorded through this research will be collected in the form of a resource booklet and shared with new Indigenous parents. This resource will support those Indigenous parents who do not have access to keepers of cultural knowledge passed down in oral tradition.

## **Preface**

This thesis is an original work by Taylor Gill. This thesis, and the study of which it is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name “Grandmothers Wisdom Network”, Study ID: Pro00097448, May 2, 2022.

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## Introduction

The research presented in this thesis was completed in partnership with the Grandmothers' Wisdom Network with the aim to support their vision of fostering healthy Indigenous families in Alberta. In 2018, five Indigenous Grandmothers residing in Alberta came together to form the Grandmothers' Wisdom Network, supported by researcher allies at the University of Alberta. The Grandmothers' Wisdom Network aims to support the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health of Indigenous families, including young mothers, pregnant women, and children living on- and off-reserve in Alberta. They are working to do this by reaffirming Indigenous Knowledge about the cultural determinants of health and their effects on children's developmental trajectories, and determining future priorities for advancing research, policy and practice on Indigenous maternal, neonatal, child and youth health and well-being. The members of the Grandmothers' Wisdom Network include one First Nations Grandmother from each of the three Treaty territories in Alberta and one Métis Grandmother from the Métis Nation of Alberta. Together, the five Grandmothers and I explored the role of Indigenous Grandmothers as caregivers to their grandchildren, conduits of Traditional Knowledge, and support systems for new Indigenous parents. Thus, this work aims to reclaim Traditional Knowledge and cultural practices held by Grandmothers who are also Knowledge Keepers. Through this work, we celebrate Indigenous culture and identity. We plan to use this work to create resources about traditional parenting and the transmission of cultural practices and teachings for the next generation of Indigenous parents. The knowledge gathered from the Grandmothers will be passed on to new Indigenous parents in order to nurture a healthy supportive environment during the perinatal period (the time during and after pregnancy). It will provide a resource and support to those Indigenous parents who do not have access to

Knowledge Keepers, and therefore knowledge that is traditionally passed down orally. This work will also further the understanding of the role of Indigenous Grandmothers in the lives of children and in strengthening family systems.

### **Situating Myself as the Storyteller**

I must situate myself within this project because, as beautifully stated by Wilson (2008), “When listeners know where the storyteller is coming from and how the story fits into the storyteller’s life, it makes the absorption of the knowledge that much easier” (p 32). I am English/French-settler of present-day Canada, maskēkow-ininiw (Swampy Cree) and Métis. I am a member of the Métis Nation of Alberta, and my Cree and Métis family came from Norway House in Manitoba. Around 1907, my great-great-great-Grandmother Maria Beacham (née Crate), made this Jacket for her son (figure 1). It shows classic Métis silk embroidery with flower patterns on moose and caribou hide, with mink fur details. Her son wore it on his trips as a mail runner where he would make a 1600 km trip on foot to send mail between Norway house and the closest settlement, Selkirk, Manitoba.



*Figure 1.* The hide jacket made by my ancestor Maria Beacham. It is crafted with Métis silk embroidery on moose and caribou hide and mink fur details (on display at Lake of the Woods Museum).

Maria's daughter (my great-great-Grandmother), Frances Paquette (née Beacham) attended the Brandon residential school. My Grandfather, Jack Francis Taylor, grew up in northern Manitoba largely under the care of his Grandmother Frances. Figure 2 shows my Grandfather sitting on his Grandmother's knee. She is wearing beautifully beaded moccasins.



*Figure 2.* My Grandfather, Jack Taylor (right), sitting on his Grandmother's knee.

My Grandfather was six or seven years old when his mother moved west with her children leaving their community behind forever, likely to avoid the fate of her children being sent to residential school. He was instructed to deny being Indigenous to avoid discrimination. As a result, I grew up removed from my family's Indigenous culture. I had to learn the Métis beading found in the flower patterns of my ancestors' work elsewhere because the knowledge was lost within our family. I recognize that this separation also meant I did not face the barriers caused by structural inequities that represent the experience of so many Indigenous peoples today. I felt joy watching my Grandfather successfully overcome the shame about his identity, and his family's Indigeneity. This joy combined with the sadness that I feel that I was not able to grow up with my Indigenous culture, directly due to colonial practices like residential schools and child welfare programs, inspired me to carry out research with Indigenous peoples. I merged this personal connection to Indigenous identity with my passion for improving health and wellness, and that led me to this work. I believe this work is important and I am passionate about supporting work that will support the health of Indigenous people. It is my goal as a researcher to create a safe space for Indigenous knowledge to emerge (Wilson, 2022).

### **Clarifying Terminology**

In this thesis, I use the words "Indigenous" or "Indigenous peoples" to refer to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples that live in what is known as Canada in the present day. I recognize that within these three constitutionally recognized groups, there are numerous distinct Nations and communities with unique cultures, languages beliefs and practices. Elder Muriel Lee from Ermineskin Cree Nation expressed her feelings about the word Indigenous. "I don't really like that word. It's a *môniyâw*<sup>1</sup> word. . . But I guess it's close. You know, it's not our word. We

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<sup>1</sup> *môniyâw* – white person/settler

say *iyinowak*: the people that live on Turtle Island.” Turtle Island is the name used by some Indigenous Peoples to refer to the lands now known as North and Central America (Yellowhorn & Lowinger, 2017). In various Indigenous creation stories, the turtle is said to support the world and is a symbol of life and earth. However, not all creation stories from the Indigenous Peoples of America feature a turtle. Elder Lorraine from Mikisew Cree First Nation explained that in her community in northern Alberta, there are no turtles, so they do not refer to North America as Turtle Island. This conversation highlights the distinctness of Indigenous Peoples and variations in Indigenous origin stories, which exemplifies why there is no universally accepted definition for the term Indigenous Peoples (Allan & Smylie, 2015).

Other terminologies that require clarification are the use of the words “mother” and “woman” throughout this thesis. I celebrate Métis, First Nations and Inuit people who are non-binary, transgender and Two-Spirited and recognize that pregnancy is not exclusive to women and that the experience of motherhood is not defined by biology. The Grandmothers’ teachings in this work are meant for everyone, including parents, life-givers, and people that take on the mothering role.

### **Content Warning**

I would like to provide a content warning to be respectful of people who would prefer to avoid potentially distressing topics. This work discusses harm to Indigenous people that occurred at residential schools and in foster care. These topics can be largely avoided by refraining from reading the following sections: “The Truth: Harmful Colonial Practices”, “Keeping Families and Communities Together” and “Harms of Colonial Practices”.

## **Background**

### ***Indigenous Peoples in Alberta***

As of 2021, 284,465 Indigenous Peoples, including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people, lived in what is known as present-day Alberta, making up 6.7% of the province's population (Statistics Canada, 2023). The Indigenous population in Canada is growing, with an increase of twice that of the non-Indigenous population between 2016 and 2021 (Statistics Canada, 2022a). The growing population, with high birth rates, means a large percentage of the Indigenous population is made up of children and youth, which holds promise for the future of their vibrant, rich communities (Health Council of Canada, 2011).

There are forty-five First Nations in Alberta that are each part of one of five main cultural groups: Nehiyaw (Cree), Niitsítapi (Blackfoot), Dene, Nakoda, and Anishinabe (Government of Alberta, 2013; Government of Canada, 2021). There are two main groups of Cree people in Alberta, Plains Cree and the Woodland Cree, which each speak a Cree language dialect. Within these two larger groups, there are thirty-two Cree First Nations. The Blackfoot Confederacy is made up of three large Nations in southern Alberta and one in Montana (Government of Alberta, 2013). The Blackfoot language, like the Cree language, is part of the Algonquian language family. The Dene Suliné, Dene Tha', Tsuu T'ina, and Dunne-za are distinct groups that all identify as Dene. The languages spoken by Dene people in Alberta are part of the Athabaskan family of languages, which are spoken across a wide geographical area of North America (Rice & de Reuse, 2017). There are three Nakoda Nations in Alberta, which speak Nakoda, a language in the Siouan language families, and one Anishnabe Nation, which speaks Saulteaux, part of the Algonquian language family (Government of Alberta, 2013). One additional group, the

Aseniwuche Winewak Nation of Canada is recognized as a distinct cultural group under the Provincial Societies Act, rather than as a First Nation under the Indian Act.

In 2021, Statistics Canada enumerated that 127,475 Métis people live throughout Alberta, and of these people, 45,335 are members of The Métis Nation of Alberta (Statistics Canada, 2022b; Métis Nation of Alberta, 2023c). Alberta is the only province in which Métis people have a secure land base, which holds eight Métis settlements (Government of Canada, 2022). Métis people are descendants of European fur traders and First Nations people, who went on to form a distinct culture, language and nation in Canada's northwest (Métis Nation of Alberta, 2023b). Michif, a combination of Cree and French is the official language of the Métis, but many Métis people also speak Cree (Métis Nation of Alberta, 2023a). Although Inuit people are not originally from the currently defined region known as Alberta, over 2,954 Inuk now live in the province (Statistics Canada, 2023). The language spoken by Inuit people is Inuktitut (Alberta Health Services, n.d.).

### ***The Health of Indigenous Peoples in Canada***

Western literature frequently focuses on the negative health outcomes of Indigenous Peoples. This can reinforce inaccurate stereotypes and ignore the root social causes of health disparities (Hayward et al., 2021). Indigenous Peoples have responded to extreme hardships and inequities caused by colonial processes with enduring reservoirs of wisdom that have been shared and practiced over many generations. They continue to hold a wealth of distinct and lasting healing traditions that promote well-being in their communities. This research will highlight stories of strength, resilience and decolonization that reflect the wisdom held by communities for improving the health and well-being of Indigenous Peoples. For Indigenous children to flourish and reach their full potential, healthy physical contexts and supportive social,

emotional, cultural, and spiritual environments that are created by healthy family systems are vital.

Although it is important to maintain a strength-focused view of Indigenous Peoples to avoid negative stereotypes, it is also crucial to examine the state of health of Indigenous Peoples, so that the vital nature of research and projects that promote Indigenous health can be acknowledged. I recognize that Western measures of health are limited and largely focused on physical measures. This way of measuring health does not reflect an Indigenous perspective, where health is holistic and considers the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health of individuals and also the health of family systems and communities as a whole (Barnabe, 2021).

Indigenous Peoples in Canada experience health inequities, including a lower life expectancy and a disproportionate burden of chronic diseases (Kim, 2019). These health inequities are the result of political, social, and economic disadvantages that stem from the impacts of colonial practices (Kim, 2019). In 2011, First Nations men had a life expectancy at age one that was 8.9 years shorter than non-Indigenous Peoples, and in First Nations women that gap was 9.6 years (Tjepkema et al., 2019). In the Métis population, the disparity in life expectancy at age one was 4.5 years shorter for males and 5 years shorter for females, and for Inuit people the gap was 11.4 years in males and 11.2 years in females as compared to the non-Indigenous population. The disproportionate burden of non-communicable diseases, such as type 2 diabetes, obesity, rheumatoid arthritis, and chronic lung disease in Indigenous Peoples in Canada contributes to this discrepancy in life expectancy and increased morbidity (Barnabe et al., 2017; Crowshoe et al., 2018; Gracey & King, 2009). For instance, 14% of First Nations people living off-reserve and Métis people in Canada reported having at least three chronic health conditions, compared to only 8% of non-Indigenous Peoples (Hahmann & Kumar, 2022).

Disparities also exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous maternal and child health in Canada. A large national cohort study showed that between 2004 and 2006 Indigenous mothers were younger than non-Indigenous Canadians, and less likely to be married or in a common-law relationship (A. J. Sheppard et al., 2017). Infant mortality rates for Indigenous Peoples were twice as high as for the non-Indigenous population, and rates of sudden infant death syndrome were more than seven times higher for First Nations and Inuit people than for non-Indigenous Peoples (Amanda J. Sheppard et al., 2017). Several smaller studies in Indigenous communities in Canada found that maternal mortality rates are twice as high as the general population, and adverse outcomes such as pregnancy and infant death, low-birth weights and premature birth are more prevalent (Luo et al., 2010; Oliveira et al., 2013; Sharma et al., 2016; Trevors, 2001). As children form and shape the future of Indigenous communities, it is important to put their current and future health and well-being at the forefront of the work being done to promote health in these populations.

### ***The Truth: Harmful Colonial Practices***

To understand the challenges that Indigenous Peoples experience today with health, and the erosion of cultural transmission and family structure, we must consider the impacts of historical and ongoing colonialism (Kim, 2019). Damaging colonial practices, such as residential schools, intentionally disrupted cultural transmission and broke down family structure for Indigenous Peoples. Despite this, Indigenous Peoples have responded with profound resilience, and they continue to hold and carry out a wealth of Traditional Knowledge and practices.

About 150,000 Indigenous children in Canada were sent to residential schools between the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and 1996 (Johnson, 2018). Elder Andrew Wesley (2010) described that residential schools intentionally “kill[ed] the children’s Aboriginal languages, cultural beliefs,

and identity by teaching them that they were sinful, dirty, and wrong” (Wesley, 2010, p. 1). Not only were these children forcibly separated from their cultures, but they were also physically separated from their families and communities (LaFrance & Collins, 2003). This estrangement from culture and family along with the neglect and abuse that was pervasive in residential schools have both, directly and indirectly, contributed to the breakdown of traditional Indigenous family structure. Further separation of children from their families occurred during the “Sixties Scoop” (1960s to the 1990s) where many Indigenous children were apprehended by welfare organizations and placed with non-Indigenous foster families (Toombs et al., 2021). The destruction of traditional family structures resulted in further interruption of culture transmission and an absence of modelling of pregnancy and child-rearing behaviours for the younger generations of Indigenous parents (LaFrance & Collins, 2003). Today, many Indigenous parents do not have experience with positive parenting behaviour or traditional family functioning, and they lack connection to cultural practices surrounding pregnancy and early childhood.

