University of Alberta

Urban Aboriginal Students At-Promise of Completing High School:
A Community's Journey

by

Loraine Kathleen Steele

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Educational Administration and Leadership

Department of Educational Policy Studies

To the dream of high school completion for Aboriginal students, their families, Elders, Indigenous community, educators, academic community and all who support the Stay-in-School Program of the Aboriginal Youth & Family Well-being & Education Society in Edmonton Public Schools.

Abstract

This dissertation is based on high school completion being recognized as a public problem in Canada and Alberta since the mid-1960s, and re-surfaced in importance in Alberta during the early 2000s. I questioned how urban Aboriginal students, facing multifaceted challenges in areas of social, economic, judicial, political, health and education realms, fraught with hegemonic power and control issues, can become empowered to complete high school.

The main purpose of this study is to engage urban Aboriginal students involved in a stay-in-school program operated by the Aboriginal Youth & Family Well-being & Education Society in four schools in Edmonton to critically examine and identify existing social structures that may marginalize them in completing high school. As urban Aboriginal students become aware, they can identify and gain support systems to challenge the status quo, learn to answer their questions, and become self-empowered to become students at-promise of completing high school.

This study used Indigenous research methodology informed by a critical lens for research analysis with a goal of transformative action to liberate urban Aboriginal students and enhance their support systems. Critical theory provides an epistemology for addressing issues that exercise hegemonic control, through power blocs of racism, classism and sexism, and dominant forms of knowledge, to result in an ultimate shift in social inequality. Critical pedagogy points to solutions for students to become empowered, as well as for the development of educational policies and practices that create enabling conditions for urban Aboriginal students to complete high school. The methodology utilized was a holistic approach to research based on the four directions of the Medicine Wheel of physical, mental, spiritual and emotional dimensions, in which the knowledge of all involved in the research experience was valued. Talking circles and individual interviews were methods utilized to gather qualitative data through the research

questions posed on barriers and solutions to high school completion, responding to issues of power and control. Indigenous protocols were adhered to in gathering data by celebrating cultural practices, building trust relationships and respecting all perspectives. The data collected were compared to other literature sources through a critical theory lens. A melding of voices for educational policy and promising practices emerged to enable high school completion of urban Aboriginal students. The learnings from this study may be developed into educational policies and practices to support Aboriginal students to complete high school. Also, parents, Elders and Aboriginal communities can become a strong supportive voice in the education of their children.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the research participants: Aboriginal students, Elders, staff of the stay-in-school program of Aboriginal Youth & Family Well-being & Education Society, parents, Society members, Indigenous community, Edmonton Public Schools educators, and academic community, whose participation and support of this research project provided valuable insight into high school completion of urban Aboriginal students. Your candidness and willingness to share your stories with me through journeys into high school completion are much appreciated.

Thank you to those who continue the journey selflessly. I look forward to continuing the journey with you to support high school completion for our future generations of urban Aboriginal students.

Thank you to my supervisor, Dr. Janice Wallace, for your guidance and thoughtful comments throughout my doctoral program. I appreciate our conversations about critical theory that provided a lens for my research analysis, and your belief in the importance of my research. I am indebted to your diligent support and patience. Also, I am thankful to my committee for their input into drafts of my thesis: Dr. Brenda Spencer for your thoughtful insight about the organization of my thesis and for comments on how Aboriginal students can use transformative action to mobilize through oppression in schools; and Dr. Cora Weber-Pillwax for your insight into Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous research methodology. I want to thank Dr. Randy Wimmer for chairing my candidacy and oral defense examinations and for your comments about themes that emerged from the research, and to Dr. Florence Glanfield for comments on working with Indigenous communities. Also, I am grateful to Dr. Gail Jardine for serving as my external committee member at my oral examination.

Thank you to my family and friends, for your ongoing support throughout the years of my journey through graduate studies, and for your encouragement for me to write this thesis about high school completion of urban Aboriginal students. Thank you especially to my mother and deceased father who always encouraged me throughout my schooling and post-secondary education; to my brother, Ron; to my three daughters, Heather, Erinn and Amy; and to my three grandchildren, Alison, Madison, and Calden as you journey through schooling.

I end with a quotation by Chief Joseph, of the Nez Perce Nation from *Sayings of the Elders*, collected by John Friesen (1998, p. 45).

> All men were made by the same Great Spirit. They are all brothers. The earth is the mother of all people, and all people should have equal rights upon it.

Thank you. *Hay hay*!

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List of Diagrams

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Journey of High School Completion of Urban Aboriginal Students

My Research Interest

My research interest in creating enabling conditions for all students, especially Indigenous students, to complete high school in Alberta stemmed from a number of sources in my family background, education, and employment. My experience has carried me through a journey that led to the question: How can we create enabling conditions in terms of policy and practice for urban Aboriginal[1] students to complete high school in Alberta? The high school completion problem from an Indigenous perspective was contextualized by Monture-Angus (1995) as she discussed the alienation and isolation of First Nations people in education institutions in her book, *Thunder in my soul*. She stated:

> Re-claiming our place in formal education institutions is going to be a very difficult task and it is going to require a lot of patience. We must remember that schools in Canada were once part of the government's plan to assimilate us. We must question if education institutions that were founded on a belief in our Aboriginal inferiority are really part of the answer or has education been part of the problem? (pp. 79-80)

In *Alberta's children and our society are changing,* a section of Alberta's Commission on Learning, (ACOL, 2003), the authors note that:

> Over half of Aboriginal people over the age of fifteen have not finished high school while less than 10% have some university education. Slightly more than half of Aboriginal people in the province were employed in 1996. (p. 30)

> Three recent studies (C.D. Howe Institute, 2008 and 2009; ACOL, 2003)

indicated that Aboriginal students leave school in the kindergarten to Grade 12 education

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[1]   Aboriginal denotes Government of Canada indication for Indigenous persons of First Nations Métis or Inuit decent.

system at an earlier age and higher rate than non-Aboriginal students. In areas of Alberta, there was less than 50% high school completion for Aboriginal students (ACOL, 2003, p. 30).

As a result of low high school completion rates, Aboriginal students were not included in the educated workforce that Alberta deemed necessary to maintain "Alberta's advantage." Why was there inequality for Aboriginal students in Alberta in regards to high school completion, and how could it be resolved? Were there solutions to inequality for Indigenous students that could be addressed through policy? How could schools implement practices that could provide equal opportunities for Indigenous students to complete high school, as do non-Indigenous students, while all students in Alberta were supported to improve low high school completion rates?

Researcher's Perspective

I come to these questions from a background that is rooted in many cultures, as I am coming from a Métis background. I learned from an early age what it means to walk in two worlds. My mother's *kohkom* or grandmother on her mother's side was the niece of a chief of the Papaschase Reserve, which originated on the south side of Edmonton, the grounds on which the University of Alberta now stands. My great-grandmother was widowed at a young age and raised her family by herself. The Indigenous knowledge that she had of traditional medicines and practices were exchanged for food for her family. She smoked pipe with the local tribe leaders who were mostly men, a practice not common for women of her time. Indigenous wisdom was permeated throughout the centuries through spiritual teachings and practice. She was an influential person in the newly established St. Paul des Métis community established by Jesuit priests, such as

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Father Lacombe, to teach the Métis people farming for their livelihood. She and my great-grandfather were married by Father Lacombe in St. Paul des Métis. Great-grandmother instilled in me a respect for and interconnectedness with living things.

Another world that I walked in was based in the European traditions of my father and mother's father. Through these cultures, a strong work ethic prevailed and a belief that in the "new country" a granddaughter could become empowered if she worked and studied diligently. One did not have to accept her plight in life; she could effect change. During my education journey, I discovered that I had a passion and academic gift for the Sciences and Mathematics, not common for a girl at that time. My teachers mentored my intellectual curiosity that led me to overcome gender obstacles. I received a Bachelor of Science degree and was fortunate to become a professional analytical chemist for six years. As a chemist, I performed extensive quantitative and qualitative analyses utilizing positivist epistemologies with objective scientific methods based on Western Cartesian Science and Newtonian Physics, and Mathematics. Even though it was a chemist's dream to have these opportunities, I often wondered, as a Métis woman, what was missing for me personally in my positivist experiences?

My mother had been a teacher earlier in her life; I inherited her aptitude for teaching in almost everything. I got involved with teaching opportunities, such as fitness programs, children's programs, Sunday school, and as a teacher-aide for students with special needs. As I became more reflexive following the births of my three daughters, I questioned the lack of an emotive aspect of Science and where subjectivity fit. It wasn't easy being a girl in the field of Science receiving higher marks than the boys in Mathematics and Science, through junior high and high school, especially being a Métis

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girl in an urban setting in Edmonton. Later in my life, my daughters were developing an interest in the Sciences and I contemplated what enabling conditions would be present for my daughters to complete high school, to enter Science education, or to study any field they might choose for that matter.

I continued into the field of education through an after-degree program in Science and Mathematics education. My mind was opened to the "serendipity of science" through professor Dr. W. Brouwer, who espoused the humanistic movement in Science as discussed in such works as Sir Karl Popper's *The logic of scientific discovery* and *Conjectures and refutations: The growth of scientific knowledge.* Our research was aimed at overthrowing previous carefully held scientific theories in order to put forward new ones. I was drawn to the reframing of scientific theory through paradigm shifts as conceptualized by Thomas Kuhn in *The structure of scientific revolutions.* Perhaps senior high school students could experience the serendipity of science as I did with a wise teacher exposing students to a variety of epistemologies that validated multiple ways of knowing. I could visualize my daughters finding ways to maneuver through obstacles of gender and race, as I did, as could any other urban Aboriginal student with the guidance of caring teachers and support of other educational stakeholders.

Yet another intersection occurred in my education and work experience journey. I became Advisor to the President of the Métis Nation of Alberta in Education, Advanced Education and Career Development at the same time that I entered the Master of Education program in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at the University of Alberta. My studies and work with Indigenous peoples led me to critically examine education as a vehicle to emancipate and empower people.

A few years ago, I became involved with the Aboriginal Youth & Family Well-being & Education Society (www.aboriginalyouth.ca), which had a program working with urban Aboriginal youth in Edmonton and a vision of creating opportunities for urban Aboriginal youth to fulfill their hopes and dreams. The staff of the program worked with selected students identified as "at-risk" of dropping out through a referral by staff of Edmonton Public Schools, parents and community, or any Aboriginal students who felt they might benefit from the program. At that time, it was heartwarming to have shared in a junior high graduation ceremony night with students, families, friends and supporting agencies, as students who had participated in the program became empowered to finish junior high school and transitioned to high school and beyond. The students faced significant challenges on their education journey.

Introductory work for my PhD led me to meet a visiting professor from New York to the University of Alberta, Dr. Joe Kincheloe, in a summer course I enrolled in called *Critical Multiculturalism*. The professor and course were inspirational to me; together they made me realize that I could succeed in a PhD program and that critical theory could be an epistemology that would enable my research to critically examine ways of empowering urban Aboriginal students to break the barriers and stigmas of students at-risk of dropping out of school prior to high school completion. It helped me to imagine that these students could become students "at-promise"[2] of success, which included high

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[2] At-promise is intended as a positive empowering term denoting the potential of Aboriginal students to complete high school. At-risk has a negative connotation that could be perceived as labelling with hegemonic effects that could become a self-fulfilled prophecy of non-completion (conversations in *Critical Multiculturalism* course, n.d.).

school graduation, as part of the students' and their families' dreams. The course helped me to understand that power blocs[3] of race, class and gender could privilege certain groups of students, while simultaneously marginalizing other subordinated groups of students. A critical lens could add insight for urban Aboriginal students to understand power relationships between domination and liberation. Knowledge, therefore, becomes key to social transformation that results in liberation despite the power blocs of race, class and gender.

My policy and practice work experience at Alberta Education as an Education Manager with the Native Education Team and later Director of Field Services led me to examine high school completion as a Government of Alberta priority. Students were completing high school at a rate of about 70%. The low rate of completion had been a concern in Alberta since before Alberta's Commission on Learning, October 2003, which established a goal of 90% high school completion in *Every child learns. Every child succeeds: Report and recommendations*. The report stated:

> Far too many Alberta young people fail to complete high school on time. One out of every four students does not complete high school within five years of entering grade 10. The completion rates are slightly below the national average and simply unacceptable for a province like ours. (p. 60)

> Looking ahead, completion of high school will increasingly become a necessary condition for success as an adult – for good citizenship, for personal achievement, and for work. With respect to employment, high school completion will be the very minimum requirement for entry to the workforce and projections show that, for the vast majority of jobs some level of post-secondary education will be required. Information also shows that people with post-secondary credentials do

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[3] Power blocs are social categories formed strategically to advance the interests of those who form them and who have privileged access to maintain control over resources and the capabilities of some actors (conversations in *Critical Multiculturalism* course, n.d.). The most prominent power blocs that I focus my thesis on are race, class and gender, and are present in all social domains. Some others to note are ethnicity, sexual minorities and persons with disabilities.

better in the labor market. They're able to get better jobs and they're higher paid. (p. 59)

The Commission established Recommendation #11 to respond to this problem.

Develop and implement a comprehensive, province-wide strategy with the goal of ensuring that 90% of students complete grade 12 within four years of starting high school. (p. 61)

One might ask why high school completion mattered in Alberta. A projection for the lack of an educated workforce and labor shortage in Alberta was confirmed in a survey from the Canadian Federation of Independent Business in 2002 that "38,000 jobs in small- and medium-sized Alberta companies were unfilled simply because there weren't the qualified people needed to do the job" (ACOL, 2003, p. 29). Projections continued to show that education would become increasingly important.

Provincially, there was a drive for highly skilled people to meet the needs of Alberta's changing economy as it became more diversified and knowledge-based. Alberta Human Resources and Employment informed us that nearly one-third of new jobs over the next five years would require college, technical and trades training, and over one-fifth of all new jobs would require a university education. In contrast, only one of ten jobs would require less than a grade 12 education.

In a recent research paper from Statistics Canada and Human Resources and Social Development Canada entitled *Follow-up on education and labour market pathways of young Canadians aged 18 to 20 – Results from Youth In Transition Study (YITS) Cycle 3* (July 2006, p. 6)*,* it stated:

Today, no one questions the importance of education. Globalization and the changes that have taken place in information and communication technologies have led to the development of a knowledge-based economy the two main components of which are knowledge and information. The competition is no

longer for low-skilled, poorly paid jobs but rather for highly skilled positions. (Schleicher, 2006)

The minimum qualification now required is a high school diploma. This diploma also opens the door to higher learning or the labour market. In addition, the labour market is increasingly demanding and a postsecondary education is virtually essential in order to gain access to it. Between 2004 and 2008, two thirds of new jobs will require a postsecondary education or qualifications for management positions. (HRSDC, 2004)

A concern for the Government of Alberta was that there was a potential threat to "Alberta's advantage" if students did not complete high school, technical training or university education. Education was viewed as key to economic prosperity with high school completion playing a vital role in preparing students for future opportunities in Alberta. Urban Aboriginal students aimed to take their rightful place in Alberta's economy with all high school students noted in the above statistics and quotations. In my research I intend to critically question if preparing for the labor market was the only purpose of public education, or could economic education goals become a potential hegemonic control for urban Aboriginal students.

High school completion has been of high public interest in Alberta since at least the mid – 1990s. According to Statistics Canada data, high school completion rates for all students have been about 65% since the mid-1960s. Why was this the case? In early 2000, I led a focused conversation on behalf of the Department of Education with Aboriginal Youth & Family Well-being & Education Society (AY&FW&ES) students, teachers, counsellors, parents, program family youth workers and program director to examine barriers to high school completion. This focus group was part of a provincial Ministerial strategy to examine high school completion barriers by examining the current high school completion literature, speaking with known experts in the field of high school

completion, and holding provincial area focus groups in order to better understand the problem and how prevalent it was, what was being done to assist with high school completion, and what further could be done.

The focused conversation with students and members of Aboriginal Youth & Family Well-being & Education Society (AY&FW&ES) gave me some insight into barriers that urban Aboriginal students faced when many have left an Aboriginal community to move to a city life and into a neighborhood school. My learnings from the conversations painted a picture of some of the barriers that Aboriginal students from this community were facing, with a few suggestions that could help to improve their high school completion results. However, the unpublished data from the conversations were rolled up into one generic report that focused on neither Aboriginal nor non-Aboriginal students, and provided minimal suggestions to improve success for Aboriginal students, especially those in an urban setting. Suggested outcomes to garner success for Aboriginal students that were published in Alberta Education's *Removing barriers to high school completion – Final report – September 2001* report stated:

> Outcomes from the *Removing Barriers to High school Completion – Final Report* complement and support outcomes for increasing successful high school completion by Aboriginal students that emerge from *First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework* and *Strengthening Relationships, the Government of Alberta's Aboriginal Policy Framework.* (p. 27)

Members of the Society that took part in the *Barriers* study told me that they did not see themselves in the study; they were still waiting for the results (conversations with AY&FW&ES members, n.d.).

Given that some sources predicted that Edmonton would grow to be the city with the largest Aboriginal population in Canada by 2016

(http://myunitedway.ca/ourwork/stories/focus-urban-aboriginals) with a youth skewed

population, there was a heightened urgency for understanding how to improve high

school completion rates for urban Aboriginal youth.

High school completion was not only a priority for Alberta provincial government

and one of the top priorities in the Education Ministry 2009-2010 Business Plan, but it

also became a priority within business plans of Alberta Education stakeholders, such as

Alberta School Boards Association, Alberta School Councils' Association, College of

Alberta School Superintendents, Alberta Teachers' Association, and other education

stakeholders, such as the C.D. Howe Institute. Various education stakeholders have

identified a universally acknowledged public problem and were trying to address what

policies and practices could best address high school completion, especially for identified

groups such as our urban Aboriginal youth. The African proverb, "It takes a whole

village to raise a child"[4] suggests the importance of the whole community, including

public education stakeholder groups, becoming involved in high school completion for

urban Aboriginal students. Everyone loses when our urban Aboriginal youth cannot or

do not access opportunities that education could offer them. The intent of my research is

to add insights and understanding that could be utilized by Aboriginal students, their

families, and various educational stakeholders, when addressing policy and practice

through a critical lens.

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[4]   African proverb: "It takes a village to raise a child" can be found at
      http://www.hnet.org/~africa/threads/village.htmlhttp://www.hnet.org/~africa/threads/village.html

Journey through the Problem and Emerging Research Question

High school completion data for urban Aboriginal students were not readily available to indicate the extent of the public problem of non-completion within this specific population.

However, some Aboriginal community members in Edmonton maintained their own data and have reported that about 51% of urban Aboriginal students in Edmonton did not complete high school, and left school by grade 8 or grade 9. It did not matter that the data were sketchy at best; what did matter was that by not completing high school, urban Aboriginal students were not accessing the opportunities that education could offer them. I reflected on the problem about what it meant in terms of policies and practices that could enable this population of students to complete high school and beyond, which drove me to the burning question to guide my research: How can we create enabling conditions in terms of policy and practice for urban Aboriginal students to complete high school in Alberta?

As I further thought about the research question, a number of specific sub-questions related to my research question arose:

- How are the barriers to high school completion articulated by urban Aboriginal students, their parents and community, and the education stakeholders who support urban Aboriginal students?

- What are the assumptions about the purpose of public education in Alberta, as it relates to goal setting?

- What solutions are available for urban Aboriginal students to address issues of power and hegemonic control when seeking to complete high school?

Using a critical theory lens, my research focus was on urban Aboriginal students "at-promise" of completing high school, with the goal that an entire community could be transformed despite social inequality and other barriers, whether real or perceived.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study was to engage urban Aboriginal students to critically examine and identify existing social structures that could marginalize them in completing high school and create the conditions for them to become labelled as at-risk students. Were there underlying assumptions about students and power relations in these situations? As urban Aboriginal students became aware, they could perhaps use their awareness to gain support systems to challenge the status quo. Parents, extended family, Elders, community and education stakeholders held important roles in this research and provided support for students in their care.

The learnings from the study could be developed into policies to support the work of the policy makers, such as Aboriginal communities, school boards and other education stakeholders. Second, the learnings could be developed into promising practices to support the educators, teacher education programs and support systems of urban Aboriginal students. Third, parents and families, Elders and Aboriginal communities could use the learnings to become empowered as a strong supportive voice in the education of their children. Fourth, the results of my research could be added to the small body of research available in a local Albertan context that focuses on high school completion for urban Aboriginal students.

In the next chapter I discuss my journey through the literature and how it relates to the research experience.