### ***The Perinatal Period: A Crucial Window of Development***

A parent’s connection to Traditional Knowledge and practices about pregnancy and child-rearing is important for shaping a healthy environment for children during the perinatal period – pregnancy and the first year of life (First Nations Health Authority (FNHA) & Office of the BC Provincial Health Officer (PHO), 2021). This is a crucial time in development that can impact the child’s health trajectory for life (Blount et al., 2021). The Developmental Origins of Health and Disease (DOHaD) hypothesis explains how the physical, biological, and social environments that surround the child during the perinatal period are crucial to healthy development (Barker, 2007). This environment has implications for the child’s future non-communicable disease risk due to factors including changes to DNA, such as methylation, that

can alter the way genes are expressed (Barker, 2007; Wild, 2005). There is a large body of knowledge that considers factors like the presence of social stress, the availability of needed nutrients and the absence of toxins during the perinatal period as predictors of future health, with plasticity and adaption to the environment as the biological mechanism (Gluckman et al., 2010). As such, the perinatal period is an important life stage for intervening to improve maternal health and parental physical, mental, social-emotional, and spiritual well-being. The holistic health of parents, in addition to their connection to Traditional Knowledge and culture, translates to gestational wellness and will positively influence the health of the next generation of Indigenous Peoples in Canada (Blount et al., 2021; FNHA & PHO, 2021).

There is ample evidence showing that connection to culture and Traditional Knowledge influences the health and well-being of Indigenous Peoples by strengthening identity, self-image and a sense of connection (King et al., 2009; Murrup-Stewart et al., 2021; Nettleton et al., 2007). Holding Traditional Knowledge has been shown to be supportive of a healthy identity and positive self-image for Indigenous Peoples (King et al., 2009). Additionally, a report by the World Health Organization recognizes the connection to cultural identity as a crucial social determinant of health for Indigenous Peoples (Nettleton et al., 2007). Similarly, a large review found that culture, such as access to traditional food, activities and medicine, and language, were protective factors for the health of Indigenous Peoples (McIvor et al., 2013). Murrup-Stewart et al. (2021) found that for Indigenous youth in Australia, culture provides them with a sense of connection and that connection “has an essential influence on the well-being of young people” (p. 1). A recent scoping review that examined cultural-based approaches to suicide prevention in Indigenous communities globally found a consistent theme in the literature that supported cultural connectedness as medicine and a successful form of suicide prevention (Sjoblom et al.,

2022). In an Alberta context, a mixed methods study looked at traditional language knowledge as a measure of cultural continuity in Cree and Blackfoot communities and found that greater cultural continuity correlated with a significantly lower diabetes prevalence (Oster et al., 2014). A connection to culture, including holding Traditional Knowledge and speaking one's traditional language, can be protective and provide healing for the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual aspects of Indigenous Peoples' well-being.

### ***Indigenous Grandmothers***

Grandmothers are keepers of vital knowledge and experience and play an important role in parental support and child development across cultures (Aubel, 2005). Indigenous cultures in Canada are matriarchal and view women as having the sacred role of life-giving and important responsibilities of transmitting knowledge (National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health, 2012). In the traditional Indigenous kinship structure and in many Indigenous families today, Grandmothers not only provide instrumental support but also serve as transmitters of Traditional Knowledge to younger people within their families and communities (Sengendo, 2001). By supporting the reaffirmation of Indigenous knowledge in new parents, Grandmothers can help overcome the damaging effects of colonization by strengthening kinship ties, creating a healthy environment during the perinatal period, and thus positively affecting the health of future generations.

### ***What is Known About the Roles of Indigenous Grandmothers***

In the academic literature, multiple studies examine the role and experiences of Indigenous Grandmothers caring for their grandchildren in the Canadian context (Bahr, 1994; Brown, 2017; Gabel et al., 2016; Ginn & Kulig, 2015; Hill, 2016; LaFrance, 2021). Two of these studies are situated in the field of social work and are interested in Grandmothers' journeys and

experiences as primary caregivers for their grandchildren (Brown, 2017; Hill, 2016). Another study within the field of social work examines the lived experience of a Métis Grandmother and the findings emphasized the capacity of Grandmothers' knowledge to resist colonial systems in child welfare (LaFrance, 2021). To my knowledge, only one study in this area was conducted in Alberta. This study looked at the role of Grandmothers in promoting health and well-being within their families and communities by maintaining networks of support (Ginn & Kulig, 2015). It found that Grandmothers are important figures in health promotion due to their rich Traditional Knowledge, and their intimate knowledge of their community.

A deeper understanding of Grandmothers' experiences caring for their grandchildren in various capacities, rather than only as primary caregivers, would help to provide a more complete understanding of their support roles. Additionally, limited knowledge has been documented on the experiences of Indigenous Grandmothers in the Alberta context.

***What is Known About Traditional Knowledge and Ceremonies: Pregnancy, Birth and Early Life***

Other literature that contains Traditional Indigenous Knowledge about the perinatal period includes several Indigenous parenting information resources (FNHA & PHO, 2021; National Aboriginal Council of Midwives, 2017; National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health, 2012; Toombs et al., 2021). Two notable resources from the United States relay traditional values and teachings for "Positive Indian Parenting" (Northwest Indian Child Welfare Institute, 2010; Stuecher, 1991). One booklet reflects the diversity of Indigenous Nations across Canada and lays out a program that aims to empower Indigenous parents (The Wabano Centre for Aboriginal Health, n.d.). These resources focus on child-rearing but contain little about the time before the child is born. A series of short booklets, published by the National Aboriginal

Council of Midwives, contains stories and teachings about pregnancy, birth, and infant care (National Aboriginal Council of Midwives, 2017). These brief educational materials do not include teachings or guidance specific to the Indigenous cultures in Alberta and cover a limited scope of Traditional Teachings surrounding pregnancy. Overall, there is a lack of information on what specific Traditional Teachings Grandmothers pass down to new parents to promote health in the next generation by altering the environment during pregnancy and early childhood.

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this project was to explore the Traditional Knowledge of Grandmothers about Indigenous culture and the transmission of this knowledge to parents and during a child's early life to promote positive child development. This research was guided by the values and aspirations of the five Grandmothers that make up the Grandmothers' Wisdom Network and explored three main research questions:

- 1) What are the roles of Indigenous Grandmothers in Alberta in raising grandchildren and supporting healthy family systems in their communities? What are the lived experiences of Grandmothers carrying out these roles?
- 2) As part of their role as cultural teachers, what Traditional Teachings and Ceremonial practices are passed down by Indigenous Grandmothers during pregnancy, at birth, and in the first few years of life in order to strengthen kinship ties and support the health and the best possible life for the child?
- 3) What are the challenges for Indigenous Grandmothers carrying out their roles within their families and communities?

This work aims to provide an understanding of the roles of Indigenous Grandmothers, their lived experience carrying out these roles, and the challenges they face in carrying out their

roles. Using this information, we will be better able to structure support for Indigenous Grandmothers in all they do to foster the health of the next generation.

This research also explores the Traditional Teachings and Ceremonial practices relevant to pregnancy, birth and early childhood that originate from the Indigenous communities and cultures about which the Grandmothers hold knowledge. We gathered knowledge that can be shared with new Indigenous parents to nurture a healthy environment during the perinatal period. Recording this Traditional Knowledge is a way of adding it to collective memory and keeping it for future generations. It also provides a resource and support to those Indigenous parents who do not have access to keepers of oral knowledge (Kovach, 2021).

### **Method**

This qualitative research project uses an Indigenist, anti-colonial framework. It assumes an Indigenous worldview that reflects Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies, to ensure the research is truly Indigenist at its core, rather than simply involving Indigenous Peoples in Western research (Coghlan, 2014). Indigenous worldviews can be described as relational: focused on relationships and the connectedness of all things (Campbell, 2007; Gaudet, 2019; Hart, 2010). Within this worldview, the task of research is to build a relationship with knowledge (Wilson, 2022). The use of Indigenist research is methodologically coherent with the questions and aims of this project. Centring this work on an Indigenist, anti-colonial framework allowed me to highlight and correct for colonial power dynamics throughout the project. By enacting Indigenism together, the Grandmothers and I created a space of deep learning and knowledge co-creation. As Wilson (2007) states, “It is the use of an Indigenist paradigm that creates Indigenous knowledge” (p. 194).

Indigenist research prioritizes Indigenous voices and experiences and focuses on priorities set by Indigenous Peoples (Loppie, 2007; Martin & Mirraboopa, 2003). This is consistent with the central, participatory role of the Grandmothers in this research. Further, this project emphasizes the diversity of cultures, aims to generate knowledge for the benefit of Indigenous Peoples, and integrates cultural protocols into the method (Russell-Mundine, 2012). Cultural protocols that were followed include the use of Ceremony and prayer described in detail below. Finally, this project takes an anti-colonial approach that considers the lasting effects of colonization and aims to stop ongoing inequities.

### **The Grandmothers**

The participants for this project include five Grandmothers that make up the Grandmothers' Wisdom Network. The Grandmothers include Elders Muriel Lee from Ermineskin Cree Nation (Treaty 6), Elder Jackie Bromley from Kanai Nation (Treaty 7), Elder Darlene Cardinal Sucker Creek Frist Nation (Treaty 8), Elder Lorraine Albert from Mikisew Cree First Nation (Treaty 8), and Elder Norma Spicer, a Métis Knowledge Holder from the Métis Nation of Alberta (MNA). They were excited to be identified and recognized within this work. As founders of the Grandmothers' Wisdom Network, they also form the Grandmothers' Advisory Circle. This community-led project stems from and is directed by their vision for the future of healthy Indigenous families in Alberta.

Each of these Grandmothers brings a unique perspective from different First Nations and Métis communities. This diversity of experience allows us to understand the research questions from different cultural viewpoints and ensures that people living on- and off-reserve in urban, rural, and remote communities in Alberta are considered. Gathering the perspective of a few

people that provide a diverse viewpoint is a suitable way to gather information about the topics of interest in this descriptive qualitative study (Bradshaw et al., 2017).

### **Building a Relationship with Knowledge**

This project used sharing circles (figure 3) as an Indigenous research methodology. Sharing circles are akin to focus groups, but they hold sacred meaning for the Indigenous cultures from which they originate (Lavallée, 2009). Each member of the circle is considered equal, and everyone is given space to speak, which is in line with the Indigenous worldview and its values of inclusivity and active listening (Montesanti et al., 2021).

Indigenous storytelling was also used within the context of the sharing circles. In addition to being important in many Indigenous cultures as a way of passing on wisdom and lived experience, storytelling is also inherently relational and decolonizing, as it dismantles the power relationship that may exist between the researcher and participants (Loppie, 2007). Storytelling was used to help us answer the research questions as it is suited to revealing a deeper understanding of lived experiences (Tachine et al., 2016).

The specific protocol for the sharing circles was designed with the Grandmothers to ensure it was appropriate to their cultures and traditions. The research was also rooted in Ceremony. A smudge and prayer performed by one of the Grandmothers opened the first sharing circle, to set good intentions for the research. A Pipe and Calumet Ceremony was also carried out. This Indigenous Ceremony, originating in the plains region (Blakeslee, 1981), was done to bless my thesis and ask our ancestors to be with us in the work we were doing. Elder Muriel explained, “When we started. . .we did the Pipe, the Pipe spoke for us, so we haven’t done this on our own. We’ve had help”. Before each sharing circle or meeting, I requested that a

Grandmother offer an opening and closing prayer in exchange for tobacco (for First Nations Grandmothers) or tea (for the Métis Grandmother).

Data collection for this study consisted of four in-person sharing circles and one virtual sharing circle for which guiding questions focused the discussion. The portions of the sharing circles to which the Grandmothers agreed were audio recorded. When appropriate, notes were taken for any portion of the sharing circles that are not recorded.



*Figure 3.* The Grandmothers in a sharing circle. A dish of smouldering sweetgrass from the morning's smudge can be seen in the centre.

### **Analysis and Interpretation**

This work used a qualitative descriptive approach, which seeks to reach a rich emic understanding from the perspectives or worldviews of the participants (Caelli et al., 2003). This

approach allows the findings to be presented in plain language that is close to the participants' way of understanding (Sandelowski, 2000). To further this goal, the results contain numerous quotes to capture the powerful voices of the Grandmothers. Within this approach, thematic analysis was used to analyze and organize the data into major themes. An inductive method was employed, meaning the themes were linked to the data and no pre-existing coding frame was used (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The thematic analysis was done by hand, following Braun and Clarke (2006) framework for completing a thematic analysis. First, all the voice recordings of sharing circles were transcribed verbatim. The process of transcription, as well as reading and re-reading the transcriptions and other notes multiple times allowed me to become familiar with the data. I then read through the data and made notes and highlighted sections that were rich with information in order to begin organization and to deemphasize off-topic or housekeeping conversations that were included in the initial transcripts. Next, I went through the data again and assigned a topic or code to each highlighted section of text or quote. The use of open coding allowed codes to develop and change as the data were analyzed (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). I then examined the codes and combined them into larger themes. Next, I gathered the relevant data under each theme to ensure the data supported the themes. This organization of the data allowed the themes to be reviewed and adapted as needed and sub-themes to be identified. I discussed the themes with my supervisor, Stephanie Montesanti, which allowed for further refinement of the themes and discussion about the interrelatedness of the themes.

My analysis took on an iterative analysis approach, which revisited the Indigenous Storytelling method used in data generation to discuss the themes identified with the Grandmothers. This iterative approach which involved the participants aligns with the Indigenist

framework and the principles of Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession (OCAP®) (Montesanti et al., 2021; Schnarch, 2004). Data were analyzed concurrently with data generation to provide frequent opportunities to gather feedback from the Grandmothers. In addition to the sharing circles held for data generation, one additional virtual sharing circle, and one additional in-person sharing circle were held and dedicated to presenting the themes and results back to the Grandmothers so the work could be supplemented or changed based on their feedback. Several one-on-one conversations and meals we shared when we came together for the sharing circles also served to clarify and build upon the initial results. By using this iterative analysis process, the themes were identified and interpreted through the lens of the Grandmothers' pertinent worldviews.

When answering the research about the Traditional Teachings and Ceremonies around pregnancy, childbirth and parenting, the Grandmothers carefully decided what information to include. Some information and details about Ceremonies are too sacred to write about, so we were careful to leave this information out of the results. The Grandmothers usually agreed about what was appropriate to share, but if even one Grandmother felt something was too sacred in their culture and beliefs to share, the information was omitted.

As I interpreted the results, my process was informed by The Seven Sacred Teachings, which are important teachings that I learned from the Grandmothers during our discussions (J. Bromley, personal communication, May 16, 2022). These teachings include lessons on love, wisdom, respect, truth, humility, honesty, and courage. I strove to embody these teachings and qualities as I interacted with the Grandmothers and interpreted the data that emerged through our work together. This meant that I approached the interpretation of the data with an attitude of love for the Grandmothers and gratitude for the generosity they brought to the work. I aimed to

respect their stories and strove to portray them in a truthful, honest way. I relied on my own wisdom to translate their wisdom into a coherent story and had the courage to continue even when the process was difficult.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The safety of and regard for the Grandmothers, as Indigenous research partners, was a priority in this research. Given the history of harmful research practices that have damaged Indigenous Peoples, ensuring the Grandmothers' well-being and agency in the research was of high importance and approached with utmost sensitivity (Hyett et al., 2018). Ethical clearance for this study was received from the University of Alberta (Study ID: Pro00097448). All research in this project followed the principles of OCAP<sup>®</sup> (Schnarch, 2004). Additionally, we were guided by the Six Principles of Métis Health Research (Métis Centre at National Aboriginal Health Organization, n.d.). This included building reciprocal relationships, recognizing diversity, and fostering safe and inclusive environments for all. Following the principles outlined by Métis Centre at National Aboriginal Health Organization (n.d.), we aimed to have “respect for individual and collective autonomy, identity, personal values, gender, confidentiality and practices and protocols (p. 2)” and prioritized research topics that were relevant, accurate and would benefit all. We strove to contribute to and protect both Métis and First Nations cultural knowledge.

Within the Indigenist, anti-colonial framework, this project was informed and shaped by the Grandmothers. Instead of being solely research participants, the community partners became co-researchers, directing the course of the research to ensure it was relevant to them and that they could maintain self-determination while upholding their worldviews (Martin, 2012). This was accomplished by centring the Grandmothers as co-researchers and advisors during each step of

the research. They were involved in determining which topics were important to discuss, how the data generation should occur and were the leading voices in deciding how the data was interpreted and managed.

I worked to ensure that the data were used and managed in ways that retained community sovereignty and ownership of the information and its interpretation (Walter & Suina, 2019). I worked with the Grandmothers to develop a plan to ensure they own and control the data and were comfortable with how it was being collected, stored and published. Further, this project used the guiding principles of the ‘three R’s of Indigenous methodology’, respect, reciprocity, and relationality, proposed by Indigenous researcher Shawn Wilson (Wilson, 2008). A research agreement was established between the Collaborative Applied Research for Equity in Health Policy and Systems (CARE) Research Lab, of which I am a part, and the Grandmothers’ Wisdom Network, to facilitate equitable research processes and reciprocal relationships. The Grandmothers were fully integrated into all aspects of the research and provided key stewardship on both data generation and project outcomes. In keeping with Indigenous protocols that reflect Indigenous oral tradition, informed oral consent was obtained in a culturally sensitive manner (Tauri, 2017).

There are long-standing relationships between the Grandmothers and two researcher allies supporting the Grandmothers’ Wisdom Network, Dr. Stephanie Montesanti and Dr. Richard Oster. These relationships provided the base of trust and connection with the Grandmothers that allowed this research to take place in a way that aligns with Indigenist research (Hart et al., 2017). As a researcher working closely with the Grandmothers, I committed to a relationship with them that extends beyond the few time points of interaction that were scheduled across this year-long study. I attend monthly meetings with the Grandmothers and

engaged in personal sharing that strengthened my connection and friendship with them. I frequently communicated with them over text messaging, phone calls and emails, and visited one of the Grandmothers in her home. When we came together for sharing circles, we always took the opportunity to gather for dinner the evening before. We also ate meals together and visited on the days we held sharing circles. These social gatherings and other times we spent together, such as trips to and from the airport, allowed for informal sharing and the strengthening of our relationships. I used Métis beading to create thank-you gifts for each of the Grandmothers as my way of expressing gratitude for their part in my thesis work (figure 4).



*Figure 4.* Thank-you gifts for the Grandmothers, which I made using Métis beading technique.

## **Rigour**

I employed several rigour and verification strategies. First, I maintained methodological coherence, to ensure the stages of research fit together in an interrelated way. Participant checking was used and was vital to the rigour of this study as it aimed to represent the experiences and knowledge of the Grandmothers in a straightforward and transparent way. The Grandmothers were consulted and involved at each stage of analysis and interpretation to ensure their experiences, perspectives and worldviews were represented. My commitment to developing a deep, long-term relationship with the Grandmothers outside of this research project also contributed to the rigour of this project, as it allowed trust and understanding to develop between

us. Researcher reflexivity, in the form of journaling, was used to mitigate bias and encourage reflection and a deeper understanding of the work. Finally, journaling was followed by discussions with a friend to help me consider angles not obvious from my position inside the research process.

## **Results**

### **The Grandmothers' Voices**

During our sharing circles, the impact of the Grandmothers' stories was emulated in the way they spoke – by their expressions, emotions and tone of voice. The Grandmothers had the desire to express their own stories of restoring healthy family systems through cultural connection and a strong spiritual path for children. Direct quotes from the Grandmothers are used throughout the results section to stay true to the Grandmothers' voices. While qualitative research methods have the potential to elicit rich descriptions of emotional and personal experiences, it was not possible to fully understand the essence of the Grandmothers' words as they were largely shared in the English language. Three of the Grandmothers frequently used their native language of Cree and Blackfoot to express the true meaning of the teachings in their culture. Two of the Grandmothers speak Cree and were able to communicate with each other in their languages when words were similar enough between Plains Cree and Woodland Cree. I have included some words the Grandmothers spoke in their languages and the translations within the quotes below to convey the meaning and power they hold. When reading the results, it is important to keep in mind that the Grandmothers were often translating stories into English, which leads to variances in meaning and interpretation. Elder Muriel eloquently explains, "Cree and English are two totally different languages that are interpreting different worldviews. It's difficult to go from one worldview to another – the meaning is lost."

## **The Role and Impact of Grandmothers on the Well-being of Grandchildren and Families**

The Grandmothers all agreed that Indigenous Grandmothers are fundamental for the functioning of families and communities and the continuity of cultural knowledge. They discussed several roles that they carry out. These included *caring for children* and *providing love and a sense of worthiness* to children. *Adopting grandchildren* is a common practice for Indigenous Grandmothers, and their roles of caring for and teaching children not only extended to biological grandchildren within their families but also to other children in their communities. Additionally, the Grandmothers spoke about their role in teaching culture and Traditional Knowledge to the younger generations. They view *culture and self-esteem* as intrinsically linked since a connection to culture bolsters self-esteem. Connection to language is an integral part of one's connection to culture. As Elder Muriel explained, "*Language is the culture, and culture is the language.*" The Grandmothers also spoke about their role as mentors in *the circle of life* for the younger generation. Through Traditional Teachings and ceremonies, they prepare the spiritual path for children to pass through the life stages from infants to adolescence, to adulthood, and finally to become the Elders for the next generation.

### ***Caring for Children***

Elder Jackie describes a specific role of Grandmothers, "Grandmothers are vital in Indigenous communities, they serve as caregivers..." Conversations with the Grandmothers revealed that the role of Grandmothers as caregivers is nuanced and complex. In the Grandmothers' cultures and communities, grandparents often act as primary or supplementary caregivers to their grandchildren. During the sharing circles, the Grandmothers spoke about being raised primarily by their grandparents, having grandparents raise or help raise their children, and raising their grandchildren. While it was a common, important theme, the

circumstances leading to this family structure varies between families. Elder Lorraine's father took her away from her mother for unknown reasons when she was just two years old, and they went to live with her paternal grandparents, which she describes as an unhealthy environment. She explains, "Because I was deserted as a child, I did not know how to mother... My mother-in-law, [my kids' Grandmother] took over and raised my kids because I didn't know how to raise them...It was accepted that the Grandmother would take over, with the exception of feeding... That's all I did, breastfeeding and the diapers." Lorraine goes on to share that she is grateful that her children were able to get what they needed from her mother-in-law since she had not been taught, through example, to provide her children with what they needed. Later in her life, Lorraine helped to raise one of her granddaughters and remembers it as a rewarding experience. Elder Jackie's grandparents raised her because her mother was diagnosed with Tuberculosis right after she was born and was sent far outside of their community to Charles Camsell Indian Hospital for treatment. Elder Norma's Grandmother also raised her from the time she was a baby, and her Grandmother "always took in all of her grandchildren... whose parents were too ashamed to look after them." Elder Darlene spoke of how lucky her first child was to have her Grandmothers around. She explains, "My firstborn lucked out because I had the grandmas around telling me how to do this and this." Sometimes the care provided would be in the form of financial support, as described by Elder Muriel. Muriel's father died two months before she was born. Her grandparents stepped in to help by providing material means. She shares, "My grandfather helped my mother. He gave her a cow. So, she sold the cow, bought material, and she built us a home. That's how grandparents helped."

Having grandparents care for children/grandchildren not only has benefits for the child and family but also has advantages for the grandparents. Elder Jackie explained that "by raising

their grandchildren, grandparents stay connected to family and are able to remain active and pass on their knowledge.” Thus, the role of grandparents as caregivers in Indigenous communities is mutually beneficial for the grandparents and the children.

**Keeping Families and Communities Together.** The Grandmothers described that having Grandmothers raise or help raise children is one way of sustaining strong familial ties. They expressed that the presence of love and connection to culture is essential to raising strong, healthy children. The Grandmothers noted this is especially important today with the number of Indigenous children who enter the child welfare system. Horrific things that the grandmothers know to have happened to children in foster care include the child being forced to kneel on marbles as punishment, returning home with bite marks, and inappropriate medication use that led to dependence. Elder Lorraine speaks unequivocally of the need to keep children within the family. She also reaffirms the importance of making the child feel loved and instilling a positive identity of who they are and where they come from.

All these little babies that are taken at birth and fostered out...they're really lost...

Try and find somebody in the family that will take your baby... we may not all be in a good financial position and have a big fancy house to live in. But we have love, and love is... there is no value.

When speaking about babies taken away at birth she continues to describe, “They never had a chance to have that love and Ceremony.” One of the Grandmothers shares that her daughter took in a family member’s children who were affected by fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. She proudly tells us,

Today... you wouldn't think that they had any addictions or fetal alcohol. She's teaching them to read and write... They're doing great in school... She's showing

them a lot of love, a lot of love.... The kids are just drowned in [love] because now they have all these big brothers.

The Grandmothers also discussed that if communities had control over their child welfare system locally, then children could remain in communities and keep kinship relationships (with their grandparents, for example).

### ***Providing Love and a Sense of Worthiness***

Elder Muriel explored the etymology of the Plains Cree word *nôtikwêw*, meaning ‘old woman, or Grandmother’ to illustrate another role of Grandmothers. One translation of *nôtikwêw* is “the one who lives in a dwelling that is so full”, with an unspoken reference to a teepee. Elder Muriel describes, “Her relatives are visiting, and that dwelling is literally coming apart because her home is so full... Why is that? Because *nôtikwêw* is the kindest person on earth.” Children experience the love of a Grandmother as a unique type of love and care. Elder Muriel experienced this type of love from two Grandmother figures. She explains,

There’d be about ten of us there. We filled that big table because we were always welcome there. We were loved there. We were respected there. A sense of being a worthy person was communicated to us in those homes. That’s the only place I ever felt true worthiness.

This story speaks to a special kind of love that a child can have with their Grandmother. Elder Lorraine echoed this when she explained that even though her Grandmother was stern, “She was a really sweet, kind person.” This bond of care and love a Grandmother provides creates a sense of worthiness for the grandchild. Worthiness comes from the love, welcoming and acceptance that Grandmothers provide. This communicates to the child that they are wanted and that they deserve to receive love.