Chapter 2: Journey through the Literature

My journey through the literature led me into theoretical considerations about critical theory as an epistemology, and through the examination of social dimensions of racism, classism and sexism issues that could play a role in hegemonic control over urban Aboriginal students. My journey continued into critical pedagogy as an ontological practice to raise the hope of transforming society with education: as a tool that is key to the empowerment of urban Aboriginal students seeking to complete high school. On my journey through the literature, I turned to focus on the policy and practice environment of high school completion and how urban Aboriginal students fit into this schema. Next, I examined the methodological processes of Indigenous research methodology informed by a critical lens with a goal of transformative action to continue on my journey through the research experience. Last, the purpose of education was examined in the literature in terms of goals of public education that may or may not be congruent with the goals of urban Aboriginal youth and their parents, community and Elders.

Critical Theory as an Epistemology

Critical theory has influenced many disciplines, including education. Critical theory is comprised of a body of theories that arose from the Frankfurt School before World War II under the influence of Marxism through people such as Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse and Walter Benjamin (Kincheloe, 2008) and was generated by their disillusionment with modernity. A number of them fled to the United States to avoid persecution by the Nazis. Jurgen Habermas, who remained in Germany, both learned from and critiqued the work of the Frankfort School theorists, extended the work of critical theory, and in the last third of the twentieth century, Paulo Freire, Henry

Giroux, and Peter McLaren became influential critical theorists who specifically focused on education.

Critical theory provided liberation of the marginalized through rights discourse. The marginalized involved in a situation can engage in conversation or discussions to make meaning that elucidates the concepts of human rights. Discourse includes the importance of history and context in understanding the notion of inclusion and exclusion, whereby some people are admitted and others are excluded, because of being a certain race, class or gender. The marginalized can understand how rights can shift power relations and find strategic actions to claim space through social mobilization.

One example of liberation of the marginalized was the work of Habermas, whose communicative action model provided the conditions that enabled people to enter into dialogue in order to develop meaning in their situation and find strategic actions that could transform that situation. Habermas' theories provided a way for researchers in education to consider how disadvantaged students could become empowered and mobilized to resist racism, classism and sexism. Critical theory provided a means for raising consciousness and challenging the structures of power, which had implications for the role of schools.

> Critical theorists place at the center of analysis the power, policies and structures that restrict access; their work often demonstrates how privilege is maintained and the disempowered and silenced are kept that way, raising "serious questions about the role of schools in the social and cultural reproduction of social classes, gender, and racial and ethnic prejudice." (Marshall, 1998, p. 2)

In critical theory, Habermas' theory of communicative action illuminated concepts of social inclusion and exclusion by examining social integration and system integration. Knowledge about power structures was transmitted into social life by questioning rights

and moral norms through increased discussion involving students, parents and the community. The power of communicative language empowered students. Power was enacted through discourse and given authority at the local level (Habermas, 1979). Talking circles enact communicative action within Indigenous communities. Henry Giroux's work in political and education domains challenged the reductionist notion that schools were to operate under the dominant constructs put into place to maintain social, political and economic power or, in other words, to maintain the status quo in an oppressive state. Giroux imagined that schools could become sites for resistance to subjugation and places to develop critical radical democracy. Youth could be taught to use knowledge about social mores; the cultural and bureaucratic reproduction of race, class and gender structures; and to develop critical empowerment through education (Giroux, 1986). Giroux's work informed my thinking with regard to enabling urban Aboriginal students to gain knowledge about their domination within a racist and classist society, thus enabling them to think about their schools as sites of resistance (Giroux 1988, 1997, 2006, 2007). Peter McLaren's work in critical theory stemmed from his career in education as an elementary school teacher in Toronto in the 1970s. His book, *Life in schools* (1989), introduced critical theory to teachers and other educators. Educators learned that critical theorists challenged the claims that schooling was an "apolitical and value-neutral process" (p. 163), and that schools were meritocratic institutions that rewarded hard working learners. McLaren claimed instead that schools were a highly political environment with an ability to reproduce a culture of dominance that subjugated particular people. An objective of critical theory was to empower those without power and to transform social inequalities and injustices that existed (p. 160).

For example, students who came from white, affluent backgrounds and were male were privileged over others because of their race, gender and social status. McLaren stated that the purpose of education was for a "transformative vision of the future" (p. 165). Critical theorists also have arisen from Indigenous communities throughout the world, such as Linda Tuhawai Smith of New Zealand and Ng-ug-i wa Thiong'o of Africa. They shared similar experiences of domination and oppression in their respective educational systems within their communities and countries. Many recounted how resistance theory was put into practice in their Indigenous communities in order to fight the hegemony of the dominant society. By critically utilizing praxis through reflection and action from these peoples in their own situations, the possibilities of critical theory became enriched.

In *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*, Linda Tuhawai Smith (1999) led researchers to challenge colonization of Indigenous peoples by the Western world through a positional superiority that the West had bestowed upon itself. Knowledge was legitimized by the dominant society, which in turn determined what was valuable and what was negated in terms of power and control. Anything outside of the dominant sphere of influence did not even rate consideration in science, research and education. Smith also considered the role of colonization and how Indigenous peoples were denied their own languages, knowledges and cultures. In both Canada and the United States, there were similar attempts at assimilation in Indian boarding schools and residential schools by the state targeting the children who were revered in their home communities as transmitters of Indigenous knowledge. Assimilationist policy carried over into economics and societal issues, both in North America and New Zealand (and elsewhere), denying Indigenous people the right of access to positions of authority or

wealth, and ultimately denying Indigenous peoples of their land. Smith (1999) recounted examples of exclusion and marginalization of Aborigine parents in Australia and Maoris in New Zealand who had their children removed from their homes by the state, and of certain Native intellectuals who could promote dominant non-Aborigine ways of knowing back into Indigenous communities. Interestingly, through attempts of assimilation and having their knowledges labelled as non-authentic, Indigenous peoples have not been silenced in New Zealand, North America, or elsewhere. Indigenous rights and knowledge were legitimized through relational connections with Mother Earth and the universe, and through spirituality. Assimilation attempts could not destroy rights of Indigenous peoples, nor subjugate Indigenous knowledges. Ng-ug-i wa Thiong'o of Africa, in his journal article, *Decolonising the mind: The politics of language in African literature* (1993), displayed similar acts of colonization of African peoples as other scholars in their respective countries. In his account, we see the control by imperialism of the economy, politics and culture of Africa. The stronghold of power has been language. African languages have been subdued by English and French, languages of the oppressors. In addition, those who had the right to tell Africa's stories were contentious. For example, debate existed as to who had authority to write African literature: Africans writing about Africa, non- Africans writing about Africa, or Africans writing about other places than Africa? Therefore, in addition to questions of language loss, the debate rested with the subject matter, social origins and geographic habitation of the writer (p. 6). Like the Maori of New Zealand, the Aborigines of Australia and the First Nations of North America, Africans also had to endure colonial school experiences (Ng-ug-i wa Thiong'o, 1993). Missionary schools and nationalist schools were operated by British and religious

dominations. Children caught speaking in their own languages suffered corporal punishment. Like the Residential Schools experience in Canada, African children were rewarded to "tattle" on other children of their own community who spoke in their Native tongue. Achievement in spoken or written English was rewarded, and thereby became a measure of intelligence in formal education. Failing English ensured failure of access to economic status. Language served a dual purpose: communication and purveyor of culture. To be denied one's own language was to be denied one's own culture. Culture transmitted history and knowledge of one's own epistemology and ontology. In Africa, colonialism controlled the linguistic, economic and political realms of the bourgeoisie. However, it could not control the minds of this class; they spoke their language at home (Ng-ug-i wa Thiong'o, 1993). The African child faced racism and teachings of racism in the literature of the colonial languages under imperialism. Literature written by this group was produced in European languages and was used in the countries experiencing neo-colonialism, or struggling to emerge from colonialism. The history and culture of African people lived despite colonialism, generally through the peasants and the working class deemed as the people. African languages also did not die in their communities; African languages became part of the whole of Africa as a multi-nationalistic state with many individual languages in peoples' mother-tongues (Ng-ug-i wa Thiong'o, 1993, p. 23). Extinction of Indigenous language did not occur.

Perhaps the most influential critical theorist advocating for the liberation of oppressed people was Paulo Freire with his work in Brazil on liberation theory and his concept of that raised conscientization that led to transformation out of oppression. Education for the oppressed was viewed as having the potential to transform society, with

the individual learner actively seeking self-empowerment and social transformation.

Social equality and equal access to education were questioned. For me, the critical

questions, prompted by Freire's work, include: Were there particular causes and

characteristics of inequality that had consequences on society and could be addressed

through education? Was there a particular form of hegemony that maintained the status

quo for inequalities to remain intact and for power and domination to continue? What

power structures were in place that maintained exclusion of at-risk students from

completing high school? Did students deliberately choose where to place themselves in

society's hierarchy, without challenging themselves, or societal expectations? Education

had the potential for urban Aboriginal students to become liberated from dominant

ideology by "stimulating in the children a critical way of thinking" (Freire, 2002, p. 139)

and reflecting "on an education that challenges the status quo, on dialogue, on democratic

initiatives" (p. 140). By utilizing Freire's liberation theory of conscientization, urban

Aboriginal students could become empowered to mobilize despite the power blocs of

racism, classism and sexism.

Social Dimensions of Inequality: Racism, Classism and Sexism

There are social dimensions to inequality in Canada that are reflected in patterns

of socio-economic stratification because of race, class, gender, ethnicity, and location

(Fleras, 2001, pp. 30-32). Fleras proposed a notion of inequality that revolved around

four key premises:

- patterns of inequality are socially constructed rather than anything inherent or inevitable in society;
- inequality is amenable to sociological analysis when reflected in measurable rates that persist over time;
- patterns of inequality are not random, but tend to cluster around the correlates of race, ethnicity, gender, class, and location;

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- equality is preferable and attainable even if few can concur on "means" or "outcomes". (p. 31)

Individuals within these clusters of socially constructed inequality were ranked lower than others in terms of wealth, power and status, for various reasons related to race, class or gender, while others, by virtue of their position within dominant social groups (white, middle class, and male), were ranked higher. This stratification, due to culture, became "normalized" in societal beliefs. "At-risk" students were marginalized and disempowered because of three dimensions of social inequality, racism, classism and sexism, that resulted in the perpetuation of social inequality. Critical theory rejected this process of normalization and unequal access to privilege, and revealed the process for structuring domination and subordination in social power that then perpetuated inequality through public institutions, such as education, policies, social structures and human behaviour.

Racism as a Power Bloc

Racism involves exploitation or domination of a group over others through exclusion from access to privilege and power (Fleras, 2001). It is not about superiority or inferiority due to biology or genetic make-up, or about culture; it is about power and control. Racial inequality was institutionalized within the structures, values, and institutional practices of Canadian society that empowered elite groups to perpetuate ideologies of inequality because of vested interests. Through a critical theory lens, particular attention was drawn to how the ways in which power relations of domination and subordination were socially constructed and embedded historically within the institutional structures of Canadian society but marginalized groups or individuals could

become empowered to resist racism. This knowledge is key for students struggling to gain emancipation in order to become at-promise of completing high school.

Racism: The Oppression of Aboriginal Peoples

The oppression of Aboriginal peoples in Canada has been historically documented for over 500 years (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1992). In spite of this, Aboriginal peoples maintained independent political communities with inherent rights to self-determination since time immemorial. They interacted in society in multiple jurisdictions. Today, Aboriginal peoples do not regard themselves as minorities, or immigrants, or a "distinct society" and many do not see themselves in a multicultural mosaic that Canada espoused, and certainly not in an assimilated melting pot as largely experienced in the USA (conversation with Elders, n.d.). Aboriginal peoples are Indigenous to the lands in Canada. Colonial governance attempted to oppress Aboriginal peoples through pity, denial, exclusion and even annihilation of First Nations, Métis, Inuit and other Aboriginal peoples. In modern times, urban Aboriginal youth are to be encouraged by society to celebrate their cultures, languages and places in Canadian history; to exercise their inherent rights; and to learn how to critically resist the power bloc of racism.

Class Elitism as a Power Bloc

Class structure stratifies society in Canada according to prestige and perceived value to society. Fleras (2001) noted that class structure was the determinant of work, wealth, income and education in Canada that helped to shape a broad range of lifestyle factors with regard to access to resources, such as wealth, status and power. It was the gap between the rich and the poor that created social inequality (p. 40). This gap

widened in school systems as resources were made available to the rich; for example, many Aboriginal and poor communities, particularly those in remote locations, still do not have access or support for the Internet, which places these communities further behind the "have students" for education programming. Within the class structure in Canada, deemed as a land of limitless opportunity by many people, Aboriginal peoples sought, but have largely been denied, the potential for social mobility (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1992).

Sexism as a Power Bloc

Patriarchal domination occurred in the private realm of the home and the public realm of economic and political institutions in Canada. Women have been devalued historically, both privately and publicly. This continues to be current practice as displayed through wage disparity, under-representation of women in executive positions, and uneven family commitments and responsibilities that leads to exclusion of women in the workforce, or to wage inequities. Private sphere responsibilities flowed into the public realm of paid labor in areas of childcare, household labour, workplace equity and identity that often resulted in the inequality of women (Fleras, 2001; Fleras and Elliott, 2007). Aboriginal women have presented many personal accounts of being devalued in the home and of the inequities they have faced in public institutions (conversations with Métis women Elders, n.d., and Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples: *Overview of the first round*, Oct 1992).

Intersection of the Three Power Blocs: Racism, Classism and Sexism

What does social inequality mean for the individual, or groups of individuals, who fall into one or more of the dimensions of social inequality: racism, classism and sexism?

Are there competing degrees of inequality between racism, classism, or sexism, or is there a doubling, or tripling, or some higher mathematical power for intersecting social inequalities? How large does a problem of racism, classism or sexism have to become for society to react by mobilizing to counteract marginalization of peoples in order for them to become social equals? Too often people who face marginalization face more than one power bloc of racism, classism or sexism in which the status quo is reproduced by those in power in society.

Reproduction of Power Blocs of Racism, Classism and Sexism: The Story of Blame

To maintain the status quo, or reproduce social inequality, attempts were made by those in power to oppress those of less privilege. Such strategies included minimizing social problems, or ignoring them. Fleras (2001) describes how social problems can be minimized to maintain status quo by diverting or ignoring the issues and shifting blame to the victim, the perceived "enemy", the institution or the system as a whole. I suggest that a blame game occurred to reproduce the power blocs of racism, classism and sexism in Aboriginal schools and school systems. The blame game can be played with four blame trump cards: blame the Aboriginal student, blame Aboriginal peoples as a race, blame the school, or blame the school system.

First in the blame game, the victim can be blamed for social inequalities, such as high school completion rates. For example, in some schools in Alberta with Aboriginal students facing a number of societal issues, Métis Elders talk about their students being called "at-risk" of not finishing school, even from an early age. The student is being blamed for dropping out of school. Mainstream society does not want to address the underlying problems, so people "skirt the issues" (conversation with a Métis Elder, n.d.).

Second, the perceived "enemy," can be viewed as a scapegoat, or the cause for social problems (Fleras, 2001, p. 21). An example is that, supposedly, Indians and Métis are to blame for their own problems (conversation with the same Métis Elder, n.d.). Emma LaRoque, a Métis woman originally from northern Alberta, writes a story in *Defeathering the Indian* that illustrates the misconceptions that lead to blaming the enemy.

> The public in general has low expectations of Native people. Recently, on a train to Winnipeg, a woman beside me began discussing the "Indian problem". She listed the usual vices: "They're always drunk, they don't work and they're all on welfare". But she also said something – not once but several times- that caught my attention, "It's no use; we've tried everything. Nothing works for the Indian. It's no use – nothing will ever work". (1975, p. 43)

> Third, the institution can be blamed for social issues facing Aboriginal peoples.

An example is in *Thunder in my soul*. Patricia Monture-Angus (1995, pp. 79 - 80) discusses alienation and isolation of First Nations people in education institutions.

> Re-claiming our place in formal educational institutions is going to be a very difficult task and it is going to require a lot of patience. We must remember that schools in Canada were once part of the government's plan to assimilate us. We must question if education institutions that were founded on a belief in our Aboriginal inferiority are really part of the answer or has education been part of the problem?

She continues by providing a solution that can result in empowerment.

> It is not schools as institutions we must depend on but the creativity of all First Nations people. We must learn to rely on ourselves and not on institutions of colonial governments. We must always have in our sights the process and nature of our oppression and colonization. Education is important if and when we are able to educate our young in a decolonised way. Colonialism and its consequences are the obstacles…

However, there is a need for caution, both for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

> What all my fears and worries are rooted in is my real fear that we are just going to wrap education up in a pretty red wrapper and call it "Indian" education and say we are done.

Schools, or institutions, are not to blame for the public problem of low high school completion rates. The problem of low high school completion rates is not to be diminished, or ignored. Low high school completion rates need to be faced head-on with knowledge and knowledge production in research to find ways to combat the social inequities and hegemonic control mechanisms that oppress marginalized students so that they can gain strategies to finish school.

Fourth, the system can be blamed for poor results. The education system as a whole can be identified as the ultimate cause for oppression, or exploitation of urban Aboriginal youth. An experience of blaming the system came to my mind with the Aboriginal Healing Foundation established to compensate residential school survivors for the atrocities some Aboriginal people experienced in the residential school system. In 1997, the Minister of Indian Affairs, Jane Stewart, issued a public apology about the poor treatment of Aboriginal people in Canada in residential schools and promised a $350 million healing fund. I attended public meetings at the Canadian Native Friendship Center in Edmonton where Aboriginal individual survivors shared re-hashing of the pain and anguish of residential school experiences and the intergenerational effects of residential schools within their families and communities (communication with Foundation presentation participants, n.d.). Urban Aboriginal students and their families continue to experience negative intergenerational effects of residential schools in contemporary times. Rather than blaming the school system, through research, the urban Aboriginal community can learn to identify problems associated with the negative residential school experiences and seek ways to overcome these problems so that their children can become at-promise of completing high school.

There is lots of blame in the blame game that can be attributed to those in power that affects an individual, a particular race, an institution or a system. However, those in power continue to ignore the issues and carry on with the policies and practices that maintain their privilege and oppress those of less privilege. Next, I suggest why I chose critical theory and critical pedagogy for my research.

Summary of Critical Theory in Relation to my Research

In summary, critical theory is the epistemology chosen for my research because it provides a way of examining what has oppressed marginalized groups, such as urban Aboriginal students, and provides a strategy to aid them to find solutions for problems such as low high school completion rates. The dominant structures of power that control and maintain privilege for certain individuals and groups due to racism, classism and sexism can be critiqued by raising consciousness through implementing communicative action strategies within students' families, their communities and educators. The work of Habermas, Giroux and McLaren in critical theory provide a background for my research within education domains in the USA and Canada, and provide an awareness that schools are political environments that reproduce the status quo, but also could be places of resistance where social inequalities are transformed. Additional background was provided through similar accounts of oppression that Indigenous peoples have faced throughout the world. Examples were explored in the works of Linda Tuhawai Smith, Ng-ug-i wa Thiong'o and Paulo Freire, and their theories of praxis for raising consciousness and enacting liberation theory to potentially transform society. Many of our own Canadian Indigenous peoples have faced atrocities of the residential schools experience that had long-lasting intergenerational effects facing today's urban Aboriginal

student, families and communities. By critically examining experiences of marginalized peoples internationally and within a local context, the knowledge gained enlightened my thinking as I sought to answer my research question: how can we create enabling conditions in terms of policy and practice for urban Aboriginal students to complete school in Alberta, as well as subsequent questions on barriers, purpose of education and solutions.

Critical Pedagogy as an Ontology

McLaren (1989) stated that critical pedagogy was defined as the "new sociology of education", or critical theory of education which "examines schools both in their historical context and as part of the existing social and political fabric that characterizes the dominant society" (p. 159). Critical pedagogy, which emerged in the 1970s, focused on the educative aspects of critical theory. McLaren agreed with Paulo Freire and Henry Giroux that education had the "potential to transform society, with the learner functioning as an active subject committed to self and social empowerment" (p. 165). Through the use of critical pedagogy, students could learn to challenge the hegemonic dimensions of social inequalities of racism, classism and sexism by examining history and culture in education. Critical pedagogy provided historical, cultural, political and ethical direction in education for those who "dare to hope" (p. 160). Critical pedagogy could be used to examine and resist the controls of domination.

Critical pedagogy theorists provided teachers, administrators and researchers with an understanding of how power operated through racism, classism and sexism; how they were played out in school politics; and how they perpetuated the privilege of the ruling elite. Through critical pedagogy, marginalized and subordinated groups, such as

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Indigenous students, could be empowered to understand the power relationships between domination and liberation. Knowledge was key to social transformation by gaining an understanding of whose interests were being served by dominant forms of knowledge, and who became dominated and excluded as a result. Habermas called this emancipatory knowledge (McLaren, 1989, p. 170). By adding emancipatory knowledge to technical knowledge that could be quantified and measured, and practical knowledge that enlightened individuals to guide their daily actions in social situations, a teacher could enable students to understand social relationships and the manipulation of power and privilege. This could be done through language and discourse by students seeking solutions for their problems.