**Adopting Grandchildren.** Part of the role of Grandmothers is to ensure that the provision of love and a sense of self-worth is consistent whether they are related to their grandchildren by blood or not; the Grandmother figure who carries these roles does not need to be a biological Grandmother. Elder Muriel spoke about an adopted family, her Auntie, from whom she felt the love of a Grandmother. Elder Jackie also spoke about the practice of adopting grandchildren in Blackfoot culture,

Many Grandmothers adopt a grandchild, which we call kipitaipokaiksi ‘favourite child’. For the child, there is a sense of honour and pride in being chosen as a kipitaipokaiksi because the idea of someone choosing to adopt you, to teach and raise you shows that the person loves you and cares for you, deeply.

Elder Lorraine also had this experience,

I ended up with all these other little grandkids that are not biologically mine, but they all think I'm their Grandma. They call me ‘Auntie Grandma’ or something like that. . . They all believe I'm their Grandma. I know they love me, and I love them.

Elder Darlene, who teaches Indigenous culture at schools, notes that her students call her “kôkum<sup>2</sup> Darlene.” Additionally, Elder Darlene legally adopted a woman as her daughter to help her keep in contact with her children. Darlene’s adopted daughter was in foster care herself when she was younger, and her children were also in the child welfare system. Before she was adopted by Darlene, she did not have a mother to supervise visits and so she was not able to see her children. Darlene adopted her to help her gain visitation rights, to teach her how to parent and to help her raise her children. Her daughter’s children are now Elder Darlene’s grandchildren, and

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<sup>2</sup> kôkum – Grandma (Woodland Cree)

she has a deep and loving relationship with them. The sense of worthiness that can come from a Grandmother's love is not dependent on a biological relationship; rather in Indigenous cultures and communities, there is a practice of taking on the role of Grandmother to (formally, or informally) adopted grandchildren.

### ***Culture and Self-Esteem***

Another way that Grandmothers provide a sense of worthiness and strong self-esteem for their grandchildren is by teaching culture. The Grandmothers identified that one of their roles as Knowledge Keepers is to pass on culture to the next generation through stories, teachings and Ceremonies and their connection to the ancestors that came before. Elder Muriel underscores the importance of their role as keepers of culture, "There would be no culture without Grandmothers, I can tell you that."

Culture is regarded as integral to the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health of children by the Grandmothers. Knowing and participating in one's culture has the capacity to be healing, as it provides a sense of belonging, deepens the knowledge about who someone is and where they came from – their sense of identity – and increases self-esteem. Elder Norma explains how connection to culture is a protective factor for positive self-esteem in children:

[Children] should be able to look to us for all of the teachings. . .when the children don't know their culture. But when they do, and when they get that 'aha' moment when they start to really really appreciate that they're important. It just makes that journey so, so precious. . .When you're involved [with culture and community] you get that pride. Being involved is health. Health isn't just a healthy body. Health is a healthy soul, a healthy way of living, a healthy way of

thinking. . . It gives you a chance to come out of areas of depression. It's that feeling of belonging.

She continues to explain how being connected to culture strengthens the identity and sense of belonging of children within their community as they learn where they came from and learn that they are part of something larger:

Knowing your roots and knowing traditional culture. . . it's nice to know where you come from, what you do, where you belong, how you fit in. It really helps our youth to find pride in themselves. . . It's that sense of belonging of feeling that you're part of something bigger than yourself. . . To me that's the biggest connection that there is.

She continues, explaining that Ceremonies are important because they “create a connection to the culturally ingrained values and give a sense of comfort, faith, and security with others that share our beliefs.”

**“Language is the Culture, and Culture is the Language.”** Elder Muriel. Grandmothers also teach that traditional language, in which culture is embedded, is crucial to the well-being of children. Elder Darlene avows that language and identity are connected, “When we have our language, then we know who we are.” Elder Muriel adds that language is important and spiritual,

Language is really the heart of the culture. Language directs you and gives you strength. It's a spiritual language because spirits watch over it. . . As soon as we speak our language, it ignites that power and [the spirit] comes to help us. The land, the water, the air... Language connects you to those elements. All life forms are infused with the Creator's power. When you use the language, you ignite the power of the world, and it goes to work to answer your prayers.

Elder Muriel passed on a teaching to us that she learned from Elder Leona Makokis: Identity is encoded in the language. By teaching culture and language, Grandmothers strengthen a child's connection to where they came from and who they are.

### *Circle of Life*

A theme that consistently surfaced during our discussions was “the circle of life.” The Grandmother's or Elder's role within this cycle was explained from a Plains Cree perspective by Elder Muriel.

nôtikwêw<sup>3</sup> is the last person in the family... There's the infant, the child, [the] adolescent to adult... after that it's a Grandmother... One Elder even said, “That's why we have five fingers”. There are five family members... Even before a child is born, that woman is being coached on how to live life while she is carrying awasis<sup>4</sup>... The child's mind and spirit are being shaped... When they're born, there are Ceremonies, and it's usually the Elder that performs [those] Ceremon[ies]: A Grandmother... When she goes into her Ceremony, the spirits recognize what she is doing. She calls upon them to bless that child... So, Grandmothers are the connectors between the world, the family, and the spirit world... the Grandmother is helping in the life of awasis... In every phase of that child's life, there are Ceremonies that are moulding and shaping this child. [The children] start out as... helpers to the Grandmothers for the females. The little boys, they train, and that teaches them how to behave. Then the child goes into adolescence, and there is Ceremony there still... How to parent, it's all in there. It is interwoven in everything that Elders tell that child. Then, that person becomes

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<sup>3</sup> nôtikwêw – Grandmother or Old woman (Plains Cree)

<sup>4</sup> awasis – Child (Plains Cree)

an adult. If we've done our work, that person will be a good parent. Then as parents, they begin to be trained as Elders... Then, they become Elders...that woman becomes nôtikwêw, becomes nokum<sup>5</sup>... There is no difference between a nôtikwêw and an Elder, kisêyiniw<sup>6</sup>. See, kisêyiniw means 'the one that's old, the one that's wise, the one that's kind'. We call Grandfather ni mosôm<sup>7</sup>. And then ni mosôm turns around and calls his grandchildren and great-grandchildren mosôm<sup>8</sup>. And I do that too. The reason why we do that is we hope that our grandchild will reach Elderhood...So the spirit child comes out, makes a complete circle of life, then goes back to the Creator... if we've done our job, that Elder now going to the spirit world should be pretty much in the same experiential level as that child coming to be born.

This description highlights the role of the Grandmother in mentoring the child on their journey from infant to Elder, through Ceremony and Traditional Teachings. This relationship is highlighted in the Cree nickname, "mosôm," that Grandfathers call their grandchildren, which repeats their own title back to the child. These teachings and Ceremonies direct and educate the child on their roles in their family and community at each stage of life and prepare them to one day take over the role of Elder so the cycle can renew itself with each generation. Elder Norma expresses a similar sentiment, stating, "We live through our grandchildren... We're a reflection of their lives."

Elder Muriel further explains this journey as a chain, road or path. "The Creator, the helpers, the ancestors and the Elders here on earth. That's what the Grandmothers' work

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<sup>5</sup> nokum – My Grandmother (Plains Cree)

<sup>6</sup> kisêyiniw – Elder (Plains Cree)

<sup>7</sup> ni mosôm – My grandfather (Plains Cree)

<sup>8</sup> mosôm – Informal word for grandfather, grandpa (Plains Cree)

is. . .they connect you to the ancestors. . .That’s the power.” Having a thriving cycle of life that produces wise Elders and Grandmothers in each generation is crucial to the continuation of culture and therefore health within Indigenous communities.

### **Ceremonies and Traditional Teachings Grandmothers Share That Are Key to the Well-Being of Children**

As conduits of culture, Grandmothers play an important role in teaching new parents about the Traditional Teachings and Ceremonies that are important during pregnancy, at birth, and in the first few years of life. Elder Muriel explains that Grandmothers help by “lead[ing] the young mom to review her parenting experience and process and begin to decolonize by practicing the teachings we are giving them.” In our sharing circles, we captured these Traditional Teachings and Ceremonies. These include teachings about *pregnancy, easing the journey from the spirit world to the physical world* for the babies being born. We also discussed the importance of *protecting the baby’s spirit* and practices that will ensure the child’s spirit remains within their physical body. An important teaching that the Grandmothers shared about parenting was that *children should be welcomed, celebrated, and cherished* regardless of the circumstances of their conception or birth. The Grandmothers also shared teachings about *childbirth, belly button teachings, baby showers* and *giving the child a spiritual name*.

#### ***Pregnancy***

The Grandmothers teach that it is important for the mother to take care of herself while pregnant because a healthy mom will help support a healthy baby. They explain that what the mother eats during pregnancy nourishes the baby, so it is important for the mother to consume healthy foods. They continue that because the baby is exposed to what the mother is exposed to, the mother should abstain from harmful substances, such as alcohol, drugs and cigarette smoke.

They also emphasize that women should try to remain in good spirits and keep a positive outlook during pregnancy by engaging in enjoyable activities and spending time with people that make them happy. The Grandmothers continue that because the baby's spirit is delicate, the mother should avoid negative spirits and negative people while pregnant. The Grandmothers explain that the child can hear the outside world from inside the womb and that mom, dad and family should sing and speak to the baby and play powwow music for them, as bonding with the baby starts in this way. Importantly, while pregnant, Elder Muriel explains that people need to "consult or ask your Grandmother or Grandfather which Ceremonies you're allowed to go to because there're some that they can go to." The Grandmothers clarified that some Ceremonies, such as burial ceremonies, should be avoided due to the presence of negative spirits that can impact the baby. The Grandmothers emphasize the importance of social support during pregnancy. They underline that it is crucial to have support from your partner, family, and community for all the changes and difficulties that may come with pregnancy. They define the father's role as one of supporting the pregnant mother and explain that Grandmothers, mothers and aunties frequently play important support roles during pregnancy as they may have gone through comparable experiences.

### ***Easing the Journey From the Spirit world***

The function of breastfeeding, the Moss Bag and the baby Swing as practices, teachings and spiritual items emerged as a theme in the data: they ease the transition of the baby from the womb into the world. Elder Muriel explains, "The bonding between mother and child goes back to pre-birth when the mother provided life to the child through the umbilical cord." She explains that this bonding continues through breastfeeding:

...the Moss Bag and the Swing are all a continuation of the experience of being in the womb. When the heart starts pumping, that baby starts swaying. That swaying is continued in the Swing after they are born. When children are born, they are birthed into a very strange environment. They came from the spirit world. And so, we do all we can to prevent the shock of transitioning from one world into another. We do this through breastfeeding, the Moss Bag, and the Swing.

**Breastfeeding.** The Grandmothers spoke about how breastfeeding creates a bonding experience between the mother and child and is important for nourishing them. Elder Muriel explains,

We know the earth as our mother. That mother gives us life; sustains our life. So, as mothers and Mother Earth, we have the same job: We breastfeed our children because all the health that that child needs is in our milk. And you bond with your child forever. When you breastfeed, you provide safety, you provide identity and strength.

**The Moss Bag.** Another teaching shared by the Grandmothers included the Moss Bag (figure 5). Moss Bags keep the child wrapped tightly and helps them feel safe like they did in the womb. Elder Lorraine tells us,

My [mother-in-law] told me you have to make a Moss Bag for your baby. A lot of young moms don't wrap their babies. And she said that's why babies are so cranky because they don't feel tight, they don't feel secure. And Moss Bags make babies feel really tight and secure. She made a Moss Bag, a Swing and baby moccasins for my newborn daughter.

Making gifts such as these for babies is seen as an honour.



*Figure 5. A Moss Bag made by a friend of Elder Lorraine.*

**The Swing.** All the Grandmothers fondly remember the baby Swings they used (figure 6). They explain that a Swing is made by securing pieces of rope between two hooks in the ceiling. Then, a blanket is wrapped inward around the ropes. Sticks, attached between the ropes, are used to keep the Swing open. A string that hangs down from the Swing allows the parents to rock the Swing from the bed below. Elder Lorraine explains, “Everybody had a Swing for their baby. It was a big thing to have somebody come and make the Swing for you. Whoever made the Swing was just so proud. Elder Muriel explains that the Swing is a spiritual item. “All the parts of the Swing, like the rope and the sticks, are spiritual and do something to protect the child.”



*Figure 6.* A traditional baby Swing. Elder Muriel smiling at her grandchild, who is in a Swing.

### ***Protecting the Baby's Spirit***

Another theme in the Grandmothers' teachings was a focus on protecting the baby's spirit. The baby's spirit is seen as delicate and unable to defend against negative spirits. There are many teachings that aim to protect the baby.

**The Soft Spot on the Baby's Head.** Elder Darlene describes, "[The soft spot on the head] is the opening to the spirit world. . . their little spirit is very sensitive... if you cover it, then [their spirit] stays within." The Grandmothers teach that a baby's head should remain covered to protect the spirit (figure 7). Elder Darlene continues, "[The bonnet] keeps them warm and also it protects them." Leaving the soft spot exposed or tapping on the baby's head could lead to the baby losing her spirit. Elder Darlene further explains that if the spirit is away from the child, they

may seem dazed. If this happens, a Ceremony is held to bring their spirit back into their body. When the spirit returns, the child lights up.



*Figure 7. A traditional bonnet. Elder Muriel's granddaughter wearing a beautiful bonnet in Muriel's daughter's arms.*

**Avoiding Negative Spirits.** Traditionally, children under twelve are not brought to funerals or grave sites because they might encounter bad spirits that their sensitive spirits could not handle. The Grandmothers teach that if this happens, it can cause illness or changes in the child's behaviour. They explain that it is better if the child says goodbye to a loved one at home. In Woodland Cree culture, this teaching also extends to spiritual Ceremonies, such as the Round Dance. If a child is carried by the mother while she dances, the child could be seen as an offering and could be taken to the spirit world.

When carrying a baby, the Grandmothers teach that it should be facing inward toward the parent's chest. This is to ensure that the baby is protected from bad spirits when the parent is walking. Additionally, another teaching from the Grandmothers is to keep the windows in a baby's room covered so they cannot see negative spirits through the windows, and to not leave

infants alone at night. Elder Lorraine explains that traditionally, “The baby wasn't in another room. The baby was in the room with you all the time, not in the nursery.”

### ***Children Should be Welcomed, Celebrated and Cherished***

The importance of love and the welcoming of children is taught to parents by the Grandmothers. An important teaching is that children should be welcomed, celebrated, and cherished. Elder Jackie explains, “That baby you’re carrying, it’s a gift from the Creator, you’ve only got it for a little while, you take care of it.” This teaching is a resurgence of the traditional belief toward having children. This teaching restores strength and positivity about bringing children into this world and counteracts the shame surrounding certain circumstances of having children that was brought by European religion and residential schools. Elder Norma shares, “I think that residential schools did a lot of damage, but so did religion due to shaming Indigenous communities about something we used to be. Bringing a baby into the world was a wonderful thing.”

### ***Childbirth***

“Sacred”, “Ceremony”, “precious”, “ancient”, “cherished”, “honoured”, and “celebrated”, were all words used by the Grandmothers to describe childbirth. Indigenous birth is seen as a sacred Ceremony. There were some cultural variations in the Grandmother’s teachings on childbirth. For instance, while some of the Grandmothers’ cultures teach that the labour room should be silent, so the child would not be afraid to come into the world, other cultures included drumming as part of the birthing Ceremony.

The Grandmothers see value in Elders being present during childbirth to encourage breastfeeding and a healthy lifestyle and to speak of Traditional Teachings. Elder Norma explains that Grandmothers can teach the mother “...to trust her power, give her courage, and the

knowledge that her body knows what to do during childbirth. Teach her to trust herself and acknowledge all the women who have given birth before her.”

The treatment of the placenta is another sacred element of childbirth. Following birth, it is wrapped in birch bark or cloth and carefully handled as it is placed in the forest or hung from a tree. There is a traditional Ceremony that includes the placenta, but it is too sacred to write about and must be heard directly from an Elder who has permission to share it.

The role of the father in childbirth is that of a “coach” or support person. Elder Norma believes that having the father present during birth brings him closer to the child. “I think just having them there when the baby is born just makes them so much more involved... It’s just a miracle! If they’re there when it’s happening...” Elder Darlene agrees, “I would like to see the man in there because it brings them closer to their child.” The Grandmothers explain that the father can perform special tasks like cutting the umbilical cord.

### ***Belly Button Teachings***

The Grandmothers from Woodland Cree, Plains Cree, Dene and Blackfoot cultures similarly teach that the small section of the umbilical cord that falls off to form the belly button is important and should be dried and saved in various ways. Elder Darlene tells the story of what was done with belly buttons in her Woodland Cree culture.

For us, it was [that] you put [the belly button] where you want your child to be.

For my oldest, I put it in [a] popular mechanics [book] and he was a plumber and owned his own company for construction... My mother put [my brothers’ belly buttons] in a wood pile so they would be hard workers. My sister’s [belly button] was put in a sewing machine and she sews the most fantastic designs...

Elder Darlene also explains that eventually, the belly buttons disappear. “Somehow the belly buttons were gone. They went on to fulfill the child’s dreams.” Elder Muriel agrees and continues to share that if you put a belly button in a gun case, that person would be a good hunter. Elder Lorraine’s mother-in-law taught her to wrap up the belly button and take care of it,

So your baby does not wander all their life looking for their belly button. People in your family that slam cupboards...and doors, always looking for something. Those are the people that lost their belly buttons, and they always spend their whole life looking for it.

Elder Muriel describes, “Yeah, they’ll look all over”, and continues to explain there is a joke that goes, “Where was I born? I’m looking for my belly button.” The Grandmothers’ teachings convey that the belly button holds a connection to one’s identity and if it is lost then part of that person’s identity is also lost. In Plains Cree culture, belly buttons can be kept safe in a special leather pouch (figure 8).



*Figure 8.* A leather, beaded pouch for keeping the child’s belly button. In Plains Cree culture, a pouch like this is used to store a child’s belly button and to keep it safe.

Elder Jackie shares a different perspective and explains that in Blackfoot culture, the belly button might be sewn into a special dress, as hers was (figure 9). Her Grandmother raised her from when she was a baby. When her umbilical cord fell off, her Grandmother sewed it into a pocket in a buckskin dress. Her Grandmother died before she learned the full reason behind this practice, but from what she has learned from her aunt, she understands that it is because “[the belly button] is that bond that you have, the physical attachment... a connection between the baby and the Grandmother. She wanted me to have it for future survival and well-being... Grandma wants to see me live a good life.”



*Figure 9.* Elder Jackie, age 7, wearing the buckskin dress that her Grandmother sewed for her. Inside the pouch on her waist is her belly button. Jackie's family recovered this dress from the Glenbow museum where it was on display.

Elder Norma expresses that there are no specific Métis teachings on the belly button, but that Métis people often practice teachings, such as these belly button teachings, from First Nation groups due to their closely connected histories.

### ***Baby Showers***

Baby showers serve a different purpose in the Grandmothers' Indigenous culture than in Western society; they are meant to serve as an opportunity for the community to meet and connect with the new baby. They are not to be held before the child is born. The reasons for this differed between the Grandmothers' teachings. Some Grandmothers articulate that having the shower before the birth and being surrounded by gifts and items for the baby might mean more grief if the pregnancy is lost. Elder Darlene explains this, "We never had a baby shower before, because, to us, it's like you're giving bad spirits. It's bad medicine for the baby". They all agree that the purpose of the baby shower is to celebrate and connect with the child. Elder Norma elaborates, "A baby shower is more community-driven... you pick your family, your extended family, your friends, to have a baby shower. It's a special occasion where you get to bring the baby to show [everyone]. It speaks to kinship."

### ***Giving the Child a Spiritual Name***

A naming Ceremony honours the child coming into the world. The Grandmothers teach that the spiritual name given to children protects them from harm. Children often receive names from their grandparents or other Elders as gifts. Many of the Grandmothers were named by their grandparents. Elder Darlene's Grandfather named her Sekpatchwan, meaning "braids". Because she was born prematurely, she was not presented to her Grandfather until she was older than is typical. By this time, she had little braids in her hair. She expresses the importance of this name

to her, “I had different names, but my real name was Sekpatchwan.” Elder Jackie was given a different name by each set of grandparents.

On my Grandmother's side... the name that they gave me was Bosabinaki... That was given to me right after I was born. And what it means in Blackfoot is "my green eyes" because I've got green eyes. And then, on my dad's side, they call me Apuiski. That means “light-faced woman”.

Jackie explains that in the Blackfoot culture, a traditional naming Ceremony includes bringing the new baby into a teepee. The Elders and grandparents would pray over the child and speak about what was needed to integrate the baby into the community. Elder Lorraine’s Grandfather named all the children in their family. She describes, “My name is Be-tł’a-ma, which means ‘stinky, dirty hands’. He would look for a characteristic in a baby, and he would name them after it.”

### **Challenges Carrying out Their Roles as Grandmothers**

As the Grandmothers discussed the immense and numerous roles that Indigenous Grandmothers carry out in their families and communities, they shared the challenges they face in carrying out these roles. There were three main challenges that the Grandmothers spoke about: 1) the need to include and respect Grandmothers more in Indigenous communities and within modern society, 2) the ways the functioning of modern society interferes with traditional practices, and 3) the harms of colonial practices, such as residential school, that the Grandmothers continue to work to overcome and heal for themselves, their families, and their communities.

### *Including and Respecting Grandmothers*

Several of the Grandmothers highlighted a change in how Elders are treated by families and communities in the present day, as compared to when they were young or in the distant past. While emphasizing their ongoing, vital roles and involvement in family and community, they also express concern for the insidious changes that deemphasize the presence of and connection to Elders and Grandmothers. Elder Darlene shares a concern,

We are losing the honour for the grandparents, Grandmothers... So many of them are ending up in old age homes or nursing homes. Meanwhile... our granddaughters and great-granddaughters are without a Grandmother... We need to step forward and start looking after our Grandmothers.

Elder Darlene further explains that in her community grandparents used to make the final decision on all important matters, but today at the Chief of Council meetings she does not see any grandparents or Grandmothers there. Elder Darlene highlights she is teaching culture on a reserve but that “they've lost their culture, lost their language. And then not only that, but I know that many of the Grandmothers are not being accessed.” Elder Muriel agrees, “If the world paid attention to our Elders, the world would be different.” Looking back on her childhood, Elder Lorraine explains, “In those days grandparents ruled.”

Elder Norma emphasizes that overall, Grandmothers are valued and respected in her experience as a Métis Elder and Knowledge Keeper. She tells us,

In my culture and with the Grandmothers that I meet, they're included. We try to include Grandmothers in every meeting that we have... either in a spiritual way or a cultural way. If the youth [are] having a conference, they'll invite one of us to come and do a prayer. In the different regions that we have and the different

communities, [the Grandmothers] are involved in almost every aspect of the groups that do stuff in the community.

Métis grandmothers are playing key roles within their community and continue to be included and consulted for spiritual and cultural leadership. This is generally true for First Nations Grandmothers as well, but the overall change towards a loss of respect is concerning for the Grandmothers.

### ***Society Interfering***

The Grandmothers communicate how modern society and institutions such as the healthcare system have created barriers to practicing their traditions and Ceremonies. For instance, Elder Lorraine shares the example of smudging in the hospital as one such obstacle. Smudging is a traditional practice of burning medicines, such as sage, as part of a Ceremony, to cleanse energy or spirits and for praying. Birth and death are life events when smudging would traditionally take place as part of a Ceremony. Elder Lorraine expresses frustration with barriers faced by members of her community who wanted to smudge in the hospital. “Our people have to go and stand outside the hospital [or] smudge in their car when they want to smudge with their with their relative in the room.” She explains that even when hospital rooms are set up with reverse airflow for smudging, the hospital policy is that they must be notified 24 hours in advance of smudging, which is not always possible or practical. She adds, “You have to have a security guard come in, check everybody and make sure nobody's going to smoke something they're not supposed to... how humiliating.” Elder Norma expresses her belief that the reasons for this treatment by institutions such as healthcare must go beyond practical considerations,

I never understood how come there's an issue about smudging when the church has been using incense for years. In the hospitals, when they did the last rites, they always use incense. How is that different from smudging... as far as the health reasons?

These experiences illustrate how traditional Indigenous practices fail to be considered within Western society and how obstructive institutional policies can be for important cultural practices like smudging.

### **Harms of Colonial Practices**

All the Grandmothers spoke of the harms of residential schools, some from personal experience, and of the sometimes devastating and lasting effects they see in their community. Despite this, there was generally a tone of optimism about the healing and change that is taking place and a desire to help to support healthy families and communities to continue to move in a positive direction. Elder Muriel exclaims, "We are strong".

**Having a Hard Time Getting Language Back.** The Grandmothers discussed how residential schools interrupted language and affected attitudes toward language for Indigenous Peoples. Elder Lorraine explains, "We were shamed into not speaking our language. We were beaten up and everything. . . That's why even now a lot of communities are having a hard time getting their language back." Elder Darlene tells the difficult truth, "We were murdered for speaking our language." Elder Jackie shares her experience,

In residential school, my first language was Blackfoot, and I didn't speak a word of English. I used to get punished for that. Going through that, it conditioned my mind – don't speak your language, you'll get into trouble. . . Today [language] is so important. . . Our kids, the next generation have to keep learning our language.

Elder Muriel describes that she now understands how being told not to speak their language could manifest as feelings of unworthiness and result in attitudes that, “. . . do not value the language. I could see something taking root in the brain and from that, a negative belief is born that is passed from generation to generation.” Elder Darlene, who teaches Cree in schools, explains why learning their language in school is crucial for Indigenous children today. “Because [kids] don’t hear [their language] at home, they need to take pride in their language – this is who I am”.

**Intergenerational Trauma Interrupts Family Systems.** Intergenerational trauma was a consistent theme of discussions. The Grandmothers convey that it is necessary to understand how intergenerational trauma occurs to comprehend how historical events, like residential schools, are affecting Indigenous families and communities today. They explain that parents today need to understand the truth about what happened in the past so that they can understand why their parents acted the way they did while raising them. Elder Jackie tells a personal story about intergenerational trauma and its effects on child-rearing. She speaks about how what she went through in residential school affected her, and affected her children, both when they were young and when they became parents.

Because of residential school, I did not know how to love. I did not know how to tell the truth to my kids. I did not know how to respect my kids. I didn't know how to be humble. Because in residential school there [were] none of the Seven Sacred Teachings<sup>9</sup> I always talk about. None of those. My mother didn't have all those.

She explains,

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<sup>9</sup> The Seven Sacred Teachings include lessons on love, wisdom, respect, truth, humility, honesty, and courage.

Indigenous people have gone through discrimination, so much. Still, even our generation, I went through low self-esteem. So did our youth, they went through low self-esteem. They didn't know how to parent. That's all because of the intergenerational trauma that our parents put us through.