Freire (1975) showed us that education had the potential to transform society, with the individual learner actively seeking self-empowerment and social transformation out of oppression, once he or she became aware of the power blocs. Liberation of the oppressed to resist racism, sexism and oppressive class structures could occur through reflection and action that Freire labelled as praxis (p. 101). Colonization could be challenged by conscientization of the marginalized through the utilization of reflection and action. Praxis transformed reality, which Freire deemed "the source of knowledge and creation" (p. 101). Liberation could emerge by minimizing domination. Pedagogy of the oppressed occurred when the oppressed took action through liberatory education to find their own answers for their realities.

Freire (1985) demonstrated that the liberating practice of education promoted dialogue and creativity leading to transformational action. In this practice, both the educator and learner became subjects of the knowledge that was reflected in action and

became educated and transformed during this process. This was the process of conscientization, in which those involved, whether teacher or student, "participate critically in a transformational act" (p. 106).

The work of a number of scholars has emerged in the area of critical pedagogy, and has shaped the framework in which educators and students could make sense of the world of oppression and domination and find ways to solve problems. These scholars have added knowledge in areas of critical theory, feminist epistemologies, critical race theories, and African American studies that examined the oppression of racism. I mention briefly the work of five critical pedagogy scholars who provide insight for my research: Michael Apple, Ira Shor, Patti Lather, bell hooks and Joe Kincheloe.

Michael Apple's work in the 1980s and beyond studied the effects of power and inequality in education in the USA. He showed us that schools were not separate from politics and economics and demonstrated how political, economic, social and cultural dynamics benefitted the privileged socioeconomic class, and gender hierarchies for groups already in power. In schools, this was reinforced by a belief that a meritocratic society awarded educational excellence and provided economic opportunity (Apple, 1982, p. 40). Students who did not do well in school or, consequently, in economic life were held to blame resulting in inequality being perceived as fair. Apple (1990) alerted us to understand that elites established what was constituted as official knowledge through their economic and political powers, thereby negating the importance of other forms of knowledge. In my research, the work of Apple is used to provide insight into how the power of the elite shaped educational opportunities by privileging their cultural knowledge over other groups, rather than opening space for multiple ways of knowing

and being. One Métis Elder said to me, "I want my children and grandchildren to learn

and use what is being taught in schools, and to keep the old ways of knowing about

things...to be successful and remain a proud Métis knowing where they came from..."

(conversations with an Elder, n.d.). Urban Aboriginal students could become successful

in today's society and maintain the strong Métis or First Nations knowledges they hold,

by utilizing a critical lens to examine education and power and, ultimately, politics and

economics, to establish solutions for their particular challenges.

Ira Shor's background in the Jewish community in New York gave him insight

into the workings of racial and ethnic discrimination, which he sought to combat through

a critical lens in his teaching. Shor utilized the work of Freire in North American

classrooms, integrating social critique and pedagogical techniques that could create new

educational possibilities based on student experience. Teachers who used these methods

shared power with students collaboratively in knowledge production during the learning

process (Shor, 1996, pp. 30 – 33). Students became active agents of learning, rather than

passive vessels waiting to become filled, or emptied, depending on how the problem was

perceived. Shor challenged a contemporary notion of teacher as information transmitter

and student as passive receiver. Language became important to the synthesis of different

ways of thinking, talking and learning in the classroom and the empowerment of

students. Shor's work in classrooms provided insight for my research for urban

Aboriginal students to become empowered as active agents of learning in order to

complete high school.

Patti Lather's work in feminist theory and practice and critical pedagogy provided

a valuable dimension in my research into the power structures of sexism that some urban

Aboriginal students were facing. A tendency of male domination in the field of critical

pedagogy makes Lather's scholarship to challenge the marginalization of sexism issues,

and to return to issues of power control and validation of knowledge production, even

more important. Heterogeneity (Lather, 1998, p. 448) allowed a universal place for

critical pedagogy to operate in all realms of social justice. With regard to sexism issues

in Cree and Métis communities in Alberta, however, it is worth noting that there was no

Indigenous language to denote he or she as a gender completing an action; instead there

was Indigenous language to denote relationships with living and non-living things that

gave and sustained life that men and women together held sacred to preserve.

The work of bell hooks stemmed from her background, living with the

devaluation of black women in the USA. Her work in the 1970s and beyond crossed the

intersection of two power blocs of racism and sexism. She challenged the work of white

feminists with the legitimization of racial dynamics in the women's movement against

oppression. hooks challenged critical theorists to identify and eradicate domination that

crossed the power blocs of racism, classism and sexism, along with other issues of power.

hooks' concerns were with the plight of the oppressed and their needs, and with the

pursuit of resistance to domination that Freirian theory espoused. Her conversations with

Freire acknowledged the location of thinkers in their practice of critical pedagogy (hooks,

1994, p. 9); however, hooks urged educators to recognize differences, to put their

positionality aside, and to use education as a place to learn through a "collective call for

renewal and rejuvenation in our teaching practices....so that we can create new visions"

(p. 12). By doing so, hooks reflected on the possibilities: "I celebrate teaching that

enables transgressions – a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement

which makes education the practice of freedom" (p. 12). Education was a tool for empowerment to challenge the boundaries of racism and sexism so that students could create new visions for themselves, such as completing high school so they could pursue those visions.

Joe Kincheloe's work in critical pedagogy has added a wealth of knowledge because he was a prolific writer with a large body of academic publications. His roles as teacher, professor, and mentor have touched my work in critical pedagogy. We had a number of conversations during a summer class I attended at the University of Alberta, entitled *Critical Multiculturalism,* that Dr. Kincheloe taught as a visiting professor. In the course, we discussed the notion that positionality trumped ideology in terms of where we were situated in society, culture, history, and politics. We examined colonialism and its shaping of our country in terms of social, economic, political and education realms. Power and privilege were central to the discourse in class. The critical multiculturalism discussions examined the sensitivity of multiculturalism in arenas such as validation of knowledge production where knowledge production was controlled by a small group of people with agendas to protect the power they currently held because knowledge is power. Other scholars continued the discourse on critical multiculturalism, such as Stephen May (1999) and Kogila Moodley (1999). The hegemony that was achieved was not by force, but by winning the consent of those who were governed by those in power. Hegemony was held in place by the beliefs and mores of society built upon socially constructed ethnocentric superiority in a contemporary context. If there was a shift in societal ideals, then there was a resulting shift in hegemony, a morphing, to maintain the status quo and to maintain power of the elites.

Kincheloe's first chapter in *19 urban questions: Teaching in the city (2004)* is particularly relevant to my research as he addressed the perpetual crisis of urban education, uniqueness of education in an urban setting, and keeping the hope alive through possibility, change, and resilience grounded in critical pedagogy. This chapter set the scene of the book for other critical scholars to identify issues that students and educators face in urban settings. Also, Kincheloe's first chapter in *Teaching city kids* (2007) stressed the urgency of critical pedagogy to shed light on the necessity of educators to know the complexities facing their urban students, especially the ones most marginalized by racism, classism and sexism (pp. 4 – 7).

Summary of Critical Pedagogy in Relation to my Research

In summary, critical pedagogy as an ontological practice focuses on education grounded in the learner's own world and experiences, their concerns, and their hopes and dreams of what they could become. Critical pedagogy provides educators an understanding of how power and control operates in school settings. I highlighted the work of some critical pedagogy scholars who provided insight into political, economic, social and cultural dynamics in schools that had the potential to marginalize and oppress students facing racism, classism and sexism issues, in various parts of the world, including urban settings. Examples were: Michael Apple who described power and inequality in schools; Ira Shor who demonstrated racial and ethnic discrimination in schools; Patti Lather who spoke about marginalization due to sexism issues; and bell hooks who made reference to the intersection of the power blocs of racism and sexism. Joe Kincheloe was my mentor who raised my consciousness about critical theory and critical pedagogy, and his work in various domains, including urban schools and with

Indigenous peoples. All of these scholars and others challenged status quo thinking about learning, validation of knowledge production in terms of who had power and control, and what role educators could play, either to continue the hegemony of dominant society, or as social activists facilitating empowerment of all students, rather than solely the elite. The learnings about the potential to transcend oppression through the use of ideas embodied in critical pedagogy were useful in considering my methodology when considering my interactions with urban Aboriginal students, families, communities and educators seeking to complete high school, or supporting students to complete high school.

Policy Environment of High School Completion and Urban Aboriginal Students

Current High School Completion Policy and Practice

A historical perspective of high school completion in Alberta and Canada demonstrated that since the mid-1960s, 65% of high school students were completing, which is similar to the statistics quoted in Alberta's Commission on Learning in the early 2000s. However, unlike the 1960s, most jobs now require at least a high school diploma to be qualified and, in most cases, prefer up to four years of post-secondary training as well (conversation with labor market analyst, n.d.).

The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC)[5] was established in 1967 as a forum in which to discuss issues of mutual concern in education in Canada. CMEC was the mechanism through which education ministers in various provinces and territories consulted on matters of common interest; it also represented international

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[5] CMEC is a national voice of education in Canada, even though education is a provincial jurisdiction, except for First Nations education and education in institutions, which have federal jurisdiction.

education interests. Since the 1960s, CMEC has examined reports of high drop-out rates, functional illiteracy, and mediocre results in international Mathematics and Science tests. These reports were presented as evidence of the failure of public education, from which educational reform gained momentum in the late 1980s (Manzer, 1994).

The Economic Council of Canada (ECC) developed measures to determine the quality of education based on students' performance in basic foundation skills needed for further education or the labor market. The ECC reported in a study in 1992, entitled *A lot to learn*, that about 30% of Canadian students did not complete high school; 28% lacked reading and language skills; 44% lacked numeracy skills; and most students performed at lower rates in Mathematics and Science than most other industrial countries. In Alberta, trend data has been collected for about ten years and has found that the data demonstrated 63 - 70% high school completion rates, depending on which methodology was used for calculations. In contrast to results for the general population, Statistics Canada data for Aboriginal peoples in the 2001 census demonstrated that 43.5% of Aboriginal adults in Alberta did not finish high school (Statistics Canada, 2001, Aboriginal Peoples Survey).

Policy Environment for High School Completion in Alberta

Statistics have driven some of the practices that Alberta Education adopted in the late 1990s and continued into the 2000s in an attempt to improve high school completion results by gaining momentum in the marketization of education in the global economy.[6] The Alberta government steadily strengthened its commitment toward content-oriented

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[6] For example, Alberta resident students studying abroad could complete high school courses in approved international schools that teach the Alberta Programs of Study, utilize rigorous testing standards and employ Alberta certificated teachers. Also, some high school courses are available for resident students studying abroad through distance learning and the Internet with rigorous standards enforced. These students are counted in the provincial high school completion rates data.

education for the purpose of improving results. Policy development and implementation

priorities were set out in the Commission report (ACOL, 2003)**:**

- Educational standards in Alberta must be the highest in Canada and among the highest in the world. This is being reflected in high results in TIMSS (Trends in Mathematics and Science Study), SAIP (School Achievement Indicators Project) and PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment).
- Results based curriculum reflects high standards, the needs of Alberta's society and economy, and student needs. Curriculum and teaching and learning resource development are closely aligned to the assessment program in Alberta Education.
- Basic reading, writing, spelling and computing skills are to be part of the foundation of learning and application of knowledge.
- Drop-out rates are to be reduced by improving basic skills and enhancing programs that will increase attendance, motivation and self-esteem of at-risk students. (p. 32)

ACOL's Recommendations for Aboriginal Students

In *Success for every child* (ACOL, 2003)*,* the Commission stated, "Aboriginal

education gets a failing grade" (p. 81). The Alberta School Boards Association

presentation to the Commission on Alberta education for Aboriginal students noted:

Our education system has failed these students. It has failed their communities. It has failed the next generation of children who will be born poor and disadvantaged because their parents haven't completed high school and can't provide for their needs. The public education system must do better by these students. We must stop the cycle. (p. 81)

The Commission identified 15 recommendations to improve education outcomes for

Aboriginal youth and children. One recommendation that pertained to high school

completion was Recommendation #33: "Take steps to ensure that First Nations and

Métis youth are well prepared for post-secondary education and the workforce" (p. 81).

High School Completion Symposium, 2006

The Minister of Education hosted a provincial high school symposium in

September 2006 in Edmonton that included invited youth, parents, educators, business

leaders, community leaders and other educational partners. The youth invited to the symposium were nominated by school superintendents and were to be enrolled in an outreach program, or identified as an at-risk youth. Fifty other youth were to be identified by Children's Services from the Youth Strategies programs. A number of the youth identified were Aboriginal students; some of their stories were projected on a large screen for the audience to see and hear at the symposium. The symposium was part of a province-wide consultation process, *Your Future Starts Here,* which was to generate new, community-based solutions to increase Alberta's high school completion rates. In addition to the symposium, all Albertans were encouraged to share their views on how to improve high school completion by completing a high school completion survey online. A *summary report on Alberta Education's high school completion symposium* was posted on Alberta Education's website with many other high school completion documents on various initiatives.

Alberta Education's High School Completion Initiatives and Resources

Some of the initiatives and publications on the Alberta Education website or in print on high school completion were: *A qualitative analysis of the Alberta Learning removing barriers to high school completion report (2001),* which described an overview of early school leaving within a Canadian context, literature review of early school leaving characteristics based on the 2001 Barriers report, comparison and contrast of the national and provincial studies in twelve key issues[7], and recommendations based on a synthesis of the two studies. Another Alberta Education resource that was publicly

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[7] The 12 key issues in the qualitative study are: social climate, school environment, stability, child abuse, family influences, community, individual characteristics, companions, schools attended and suspensions, cognitive ability, behaviour problems, and future plans.

available was *High school completion: AISI (Alberta Initiative for School Improvement) provincial research review.* In the resource, there was a short section about First Nations, Métis and Inuit students (p. 10), and two bullets: 1)importance of integration of Aboriginal perspective(s), content, and resources into curriculum and instruction to increase pride in the Aboriginal population and to provide an understanding in the non-Aboriginal population, and 2) utilization of the Circle of Courage (Dr. Martin Brokenleg, 2002) philosophy as a framework in an AISI project about the theme of social and psychological support (p. 20). Also, of the 800 Cycle 1 (2000 – 2003), and 460 Cycle 2 (2003 – 2006) AISI projects (p. 31), the report stated that there was only one project that focused exclusively on an Aboriginal population for high school completion, with a few projects mentioning Aboriginal issues, and the importance of cultural awareness within the school – although this was not the primary focus of the AISI project (p. 27). The report stated, "Given the staggering statistics regarding non-completion by Aboriginal students, there is no question that more projects focusing upon Aboriginal student retention need to be created, supported and deployed" (p. 27).

The Alberta Education website explained that high school completion in Alberta was important for the future of young people, their families and their communities. The politicized importance of high school completion was expanded to include the following goal: "Alberta's future prosperity rests on our ability to generate a well-educated workforce that is responsive to change" (http://www.education.alberta.ca/department/ipr/highschoolcompletion). The website contained the Alberta High School Completion Framework that supported work in five strategies: personalized learning, successful transitions, collaborative partnerships,

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positive connections and tracking progress. Each of these strategies was further

developed on the website. The high school completion website highlighted some

resources, programs and services accessible to school jurisdictions aiming to improve

completion rates. Also, the website page reported that Alberta's completion rates have

steadily increased and currently sat at 79.5% (this figure was based on a five-year

completion rate upon entering grade 10), and that the Alberta government has placed a

target at 82% by 2012 (lower than the 90% completion rate target set by ACOL in 2003

for four years of high school attendance).

Alberta's completion rates were based on a different methodology for

calculation[8]: a four-year rate, rather than three-year rate that was traditionally considered

to be the length of high school since 1965 when high school completion rates were first

studied in Canadian provinces by CMEC. Whatever the data were manipulated to say,

high school completion remained a public problem in Alberta, with a further urgency for

high school completion of urban Aboriginal students that had no consistent available

published data to verify abysmal results.

Alberta Education's First Nations, Métis and Inuit Initiatives and Resources

Alberta Education's website had a First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education page

(http://education.alberta.ca/teachers/fnmi/policies) that provided policy documents

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[8] Understanding the Alberta High School Completion Rate: The high school completion rate tracks first-time grade 10 students for three, four and five years. For purposes of ACOL Recommendation 11 (four years), students have completed high school if they have: obtained an Alberta High School Diploma, a high school equivalency diploma (GED) or Integrated Occupational Program (IOP) certificate (credentialed completion); or, enrolled in a credit program at an Alberta post-secondary institution, or registered in an apprenticeship program; or, earned credit in five grade 12 courses, including one language arts diploma exam course and three other diploma exam courses, which makes them eligible for post-secondary admission.

including: 2002 *First Nations, Métis and Inuit education policy framework* and corresponding *Progress reports; Aboriginal Learner Data Collection Initiative;* and *Strengthening relationships: Government of Alberta's Aboriginal policy framework* (2000). Also, the web page provided resources about First Nations, Métis and Inuit education for students, teachers and parents, which included promising practices, case studies, handbooks, textbooks, and other resources. The site provided a link to a brochure describing a 2007 conference that examined some promising practices to enhance high school completion amongst First Nations, Métis and Inuit students. The latest addition to the web page was a news release and information about the creation of an Education Partnership Council in 2009, as a result of a CMEC Summit on Aboriginal Education held in February 2009. CMEC and First Nations, Métis and Inuit leaders agreed that, even though some education improvements have been made, there remained a significant gap in education achievement between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students across the country (News Release, October 13, 2009). The work of the Partnership Council, which included a membership of representatives from the Ministers of Education, Aboriginal Relations, and Advanced Education and Technology, Grand Chiefs of Treaties 6, 7, and 8, Presidents of the Métis Nation of Alberta and Métis Settlements General Council, and eight community representatives, could help guide the future direction of First Nations, Métis and Inuit education in Alberta with a goal to reduce and ultimately eliminate the gap in educational achievement for First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners.

Other documents to support educational practice are *Education is our buffalo: A teachers' resource for First Nations, Métis and Inuit education in Alberta* published by

The Alberta Teachers' Association in 2006 and *Our words, our ways: Teaching First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners* published by Alberta Education in 2005. Both resources provide information and practical ways to implement Aboriginal education in classrooms.

Other Alberta Stakeholders' High School Completion Literature

Within Edmonton Public Schools and other school authorities, a number of educators have taken training to implement programs in schools based on the work of Dr. Martin Brokenleg and colleagues with youth at-risk. The program is called the Circle of Courage and was based on "traditional Native educational practices" to foster self-esteem that were proposed in the four directions of the Medicine Wheel: belonging, mastery, independence and generosity. These central themes support positive cultures for education and youth work programs (Brendtro, Brokenleg & Van Bockern, 1998, p. 45). Approaches emerged from Native American cultures "where the central purpose of life was the education and empowerment of children" (p. 44). Many of the adults working with Aboriginal Youth & Family Well-being & Education Society and Edmonton Public Schools have trained with Dr. Brokenleg and colleagues on these approaches.

Other Alberta education stakeholders had public and internal publications about their high school completion priorities. A number of reports and documents were available on their websites. For example, the Alberta School Boards Association, representing the school trustees, published *How to improve Alberta's high school completion rates – Insights from ASBA's school trustees (February 2006)* on their web site. The Alberta School Councils' Association representing the provincial parents' voice had internal reports on high school completion sessions held at their annual conference

(Alberta School Councils' Association 2006 Conference). The College of Alberta School

Superintendents representing school board administrators had internal high school

completion reports and documents featuring AISI projects that focused on high school

completion (CASS Fall Conference, 2006). The Alberta Teachers' Association

representing teachers and principals in individual schools invited Dr. Jill Blackmore to

speak at a high school completion symposium, which produced an internal document,

High school completion, Why stay in school? (Dr. Jill Blackmore, April 2006). Other

education stakeholders' publications, such as the C.D. Howe Institute Commentary,

Neighbors matter: Poor neighborhoods and urban Aboriginal policy, November 2001,

and *Dropouts: The Achilles' heel of Canada's high school system* (#298, October 2009).

Each report provided insights into the public problem of high school completion and

urban Aboriginal policy.

Summary of Alberta High School Completion Policy and Practice

In summary, a historical perspective of high school completion in Canada and

Alberta showed that since the mid-1960s completion rates have remained at about 65 –

70%, while data for Aboriginal peoples from Statistics Canada in 2001 demonstrated that

43.5% of Aboriginal adults in Alberta did not complete high school. Statistics have been

derived from different methodologies; however, it was apparent that Aboriginal students

were completing high school at a much lower level than non-Aboriginal students. Public

policies and practices have been developed in Alberta for high school completion, and for

Aboriginal education, especially after the release of Alberta's Commission on Learning

report in 2003. A high school completion symposium was held, and initiatives and

resources have been developed by Alberta Education to address the public problem of

low high school completion rates in Alberta, as well as initiatives and resources for

Aboriginal students. Other education stakeholders in Alberta have developed policies

and practices somewhat congruent with Alberta Education to address low high school

completion rates. The work done, and being done, provides a background in policy and

practice that can be critically examined with students, families, community and education

stakeholders, so that urban Aboriginal students can become empowered as active agents

in knowledge production to become students at-promise of completing high school.

Other Policy Environments

High School Completion and Urban Aboriginal Literature from Canadian Sources

The Government of Canada had a document prepared in 1992 for the Royal

Commission on Aboriginal Peoples as an *Overview of the first round* of public hearings

across Canada to display the current situation of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. One of

the national round tables on urban issues affecting Aboriginal peoples was held in

Edmonton. The report included a background of the pain many suffered from the

treatment they experienced in non-Aboriginal schools with issues of racism imposed by

the dominant white society. Métis Senator, Thelma Chalifoux, recounted the double

discrimination she faced as a Métis single mother, raising five children in Alberta during

the 1950s (p. 5). Themes emerged from Aboriginal people, such as wanting the

acknowledgement of traumatic experiences in residential schools and the impact on

Aboriginal children and families resulting in many problems today of violence, addiction,

loss of culture, and loss of self-esteem among Aboriginal people (p. 3). Another theme

that emerged was the need for urban Aboriginal peoples, who now account for more than

half of Canada's Aboriginal population, to be fairly represented in Aboriginal political

organizations and receive adequate services (pp. 3 – 4). Also, the report discussed social

issues, such as urban issues, Aboriginal women, Aboriginal youth, and elementary and

secondary education. The report validated issues that Aboriginal youth were facing: the

fact that the Aboriginal youth population has increased at a rate that is double the

population growth rate of non-Aboriginal youth found in Canadian society as a whole;

and Aboriginal youth were facing the intergenerational effects of residential school

experiences that their parents and other adults in their communities had gone through. In

the section on elementary and secondary education, the report indicated that dropout rates

from high school were as high as 90% (p. 29), with no way for young people who had

dropped out in grades 10 and 11 to get back into the school system. The report indicated

that in certain locations within Canada there were schools with little or no Aboriginal

programming or content, and no Aboriginal teachers. There was an intervention call for

the inclusion of more Aboriginal languages, culture, and history in school programs;

development of Aboriginal curriculum and textbooks; more Aboriginal teachers to be

paid at the same rate as non-Aboriginal teachers; addition of Aboriginal school

counsellors; and funding to support these interventions. Some discussion related to

requiring DIAND (Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development) to provide

adequate funding, especially through tuition agreements, for students on reserve attending

public schools off- reserve (pp. 28 – 31).

In June 2003, the Government of Canada released a report, *Building a brighter*

future for urban Aboriginal children, that included sections on urban Aboriginal children

and what they were facing in regards to poverty, mobility, and living in single parent

families headed by young mothers. The report discussed public policy affecting urban

Aboriginal children, building on expertise in the urban Aboriginal community, federal government's Urban Aboriginal Strategy launched in 1998, education public policy challenges, federal government programs supporting urban Aboriginal children, and areas of jurisdiction between federal and provincial governments. Each section presented recommendations that had policy and practical solutions to address problems.

The Ministry of Education in Ontario published a study on dropouts of Native students entitled *Native student dropouts in Ontario schools (1989).* The report indicated dimensions to the dropout issue, views of dropouts, parents, and educators on factors that contributed to dropping out of provincial secondary schools, identification of "at-risk" Native students in provincial secondary schools, and factors that contributed to Native students' success in provincial secondary schools. The report provided recommendations and suggestions for the various stakeholders to support the Native students in provincial secondary schools. One important thing the report mentioned was that there was no precise and reliable data collected by any Native or government agency, either federal or provincial, for the purpose of examining educational services offered through the Ontario provincial school system to Native students (p. vii). This was similar for the Alberta provincial school system. Also, the Ontario study suggested the difficulty of describing retention and attrition rates of Métis and off-reserve students because a data-base did not exist, and would not be simple to create, because of the self-identification nature of being Métis (p. 15).

An Urban Aboriginal Task Force was established in early 2003 to explore issues facing urban Aboriginal communities in the province of Ontario. The Joint Steering Committee of the Task Force produced a report in December 2007 commissioned by the

Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centers, Ontario Métis Aboriginal Association and Ontario Native Women's Association. The report highlighted issues that urban Aboriginal youth in Ontario were facing as three major challenges: lack of positive Aboriginal identity in the city, lack of employment opportunities, and having to quit school before graduation. Also, youth pointed to the lack of culturally relevant school curriculum and racism as factors contributing to dropping out of school, as well as other factors, such as problems with addictions, mental health concerns, reality of youth suicide, gangs, and lack of cultural, social, and recreational facilities (p. 23). In a section about urban Aboriginal youth, the decision to drop out of school was described in the following way:

> The decision to withdraw from school early is rarely based on a single reason or incident – regardless of whether the issue concerns family, health, boredom, a need to provide child care or find employment. Leaving school often begins with students failing to attend classes because they are facing overwhelming challenges in their lives. (p. 128)

Other Schools and Programs Pertinent to High School Completion of Urban Aboriginal Students

There were a number of existing schools and programs that were geared toward the goal of urban Aboriginal high school completion, as well as other measures to indicate successful schooling of students. Below I will describe a few of them located in Canada and the USA.

An Edmonton project that was operated by Edmonton Public Schools between 1982 and 1985 was the *Sacred Circle Project.* It was a unique urban Aboriginal education project designed to introduce Native education for urban Aboriginal students, and to introduce education about Native people for all students. A success of the project was the integration of learnings, such as: promotion of mutual respect and understanding

between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal segments of Canada about Aboriginal peoples, integration of policies and practices into central office and the school district, decentralization of the project into several schools and central services, and removal of project status to service delivery program status in other Edmonton Public schools.

In *Making the spirit dance within: Joe Duquette High School and an Aboriginal community* (Haig-Brown, Archibald, Regnier, Vermette, Hodgson-Smith, Eds., 1997), the Joe Duquette High School that was located in downtown Saskatoon and operating in the Saskatoon Indian - Métis Friendship Center was showcased. The school was a place where teachers, students, administrators, community people and parents were working together to ensure the success of urban Aboriginal students. The school programs were based on the interconnectedness of the Medicine Wheel (pp. 47and 96).

Kirkness (1998) discussed how The Children of the Earth School in Winnipeg changed the "3 Rs (read, 'rite, and 'rithmetic) to rediscovering (research), respect, and recovering the culture and traditions of our people.....so that the curriculum will accurately incorporate our traditions and cultures into what and how we teach" (p. 12). Kirkness suggested that we consider a fourth "R" - rhetoric when we are seeking to "cut the crap":

> It is common to hear our political leaders and educators speak eloquently about the importance of education and what we must do to improve it not only for today, but for future generations. We know all the right words; we sound like experts, but we fall short when it comes to putting our rhetoric into action (p. 12).

Wishart (2009) described issues that many disenfranchised urban youth (many of them of Aboriginal descent) were facing in high schools. Students who were the subjects in her doctoral research attended an accredited private senior high school, Inner City High School, in Edmonton. Wishart used the term disenfranchised youth to connote

"disconnected from families and geographic communities" (p. xvi) in her reference to urban youth who were currently falling through the cracks of public schools and community services. Wishart suggested a model of critical literacy for the school and other educators to create conditions that could break the status quo, by fostering a sense of belonging (p. 114) for urban youth that encouraged growth toward success. The model was used to enable the school's ability to metaphorically nurture "roses (i.e., their disenfranchised youth) in concrete gardens" (p. 141).

Ward (2005) wrote about her research to serve the interests of Northern Cheyenne educators in understanding and addressing the high dropout rate among their high school students in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Ward described the American Indian education context, one that Senator Edward Kennedy called "a national tragedy" (p. 1) in a summary report for a *Special Senate subcommittee on Indian education* (1969). Despite vast changes in federal policy and resources poured into education, the evidence indicated that the dropout rates remained high among American Indian high school students. Ward reported that, "Despite overall improvements in educational status from 1960 to 2000, American Indians are still much less likely to reach the highest levels of educational attainment than among other ethnic groups" (p. 3). Empirical data to justify Ward's claim were included in her book, along with chapters about case studies in Ward's research, analysis of high school completion, examination of influences on high school completion, evaluation of school dropout models, and a comparison of high school completion for Indian and white students. There were a number of attempts at providing solutions to address a universal public problem of low high school completion for urban Aboriginal youth.

Summary of Other Policy Environments

In summary, other sources than the Alberta government have been involved in policy development and practice in the areas of high school completion and urban Aboriginal education. For example, the Government of Canada, Ministry of Education in Ontario, and Urban Aboriginal Task Force in Ontario produced reports on urban Aboriginal issues, which included high dropout rates of students. Also, some projects and programs in the USA and Canada were cited that aimed toward the goal of urban Aboriginal high school completion. These sources provided a broader context than the Alberta scene, and serve as a useful comparison for the knowledge gleaned from my research on policy and practice implications for urban Aboriginal students to become at-promise of completing high school.

Education Policy Affecting Urban Aboriginal Students

In Canada, education is a provincial mandate governed by the province's *School Act,* unless students are in a federal institution or attend a band-operated school, which are governed federally by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) or the penal system (*Youth Criminal Justice Act*). Aboriginal students in Alberta schools are governed by the federal or provincial systems depending on status of the student and what school the student is attending. Sometimes a tuition agreement is in place for federal students with treaty rights attending provincial schools; however, in many cases this is not a smooth transition. In all cases, education is mandated by government, which implies that government decisions establish public policy and determine equitable opportunities for all students. Ultimately, federal and provincial governments are to be

held accountable for espoused values and policies to support equity that governs education for all Aboriginal peoples.

Urban Aboriginal students are attending Edmonton Public Schools; however, a number of the students are there through tuition agreements between a First Nation and the provincial system. An added consideration is that sometimes a student goes back and forth from the reserve to the city and vice-versa throughout a school year, which can make government funding to the public school jurisdiction for the student problematic, especially if the student moves after September 30 of any particular year, which is the date that final student numbers are submitted to the Department of Education for funding to the jurisdiction for the year. The student count affects funding dollars available for education programming. There is no additional funding awarded to school jurisdictions after September 30 of any particular school year.

Education for Indigenous Peoples in Post-Colonial Times

All of the contemporary policy issues described above exist in the larger policy context of the colonial relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in Canada**.** Many urban Aboriginal students experience the intergenerational effects of colonialism. As described earlier, the oppression of Indigenous peoples is universal. In Canada, oppression of Indigenous people has been documented for over 500 years in many accounts. In spite of this, Indigenous peoples maintained independent political communities with inherent rights to self-determination.

Immigrants chose to come to Indigenous peoples' land and were granted entrance to the territory through a treaty, which was viewed as a peaceful path to mutual benefit held in a sacred agreement. Each First Nation had its own governance structures and

operated Nation to Nation (Judge Arnot, Treaty Commissioner, Saskatchewan, Tenth Annual Rural Education Congress, Saskatoon, oral presentation, April 2005).

Problems resulted when treaties were not honored by the settler society. The *Indian Act* is paternalistic and promotes assimilation. First Nations peoples are marginalized by the *Indian Act*, which controls their lives from birth to death. Canada's national shame is the treatment of Indigenous peoples. Until 1951, grievances included:

- prohibition of spiritual practices,
- imposition of residential schools,
- imposition of permit system through Indian agents,
- imposition of pass system to travel anywhere,
- prohibition from legal counsel,
- prohibition to vote in federal elections, and
- imposition of Third World poverty levels.

Section 35 of the *Constitution Act, 1982* recognized and affirmed Aboriginal and treaty rights. Treaties were established for mutual benefit. Canada entered treaty agreements for peaceful settlement into the territory in order to diplomatically avoid the Indian wars that occurred in the USA and to assert sovereignty through land ownership and freedom of religion. First Nations entered treaty agreements in order to gain new economic strategies by acquiring education and farming skills, and to protect their own ways of life (Judge Arnot, April 2005). Some First Nations peoples in Canada did not have signed treaties with governments; therefore, education jurisdiction was questionable in these areas.

More recently in Alberta, Aboriginal student numbers are increasing rapidly, while non-Aboriginal student numbers were on a steady decline. Aboriginal population growth is skewed toward pre-19 years old, or school age, while the non-Aboriginal population growth is skewed toward the older adult (baby boomers did not have

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replacement numbers of children, which has continued into further Generations X and Y, and Millennial). (Statistics Canada, Population characteristics, 2006).

Aboriginal children are moving off reserves and Métis settlements (not governed by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada) and into cities. Public schools and governments need to continue to develop policies and implement programs to meet the needs of Aboriginal peoples that supplement existing Aboriginal policies. Existing policies and documents supporting changes to Aboriginal policies include: *Strengthening relationships, The Government of Alberta's Aboriginal policy framework*, September 2000; *First Nations, Métis and Inuit education policy framework,* February 2002; *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, Volume 3: Education;* and *Gathering Strength: Canada's Aboriginal Action Plan* (1992).

Education Law for Federal and Provincial Aboriginal Students

The *British North America Act*, 1867 provided the division of powers between Canada and the provinces; education was a responsibility of provinces except for education in First Nations schools and federal institutional schools. Another Act, the *Alberta Act, 1905*, allowed minority school districts to be formed. Also, the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms,*1982, in particular section 15, provided equality rights, and section 23 provided minority language educational rights (e.g. francophone rights). Section 23 rights applied to some Métis students whose first language was French rather than an Aboriginal heritage language, or English.

Other acts that impacted education of urban Aboriginal youth in Alberta were:

- *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act 2000* (was the *Child Welfare Act*)
- *Family Support for Children with Disabilities Act 2003*
- *Labor Relations Code 2001*
- *Family Law Act 2003*

- *Youth Criminal Justice Act 2002*
- *Youth Justice Act 2000*
- *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act 2000*
- *Personal Information Protection Act 2003*

Some of the students that were involved in my research were personally experiencing situations requiring the enactment of pertinent laws, as outlined above, in addition to the *School Act.*

Freedom of Information and Privacy Protection Act 2000 affected how data were collected and disclosed in Alberta. This could affect education programming in public school jurisdictions for Aboriginal students. For example, for a school that had less than six Aboriginal students, the data could not be reported in a disaggregated manner (i.e., per school), because an individual Aboriginal student might be able to be identified in that situation. Many school jurisdictions in Alberta have identified the inability to receive disaggregated data for individual schools from the Department of Education about their Aboriginal students as a problem in knowing how to plan appropriate programming for them (communication with school superintendents, n.d.).

Funding for Aboriginal Students in Alberta

In 2004, Alberta Education introduced the Aboriginal Learner Data Collection Initiative (http://www.education.alberta.ca/teachers/fnmi/aldci) to identify Aboriginal learners in the province. The data collected by the Ministry of Education was intended to be used to assess the educational attainment of Aboriginal learners, effectiveness of the education system and to allocate provincial First Nations, Métis and Inuit funding to school authorities. School authorities in Alberta received $1155 per each identified First Nations, Métis and Inuit student in the 2009-2010 school year in the funding allocations provided by Alberta Education to school authorities as part of their operating grant. The

amount was based on the one-time count on September 30, 2009 of Aboriginal student numbers for the 2009 – 2010 school year. As mentioned previously, the mechanism for this count is seriously flawed.

In 2004, a voluntary Aboriginal self-identification question was added to student registration forms completed by students by the fall of every school year. A student could voluntarily declare if they were Status Indian/First Nations, Non-Status Indian/First Nations, Métis or Inuit and did not require verification. I heard from a staff member of Alberta Education that some students who declared they were Aboriginal students in one year did not self-declare in the following year (conversation with staff, n.d.).

Self-identification affects programming for provincial Kindergarten to Grade 12 schools in Alberta. The funding model makes it important for school authorities to encourage Aboriginal students to self-identify. When the model was being developed, I served on an internal Government committee that consulted with Aboriginal organizations. Interestingly, most committee members might have expected Aboriginal students to self-identify due to funding implications. However, my experience was that, for many Aboriginal people, a dictation by Government to do something was not a strong enough reason to comply. In reality, self-identification was voluntary and many Aboriginal students and their parents have chosen not to self-identify for various reasons (conversation with Elders, n.d.). When I worked as Advisor to the President of the Métis Nation of Alberta, some *kohkoms* and *mosoms* told me that they and their families did not have good experiences in schools, either in residential schools themselves, or their children and grandchildren in provincial schools. To them self-identification as an Aboriginal person on a government document brought back negative experiences of

schooling and lack of trust. In other instances, *kohkoms* and *mosoms* told me they wanted their children and grandchildren in provincial schools to be identified as Métis. When I asked why, some told me, "Because it is time" (conversations with Elders, n.d.).

Flexibility and Accountability Pillars of Alberta's *Renewed Funding Framework*

An aspect of funding that affects programming for urban Aboriginal students is that the *Renewed Funding Framework 2009 - 2010*, which was the model to determine funding allocations for Kindergarten to Grade 12 school authorities in Alberta, was based on the three pillars of flexibility, accountability and funding allocations. As part of the *Renewed Funding Framework* model that funded school jurisdictions for Aboriginal students, this meant that, due to the flexibility pillar of the *Renewed Funding Framework,* a jurisdiction that received $1155 for each Aboriginal student in the 2009 – 2010 school year in the First Nations, Métis and Inuit funding allocation, did not necessarily have to allocate that funding to Aboriginal students. Because the funding was not targeted for Aboriginal students, a school jurisdiction could pool funding for programming based on local needs as determined by the local school board and its education stakeholders. However, ultimately the local school jurisdiction was responsible for its students and, therefore, responsible for high school completion results for all students, including Aboriginal students, regardless of the funding model or the method for identifying Aboriginal students.

Summary of Policy for Education of Urban Aboriginal Students

In summary, education for urban Aboriginal students is the responsibility of federal and/or provincial jurisdictions depending on the status of the student. This means that education programs for individual Aboriginal students coming from reserves to the

city can be affected by the funding available in a tuition agreement or the understanding between provincial schools and the band where the student come from, which has not always been a smooth transition. Also, for urban Aboriginal students deemed as provincial students, there are policies, programs and funding in place that determine programming. In the previous sections, I provided a synopsis and history of acts, laws, regulations and policies, and the funding mechanisms Alberta currently holds in place that can affect urban Aboriginal students, their families, communities and educators when designing appropriate policies, programs and support systems for students as they work to become at-promise of completing high school.

Purpose of Education

The purpose of education that urban Aboriginal students, their parents, and community espoused was important to my research in terms of goal setting. By identifying reasons for completing high school, students in the research are enabled to set goals and reveal strategies to achieve their goals, based on critical awareness. Many scholars have expressed their interpretation of the purpose or goals of public education in North America – goals that could be congruent with or in conflict with the desires of Aboriginal students and their families.

Labaree (1997) described three goals for American education that have been in the education arena for a number of years. They were: democratic equality, in which schools should focus on preparing citizens; social efficiency, in which schools should focus on training workers and social mobility, in which schools should prepare individuals to compete for social positions. Labaree deemed the first two goals as public goods, and the third goal as a private good (article abstract, p. 39). Schools are blamed

for all kinds of social ills by critics from the political left and right. From the right, schools are blamed for being an economic waste of massive amounts of money, and for incompetence at preparing students for jobs in the workforce. From the left, schools also have been viewed as places that reinforce social inequality (Labaree, p. 40).

Because of competing perspectives, goal setting for education has shifted based on political reasons, not pedagogical, cultural or social. In Alberta, excellence in education is the current dominant mantra, placing equality of education in a distant questionable shadow. Even the notion of equality has morphed to mean equal opportunity based on class privilege in a hierarchal society. Hegemony covertly ensures that power relationships are maintained in schools and society; students are facing these power issues.

Wallace (2004) discussed globalization and how it has affected the purpose of education that shapes policy and practice (pp. 99 - 100). Alberta as a resource-rich province is dependent on the global marketplace for the province's revenues. Hence, the province is held hostage by oil and gas price fluctuations, wheat and grain markets, and, at times, cattle export bans because of contagious diseases of animals, such as BSE (Bovine spongiform encephalopathy). The Department of Education uses the mantra of efficiency that dominates the rhetoric of globalization as an excuse for funding cuts to education, both in good and bad times in the world marketplace that controls oil and gas revenues.

In light of the effects of globalization, Wallace explains that critical theorists have reminded us that the purpose of education for democratic equality has never been fully realized because educational policy and practice has had a tendency to be reproduced to

advantage the elite (p. 105). For the urban Aboriginal students involved in my research, resisting the mantra of efficiency and raising a critical awareness of equity as a goal of public education could empower them to find supports they need to achieve their personal and collective community goals.