She describes the healing process she went through with her children. “I took a long time before I was able to go to my daughters and hold them... When I started doing that... they pushed away from me. That bonding should have happened when they were first born.”

The Grandmothers explain that the trauma from residential school was unconsciously passed on to the next generation. In one example, Elder Jackie discussed how she expected perfection from her children. She now realizes from where these unrealistic expectations and the disproportionate reactions of anger came. Elder Jackie was forced to fold towels and sheets in a very specific way while at residential school. She shares,

If you don't do it, you are in trouble. And I started doing that with my kids. . . If I looked in the closet and the towels were not folded how I wanted...I would get so mad because that anger was coming back because of the way the nuns [treated us]. No wonder there is intergenerational trauma. I see it in my kids, I see what I put them through.

Hearing this story helps Elder Muriel realize a similar pattern in her relationship with her children. She describes intergenerational trauma, “Just like a sickness, it spreads. I had to really understand how I was impacted.” Elder Jackie also recognizes how trauma moves through the generations.

When I think about the damage that the nuns and the priests did. No wonder we are lost, no wonder my parents were lost. No wonder my parents didn't know how to bond with us. And that bonding, I couldn't bond with my kids too.

She continues explaining how she understood her circumstances when she was little,

We thought it was our parents that sent us to residential school. We thought they didn't love us. My mom and dad never talked about residential school. Today, they are in the spirit world. Now I know why they were how they were parenting us.

**Interruption of Family Planning.** Another story told by the Grandmothers about how residential schools disrupted healthy family systems was from the interruption of family planning. Residential schools instilled shame about the woman's body and changes in puberty in young Indigenous women. Elder Darlene discusses her experience with her first menstrual period. "My mom was in residential school for fourteen years, so I didn't get that teaching. When it was time for me and I became a woman, I thought I was going to die." This reminds Elder Jackie of her experience, which she shares with us,

You know one thing about residential schools? When some of the girls started their periods, it was a bad thing. It was bad. And we felt dirty... that shame, it just traumatized us. I didn't know about it. I was scared. I was even scared when I got pregnant. I didn't know how to protect myself. I mean, I should have been on birth control.

She explains that this shame has been passed down to the next generation as well, with many of them not receiving adequate education about birth control from their parents who went through residential school. "[In residential school] they damaged us physically, mentally, sexually. . . No

wonder all these young teenagers are getting pregnant. They didn't know because their parents were afraid.”

**A Call For Reconciliation From Within.** The Grandmothers illustrate that there is much healing, understanding and reconciliation that needs to take place from within Indigenous families, individuals and communities. Elder Muriel expresses, “Young people don't understand – they don't connect the social dynamics of the present to the residential school. My kids. . . used to be mad at me because I never taught them their language. . .But they don't know why.” Elder Darlene describes that, while difficult, there is a need for understanding from the younger generations. “They don't realize that there is such a thing as forgiveness”. She continues, “They need reconciliation for themselves, not from the white people, but from their people.” Elder Muriel discusses one way for this internal reconciliation to happen.

Language... needs to be the first requirement to make true truth and reconciliation. That person needs to know where they come from, their identity, and how it was taken from them. Because if they know that they'll say, "You know what, I'm taking my power back", you know?

### ***Looking to the Future: Decolonization***

For the Grandmothers, one purpose of discussing the harms of colonial practices was to understand where the young people stand today, so they can better understand how to help them heal. Elder Jackie describes how she wishes to move into the future, “I am trying to stop that intergenerational trauma with my kids. Because somewhere it's got to stop. That's why I say the Seven Sacred Teachings are so important because it leaves you in peace and lets you live in harmony if you follow those.”

Elder Muriel describes that the booklet we are making together as part of the knowledge sharing for this research will be useful for young Indigenous women today.

We will be filling a need in our young women. And something that we never really gave to our children, but we didn't have it to give it to them. . . We have to look where this young woman is standing. She is a product of the residential school system. She's probably four or five generations from the time of the boarding school where everything was stripped from her parents. All the mythology, ideology, the Ceremonies. . . it's necessary to teach the young people that there are mountains that need to be moved and not necessarily by themselves.

Elder Jackie is also hopeful that the Traditional Knowledge we are gathering will fill a need for information for parents today. "All this information, that's going to help a lot of people, a lot of generations." In looking toward the future, Elder Darlene explains,

Yes, we do have a lot of damage[d], trauma[tized] children and adults walking around because of residential school. But now we have to change that. Bring back how we were raised before the Europeans came in. Now, we're going to start a whole new generation which is the seven generations . . . So, we start working on these ones that are going to be... I'm looking at it as the future of our children, our grandchildren, our great-grandchildren... These [children living with FASD] now know about FAS[D], and they're having healthy children... They're very healthy babies because the changes are already coming in. But they don't know about how we used to look after babies a long time ago. So, that's where this [work we are doing] is going to come in handy. And so, I honour it... [the

booklet] is going to be shown to the two little babies that I showed pictures of.

[They] can have this and they could pass it on to the next seven generations.

Elder Jackie shares her hopes for the future.

We need to teach today's generation and even the young Grandmothers that may have been affected by residential school to remind them of how important their roles are in their families and communities. Grandmothers are sacred in Indigenous communities and it's our responsibility to ensure that our family and community are guided in a positive way so that we can ensure that our future generations continue to teach their own children and grandchildren how to conduct themselves and treat others with love and respect.

### **Interpretation and Discussion of Research Findings**

This research employed sharing circles as an Indigenous research methodology to explore the experiences and perspectives of five Indigenous Grandmothers in Alberta (Archibald, 2008). It describes the roles of Indigenous Grandmothers, their experiences carrying out these roles and the challenges they face today. This thesis also documents and provides insights about traditional cultural teachings and Ceremonial practices during pregnancy, childbirth, and early life. Through trust- and relationship-building, the Grandmothers shared in-depth personal stories about their roles and Traditional Teachings and practices. The knowledge about traditional cultural teachings is important to document because these teachings and Ceremonies were traditionally at the heart of how Indigenous children learned about their cultural identity and how the knowledge and values of grandparents or Elders were transmitted and sustained. The Grandmothers in the Grandmother's Wisdom Network carry out the important role of teaching and mentoring their

children, grandchildren, and young people in their communities. The sharing circles we held with the Grandmothers resulted in rich conversations that spanned many topics.

First, this research explored the roles and experiences of Indigenous Grandmothers in Alberta. Through exploring the diverse experiences of five Indigenous Grandmothers, who have moved through the personal life stages of being a grandchild, child, mother, Grandmother, and in some cases, great-Grandmother, we were able to obtain a rich understanding of their current roles as Grandmothers within Indigenous kinship networks and communities. Indigenous Grandmothers serve as instrumental caregivers, Knowledge Keepers, cultural teachers, mentors for the next generation in the circle of life, and providers of love and self-esteem to children.

The findings of this work suggest that the role of Indigenous Grandmothers extends beyond family and includes responsibilities within the broader community. This is consistent with a participatory action research study that involved seven First Nations grandmothers from Alberta, Canada that found that Indigenous Grandmothers provide support for their families and communities as they educate others and pass on their cultural knowledge (Ginn & Kulig, 2015). Our results showed that Indigenous Grandmothers readily take on the role of a caring Elder and mentor for children in their community. This is highlighted by Elder Darlene's students calling her "kôkum Darlene" while she teaches Indigenous language and culture at schools. She shares Traditional Knowledge, serves as a role model, and provides a sense of comfort that allows her role to go beyond that of a teacher — she takes on the role of a Grandmother for her students. Of particular interest in this work, is the finding that it is common and culturally accepted for Grandmothers to embrace or adopt grandchildren that are not biologically related to them. This practice positively affects those children's lives and the community as a whole. A narrative paper that examined the role of Native American Grandmothers in the United States found there to be

similar flexibility of kinship roles within the communities they studied (Byers, 2010). This is consistent with the Indigenous worldview that recognizes the connectedness of all things. For example, Métis Elder Maria Campbell (2007) discusses the Cree concept of wâhkôhtowin:

Today [wâhkôhtowin] is translated to mean kinship, relationship, and family as in human family. But at one time, from our place it meant the whole of creation.

And our teachings taught us that all of creation is related and interconnected to all things within it. (p. 5)

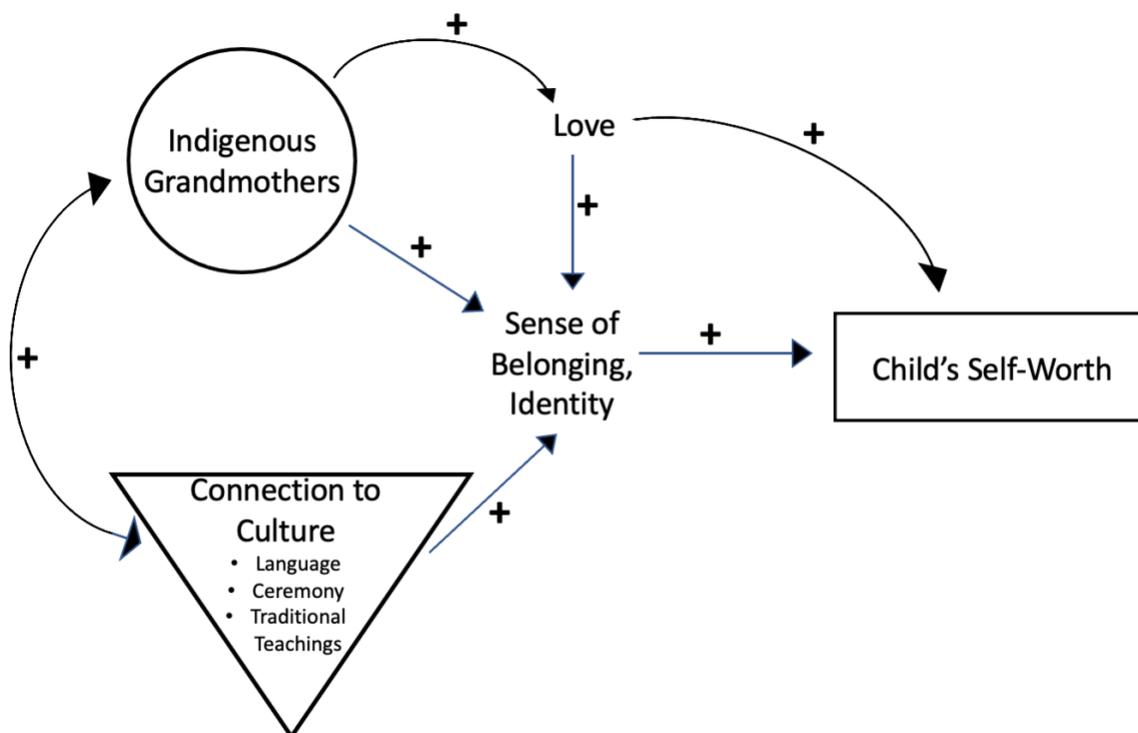
As the Indigenous worldview honours the relationships between humans, animals, water and the earth, it follows that a blood relationship of Grandmother to biological grandchild would be less important than the human-to-human connections that reflect this wholeness.

Another finding of this work showed that the caregiving provided by Indigenous Grandmothers for children can be important in keeping children in the community and mitigating the negative effects of the child welfare system. This finding is corroborated by other literature from Canada and the United States that showed that one motivation for grandparents to provide care for their grandchildren is to keep them out of the child welfare system (Bahr, 1994; Cross & Day, 2008). Additionally, our findings suggest that the impact of a Grandmother's love helped families overcome challenges, including financial struggles and gaps in parenting knowledge for those parents who may not have been prepared for the parenting role by their upbringing due directly or indirectly to colonial practices like residential schools. Another major benefit to Grandmothers being caregivers is the benefit it provides to the Grandmothers themselves. Acting as caregivers helps them stay involved and active within their family and community and provides them with a sense of purpose. This finding is consistent with two qualitative studies, one by Dennis and Brewer (2017) that interviewed Lakota Elders, and another study by Gabel et

al. (2016) that used photovoice, which both recognized the mutual benefit of the grandparent-grandchild relationship for Elders. The Grandmothers in this work discussed being caregivers to grandchildren as a positive, rewarding experience, and no negative effects were voiced. While most other literature also explored the benefits of Grandmothers as caretakers, some sources looked at the struggles of this position. The challenges for Grandmothers in the caregiving role illuminated in other papers included financial strain, feeling taken advantage of, and difficulties in navigating parent-child relationships with adult children (Boon-Nanai et al., 2022; Brown, 2017).

The results of this work also clarified an important connection between children's relationship with their Indigenous Grandmothers, children's connection to culture and their self-worth (figure 10). Our results affirmed the role of Grandmothers as keepers and teachers of culture (Brown, 2017; Byers, 2010; Ginn & Kulig, 2015). Additionally, the Grandmothers taught us that connection to culture, including language, Ceremony and Traditional Teachings, can create an important sense of belonging and strengthen cultural identity. The Grandmothers explained that a sense of belonging and identity are also strengthened through strong kinship connections. This is beautifully echoed by Wilson (1996), "The stories handed down from Grandmother to granddaughter are rooted in a deep sense of kinship responsibility, a responsibility that relays a culture, an identity, and a sense of belonging essential to my life" (p. 7). Our results also explored how an Indigenous Grandmother's love for her grandchild contributes to the child's sense of self-worth. This increase in self-worth happens directly through receiving love, and indirectly by increasing the child's sense of belonging ("I belong here") and identity ("this is who I am"). A bi-directional relationship exists between the connection to culture and the involvement of Indigenous Grandmothers since Grandmothers

provide a connection to culture through their teachings, and a connection to culture emphasizes the importance of Grandmothers. Thus, both the actions of Indigenous Grandmothers and increased connection to culture through other means, like school programs, can increase a child's self-worth through multiple interacting pathways. A stronger connection to culture reinforces the presence and inclusion of Indigenous Grandmothers, creating positive feedback in the process of increasing a child's self-worth. Taken together, these results show that the role of Indigenous Grandmothers in a child's life and a child's connection to culture have a complex and self-perpetuating relationship that both contribute to a child's self-worth.