Evolution of the Purpose of Education

Hodgkinson (1991) introduced three purposes for education that have seen a rapid evolution in the last century: aesthetic, economic and ideological. These three purposes of education resonated for me, and became intertwined.

First, aesthetic purposes of education were associated with self-fulfillment and the enjoyment of life. Liberal arts, humanities, athletics and adult education courses were a few examples of aesthetic education. Learning was for the sake of learning and enjoyment; for self-actualization. For example, the love of learning could be seen as urban Aboriginal students break-dance to express their ways of knowing, during a peer mentorship presentation to share the message with others of the importance of staying in school.

Second, economic education was for the purpose of making money, which determined the future economic status of the learner. It was about getting a job. This purpose was where much of our education system, both the Kindergarten to grade 12 system, and post-secondary education, currently resides. Universities are rated against one another as to numbers of students that are employed immediately upon graduation. Government policies and programs support the competitive nature and excellence standards of economic education within a global economy. Supposedly, high stakes testing statistics justified these policies and programs, but where did equity reside in the

discourse of economic education? Perhaps it did in the abysmal statistics of the unemployed or underemployed, or the citizens who were not even on the radar screen of statistical information. Low high school completion rates and high dropout rates were fairly new focal points in Alberta for accountability of school jurisdictions and government, driven largely by economic concerns for a suitable workforce that could compete in a globalized economy. The urban Aboriginal students in my proposed research could become objects to be studied under a microscope through the hegemonic lens of economic purposes. Viewed through a critical lens, however, these same students could be acknowledged as at-promise students with the potential to be supported by parents, community, educators and levels of government, who were working together to find ways to solve problems that stood in the way of high school completion.

Third, ideological education had the purpose to transmit the dominant culture of society. Education was the tool of denominational or church schools, secular or non-religious schools, and the state. Ideological education had political underpinnings premised on the dominant norms of Canadian society with nationalistic indoctrination as a product. Critical pedagogy, however, would challenge these goals that maintain the status quo for the benefit of the dominant culture to make room to validate the addition of different epistemologies. In order for Canada to become a true multicultural nation, Indigenous ways of knowing must be granted credence for society to become richer with many interwoven cultures.

The three purposes of education remain intertwined in Alberta. For example, the Ministry of Education in Alberta supports language learning in the Second Languages initiative. This initiative is presented by government to support the economic purpose of

competition for jobs in a global labor market requiring languages for trade, and to

maintain Alberta's Advantage economically with the acquisition of languages. Many

students in the research experience speak Indigenous languages and English. Second, the

Second Languages initiative supports the sheer aesthetics of language learning and

appreciation of language in cultures of our diverse population. Third, second language

acquisition supports cultural and ideological purposes, such as the formal policy

statements around bilingualism and multiculturalism in Canada. Looking through a

critical lens, it is very questionable whether the purposes of education have been truly

realized for urban Aboriginal students seeking ways to complete high school because of

the tendency for policies and practices in education to advantage the elite rather than

promote social equality.

Hodgkinson (1991), citing Hoy and Miskel (1987), provides a powerful

redefinition of educational goals that, in some aspects, mirrors the empowerment goals of

critical pedagogy.

> Education is the not the art of training and subjugating people to serve the profit of others. It is the art of helping people to know themselves, to develop the resources of judgment and skills of learning and the sense of values needed in facing a future of unpredictable change, to understand the rights and responsibilities of adults in a democratic society and to exercise the greatest possible degree of control over their own fate. To educate is to look for truth, to stir discomfort in the placid minds of the unthinking, to shake ideologies, disturb complacence, and undermine the tyranny of anti-intellectual commercialism, which reins in the marketplace and, in some of our legislatures, to the disadvantage of all of us. To educate is to reject the false analogies of the marketplace, to see justice and equality as noble aims rather than as obstacles to a takeover bid, to insist that human progress has no bottom line. (p. 16)

Summary of the Purpose of Education

In summary, the purpose of education is central to goal setting for urban

Aboriginal students and their support mechanisms to become at-promise of completing

high school. I have provided a brief background in the public and private aspects of the *raison d'être* for education and schools that scholars have identified, and the drivers that hold status quo reasons for schooling in place. I viewed the purpose of education as intertwined between aesthetic, economic and ideological realms that provide a goal for an individual or an education system to work toward. The work of the scholars presented, and others, provided knowledge that I incorporated into my research experience.

When participants in my study critically examine the purpose of education, it becomes possible for students to use their knowledge to set goals and become empowered to find ways to attain their goals. Through a similar critical lens, parents and extended families, Indigenous organizations and communities, and educators can reconceptualize a vision that questions whether current purposes, policies and practices for schooling are in the best interest of students who attend their schools. Together, all the students and stakeholders involved in my research could address my research question: How can we create enabling conditions in terms of policy and practice for urban Aboriginal students to become at-promise of completing high school?

Gaps in Literature Relating to my Research

As I worked on this literature review, I discovered that there was little published information in the area of creating enabling conditions in terms of policy and practice for urban Aboriginal students to complete high school in Alberta. The literature about high school completion of urban Aboriginal students and statistics was sketchy at best, if available at all, in various provinces of Canada or the USA. My research addresses this gap using a methodology of Indigenous research methodology framework based in critical theory with a goal of transformative action. I will turn now to my research

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methodology and the following research design and methods that enabled me to explore

my research question: How can we create enabling conditions in terms of policy and

practice for urban Aboriginal students to complete high school in Alberta?

Chapter 3: Journey through the Context of the Research Experience

In the previous chapter I discussed my journey through the critical theory and critical pedagogy literature. Critical theory provides an epistemology for addressing issues that exercise hegemonic control over urban Aboriginal students, while critical pedagogy points to solutions for students to become empowered, as well as the development of policy and practice that creates enabling conditions for urban Aboriginal students to complete high school. In this research, both critical theory and critical pedagogy inform Indigenous research methodology through a critical lens with a goal of transformative action.

In this chapter I continue the journey through the research context using an Indigenous research methodology informed by a critical lens to understand power issues in schools and with the goal of liberating urban Aboriginal students and enhancing their support systems. I used a research method of talking circles and individual interviews to gather data from research participants from the Aboriginal Youth & Family Well-being & Education Society. The journey continued by using critical theory to analyze the data obtained from the research through a critical lens in order to extend the knowledge base and provide transformative possibilities on high school completion possibilities for Aboriginal students.

Context of the Research

For my research I chose to work collaboratively with the Aboriginal Youth & Family Well-being & Education Society students, parents and extended families, Elders, community and educators involved in a stay-in-school program operated by the Society in four schools in Edmonton Public Schools. I have a relationship in the Indigenous

community with the Aboriginal Youth & Family Well-being & Education Society. Prior to my research, we worked together intermittently for a number of years toward achieving the goals of the Society. Some of the participants from my current research were involved in 2000 in the *Removing barriers to high school completion* study conducted by Alberta Education, which I conducted and provided input into the final document written by government. They were chosen for my current research because of their vast knowledge on high school completion and urban Aboriginal students.

The Aboriginal Youth & Family Well-being & Education Society (www.aboriginalyouth.ca) that is situated in Edmonton Public Schools was established in 1996 with a mission of "Creating opportunities for our Aboriginal youth to fulfill their hopes and dreams". The Society has a strong focus on high school completion of urban Aboriginal students in their program. The purposes of the society's programs are to assist Aboriginal youth to remain in school, to be successful in achieving their educational potential, and to assist their families to support their children and youth in this goal. The three beliefs of the Society are that:

- family and community involvement is essential to their success;
- in order to help improve the conditions of Aboriginal children, youth and families, they must focus on prevention; and
- parents and extended family members must be involved and encouraged to participate in their children's education, development and growth.

The Society is operated by a volunteer board of directors and a small funded staff consisting of a Director, family support worker, and education mentors in four schools in Edmonton. Their office is situated in one of the schools. They draw upon the Indigenous knowledge of Elders and the community. The education mentors, who are assigned to a certain school, provide tutoring and other services, such as weekly workshops focusing

on pertinent topics, and sports and other activities, directly in the school for the urban

Aboriginal students participating in the program. Students are referred to the program by

the principal and staff of the particular school, the students themselves, and families who

had previous experience with other children in the program. Also, the program relies

heavily on the board of directors and other volunteers to assist with activities and

celebrations.

There are scheduled family and student events, and occasional celebrations where

the community are invited to attend. These events depend on budgetary constraints. The

extended Aboriginal community is involved in the program including a number of

revered Elders, extended families of students, Métis Nation of Alberta, other

representative associations, and others. The program has many supports, such as the

local MLA, local city councilor, Department of Justice, Alberta Lottery Fund, Edmonton

Community Foundation, City of Edmonton, Canadian Heritage, Region 6 Alberta

Children's Services, and Edmonton Oilers Foundation. However, the Society is

constantly looking for on-going funding, since the program does not have core funding.

In lean years, the program had to be discontinued in certain schools (at one time the

program provided service to students in five Edmonton Public schools). With

inconsistent funding support, the program has been unable to plan confidently for more

than two to three years in advance, if that far, and staff are constantly preparing and

distributing funding proposals to various funding agencies and governments.

The Society provided service to urban Aboriginal youth focusing on four goals:

- to provide a visible and inviting place so youth and their families can feel a sense of pride and ownership,
- to nurture well-being and development in each individual in order for them to appreciate their own strengths and to realize their capabilities,

- to provide opportunities for youth to remain in school and become confident,
- to encourage and support parents and extended families to be actively involved in the child's education.

Also, the Society provided family support that was given through:

- referrals to services,
- advocacy,
- support in employment, budgeting, parenting, personal development and group parenting workshops,
- encouragement of participation in the child's education.

Educational mentoring was provided to students for:

- daily school instructional support,
- mentoring in personal development,
- cultural and recreational activities,
- weekly workshops.

The people involved with the Society were grass-roots to the community of Edmonton and were well aware of the issues that Aboriginal people were facing in urban settings. Their knowledge was shared in my research in the stories during the talking circles and interviews about the journeys that they as students, Elders, parents of children, or parents of children's children endured as they travelled through the education system.

Methodology as it Pertains to the Research Experience

Indigenous Research Methodology

For my research experience with urban Aboriginal students and their support systems, I chose Indigenous research methodology to conduct the research. Indigenous research methodology enabled a respectful way of gaining knowledge with students, parents, community members and educational stakeholders, while adding a responsibility to validate the knowledge production of all worldviews of those who came to the table of

the research experience. As an Indigenous researcher, I was part of the research

experience.

Indigenous research methodology incorporates respect and responsibility. Weber-

Pillwax (1999) states:

> Indigenous researchers will be expected to ground their research knowingly in the
> lives of people as individual and social beings, and not on the world of ideas. Any
> theories developed or proposed will be grounded in and supported by indigenous
> epistemology as it is lived out and given from within the community. Underlying
> the shapes and conditions of indigenous communities are the theories and
> explanations that spring from the people themselves – theories that explain the
> many facets and connections of our individual and collective lives. Here, over the
> thousands of years that we have lived together, respecting each other's
> individualities, the philosophers and the prophets of each generation have
> carefully pulled together the threads that compose our epistemology, our ways of
> knowing, our science of knowledge. (pp. 42-43)

As an Indigenous researcher I had a responsibility for all of the relationships in my

research, based on respect. A use for the knowledge that was gained from the research

was to be decided by the research community. Protocols were established respectfully

through the offering of tobacco and cloth to the Elders to signify my strong intentions of

paying honor to the participants' knowledge and for the commitment of continuing our

work together. Relationships were maintained much past the research experience.

Smith (1999) reflected on Indigenous research methodology and stated, "A

research methodology is a theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed …

a research method is a technique for (or way of proceeding to) gathering evidence" (p.

143). Smith continued that methodology "frames the questions being asked, determines

the set of instruments to be employed and shapes the analysis" (p. 143). Indigenous

methodologies were often a mix of existing methodological approaches and Indigenous

practices. Further in her work, Smith stated that methodology is "important because it is

regarded as a way in which knowledge is acquired or discovered and as a way in which

we can "know what is real" (p. 164). Respect, connectedness, and responsibility were

paramount to my proposed research and to the body of knowledge that was acquired

throughout the research.

Weber-Pillwax (1999) described a set of principles that could be considered when

utilizing Indigenous research methodology. They included:

- the interconnectedness of all living things,
- the impact of motives and intentions on person and community,
- the foundation of research as lived indigenous experience,
- the groundedness of theories in indigenous epistemology,
- the transformative nature of research,
- the sacredness and responsibility of maintaining personal and community integrity, and
- the recognition of languages and cultures as living processes. (pp. 31-32)

These principles provided parameters for those involved in the research experience on

how to interact, whether they were Indigenous or not, within an Indigenous research

methodology framework.

Kenny (2000) grappled with defining Indigenous research methodology. She

posed many of the questions that I had in articulating what was Aboriginal research, and

identified it as a unique approach to research (p. 144).

> What is Aboriginal research anyway? Is it the study of Aboriginal peoples? Is it led by native and non-Native scholars? Is it Aboriginal peoples studying Aboriginal peoples? Is it any research done by an Aboriginal person?
>
> For me, Aboriginal research is research which reflects the values and beliefs of our peoples. Hopefully, when Aboriginal researchers do research, they will keep their thinking broad in terms of methods and approaches, and will, at the same time, be able to construct and conduct their research in a way which is in accordance with their worldviews. (pp. 144 – 145)

Oral conference presentations were given by a panel at a University of Alberta

conference in 2001 and were published in the *Canadian Journal of Native Education* on

the topic of coming to understand what was Indigenous research. Individual panellists

shared how they used Indigenous research methodology in their research experiences.

Weber-Pillwax (2001) told stories of relationship and kinship that were grounded in

northern Alberta communities in her presentation on the nature of Indigenous research.

She shared:

> ...the Indigenous research has to benefit the community…The research methods
> have to mesh with the community and serve the community. Any research that I
> do must not destroy or in any way negatively implicate or compromise my own
> personal integrity as a person, as a human being. (p. 168)

These powerful words were echoed by other presenters on various topics about

Indigenous research methodology.

Shawn Wilson (2001) focused on four aspects: ontology, or what you believe is

real in the world; epistemology, or how you think about the reality; axiology, or set of

morals and ethics; and research methodology, or how you are going to use your ways of

thinking. He put them together to develop a research paradigm. He stated, "To me an

Indigenous methodology means talking about relational accountability. As a researcher

you are answering to all your relations…being accountable to all my relations" (p. 177).

Cardinal (2001) spoke to what was an Indigenous perspective. He stated,

> Indigenous peoples with their traditions and customs are shaped by the
> environment, by the land. They have a spiritual, emotional, and physical
> relationship to that land. It speaks to them; it gives them their responsibility for
> stewardship; and it sets out a relationship. (p 180)

He talked about the importance of stories, symbols, dream work, circle work, Elders.

Also, he talked about intuition, and molecular or cellular memory.

> I am saying that Indigenous research methods and methodologies are as old as our
> ceremonies and our nations. They are with us and have always been with us. Our
> Indigenous cultures are rich with ways of gathering, discovering, and uncovering

knowledge. They are as near as our dreams and as close as our relationships. (p. 182)

Steinhauer (2001) discussed how she situated herself in research. She used talking circles to gain access to the data in her master's study through protocols of offering tobacco to signify her good intentions and to pay honor and respect to the participants' knowledge, an inherent wisdom that had remained strong and carried on. She shared the importance of knowledge being maintained within the research community. She went to her uncle to receive the Cree word for "carrying on" and shares that "*ekasis'pohtahk* captures the specific essence of carrying on this knowledge that is also related to something more sacred" (p. 187).

At the conference described above, Dr. Stan Wilson (2001) of the University of Alberta stated, "Rather than taking curriculum and infusing it with culture, we need to take culture as a starting point and infuse it with education" (conversation with participants, n.d.).

Researchers from other locations also have utilized Indigenous research methodologies in their research experiences. Pepper and Henry (1991) describe a model of self-esteem from an Indian perspective of the whole being using the Medicine Wheel with its four directions of social conditions: power, uniqueness, connectiveness and models for development of positive self-esteem. This model was used to develop positive self-esteem of children; the model displayed an intact Medicine Wheel to reflect high self-esteem, and a broken Medicine Wheel to reflect low self-esteem that could be used for positive individual development to maintain the four directions of the Medicine Wheel for Indigenous children. There were underlying principles to establish protocols on how to work with Aboriginal youth in a respectful way; to understand how urban

Aboriginal peoples have unique experiences based in culture, traditions and history; and to recognize the interconnectedness that urban Aboriginal youth had with all living things. Pepper and Henry's model is important to my research and a concept that I attempted to maintain.

King (1991) reminded us that underlying the connectedness of living things was a world view of harmony and cyclical systems for the environment in which Aboriginal people lived. In a classroom, critical educators understood that their students came from different world views and celebrated those differences through validation of different world views in everyday classroom activities. My research experience supports Indigenous world views and values that urban Aboriginal students hold within their families and communities.

Dei (2000) firmly asserted that Indigenous knowledges had a place in the academy[9] to affirm a "collaborative dimension of knowledge... diversity of histories, events, experiences and ideas that have shaped human growth and development." (p. 113). A strength of this argument was that Indigenous knowledges were valued, not negated. Dei stressed the dynamic nature of knowledge systems in which different bodies of knowledge continually influenced each other within the ongoing creation and recreation of all knowledge systems (p. 113). In my research, Indigenous knowledge was utilized to counter the hegemonic control and power of dominant forms of knowledge. Power and control were shifted to challenge the inequalities based on racism, classism and sexism.

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[9] Dei refers to academy as schools, colleges and universities (p. 112) for the political purpose of academic decolonization and legitimization of different forms of knowledges.

An Indigenous research methodology framework based on respect and responsibility gives me an obligation to preserve all my relations and relationships in the research. They are sacred. This includes much more than familial connections; it involves all of creation and the cosmos in which we live. King explains,

> "All my relations" is at first a reminder of who we are and our relationships with both our family and other relatives. It also reminds us of the extended relationship we share with all human beings. But the relationships that Native people see go further, the web of kinship extending to the animals, to the birds, to the fish, to the planets, to all the animate and inanimate forms that can be seen or imagined. More than that, "all my relations" is an encouragement for us to accept the responsibilities we have within this universal family by living our lives in a harmonious and moral manner (a common admonishment is to say of someone that they act as if they have no relations). (King, 1992, p. ix)

In an Indigenous research methodology framework, the research is not about my individual gain of knowledge; it is about my responsibility for what I would do with the knowledge. As I gain knowledge from the research, I have an obligation to share it with my community; together we build on the knowledge and how it will be used. I do not enter a community, take what I need, and leave. Instead, it is about establishing the protocols in a respectful way, honoring the community and maintaining personal and community integrity. The responsibility to the community lasts beyond the research experience to continue the work started together. These principles provide some parameters for those involved in the research experience in relation to how we would interact, whether they are Indigenous or not, within an Indigenous research methodology framework.

Indigenous research methodology informed by a critical lens with the goal of transformative action provided the methodology that helped to shape my research into a critical theory of empowerment for urban Aboriginal students, with their supporting

families, communities and education stakeholders to become at-promise of completing high school. My methodology is a holistic approach based on the four directions of the Medicine Wheel, in which the knowledge of all involved in the research experience is valued. Indigenous research methodology includes a collaborative, community-based nature, as well as relational and oral traditional approaches taken.

A key principle of Indigenous research methodology includes relationships and how relationships enable groups and individuals to trust each other. Stringer (2004) stated that good working relationships:

- Promote feelings of equality for all people involved
- Maintain harmony
- Avoid conflicts, where possible
- Resolve conflicts that arise, openly and dialogically
- Accept people as they are, not as some people think they ought to be
- Encourage personal, cooperative relationships, rather than impersonal, competitive, conflictual, or authoritarian relationships
- Are sensitive to people's feelings. (pp. 40 – 41)

Relationships are paramount to Indigenous research methodology, and to the Indigenous and non-Indigenous people involved in the research experience.

Summary of Methodology

In summary, the methodology I chose for my research was an Indigenous research methodology framework, informed by critical theory. I have described how orality, collaboration and community-based were important aspects of my research. Also, I have described how scholars successfully have utilized critical theory and Indigenous research methodology in their research and practice that has provided background knowledge for my research. As an Indigenous researcher, I was cognizant of the respect and responsibility I aimed to maintain to guide the parameters for my research. Critical theory provided the policy and practice lens for my research analysis by challenging the

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hegemonic control and power of dominant forms of knowledge, to result in an ultimate

shift in social inequality held in check by the power blocs of racism, classism and sexism

with the goal of transformative action. Each of these aspects of methodology was

considered in the development of my research methods and design.

Research Methods

   My research methods included talking circles and individual interviews to gather

qualitative data about participants' perspectives on urban Aboriginal high school

completion. In the discussion that follows, I discuss the talking circle as a viable way of

gaining knowledge, where language and discourse are central to the method of research.

Personal experiences about education were shared to gain insight into the problems of

and solutions for completing high school. I, as the researcher, was part of this holistic

approach. My hope for the research is that all participants who shared the knowledge

gathered throughout the research experience would be motivated to continue to support

urban Aboriginal children to complete high school. I was careful, as part of my

commitment to Aboriginal research, to celebrate cultural practices through protocols at

talking circles and individual interviews and to develop trust relationships and respect for

all perspectives.

Talking Circles

   Graveline (1998) discussed the importance of orality in Aboriginal communities,

as did others (Battiste & Youngblood Henderson, 2000; Weber-Pillwax, 2001).

Graveline described how Elders used a talking stick (p. 138) as a tradition of talking

circles to remind participants of the protocols and their responsibility in the circle; no one

was to interrupt the person holding the talking stick while speaking. The tradition was used with talking circle members in my research, "to provide a commitment to sit and actively listen and learn from the wisdom of the speaker who really needed to be heard". With respect to the usefulness of the talking circle process for classrooms and research Graveline suggested that:

> The Talking Circle process can be useful as a teaching tool when people need to share feelings, experiences or their point of view. Participants from diverse backgrounds can gain insight as they: speak "heartfully" and "listen respectfully" while others voice, together reflecting on experiences... (p. 141).

During my research project, as research participants told their stories in talking circles, others in the talking circle listened and learned. Often the next story built upon stories heard from others. Or, participants would nod in acknowledgement and respect of a story being told. Many emotions, expressed through laughter and tears, were shared along with the stories and journeys. In my talking circles, a talking rock, instead of a talking stick, was used as the symbol of the protocols used in talking circles to remind all participants of the sacredness of the circle. Using a talking rock in local talking circles is a common practice. The talking rock was passed from speaker to speaker as they shared their personal journeys through the research questions. For a number of the questions, the talking rock was passed around a second time for an individual participant, or more, to add to the already shared knowledge. Also, participants could exercise their right to pass, and did so, during the rounds of sharing stories within the talking circle.

Individual Interviews

In addition to the talking circles, interviews were conducted with identified individuals deemed as those with expert knowledge on high school completion of urban Aboriginal students, and/or individuals invited to attend a talking circle but were unable

to attend at the scheduled time. In total, eight interviews were conducted. Protocols were established, such as the presentation of cloth and tobacco to Elders to establish a covenant between the researcher and the individual for the knowledge I was asking to be shared, and our promise to continue the important work together to support our urban Aboriginal students, their families and communities who were seeking to find answers to guide them in completing high school once the research experience was completed. Also, I held individual interviews with the program director and identified staff prior to holding the talking circles to gain further insight into the program being offered in particular Edmonton Public Schools.

Interviewing was a viable method of gathering qualitative data. Kvale (1996) states:

> If you want to know how people understand their world and their life, why not talk with them? In an interview conversation, the researcher listens to what people themselves tell about their lived world, hears them express their views and opinions in their own words, learns about their views on their work situation and family life, their dreams and hopes. The qualitative research interview attempts to understand the world from the subjects' point of view, to unfold the meaning of peoples' experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations.
>
> The qualitative research interview is a construction site of knowledge. An interview is literally an *inter view*, an inter change of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest. (pp. 1-2)

Interviewing moves data collection from obtaining knowledge through an external observation of individuals that can be manipulated, to a qualitative method using conversations between humans to generate knowledge based on their own conceptions of the world in which they live (Kvale, 1996, p. 11). In this regard, interviewing as a research method enabled me and the research participants to gain knowledge about addressing high school completion issues.

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) identify another strength of the qualitative

aspect of interviews:

> Interviews enable participants – be they interviewers or interviewees - to discuss
> their interpretations of the world in which they live, and to express how they
> regard situations from their own point of view. In these senses the interview is
> not simply concerned with collecting data about life: it is part of life itself, its
> human embeddedness is inescapable. (p. 267)

In addition to its advantages, Cohen et al. list five unavoidable aspects of

interviews that can be regarded usually as problematic:

1. There are many factors which inevitably differ from one interview to another,
   such as mutual trust, social distance and the interviewer's control.
2. The respondent may well feel uneasy and adopt avoidance tactics if the
   questioning is too deep.
3. Both the interviewer and respondent are bound to hold back part of what it is
   in their power to state.
4. Many of the meanings which are clear to one will be relatively opaque to the
   other, even when the intention is genuine communication.
5. It is impossible, just as in everyday life, to bring every aspect of the encounter
   within rational control. (Cohen et al., 2000, pp. 267 – 268)

These five aspects display a lack of neutrality in interview situations, no matter how

systematic and objective a researcher might aim to be in a research experience. However,

my research study's methodology did not warrant neutrality; instead the interviews

served as a means to share the "cultural repertoires of all participants, including how

people make sense of their social world and of each other" (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 268).

The interviews in my research were designed with ethical considerations for the

rights of research participants from whom I was gathering valuable knowledge that

individuals shared about their experiences of high school completion of urban Aboriginal

students in the program and other lived experiences. Stringer (2004) stated:

> The use of interviews as a central component of research enables us to listen
> carefully to what people say, to record and represent events in their own terms,
> and to use their perceptions and interpretations in formulating plans and activities.

> The task is not to convince them of the inadequacies of their perspective but to find ways of enabling them, through sharing each other's perspectives, to formulate more productive understandings of their own situation. (p. 39)

Stringer described how he saw people talking with "shining eyes" (p. 39). During the interviews in my research, I saw the shining eyes of participants as they told stories about their hopes and dreams of completing high school and what this accomplishment meant to their lives, or their children's lives.

Mishler (1986) described the central task of the interview as the intention to shift attention and power from the researcher to the respondent in such a way as to encourage participants to make sense of their own experience, in order to empower them. This was done so that "through their narratives people may be moved beyond the text to the possibilities of action" (p. 119). Those involved in my interviews could apply their understandings of urban Aboriginal high school completion into action according to their own interests. Fontana and Frey (2008) described how the interviewer becomes an advocate and partner in research studies, "hoping to be able to use the results to advocate social policies and ameliorate the conditions of the interviewee" (p. 119), by utilizing this empathetic approach to interviewing. My partnership with the participants in the research study on urban Aboriginal high school completion continues to encourage empowerment long after the research experience.

Research Design

My research was designed to gather and analyze data obtained from talking circles and individual interviews with urban Aboriginal students identified for the research, their families and community, and from the knowledge of education stakeholders, such as workers in the program, the board of the Society, representatives of

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the school district, other educational organizations who held a vested interest in urban Aboriginal high school completion, and the academic community. Utilizing the methods of talking circles and individual interviews, research participants identified barriers and possible solutions to empower urban Aboriginal students to complete high school, or to empower their support systems to assist urban Aboriginal students in their care to complete high school. Also, data obtained from my literature review were considered in policy and practice deliberations.

I used this research approach as an experiential methodology in which liberating knowledge was gained in a personal way and upon which power could be constructed (Fals-Borda, 1991, p. 3). Language and discourse about the learnings were key to the research methods. As knowledge was gained, all participants could be transformed, including me as the researcher, through the research experience. Through understandings of the learnings, Indigenous communities and education stakeholders could further develop policy and practices to ensure that high school completion was like a ceremonial pipe dream[10] for marginalized students. Based on the research, all stakeholders were able to share the knowledge and the responsibility for our urban Aboriginal children to become at-promise of completing high school. Critically, the research was designed to examine and identify existing social structures that could marginalize urban Aboriginal students and present barriers to them in completing high school; the goal was for all of us to participate together in finding solutions to their problems.

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[10]   Pipe dream here refers to a pipe ceremony during which some Indigenous people shared tobacco and their sacred dreams to restore the holistic four directions of the Medicine Wheel that was broken.

Participant Selection for the Research Experience

Those who were invited to become involved in talking circles and individual interviews of my research were urban Aboriginal students facing challenges that could compromise becoming at-promise of completing high school and were involved currently in the Society's programs, as well as supporting adults. As previously stated, the program is offered in four Edmonton Public Schools by Aboriginal Youth & Family Education & Well-being Society; parents and extended families who are a vital link in their children's education; Elders who have held the wisdom since time immemorial; and the broader community who held a vested interest in the success of urban Aboriginal youth in the program. I used the notion of a vested interest community in a fairly broad sense to include the academic community, which had an existing body of research knowledge, and education stakeholders, such as workers in the program, the board of the Society, representatives of the school district and other educational organizations.

I worked with the Director of the Society to plan the research experience. Together we established where and when the talking circles took place, protocols for the talking circles, and who would be invited to attend. We discussed the types of questions in which the participants were asked to identify barriers and possible solutions to empower urban Aboriginal students to complete high school. We established two student talking circles, one in two different schools that house the Society's program, based on ease of access to students and minimal disruptions to their regular school day or their program. Locating the talking circles in the schools removed transportation issues, and eliminated the shyness of students from different schools coming together into one talking circle and sharing their stories openly. Also, we considered holding the youth

talking circles separately from the adult talking circle so that students could be frank in their answers to the research questions. We arranged for the talking circles to be held during the students' scheduled weekly workshop time in the program in two different schools. Students were invited to the talking circle in each school by the education mentor in the program. Posters were displayed in the schools to advertise the upcoming talking circle. Students were allowed to opt in or out of the research experience, if they chose to do so. Sixteen students participated in the talking circles, nine in one school and seven in the other. There was a fairly even distribution of boys and girls who took part in the talking circles.

For the adult talking circle, those who were invited to attend were Elders who were involved with the program, parents and extended family, board members, program staff, school district staff and educational experts involved in Aboriginal education. The Director invited potential participants. If participants were not able to take part in the adult talking circle at the time it was scheduled, I arranged to interview them at another convenient time, or the Director and I identified others who could add vital information about the research questions and the program. I used the same research questions for the individual interviews as those posed in the talking circles. The Director and I considered a balance between male and female participants. Eight people participated in the adult talking circle and seven adults participated in individual interviews.

Questions used in the Talking Circles and Interviews

The talking circles and individual interviews were conversations using questions to gather information in four areas: premature school leaving and challenges/barriers that

urban Aboriginal students were facing, the purpose of education from participants'
perspectives, conversations about what was being done to assist students in completing
high school, and what could be done to assist urban Aboriginal students toward high
school completion. Responses to the questions were probed, when necessary, to
encourage fuller answers to the research question and the three sub-questions that guided
my research: How can we create enabling conditions in terms of policy and practice for
urban Aboriginal students to complete high school in Alberta?

- How are the barriers to high school completion articulated by urban
  Aboriginal students, their parents and community, and the education
  stakeholders who support urban Aboriginal students?

- What are the assumptions about the purpose of public education in Alberta, as
  it relates to goal setting?

- What solutions are available for urban Aboriginal students to address issues of
  power and hegemonic control when seeking to complete high school?

The research question and three sub-questions were written in a conversational
manner for the talking circles and interviews, in a format to get at the knowledge about
barriers and challenges to high school completion, purposes of education, supports and
gaps, critical awareness, and possible solutions. They were written slightly differently
for the students and adults to acknowledge their perspectives. For the questions, see
Appendix B.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection and storage were carried out according to the ethical parameters established by the University of Alberta ethics review process (see Appendix C for the approved ethics process for this research). Research participants were provided with an invitation letter and consent form to be involved in the project; the consent form was signed prior to taking part in the talking circles or interviews. Prior to signing the consent form, the letter was read and explained for participants to fully understand what the research was about, and how their participation would add to the knowledge about high school completion of urban Aboriginal students, as we looked for information and solutions to many issues. Participants were assured that their identities would be kept strictly confidential throughout the research process. No real names of participants were provided; a pseudonym, if needed, was used in the thesis writing. Participants were made aware of the possible uses of the data that arose from the proceedings. Also, participants were alerted to the option of having their data removed anytime throughout the research experience and thesis writing. I used a tracking system utilizing numbering of particular participants for the purpose of retrieving data if a participant exercised the option to withdraw from the research. Tape recordings of the talking circles and interviews captured the proceedings, and were stored in a locked filing cabinet in my home. Field notes were taken by me, and stored in a similarly rigorous manner. The letter and consent form are attached in Appendix C of my thesis.

Data Analysis

This study made use of the data from the talking circles and interviews that were tape recorded to capture the proceedings, my field notes, and the data gathered from my

literature review. The tapes were transcribed and the data coded to analyze the content, looking for common emerging themes or patterns regarding individual and group responses sorted by categories of similar phrases, patterns, relationships, commonalities and/or differences.

Once the data from what the research participants said in the talking circles and interviews were collated, I made charts to compare themes that emerged with my field notes and compared the data to what I knew from other studies on high school completion in the literature. I used the direct words from the participants in naming themes as much as possible. (See Appendix E: Tables of Summaries of Stories Provided by Research Participants, for student adult and Elder responses in emerging themes of the research.)

Once sorted, substantive patterns emerged. The data were distilled and placed into corresponding tables for each question. Then, I designed diagrams of four quadrants based on the four directions of the Medicine Wheel for each question that represent an Indigenous way of understanding the data from the tables.

I used a critical theory lens to inform my analysis of the themes. Utilizing an Indigenous research methodology, informed by a critical lens with the goal of transformative action, findings from my research were compared to the data from other sources of available research and theoretical perspectives associated with high school completion of urban Aboriginal students to ensure the quality and rigor of the study and the thesis written. A melding of participants' voices for policy and promising practices for high school completion of urban Aboriginal students emerged.

Limitations of the Study

The research experience was limited in scope to qualitative data obtained from students who reside in two Edmonton Public schools, and the adults associated with the Aboriginal Youth & Family Well-being & Education Society program supporting these particular students, as well as participant availability.

Delimitations of the Study

The delimitations to me, the researcher, were manageability of the size of the research project, financial constraints, and time constraints to collect, transcribe and analyze the data, and write the thesis.

Continuing the Journey

In the next three chapters, I continue the journey into my research experience through the stories that the research participants told me in their talking circles and individual interviews. I have organized the findings in the three chapters according to the five questions I discussed earlier in this chapter that were designed in a conversational manner to obtain knowledge about barriers and challenges to high school completion, purposes of education, supports and gaps, critical awareness, and possible solutions. The next chapter starts by framing the stories the research participants shared in the talking circles and individual interviews and is followed by the stories they told about barriers and challenges to high school completion.

Chapter 4: Journey through the Stories Participants Told Me

> For those of you with children hold them close and give them hope that their future is being held for them. They need to know how they will have responsibility in the continuance of our people, their people. (*Everywoman's Almanac*, 1992)

This quotation was inscribed on the front of an invitation to an event honoring the Aboriginal students who successfully participated in the "Opportunities" Stay-in-School Program that Aboriginal Youth & Family Well-being & Education Society held one year -- one of many activities that the Society has held throughout the program's existence of 15 years to promote the importance of urban Aboriginal students completing high school in Edmonton.

The following three chapters share the stories that the students, adults and Elders who were participants in my research told in relation to the five research questions posed to them. This chapter sets the stage and presents the first question on barriers and challenges to high school completion.

Framing the Stories

My journey through listening to students, and the adults and Elders involved in the Aboriginal Youth & Family Well-being & Education Society program was comprised of two talking circles with students and one talking circle with adults. Additionally, I held individual interviews with staff of the Society to better understand the parameters of why, how and what was being offered in the program to the urban Aboriginal students enrolled in four Edmonton Public Schools, and with some adults and Elders who were unable to attend the adult talking circle on the set date.

I heard stories and snippets of stories about the heartaches and challenges to high school completion that students themselves were facing, their friends and extended family members and community have faced, and the wisdom of our Elders. I, too, am a member of this community. Students, adults and Elders continued to tell stories about their journeys through educational goals, awareness, and answers to problems to move forward through the education system to complete high school.

Often stories were extremely personal and were told using language that could be perceived by some readers as negative and might make some readers feel uncomfortable; nevertheless, my research focus was the participants' personal experiences and journeys through their stories. The following sections of this chapter share those stories and present my analysis of the themes that emerged as well as a comparison of their ways of knowing to other literature sources. Throughout the stories, my questions and probing that added explanations were included in brackets. The following was what they told me.

Background to the Society's Origin

During one of my individual interviews, I asked the Director of the program, "Where did the idea start?" The Director replied:

> It was a dream of my mother. She worked in the Aboriginal community in Edmonton for 30 years, starting with the Hilltop House women aged 18 to 75 who wanted to make positive changes in their lives. They wanted to help each other out to get through adversities and become healthy. That is a mainstay based on the Medicine Wheel, based on the four directions of the spiritual, mental, physical and emotional. She wanted to set up a program to help keep our youth in school with a holistic approach…not an intervention program, but a prevention and early intervention program, to do something before the youth get into trouble, and drop out of school. How can we make a difference in their lives to get them to value education?

My mother and Métis Child and Family Services were involved with Project
START (federal government stay-in-school initiative in the mid-1990s) that was
already connected to three schools in Edmonton. We got feedback from the
schools about what we were going to do in the program. Three Métis men that
were part of Métis Local 1885 went to the Commissioner for Children's Services
in 1996 to try to get core funding for the program, which is a difficult thing to do.
We got discretionary funding from the Minister to support 80 families with a part
time support worker. We have more Métis kids now in the program than before,
when we had more First Nations kids…Now we have other support for tutoring
(educational mentors), weekly workshops, sports and activities, Elders and
cultural events. Sometimes by February we have 80 plus kids, and up to 93. If
one leaves, we take another in (to the program). The funding isn't on-going; we
are constantly writing funding proposals. (May 2010)

"How did your Society name come about?"

My mother wanted every word in the name (Aboriginal Youth & Family Well-
being & Education Society) to let everyone know what we stand for, with the
overall message of hope and the well-being and health of our youth and families,
working with our partners in education and making it a serious goal for our
students to finish school. (May 2010)

Holistic Approach of the Medicine Wheel

When speaking about the background to the Aboriginal Youth & Family Well-

being & Education Society, the Director talked about basing their program on a holistic

approach of the Medicine Wheel and its teachings of the four directions of mental,

spiritual, emotional and physical dimensions as being the mainstay to becoming a healthy

human being. The Society uses the teachings of the Medicine Wheel by Elders and the

community to help each other to work through adversities, with one of the Society's

goals being to help urban Aboriginal kids in Edmonton complete high school.

Many Indigenous communities throughout the world utilize the four directions of

the Medicine Wheel in varying degrees. The diagram on the following page is adapted

from Bopp, Bopp, Brown and Lane, *The sacred tree*, 1989, and illustrates the four

dimensions of mental, spiritual, emotional and physical holistic approach that every

person needs to balance in order for "true learning" (p. 29) to be developed. When the

Medicine Wheel became broken for an individual, he or she used their own volition and

vision to maintain balance (p.12).

The following diagram represents the four factors that comprise the holistic

approach.

**Diagram 1: The
Holistic Approach**

Mental

Physical

Spiritual

Emotional
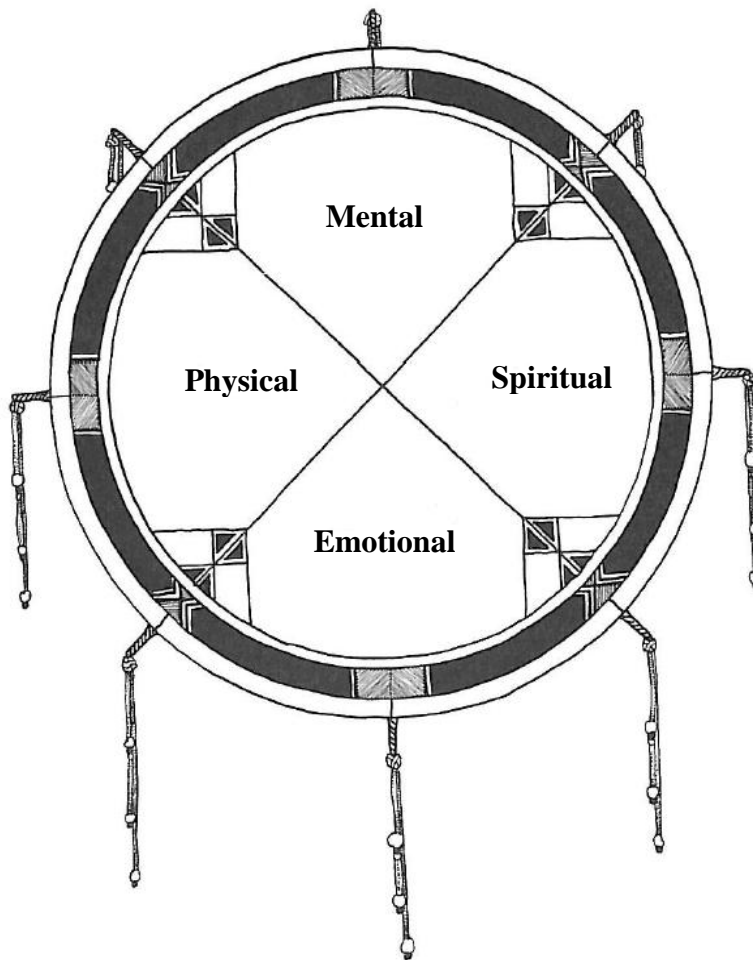
Background of Students in the Program

I asked the Director, "How do Aboriginal students get into the program?" She

replied:

> We start in September of each school year. Families we hear of, or brothers and
> sisters of previous students in our program come forward. Or sometimes students
> who are often late for school, or have attendance issues identified on documents,
> whether they are First Nations, Métis or Inuit are referred to us by Edmonton
> Public Schools. We hold an orientation meeting in the school where we provide
> programs. All of the Aboriginal students are invited to attend. We tell them what
> the program is about and have an application process to get some information
> from them. We never turn anyone away… There is a permission form for parents
> to sign…We don't turn down anyone. Anyone is eligible for the program who is
> identified as one of Edmonton Public Schools' Aboriginal students. If a student
> has good marks and has good attendance, they might want to come to our weekly
> workshops and not work with the in-school tutors (Educational Mentor – title), or
> family support worker. About 20% of our students are like this. They act as good
> role models for others in the program. We have a good mix of kids. Sometimes
> the kids' mouths fall wide open and say, "You mean you care about us?" We say,
> "Of course we do. We are going to ride you sometimes, and get on your case
> sometimes to make you accountable because we care that you succeed." Students
> are asked to sign a letter of understanding to take part in the weekly workshops,
> tutoring and fun stuff. (May 2010)

In separate interviews, I asked two of the Educational Mentors, who work with

the students daily by delivering the program, about the backgrounds of the Aboriginal

students currently in the program in four Edmonton Public Schools.