*Figure 10.* A child's self-worth is shaped by Indigenous Grandmothers and a connection to culture. The roles of Indigenous Grandmothers in a child's life and a child's connection to culture have a complex and self-perpetuating relationship that both contribute to the growth of a child's self-worth.

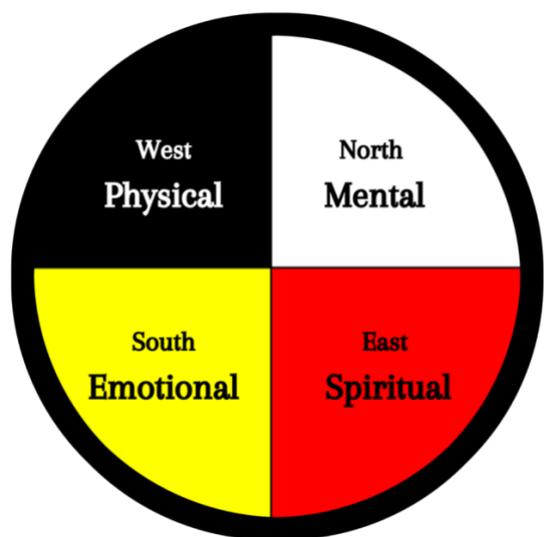
The findings of this thesis support the importance of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's call to action that aims to revitalize and preserve the Indigenous

language (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). For Indigenous Grandmothers who know their traditional language, their role as Knowledge Keepers and cultural teachers includes teaching language to children within their family and community. The findings of this work recognize that language provides a connection to spirituality. Additionally, language and the connection to culture it provides can strengthen an individual's identity. These findings are supported by Peterson et al. (2021) who discuss a language revitalization project and highlight the centrality of language in spirituality, cultural connection and identity. Of particular interest in this work was the way the Grandmothers discussed language in the context of reconciliation and cultural reclamation. Elder Muriel expressed that revitalizing and learning one's traditional language allows that person to recognize that culture and identity were interrupted by harmful colonial practices. This recognition then fuels and inspires the power needed to reclaim one's culture and identity.

This research also explored the traditional practices and Ceremonies that Grandmothers teach about pregnancy, birth and new life. We captured both practical and sacred lessons that are fundamental to supporting parents in giving their children a healthy start to life. Teachings about breastfeeding, the Moss Bag, the Swing, protecting the baby's spirit, care of the belly button, baby showers and giving spiritual names were investigated in great depth. There was an emphasis on how important it is for the next generation of parents to know the traditional way children were brought into this world and raised as this is a crucial step in cultural reclamation, decolonization, reconciliation, and healing from the violent removal of Traditional Indigenous Knowledge by racist policies and colonial practices.

The Grandmothers aim to use their Traditional Teachings to educate parents in traditional parenting practices to ensure children are brought up with healthy bodies, minds and spirits.

Here, I will use the Medicine Wheel to organize and interpret their teachings about cultural practices and Ceremonies to understand how they encompass the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual states of being that together make up a balanced, healthy person. The Medicine Wheel is an Indigenous framework for numerous teachings and is seen as a sacred approach to healing for many Indigenous Peoples in North America (Wenger-Nabigon, 2010). It is represented by a circle that is divided into four, with each quadrant embodying one of the four directions. Each of the five Grandmothers had different ways of representing the details, colours, orientations and teachings of the Medicine Wheel. Figure 11 shows one of the Woodland Cree Medicine Wheels, as taught by Elder Darlene, that has the four states of being situated within it.



*Figure 11.* A Woodland Cree Medicine Wheel, as taught by Elder Darlene, shows the four states of being – mental, spiritual, emotional and physical.

The Grandmothers' teachings about pregnancy can be viewed as encompassing all directions and states of being as they are meant to guide the mother to physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health so that the new baby she is carrying will also be healthy. Physically, the mother should nourish her body and avoid toxins, mentally, she should remain in good spirits and surround herself with positive energy, spiritually, she should avoid certain

Ceremonies to protect the child, and emotionally, she should talk and sing to the baby to initiate bonding.

As the baby transitions from the womb to the world, the Grandmother's teachings about easing the transition of the baby from the spiritual to the physical world can be interpreted as including both the spiritual and physical directions of the Medicine Wheel. The Grandmothers teach that during breastfeeding, the mother provides physical nourishment for her baby, just as the mother earth provides physical nourishment for humans and other forms of life. The Moss Bag is meant to mimic the security of the womb and bring comfort to the spirit and physical body of newborns as they become familiar with their physical state of being in the world. The Swing provides both physical comfort, with its rocking motion, and spiritual protection for the child with the sacred components of the structure that keep the child safe.

Teachings that I view as fitting into the eastern door of the Medicine Wheel, where spirituality sits, included teachings about protecting the baby's spirit. These included covering the soft spot on the baby's head, avoiding funerals and certain Ceremonies, and other lessons that ensure the child's spirit remains inside their physical body. Giving children a spiritual name and being blessed and welcomed to the community by Elders are other important teachings that provide spiritual protection for children. Teachings that speak to the emotional state of being, located in the south of the Medicine Wheel included the teachings about the importance of welcoming, loving and cherishing children. The lessons about the role of the father as emotional support during childbirth also fall into this quadrant, although their larger role as a parent spans all states of being.

I would classify the teachings that focus on the importance of the education of young parents in traditional parenting practices as part of the mental state of being, found in the

northern quadrant of the Medicine Wheel. Mental strength is also important for the mother to make healthy choices during pregnancy and for the state of mind held throughout childbirth as the mother learns lessons from Elders or Grandmothers about courage and trusting her power. Overall, the Grandmothers' teachings speak to all the directions of the Medicine Wheel and the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual states of being that come together to create well-being, balance and health.

The findings on traditional cultural practices and Ceremonies surrounding pregnancy, childbirth and new life in this thesis advance the wealth of knowledge recorded in this subject area. While some of the teachings and Ceremonies that were recorded in our results are also found in other resources, they were not explored in as much detail or depth as they are in this work (FNHA & PHO, 2021; National Aboriginal Council of Midwives, 2017; National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health, 2012; Stuecher, 1991). Additionally, in our results, we were able to capture teachings that are specific to Indigenous cultures in Alberta, which cannot be found in other resources or literature. Our findings highlighted the sacredness of childbirth and the importance of cherishing babies as gifts from the Creator. This was also discussed in multiple other nationwide sources for Canada and one traditional parenting manual from the United States (FNHA & PHO, 2021; National Aboriginal Council of Midwives, 2017; National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health, 2012; Stuecher, 1991). Further, we discussed the importance of breastfeeding for providing nutrients to the child and bonding between the mother and child; this teaching was also included in a parenting booklet that discussed Traditional Teachings about parenting from across Canada and in a report about the health and wellness of First Nations women and girls living in British Columbia, Canada. (FNHA & PHO, 2021; National Aboriginal Council of Midwives, 2017). The traditional

teaching about the sacred treatment of the placenta that we discussed in our results was also mentioned in a report from British Columbia (FNHA & PHO, 2021), and in a publication by the National Aboriginal Council of Midwives (2017) that tells stories and teachings about pregnancy, birth and parenting. The later resource also includes teachings about the sacredness of the umbilical cord and about naming ceremonies. Our findings emphasized the importance of protecting a baby's spirit due to its delicate nature, which was described in parenting guidebooks by Stuecher (1991) and National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health (2012), but our results discussed this teaching in a greater level of detail that includes specific teachings that protect the baby's spirit. The teachings about the use of Moss Bags and wrapping the baby to extend the experience of the womb were found in Indigenous parenting resources from the United States and Canada (National Aboriginal Council of Midwives, 2017; Stuecher, 1991).

Interestingly, there were commonalities and agreement on some of the teachings and practices of the Grandmothers, who come from different Nations and cultures across Alberta. While there were notable differences with specific teachings, like whether there should be drumming during childbirth, or the specifics of how the belly button should be kept, overall, the commonalities were evident. However, this research did not aim to delineate differences between the practices in each Grandmother's culture, so some differences may have been overlooked. The Grandmothers were not asked to correct or comment on differences directly, rather the information stemmed from sharing stories and each practice and teaching that was shared was appreciated and respected by the other Grandmothers.

Next, this research investigated the challenges that come with being a Grandmother in the present day. Exploring this topic was necessary for understanding how to best assist the next generation in cultivating Traditional Knowledge and practices, nurturing self-worth and forming

healthy family systems to support the well-being of future generations. Through these discussions, important findings about intergenerational trauma and how it has affected Indigenous family systems today were illuminated. For instance, low self-esteem is shaped by the historical trauma of residential school, and it is passed on through generations. This low self-esteem is what now needs to be healed in the younger generation with the help of Grandmothers and a connection to culture. In our work, language served as an example of how culture was stripped from Indigenous Peoples in residential schools and how Indigenous communities are still feeling the effects today.

The ways in which attitudes and policies in modern society interfere with traditional practices and the role of Grandmothers were also discussed. These challenges included the Grandmothers contending with a deemphasis on the respect of Elders in the present day. This concern is interesting when considered in the context of work by Fowler (1990), which analyzed the intentional disruption of the Native American Arapaho society by the government to gain control over these Indigenous people. “One of the primary objectives of federal officials was to discredit and undermine the status of [E]lders and other leaders and to limit their political role in Arapaho society to the greatest extent possible” (p. 151). The author discussed how female Elders suffered the biggest loss of their status due to the patriarchal and youth-dominated nature of modern society. The recognition of a loss of influence was expressed by most of the Grandmothers in this work, although the connection to intentional disruption by colonial forces was not discussed as a potential catalyst for this process. Elder Norma shared her experience, which did not include the same loss of inclusion and respect within the Métis community in Alberta as the Grandmothers from First Nations communities voiced.

Other challenges explored by the Grandmothers included the discriminatory policies that prevent Indigenous cultural practices, like smudging, from being carried out in hospitals. A descriptive qualitative study that looked at the reintegration of Indigenous cultural safety into hospital-based births also recognized the importance of allowing smudging in hospitals (Wiebe et al., 2015). Wiebe et al. (2015) also discussed the importance of hospitals offering the option for the umbilical cord and placenta to be taken home for Ceremonial reasons, which is consistent with the culturally important elements of childbirth illuminated by the Grandmothers in the results of this thesis. In a report by the Métis Nation of Alberta, Métis mothers expressed that while some institutions and providers were not against incorporating cultural practices into birth, they also did not encourage them, which discouraged the mothers from seeking out the support of these practices (Métis Nation of Alberta, 2022). This report also spoke about another hospital policy that restricted cultural practices: Limiting the number of support people allowed in the birthing room does not allow for the traditional large kinship support network of extended family to be present.

Some of the Grandmothers spoke about recognizing that they did not have what they needed to give the younger generation, from a parenting standpoint, due to the trauma and harm they endured through colonial practices directly, or through the intergenerational trauma that progressed through their families. A similar experience of not feeling like they were taught how to parent, or provided role models for how to parent, was echoed by Indigenous Grandmothers in other ethnographic research that took place in Canada and in the report by the Métis Nation of Alberta that explored the experiences of Métis mothers (Meadows et al., 2004; Métis Nation of Alberta, 2022). An important and interesting component of the discussion about intergenerational trauma in our work was that the Grandmothers, as the older generation, see a

need for the younger generation to find forgiveness for their parents and Elders who could not provide them with what they needed when they were young. There was a call from the Grandmothers for reconciliation from within Indigenous communities and families. This speaks to Indigenous Peoples' power to create change for themselves, without having to wait for reconciliatory actions from outside organizations, such as the government or the church. While external truth and reconciliation are still regarded as essential, the internal reconciliation and forgiveness that the Grandmothers spoke about was also seen as an important and powerful step in the healing process. This internal reconciliation speaks to an interesting perspective on what can be done to heal and look forward to the future seven generations that are on their way.

If we take a macro view, there is a common thread that runs through the results section of this work: Identity. In the section "Harms of Colonial Practices", the Grandmothers speak about identity being taken from Indigenous Peoples through residential school practices. In the rest of the results section, the Grandmothers speak about numerous teachings that restore and strengthen the identity of children. For example, Elder Muriel explains that breastfeeding provides identity to the child through the bond it forms with the mother. Additionally, the Grandmothers describe that giving a child a spiritual name, which is part of their identity, offers the child spiritual protection. The belly button teachings explain that if the belly button was not taken care of properly, the child would not know where they came from, which also speaks to identity. The Grandmothers also describe how learning their native language helps children to reclaim their identity. Finally, the Grandmothers describe some of the roles of Grandmothers, such as providing love to children and a connection to culture, as contributing to a strong identity for children. Taken together, it is clear that reclaiming and strengthening identity is seen as a crucial component of decolonization by the Grandmothers and this value is directly reflected in their

teachings. The way the Grandmothers speak about identity demonstrates that it is inseparable from physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health for Indigenous Peoples.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

The strength of this research includes the enthusiastic involvement of the Indigenous Grandmothers. The vision of supporting maternal, child and youth health in Alberta arose from the Grandmothers, as did the specific idea for this project. They were involved and interested in the project. We were able to meet multiple times, both online and in person, which facilitated relationship building, trust, and ample time for gathering and checking information. This research was a positive experience for the Grandmothers who took part in it. The sharing circle conversations were a wonderful way to bring together Indigenous Grandmothers across different cultural backgrounds. We talked and told stories about the Grandmothers' teachings and life experiences. The Grandmothers built upon each other's ideas and re-awakened their memories about some forms of knowledge or teachings that they had received.