> Students have siblings or friends who have been in the program before. Mostly
> students don't drop out; they just move. Their family backgrounds are different.
> We see it all. Some have families with a mom and dad who grew up with a strong
> education background. Others, their families just moved here in the last couple of
> years from the reserve and have adjusted. Others are from broken families, with
> both parents in the city, or one partner two provinces away. Some don't have a
> male father figure. Some families are well off (financially) and don't have
> struggles, while others can't afford bus fare and are in poverty; they need food,
> clothing, and shelter and don't bring lunch or have breakfast. The makeup of
> students is different in different schools. In this school many are not from a
> traditional family and have their own separate issues. One student is from a foster
> home (in this talking circle); another is in a group home; and one has just been
> taken out of home and placed in a group home (the day of the talking circle). Our
> students might go back home for a while (reserve or Métis settlement) – one was

gone for two weeks up north and I caught her up in her subjects when she came back. Some students are academically strong and are not denied access to the program. Some students are in the regular class with regular core courses, while others are in the Knowledge and Employability program with K & E core courses. In this school we pretty well have a balanced number of boys and girls. Some students are facing attendance hearings, bullying, fighting, and suspension; in this area (of the city) there aren't gangs, but in other schools they are there. Violence draws kids in sadly and some kids have left schools and the program to go to the street: alcohol and drugs, because their family or friends are in that life style. (June 2010)

Knowing the background of the students involved in the research enabled me to better understand the stories they told about the barriers they were facing to stay in school and complete high school, right here and now in Edmonton.

Background of the Students: Understanding their Challenges

Students' challenges were linked to a primary reason for leaving or considering leaving before finishing high school. Students perceived that their sense of belonging or being respected for who they were in the classroom and the social environment of schooling was shattered. Sometimes their relationships with their teacher, or with other students in the hallways and classrooms of the school or school yard were severed; other times their relational experiences in socio-economic realms pressured them. They might have been pushed out rather than dropped out of school; they felt attacked mostly because they were Aboriginal people facing racism and discrimination. The natural response for them was to retreat because they perceived that they did not have access to support to defend themselves. Fear developed; the sources of stress grew; and sometimes the family was not there for them. As a result, they believed that the only answer for them was to leave (adult interview with expert knowledge, June 2010).

I heard that the decision to leave school was not episodic – there was not one particular event that caused them to leave; instead, it was a process that caused them to think about quitting school over a period of time. It could have started by junior high school, or even during late elementary school. Their bad experiences in schools could have been precipitated by their parents, or negative experiences leading to intergenerational effects of residential schools. Their "churn" (adult interview with expert knowledge, June 2010) of being in and out of schools added to the mix of the barriers to completing high school and the ultimate decision to quit school. I had heard about the "churn" of Aboriginal students in other contexts from Society staff, community members, Elders and school personnel during this research study, and prior throughout the years I have worked with Aboriginal people. Some Aboriginal students moved in and out of urban schools, to and from reserve or Métis Settlement schools, small town or rural schools, or schools in other provinces where family and extended family might have currently resided, often many times in one year.

I considered the context of the background where the students were grounded when I looked for emergent themes from their stories and answers to the research questions in the student talking circles, and the adult talking circle and interviews, and from the Elders. The following sections share what I heard from the students, the adults and the Elders about the barriers and challenges that the urban Aboriginal students in this study were facing in completing high school in Edmonton.

Question One: Barriers and Challenges in Completing High School

Student Stories about Barriers

In the talking circle at both schools, I asked the students, "Why would you think of quitting school? When did you start to think about quitting school?" These questions were asked in a respectful way using protocols established within an Indigenous research methodology informed by a critical lens. I used probing when needed to have the students feel comfortable with telling stories about themselves personally, a sibling or relative, or friend who had experienced or contemplated leaving school. Student responses were often brief, but poignant, and in their own youthful language. The following was what they said.

"I Want a Future"

Some of the students in the two talking circles recognized that school was difficult for them; nevertheless they intended to complete high school in spite of their adversities. These students helped their peers in the program by serving as role models for others to realize the importance of working through problems they were facing in order to become at-promise of completing high school. The following were examples of comments from three students who talked about their intentions to complete school, regardless of the challenges they were facing.

> No reason to quit school. I want to get a good education in school. I never thought about quitting school. (School 1 – Student 1)

> Sometimes it's hard and people aren't there for you. I don't think I would quit. I need an education. I want a future to do what I want. My parents want me to finish. (School 1 – Student 4)

I don't know of anyone who has quit school or is thinking of quitting school. I'm not. (School 2 – Student 3)

"I Thought of Quitting"

A few students shared that they had thought of quitting school, or knew of family or friends who had thought of dropping out as recently as within a few weeks or days before the talking circles. Family background and personal issues were factors that students identified as challenges to stay in school.

> It's just hard, especially when you don't get help and stuff. It's just too hard. Yeah, there was a time; I don't know; about a couple of weeks ago. Came in and out of my mind. 'Specially when I'm struggling and no one is helping me, I think why not just quit. (School 1 - Student 2)

> Nope, I didn't. But some (friends) might be facing problems in their family – personal – and have thought of quitting a couple of days later. (School 1 - Student 6)

> My friend thought about quitting school because it's gay (stupid). They're having problems at home – their family and everything – lots of stuff. (School 1 - Student 9)

> My sister, she was 17 and living on her own and thought of quitting school. She would go on Facebook all night, and not always show up at school; she thought she would get kicked out. She has her own life and thinks school is dumb and doesn't need an education. She had been thinking about it (quitting school) not at a particular time. (School 2 – Student 1)

"Dream Crushers"

Some students in the two talking circles shared stories about the potential of being pushed out of school by teachers, school board members and others, as a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure. One student labeled the nay-sayers in schools as "dream crushers", while others agreed. Other students expressed difficulties they faced in school.

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It's too hard; teachers aren't there to help you. Some say, like they're dream crushers. (What do you mean by dream crushers?) Oh you can't do it because you aren't in the A class; you're in the K&E class. You can't be a scientist because you aren't in the A class. (How does that make you feel?) I feel dumb, kind of. It makes you feel like quitting school 'cause I can't be what I want to be. (When did you think about quitting?) Not at any particular time. (School 1 - Student 5)

(Student after an attendance board hearing) Don't like it (school). School board people say I won't make it (complete high school). (How did that make you feel?) Discouraged. I won't make it. Like they said I can bring this piece of paper to the bank, (can count on not making it), I won't make it, got me pegged even before I'm 16. I don't have a future; I won't make it through high school. (School 1 -Student 3)

"Too Much Drama"

Some students shared personal issues that they faced when going to school. An

example was "too much drama" that students identified as bullying.

Too much drama. (What's drama?) Like bullying.
I think about quitting sometimes, but not at a particular time.
(School 1- Student 7)

It's too stressful; too much drama – stress like getting to school on time. Teachers kind of ride your case when you're late sometimes. (School 1 – Student 8)

I was getting bullied every day, picked on and want to drop out because of it.
(School 1 – Student 1)

Siblings and Friends Did Quit School

A number of students shared stories about female siblings and friends who did

quit school for multiple reasons.

My sister, she quit school over a boy. Just dropped out of grade 10, 11 and 12. She quit in junior high. I don't live with her now. (School 2 – Student 2)

Some girls get pregnant and drop out. (School 1 – Student 5)

My friend's cousin had a boyfriend; he wasn't the best one. He made her quit school so they could live together. He started her on a bunch of drugs and stuff. She had his baby and he ran out on her. She hadn't time to go to school and get an education; I haven't seen her for three years now. She started thinking of quitting school about five years ago before she was even in grade 9. (The student added:) She thought she was independent now to quit school; she didn't need an education now. She was only 13 and in school and three years later was a train wreck. Her boyfriend left her with an addiction and a baby. She is an adult now; she is 19 and doesn't want to be embarrassed (to go back to school).
(School 2 – Student 6)

My sister did quit school; she was in grade 7. Got into a whole bunch of drugs and drinking. She hated school and said school is for losers. She's trying to get back to school. She can't make it and starts drinking and drugs again. She had a kid to look after; she had him taken away. My brothers got her into that, drinking and drugs. She was about 13 probably. She tried (to go to school) again and in grade 9 it didn't work. She can't make it on a regular basis.
(School 2 – Student 7)

Quitting School in Cities or On Reserve

I added a third part to the question about quitting school in round two of the talking circles to see if students who had attended both Aboriginal and city schools differentiated between school systems. I asked, "Would it be easier to quit if you were in a city school, or a reserve or Métis Settlement school?" Two of three students indicated that it was easier to drop out of a city school than a reserve school. The third student mentioned that a sick brother was why a cousin had to quit school on reserve.

It is easier to quit school when you are in a mixed school than when you are in a native school. I was in a school all my life where kids were native; it was different than now. I fit in better there; the teacher pushed us to succeed; not like here where we all are in K & E (Knowledge and Employability program). I can't be a nurse because I have to be in 9A. But now I want to do even better so I will make it. I want to go to college and stuff; and no matter what anyone says, I can do it. (School 1 – Student 2)

It is easier to go to school on the reserve and harder in the city like a native Edmonton school. On the reserve we were the same (native) and got along with everybody in my elementary school. We made our family proud.
(School 1 – Student 3)

It is different for different people. It was easier for my cousin who went to a reserve school to quit. She hasn't been to school since grade 6; should be in grade 9 now. Her family has to go to Vancouver because her brother is sick, and she has to go, too. She wanted to go to school to make her grandma proud, but because he (the brother) has a disease, they go together to Vancouver for the sick brother. (School 1 – Student 6)

The following diagram of barriers to high school completion portrays four broad categories of factors that might have prevented students from finishing school. I provided a visual display as a depiction of factors underlying barriers in a Medicine Wheel format that is congruent with the holistic approach of the Medicine Wheel used by the research participants in their work on high school completion.

Analysis of Stories about Barriers to High School Completion

Diagram 2: Barriers and Challenges
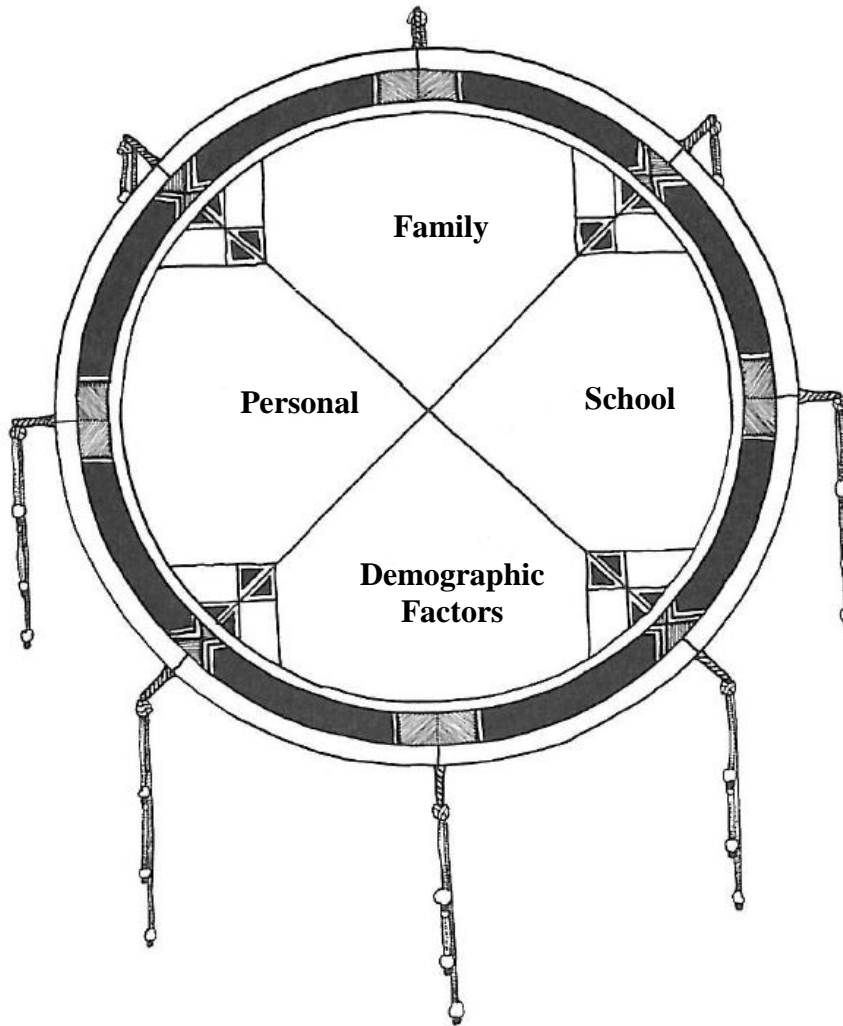
Barriers to high school completion were identified in four broad categories of

factors that might have prevented students from finishing school. They were:

- family background,
- school-related characteristics,
- personal-related characteristics,
- demographic factors facing Aboriginal people.

These four categories were similar in the student, adult and Elder stories about the barriers questions, with varying degrees of emphasis.

Various articles in literature have been published on early school leaving that examined data from school-related and non-school related studies. From the Government of Alberta documents, *Removing barriers to high school completion report*, September 2001 and *A qualitative analysis of the Alberta Learning removing barriers to high school completion report,* October 2001, three categories of early school leaving were identified: family background, personal characteristics and school-related characteristics. In the reports, the family background category included some demographic characteristics specific to Aboriginal people that I separated into a fourth category specific to my research to include the factors facing Aboriginal people that surfaced through the talking circles, interviews and literature research into critical theory. It is important to note that these categories were not firmly delineated in the stories or literature; often there was a combination, or interaction of factors that might have driven a student to quit school that was evident in the stories told by students, adults and Elders.

To use a holistic approach, I will continue in this chapter with the adult stories, and then those of the Elders, about the barriers to high school completion question.

Adult Stories about Barriers

In the adult talking circle and individual interviews, I asked similar questions about barriers to high school completion that I did with the students from the perspective of support for their particular student(s): Why would your student quit school? When would he/she start to think about quitting school? These questions also were asked in a

respectful way using protocols within an Indigenous research methodology informed by a

critical lens. Their following stories are organized into the four categories of factors that

might have prevented students from finishing school as portrayed in diagram two above.

Family Background

Adults told stories about various family backgrounds that could have caused

students to leave school early. I have included three of them.

> There are numerous reasons that cause students to quit school; it isn't one easy
> answer. Sometimes there are life events like death, family breakup; they play a
> big part. Maybe there aren't support systems for them and the child is not able to
> progress and have the supports needed. (Adult 3)

> Caregivers are tired at the end of the day, or the caregiver can't get them to go to
> school. Kids take advantage. It is difficult being a strict parent, or to have no
> boundaries. (Adult 4)

> Maybe their home life is a factor – single parent caregivers, a mother, or father, or
> grandmother. It might be unbalanced now. Students need a healthy role model
> (male). (Adult 4)

School-related Characteristics

> There are a number of factors. What is going on at school is crucial for   what is
> going on for our kids. (Adult 4)

Adults shared school-related characteristics that created barriers to high school

completion for the students in the program in a number of areas.

> **"School is Boring, Not Relevant, Just Too Hard"**

> The students I see - some kids don't see what they are learning; it is not
> interesting; they see it as boring, not relevant. They would rather stay home and
> play videogames. They can't see two to four years down the line and the benefit.
> Some would not study and rather not try on a test and take a zero. It could be they
> are not engaged in a certain class and in another class be engaged. (Adult 5)

Sometimes they have difficulties with the academics – they get frustrated in school, and lose their self worth; they might get embarrassed in front of their peers. (Adult 3)

"Teachers/Schools Weren't Welcoming, I Felt Trapped"

Teachers need to reach out to the students, make them feel welcome. Not many do that; they focus on what they need to teach. (Adult 7)

The education system is stuck in 1950s. It is in buildings that are not very welcome; the environment is not welcoming. Aboriginal culture is not infused in curriculum. It is starting, but not there yet. We interviewed 200 kids who said what they are learning is not relevant to me. Teachers say the students come to school because the law says they have to come; students say they come to school for their teachers, a significant adult in the building. If there is no adult connection the Aboriginal students quit; it's a red flag if students don't have one. (Adult 2)

The teachers made a decision to put me in a program of IOP (Integrated Occupational Program) without me even knowing so I quit school. I was not given the opportunities in school. There were no open arms to make me feel welcome. I felt trapped and closed. There was no help for homework. I pretty much learned on my own how to live in Edmonton. I reached out to teachers, friends, and aunties, but my work didn't mean anything to them.
Teachers are prepared to teach different for band and provincial schools. Any band member that knows a bit more than others about education can be thrown into a school to teach others. In my provincial school we had teachers with degrees that had the knowledge to teach. (Adult 8)

Personal-related Characteristics

Adults shared personal-related characteristics that created barriers to high school

completion for the Aboriginal students in a number of aspects, such as priorities, peer

pressure, attendance, abuse and pregnancy.

"Priorities Are Imbalanced"

My sister is not in school currently; she is 17 and has a baby; she should have graduated in June. She doesn't wake up in the mornings; she's on the computer all night - addicted to the Internet. My mom is there to help out with the baby;

my mom is making her responsible for the baby. My sister's priorities are imbalanced: TV, friends, and the computer. My other sister had two babies by 19; she graduated with honors after she went to Fresh Start. (Adult 2)

It's about priorities. We can't look at Aboriginal students as a whole; they are individuals. At Métis Child and Family Services (MCFS) we see the struggles, and how to work with the kids. They have hope and hope for their child; but sometimes the child doesn't see that. There are so many variations with the Aboriginal kids: some drink and others don't. There are so many reasons kids think of quitting school. At MCFS we brightened their days. (Adult 1)

Maybe it was what their friends are doing or peer pressure. Maybe they get into smoking, skipping school. Some girls are having babies at 15 or 16. We tell them to think for themselves and to prioritize things in their life. Can we influence them? We believe we can; our mentors are a good example. (Adult 1)

"Peer Pressure"

Sometimes kids want instant gratification; they want things easy; it might be peer pressure; friends influence the factors of hard choices kids are making. They want big money fast; they don't want to wait. Peer pressure can hold a lot of water with them. Easy money plays a role. (Adult 4)

"Attendance is the Number One Issue"

Attendance is the number one issue: everything gets in the way; they don't want to walk two blocks to school, or they might get rained on, and their pants aren't dry. We have to be consistent. Having the support of an organization (such as AY&FW&ES) helps and encourages the kids. (Adult 4)

Everyone is different. As soon as kids disconnect they might think, "Why would I have to go to junior or senior high?" They might have influences of those who have gone to school and had bad experiences; their guardian never found it important to go to school. How can these kids find the importance of going to school, of finding positive role models outside of school and us in schools? For example, a girl and her mother: the girl might have attendance issues because the girl is working at home. The mother says I need her there; the mother didn't see being in school as important. Students need good role models. (Adult 6)

Some teenagers skip classes, and are in the malls. They might smoke stuff and think it is better than sitting in class. In…high school, kids are more independent; teachers aren't on you. (Adult 7)

Mental, Physical, Sexual Abuse

I quit school. My own personal reason of quitting school is I was having trouble in school. My upbringing was that I was mentally, physically and sexually abused by the people close to me. I was stressed out every day. (Adult 8)

Babies Having Babies

I became a young mom and quit school. In my first marriage, my daughter was given away at an early age; he was 25 and I was 17. It is tough to live and to be human; a lot of people don't think how they are going to live. Sometimes help is there but not in the right places. Some native kids are having babies and are having their kids taken away. (Adult 8)

Demographic Factors Facing Aboriginal People

Adults shared demographic factors facing Aboriginal people that created barriers to high school completion in a number of areas. This fourth factor was the one that was different from other studies on high school completion, such as the Alberta Education document, *Removing barriers to high school completion report* (2001). The demographic factor was specific to the Aboriginal students and their families and communities that are involved in the program.