The Indigenist anti-colonial research framework utilized in this work provided a culturally appropriate structure for this work to succeed. Rooting the work in Ceremony, and using sharing circles with Indigenous storytelling, allowed stories and teachings to be shared in a productive way. Additionally, several of the Grandmothers have participated in other academic research and contributed valuable experience. Furthermore, they are fierce advocates for Indigenous Peoples and are wise and compassionate. Another strength is the long-term relationship between my supervisor and the Grandmothers that predated this project, which provided a strong foundation for the work we carried out. Finally, the necessity to use virtual meeting strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic has primed the Grandmothers, who live across Alberta, to meet on a virtual platform. This allowed us to meet monthly over video-

conferencing software, which increased meeting frequency as meeting in person has cost-prohibitive travel expenses.

The limitations of this study include a lack of representation of Inuit living in Alberta. Additionally, only one Métis Grandmother is part of the Grandmothers' Wisdom Network. While the five Grandmothers in the advisory circle are satisfied with the makeup of the group, it is important to consider the scope of representation. Another limitation is that the Grandmothers are extremely busy dealing with other important challenges affecting their families and communities. The local impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the devastating reality of missing and murdered Indigenous women, incarceration and homelessness, and the mass graves being discovered at residential schools, all require the support and knowledge of the Grandmothers as Elders in their communities. While the Grandmothers dedicated ample time and energy to this project, it is important to note that their energy and focus were also occupied with other pressing matters. Finally, this research was conducted in the English language. For the Grandmothers for whom English is not their first language, richer data may have been generated if they were able to communicate in their first language. At least one of the Grandmothers expressed frustration with not being able to express herself the same way in English because the English language does not have the right descriptors for the topics discussed.

### **Conclusion**

This thesis describes and clarifies the roles of Indigenous Grandmothers in Alberta. We found that Grandmothers are instrumental in providing care for children in their families and communities. This caregiving helps families overcome challenges and helps children remain under the care of people in their communities who can provide them love and a connection to culture, rather than being subjected to external care by the child welfare system. Grandmothers

also provide love and a sense of belonging to children, which helps build their identity, self-worth and self-esteem. Another way they strengthen identity in youth is by teaching them about or providing a connection to their culture, including language. The Grandmothers described their roles as rewarding with positive experiences Grandmothering and making a difference in the lives of children around them. Supportive early environments, such as strong communities and connections to kinship and culture can promote children's positive social, emotional and spiritual wellness. Ultimately, Indigenous Grandmothers contribute to the health of children in their families and communities by providing care and love and connecting them to culture, all of which strengthen their sense of self and set them up for success and well-being in their lives.

Grandmothers serve an important role in the lives of new parents, as Grandmothers hold and pass on important Traditional Teachings and Ceremonies about pregnancy, childbirth and new life. Knowledge about these teachings strengthens the identity of parents, connects them to something larger than themselves, and allows them to carry out traditional practices and utilize wisdom from Indigenous Elders. These outcomes for parents translate to healthier physical and social environments for the babies that are born into these families and can provide the children with a healthy start to life that will contribute to their lifelong wellness. The Traditional Teachings and Ceremonies captured in this work will inform resources, such as a booklet, that will reach Indigenous parents, especially those without a connection to community or Grandmothers, and give them the means to learn about the way children were brought into this world and raised by their ancestors.

This work also explores the challenges the Grandmothers face in carrying out their roles as Indigenous Grandmothers. The Grandmothers voiced concerns about the loss of respect for Grandmothers in Indigenous communities today, the culturally unsafe policies of institutions

such as health care, and how discussed intergenerational trauma stemming from residential schools continues to affect families today. Exploring these challenges was a way to understand where Grandmothers, parents and youth are situated in modern society, and how decolonization and healing can proceed. One way this can happen is through what the Grandmothers described as reconciliation from within. This includes younger generations understanding the truth of what happened in the past, connecting this truth to their present-day circumstances, and then finding understanding and forgiveness for their parents and Elders in order to heal and break the cycle of intergenerational trauma.

### **Applications of the Research**

This research follows the recommendations of The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada as it puts Indigenous Peoples' perspectives and experiences at the forefront (Government of Canada, 2022, November 24). The findings of this work could have implications for child welfare, informal care support, and maternal, child and youth health policies.

The results of this work support the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's call to action that commits to reducing the number of Indigenous children in the welfare system. One part of the solution for which this research advocates is keeping children in culturally appropriate environments by allowing children to remain in the community and supporting Grandmothers or other family members in their roles as caregivers. This would allow children to be raised surrounded with love and their Traditional Cultural knowledge, which would contribute to their self-esteem, help support their health, and set up healthy cycles for the coming generations. By using our work to understand the roles of the Grandmothers and their experience in carrying out these roles, policymakers will be better able to structure support for Indigenous Grandmothers in all they do to foster the health of the next generation. It would be valuable for future research to

explore what specific types of support are needed by Grandmothers to make their caregiving role easier and more successful.

The importance of creating community-controlled child welfare and foster care programs is a concrete recommendation from this research. This suggestion is in line with *Bill C-92 An Act respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis children, youth and families* (S.C. 2019, c. 24) that “affirms the rights of First Nations, Inuit and Métis to exercise jurisdiction over child and family services” (Government of Canada, 2019). The act was implemented on January 1, 2020, but any resulting changes that may have taken place since its implementation were not reflected in the experiences of the Grandmothers taking part in this research. The findings of this work reiterated the importance and emphasized the desire of Indigenous Grandmothers for their communities to have control over child welfare programs. As a next step in carrying out Bill C-92, Indigenous Services Canada is planning to co-develop a new child welfare system that is rooted in a community-based approach (Government of Canada, 2022, November 24). The results of this research could help inform such a system by providing the experience and insight of Indigenous Grandmothers on this topic.

Another call to action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission states, “We call upon the federal, provincial, territorial, and Aboriginal governments to develop culturally appropriate parenting programs for Aboriginal families” (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, 2016). The information about the roles of Grandmothers, and the cultural teachings and Ceremonial practices included in this research could help inform these parenting programs in Alberta. Additionally, future research could focus on the role of Grandfathers and the Traditional Knowledge they pass on to younger generations to gain this important perspective.

In conclusion, by examining the challenges the Grandmothers face in carrying out their roles, we gained valuable insights to inform future research and practice. First, the findings can inform the design of supports for Grandmothers in their role of creating healthy environments for children and youth in their communities. Second, the Grandmothers' concern about the loss of respect for Indigenous Grandmothers can be taken as a call to action for Indigenous youth and younger adults today. It could also inform policymakers in the creation of programs that emphasize access to and inclusion of Grandmothers and their knowledge. An example of one such program is the program in place in Grande Prairie Public School Division in Alberta, which brings in Elders, like Elder Darlene, to teach the children about Indigenous culture (Grande Prairie Public School Division, 2023). Third, the Grandmothers' concerns about culturally safe hospital policies expressed in this work can be used to shape policies around smudging going forward. The correction of damaging policies and institutional practices that contribute to the disappearance of Indigenous culture, knowledge and language is vital in promoting the continuation of cultural transmission to the next generation of Indigenous Peoples. The knowledge we recorded about the Traditional Teachings that pertain to the perinatal period could inform other culturally safe practices and care and inform change in institutional practices to support and celebrate the practice of traditional Indigenous cultures. This might include ensuring that the option is given to Indigenous parents to take the placenta home or arranging for young parents to engage with Elders for teaching and guidance while in the hospital. Finally, the experiences of intergenerational trauma captured in this work, and the call for understanding and reconciliation from within Indigenous families could be used as a resource for Indigenous youth, parents and grandparents as they navigate creating healthy family systems, decolonizing their

relationships and forming positive cycles of interaction that will benefit the health of future generations.

### **Knowledge Sharing**

The main knowledge-sharing component of this work is the creation and dissemination of a booklet that captures the Traditional Teachings and Ceremonies about pregnancy, childbirth and early life that the Grandmothers shared. This booklet, which is underway, is being written with new Indigenous parents as the main audience. It will provide them with access to the Traditional Teachings and Ceremonies of Indigenous cultures in Alberta and guide them on their parenthood journey. This booklet will also serve to record and keep these sacred teachings for future generations. There will be a large collection of resources listed within the booklet that will connect parents with Indigenous-specific wellness resources relevant to parenthood. We intend to distribute the booklet to all the avenues to which the Grandmothers have access through their work outside of the Grandmothers' Wisdom Network. These include the Fort McMurray Hospital in the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo and the Wetaskiwin Primary Care Network. We will also distribute it to other healthcare facilities and Indigenous wellness organizations within Alberta for use by the patients and the education of the healthcare providers. The Grandmothers are eager to use the booklet as a resource to teach workshops to healthcare providers to educate them on the Traditional Teachings and to familiarise them with how to use the booklet when supporting Indigenous parents in a healthcare setting. The Grandmothers have also expressed interest in utilizing the booklet to teach workshops to parents directly. These forms of knowledge sharing are in-line with integrated knowledge translation as described by Kothari et al. (2017), "Researchers work with knowledge users who identify a problem and have the authority to implement the research recommendations" (p. 299). The

Grandmothers will take the knowledge and resources we generated together and put them into practice through new and existing channels.

Other next steps that are important to ensure this work is utilized to its full potential could include completing a survey that asks new Indigenous parents and families how the Grandmothers' teachings can most effectively be shared with them. This insight would ensure we reach these stakeholders in a relevant and impactful way. Some other ideas that the Grandmothers have suggested for knowledge-sharing include producing a Grandmothers' Wisdom Network podcast and creating a video project to share the Grandmothers' teachings in their own voices.

### **Personal Reflections From an Indigenous Scholar**

I am immensely grateful for the opportunity to work with Elder Jackie, Elder Darlene, Elder Muriel, Elder Norma and Elder Lorraine on this work. It has been an enjoyable and life-changing experience for me, academically and personally. The Grandmothers are all extremely inspiring people, who are exceptionally intelligent and loving and generous in the work they carry out for their communities.

Completing this work has strengthened my connection to my Indigenous culture and given me opportunities to better understand my family's past. For me, this journey of connection to culture started when I visited Elder Muriel's home to complete the Pipe Ceremony to bless and initiate my thesis work. It was powerful to be in a circle while Elder Muriel spoke Cree to call upon our ancestors to watch over my project. It was special because my Indigenous ancestors also spoke Cree, so they would be able to understand her words from their places in the spirit world. I experienced a personal strengthening of my identity as an Indigenous person, just as the Grandmothers hope to achieve for numerous other Indigenous Peoples through this work. I

was able to directly experience the effect of the Grandmothers' teachings on myself and my family.

Elder Lorraine made a ribbon skirt for me as a gift partway through our work together (figure 12). Ribbon skirts are a symbol of resilience and a celebration of culture for Indigenous Peoples, and like the teepee, they represent a connection to Mother Earth (The Ribbon Skirt Project, n.d.; L. Albert, personal communication, May 16, 2022). It was very special to me to have a ribbon skirt made by Elder Lorraine – it felt like I was another of her adopted grandchildren. Over the holidays, my niece expressed interest in ribbon skirts, so she and I designed and made a ribbon skirt for her to wear the next time she attends a powwow. It was wonderful to feel confident enough in my identity as an Indigenous person to make the skirt and to be able to pass this knowledge, pride and power on to my nine-year-old niece. I witnessed how being connected to traditional knowledge can create intergenerational strength.



*Figure 12.* A photo of me in my ribbon skirt that I sent to Elder Lorraine to show her that it fit and how happy I was to have this special gift.

For me, another striking part of this thesis journey was how my passage into motherhood paralleled the work I was completing with the Grandmothers. I became pregnant halfway through this project. The Grandmothers' teachings and wisdom about pregnancy, childbirth and parenting were immediate and relevant to me. I appropriated the teachings with an attentiveness and focus that was only possible due to my personal stake in the information as an expectant, Indigenous mother. Sitting in our final sharing circle with the Grandmothers (figure 13), I listened to Elder Jackie sitting to my right praying in Blackfoot, and Elder Muriel to my left speaking in Cree. I noticed how many words I could understand as Muriel spoke – I had picked them up from listening to her speak and translate Cree over the past year, and through my work transcribing her words for this thesis. I was proud, grateful and excited each time she said a word I knew. I then thought of the Grandmothers' teaching: The baby can hear the outside world from inside the womb. I recognized how special it is that my little one spent time in the womb listening to Blackfoot and Cree languages spoken around her. Her connection to her culture has already begun.



*Figure 13.* The final sharing circle. The Grandmothers, (from left to right) Elder Jackie, Elder Norma, Elder Lorraine, Elder Darlene, and Elder Muriel with me at our final sharing circle. I was not wearing my ribbon skirt as it no longer fit over my pregnant belly.

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