"The Churn"

Sometimes life events happen. There are families that move a lot; two to four times per school year, so it's hard to settle down and belong there in the school. There are lots of other things. (Adult 5)

Some kids are going from school to school – from the reserve to the city and back and forth; they are moving in and out of town (Edmonton), or from school to school in town, or if a family splits kids are in and out in different towns, cities, provinces and we could lose track of them altogether. (Adult 5)

You pointed to a very important point: not all students are cookie cutters. Education is key to our future. But some adults might not value education, or this varies and some want them to finish. Some parents think it is ok to go to their community for a week or two. Students feel frustrated when they come back and get behind in school; they don't want to be there. Other kids are foster students; they are in group homes, but they are in school. (Adult 7)

Other reasons kids quit school is they might be moved around all the time, and not being kept in a stable place these days; it sets them off kilter. (Adult 8)

I mentioned the moving of students from school to school in the section on the

background of the students to understand some of the challenges they might be facing in

attending a number of and different types of schools.

Other challenges that this demographic group might be facing are extreme

poverty, racism and discrimination, a sense of belonging, sexism, gangs, fighting and

drinking. Adults shared stories about some of these issues.

Poverty

They quit school because of poverty, or a trauma that is impactful for quitting. The more layers you add on top of these factors, the greater it becomes that they will quit. You can't fight family obligations for Aboriginal students; teachers should help Aboriginal students. (Adult 2)

Racism, Discrimination

I was in a reserve close to Edmonton. My mom's side was in one reserve and my dad's side in another reserve. My mother moved back and forth between the two reserves, where I didn't feel relaxed or pretty much wanted. Some of it (reasons for quitting) is because of race: I was in a native family, and being hurt by my native race. I am blood, and don't put myself in this culture anymore because of the abuse. I shut myself down because of this. (Adult 8)

Aboriginal people today are still facing and seeing a lot of racism and discrimination, and I hear that as equally and that adds to the fact that well I'm not going to stick around if I'm not acknowledged. And these poor kids don't know how to defend themselves. So as Aboriginal people they don't have the

knowledge and much base in history or culture, a foundation to stand on against it so they retreat. It's a natural response in that given circumstance. And also they don't have access to support or at least they perceive that they don't have access to support to defend themselves that way and there is that fear develops, and builds around it. And suddenly the whole learning environment in the hallway and the classroom and the teachers become a source of stress and so that makes them feel that they're not able to defend themselves and the only answer they have is to leave, is to go away, so that is what they choose to do. And often times the families aren't there. They aren't there to support them to go back into school. Sometimes they will even change schools or high schools a couple or three times. It is pretty tough to get through. That social component, eh. (Adult 9)

Racism is out there in the Canadian education system. Racism is alive and well. That's why there is so much pushback. 'Cause they want to believe that we are all the same. That the reason we are not seeing successes is because we are lazy. It's our problem. They don't understand the whole history of it. Or the effects of colonization on development. (Adult 9)

Lack of Sense of Belonging

There are a number of reasons. But the primary reason is what was made known to me what I hear over and over again is the sense of belonging, and being respected as who they are in the classroom and in the school yard. There is three levels, one is the relationship with the teacher, the other is the relationship inside the classroom, the content and stuff being taught, and the other is the school ground hallway experience, the other stuff that happens around the whole school experience, various interactions within a social context with the mainstream. (Adult 9)

Sexism

I think it's tougher for a girl that is Indigenous. As an Aboriginal girl, or an Indigenous woman/student is double fold. For certain being Aboriginal and then being a woman...I mean society doesn't place much value on our women. And that is the reality. (Adult 9)

We see Aboriginal girls, but girls in general, suddenly their grades start to derogate in terms of the maths and the sciences. They kind of get pushed on in another direction. So it's the developmental phase. At that point we should be helping them to solidify their identity and who they are, and to being what they are and celebrate it because that's what is going to help them traverse over the

three years in high school. So we start to see them pulling back; at least the experience, the stuff I've seen. Some of the stuff I've read about. You're having maybe about one in four Aboriginal students actually going into in high school and maybe one in four of them actually finishing high school. Then one in four of them even going to university. They may be going to post secondary, but not going to university, so we still have a very low participatory rate in university about three times less than mainstream. (Adult 9)

Gangs, Fighting, Drinking

I wanted to keep this school open (neighbourhood school) or the crime rate might pick up. There are lot of things like gangs and what is happening; they should have things there for kids, like dancing activities. In the neighbourhood there are lots of kids drinking and some getting stabbed. I hear them fighting all night long. It is territorial, with some little girls fighting and drinking. (Adult 8)

Additional Question on When Students Leave School

To understand when students started to think about quitting school, I asked, "When would he/she start to think about quitting school?" Adults told me in their stories that there was no particular time or event that caused students to quit school, which demonstrated no specific causal relationship in leaving school early for Aboriginal students. Adults shared the following stories about when Aboriginal students decide to leave school.

It especially happens in about junior high times; key times are report cards and spring break – the fresh air, maybe they got a discouraging report card if they weren't expecting it, or even if they were expecting it and are facing academic difficulties. (Adult 3)

I can't pinpoint a time. (Adult 1)

It just comes to them that they are quitting; it is a gradual thing. They get in a rut and things get too difficult. (Adult 4)

They start thinking about it when school stops being fun. Elementary school is fun; there aren't the same issues and struggles, or the same pressures. They are thinking about their future in junior and senior high school. They want to have fun, and hang out with friends. Recess stops being fun. (Adult 5)

After elementary school stops being fun, some students are going to the mall and pull away from school; in grades 6 – 7 and junior high. (Adult 6)

It could vary as to when; it seems to be getting younger and younger. By grade 7 some students don't want to come to school; it could be parenting or the school environment. (Adult 7)

I asked the same question about when, as you, but add why. Students say I peaked at grade three, after that school is complex and I become more influenced by others to quit school. (Adult 2)

I was in grade 10 when I quit school; they just placed me there in IOP. It was building up; I was misunderstood and not having the help I needed at that time. (Adult 8)

It starts right at around junior high and the coming into high school. We know the statistics in Edmonton about 51% don't complete, have less than a high school education. So you're looking at right around grade 8 or 9, around that developmental stage. (Adult 9)

Elders Stories about Barriers

Three Elders of First Nations and Métis descent, who were actively involved in

the Society's program, were gracious to accept my protocols of offering tobacco and

cloth to share their wisdom in my research about high school completion for the urban

Aboriginal students in Edmonton in their care. Individually, each Elder was well known

for their education wisdom and involvement in their community of Edmonton for many

years. My protocols were accepted with a promise to continue our working relationship

of educating and maintaining the responsibilities we held to the students, parents and extended families, members of the Society, staff, educational community, and Aboriginal and supporting organizations for the program to support students' success, even after the research experience was completed.

The Elders held various roles for the Aboriginal Youth and Family Well-being & Education Society, such as spiritual, cultural, educational and community experts. They often provided the workshops to share traditional knowledge and culture with the students, which was an important aspect of the program. You would see them actively involved in activities and events held by the Society, and within the greater Edmonton community and surrounding areas. Their teachings were grounded in Indigenous knowledge and traditions based on the Medicine Wheel and the four directions or dimensions: spiritual, mental, physical, and emotional, within a holistic approach. The relationships that the Elders had with the students and adults in the program were built on traditional protocols within Indigenous communities. The Elder-youth relationship was a powerful one: it brought together the two most revered groups in our Aboriginal communities to share their knowledge about education for the betterment of all (conversation with community members, n.d.).

I asked the Elders the same questions that I asked the adults in a similar respectful manner: "Why would your student quit school? When would he/she start to think about quitting school?" Elders told their stories about barriers and challenges Indigenous people were facing in schools in the community of Edmonton. They have been categorized as factors according to family background, school-related characteristics,

personal-related characteristics, and demographic factors facing Aboriginal people in a

similar manner to the adult responses that were portrayed in diagram two above.

Family Background

Elders told stories about various family backgrounds that could have caused

students to leave school early.

> There are a lot of answers to that question. I will start with the student first.
> There are many problems. At the end of the day it is about family, the home
> environment. Sometimes the students come from a good home; sometimes they
> don't. There are some parents who care and get involved in their child's
> education, while some don't. (Elder 3)

> Lots of things are going on at home. At home, they are mixed up. They are
> facing no food at home; the rent is not paid; their clothes are not cleaned. Maybe
> their parents are drinking. They might have no support to talk; their mother is not
> listening, or their father. Students talk about their family; some are foster
> families, or group families; some are alone on the street and others don't
> understand them. (Elder 1)

> I don't know what happens after school. Even by grade six a family has broken
> down, or the child is taken to a foster home. Some tell me they stay in the
> basement and can't come up to eat with them (foster family), or they are ready to
> run away. Some say, "Will you drive me out of town?" I say, "Where are you
> going?" They say, "I want to go home." (Elder 1)

> Most families are single parent families. For many children it is difficult for the
> mother to push the kids to go to high school. There is a lack of financial stability.
> (Elder 2)

School-related Characteristics

Elders told stories about school-related characteristics that could have contributed

to students leaving school early. One of the Elders shared the following.

They don't feel they are included in anything; that the teachers do not
understand them. At school they say you are not going to finish anyways, and not
going to be there for a little while anyway. Some students have never
finished their work, come in late, and staff want to send them home. If they
have to finish their work, they can find a quiet place to do it. (Elder 1)

Personal-related Characteristics

Elders told stories about personal-related characteristics that could have

contributed to students leaving school early. One of the Elders shared the following.

It isn't any one reason; there are a wide range of reasons. At a personal level
students are unhappy in the school and how they have been taught. In some
aspects it is how the educator hasn't met their needs. Or students haven't had
good relationships with peers; or they don't have support from homes. It happens
especially in the ages when they go through their changes.
(Elder 2)

Demographic Factors Facing Aboriginal People

Elders shared demographic factors facing Aboriginal people that created barriers

to high school completion in a number of areas. Some of the stories had similarities to

those told by the adults. Elders shared the following stories about challenges facing this

demographic group, such as racism and discrimination, abuse, poverty and gangs. It is

interesting to note that the adults and Elders identified gangs and the experiences students

faced with gangs, while the students did not identify gangs in their stories at this time.

Prejudice, Racism, Discrimination

They are facing prejudice in schools. If they go to see the doctor and are
Aboriginal, and are standing behind a white person, they won't face you and even
know you. There is prejudice in offices; I went with my daughter yesterday to the
eye doctor. She has five kids. We walked in to the office, because the manager
was good to me where I used to get my eyes done, and that was when my husband
was alive and brought in my insurance plan. We went to make an appointment
for the five of them. We went to get the glasses fixed for my grandson because
they aren't fitting right. The staff rolled up their eyes, not wanting to bother. My
daughter wanted to leave, and I wanted to talk to the manager and say, "Straighten

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up your staff". It is different if you are from out of the city. There the ladies clean your teeth, and when the doctor comes in for the check up, he says, "Hi, how is your family and mother." They are trying to be nice and will ask, "How were the roads when you were coming in?" In the city, they all assume we are coming in from the bush, or the road allowance, when I lived down the road. Racism is rampant; some are more sophisticated and hidden. (Elder 1)

It is different in an urban environment than the reserve. There is more of not being accepted as equals, because of their race. Society has called us dirty Indians, and it is still there. Kids are sensitive to not being accepted, because of their race. They do describe what that is like. It really affects their self esteem, and the difficulty of fitting in especially in activities of team sports. There are very few native kids there, especially if they have to build relationships. They face discrimination, and aren't aware of ways and means to get involved. (Elder 2)

Sexual and Mental Abuse, Incest

Students are facing sexual and mental abuse; racism is in the halls of the schools. They (Authority figures) claim it is not true; native people are just thinking that. Some (students) are saying, "We are sleeping in the hallway (at home) because they (extended family) were having a big party in the suite. Don't tell the principal because they already think that way about Aboriginal people." I tell them, "Don't go to the mall; you can get into problems." (Elder 1)

Kids will look for me in the school by Christmas. If they face sexual abuse or incest, they will say, "What will happen to me?" I tell them, "If you tell me, I have to tell; I will talk to the principal who will call the police. I will go with you and when we go into there (Child Welfare office), I want to be sure you are going to talk, or it is your word against mine and I don't want to fight you." They all know my phone number and are still phoning me after 15 or 20 years. I ask them, "What are you afraid of, your mother, the incest?" I tell them what happens when the police come; I will sit beside you and your mother can't hit you. It is sad; there are hard things. (Elder 1)

Poverty and Pride

Poverty is a big issue. Students can't buy the same things as other students in other schools. At home they think, "Can they pay for the field trip?" Instead parents can't pay so they say their kids don't want to go. They have pride and might face embarrassment. (Elder 1)

Gangs

The gangs - need to see their colors coming in (to schools) – on the neck and head. I tell the students, "We don't do that here." (Elder 1)

Motivation is lacking to get these kids involved. We see more kids involved in small communities. It is harder to get into these activities in the cities, too expensive. If they are not involved in sports, they might join a gang. The gang issue is still there; it's a fear especially for kids of an impressionable age. Gangs accept these kids. We can guess how many are on the streets, or in young offenders. (Elder 2)

Down the road students get involved with their peers. For example, a student who is 13, and is six feet tall looks 20. He got involved in gang life. A couple of guys made him an offer. They made a promise to make things good; promises he couldn't refuse. He was fascinated by that lifestyle – the gang activities. They hooked him on drugs first. He liked it as a runner of drugs. When he tried pulling away from it, the gang instilled fear on him; they threatened his family, his life. If he walked away he would fantasize about the gang life even though it was illegal. He came to my program, lost and soul searching. He wanted to understand who he was, to identify who he was. He was Aboriginal from a certain community, and was a Métis by blood, but registered in a First Nations community. He was taken from that environment as a boy and put in foster home; later in life he was put in his family. At the beginning of being in my program, there was a curiosity. A close friend and he managed to stay away from gang life; the two boys struggled every day. I was sharing with them their identity as Indigenous people; the culture. They started to have a feel for it as a person who could fit in somewhere. They needed to know if they wanted to learn about it (their culture) that they needed to take it home to their mother and father and be part of it every day. I met the *kohkom* and the mother when they came into the school. In my program, I get the family involved when I work with the kids. It helps me understand where they are coming from. When I dig deeper into the family, sometimes their parents are lost and don't have an identity either. His *kohkom* had put her culture on the shelf for her own reasons; she didn't have a support system living in the urban environment and didn't know where to go. The student started thinking about quitting school and it entered his mind when he joined the gang. It became his reality when he was in the justice system. The gang pushed him; he had to sneak away from home at night and then had problems at school. He didn't sleep, and tried to hide it. Everything came out in the judicial system thing. He might have quit if he didn't get involved with the law; they kept tabs on him. At first it was hard to reach him; they get restless. He got back into the family, slowly, with lots of support from AY&FW&ES. There is lots of abuse in gangs: sexual and psychological. There are drugs, and poverty. Drugs are a quick fix, easy money that becomes a trap with a hard time to get out. (Elder 3)

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Elders told stories about how gender issues affect the students in their care, and

how their lifestyles are affected in urban settings.

Gender

The gender doesn't matter, male or female. They are picked on by teachers about the same if they are male or female. If a little person does not make eye contact, then they get picked on. I tell them, "Don't let anyone make you feel you don't know anything. Nobody pushes you around; this is a free society. You are our future leaders; if you don't stand up now, you and your children will be picked on." (Elder 1)

Girls find it easier to stay in school – they are striving for higher education, to go to more higher education after high school. Boys don't have the support. (Elder 2)

Urban Lifestyle Issues, "Boys Need Coin", Girls Need to Prove Themselves

Dropping out is a combination of urban lifestyle issues. Families are struggling financially; poverty forces them to pull their kids out of school. They can't afford a bus pass; they aren't getting proper nutrition or sleep. Dropping out of school is not a gender issue but peer pressure. In an urban environment, students need coin in your pocket to go anywhere. They get addicted to technology and games, like a DS. There is so much availability. They can go on Internet and challenge others in games. Boys need coin in their pocket - it costs money to do anything in the city, to go anywhere on the bus, or impress the females. The only thing they can do for free is walk, not anything else such as clothes, transportation, etc. For girls it is personal things. It becomes more personal for girls and more challenging, more advanced, more aggressive, and more brave – they want to grasp an identity to be more noticed in the public. They feel they are being watched and judged; it is more about judgement. Girls feel they need to prove to society that they can do certain things without struggling, for example, clothes or an Ipod. They want to prove you can't touch me, or hurt me because I am tough. (Elder 3)

Elders spoke about the intergenerational impact of residential schools and the

movement between schools similarly to the adult stories.

Residential Schools

It reminds me of boarding school; it had different names: residential, technical, boarding, etc. I don't feel this is my home. My reserve is where I felt safe. I was

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at the reserve where I ran to from boarding school. It was the same for the Métis kids; only numbers split the kids up (in boarding schools). (Elder 1)

"The Churn"

Urban schools face something different: kids go back and forth to the reserve and settlements schools and neighboring communities related to the family situation. The reserve might want kids to go to their schools. Parents have options to send kids to an urban school. That might affect where kids go to school. They have many programs in urban schools or neighboring schools. Parents might want to have them go to these schools, but because they are not close to the school; transportation is an issue. The rules and regulations of transportation fees can be waived, but will kids and families come forward to ask for fees to be waived? They have pride, and might not want anyone to know poverty is there. (Elder 2)

Elders told stories of cultural clash and how mainstream schools might not

understand or accept Indigenous culture.

Indigenous Culture

I focus on those who show interest in needing help to find their identity. The program does other things with the education mentors in the school. I invite the parents to understand the culture and they become involved in it. I bring students into a room and start with a smudging circle; once in a while I get a parent or two into the smudging. The school district is getting there with smudging ceremonies. Certain teachers questioned it as a religious belief; they believe in their own religion but try to block the culture, not push it away. They thought smudging could start a fire, or a tobacco (smoking) issue. (Elder 3)

Additional Question on When Students Leave School

To better understand when students started to think about quitting school, I asked the

Elders: "When would he/she start to think about quitting school?" Elders told me that

there was no particular time or event that caused Indigenous students to drop out of

school. They shared the following stories.

Before grade 9. Some (students) say, "I didn't go in grade 7, 8 or 9 and now if I go to grade 10, I don't know what they (the other students) did." I ask them, "Where were you?" They say, "Oh, just around." (Elder 1)

In grade 10 they want to leave school to get a job and make some money, and help their families. When they reach 16 they feel they don't have to go to 18 when we see them as adults, so they quit at 16. AY&FW&ES is trying to do interventions to get them to go beyond junior high. I know of some kids that quit before grade 9, especially if parents push them or don't know they are not going to school. There are lots of barriers and challenges. It doesn't happen at any one time. It's what drives them over the edge. It's not always an individual reason. If a kid's friend says why not quit school, they might. It is not an event, or a particular age, or a particular family. (Elder 2)

Understanding Barriers to High School Completion

In the above sections of my thesis, I reiterated many stories from students, adults and Elders about the challenges they faced to stay in school. Indigenous teachings based on the four directions of the Medicine Wheel: physical, mental, spiritual and emotional indicated that one or more directions of the Medicine Wheel could become broken from the holistic ideal of well-being. Students, adults and Elders shared that the brokenness related to one or more factors, usually many interrelated factors, in the categories portrayed in Diagram 2 above:

- family background,
- school-related characteristics,
- personal-related characteristics,
- demographic factors facing Aboriginal people.

The demographic factors facing Aboriginal people was the one category that was different from other studies on high school completion, such as the Alberta Education document *Removing barriers to high school completion report* (2001). The factor was specific to Aboriginal students and their families and communities. The stories told by students, adults and Elders provide a rich holistic narrative that Indigenous peoples used to identify multifaceted issues, with strategies that can provide viable solutions to problems.

What research participants said about barriers to high school completion is presented in Appendix E in table one of the summaries of stories. However, as stated in the *Removing barriers to high school completion report* (2001), caution must be taken when listing factors associated with dropping out of school.

> Although identifying factors associated with early school leaving can assist in understanding the processes linked to leaving school, a potential drawback of such lists is they can lead to a cookbook or checklist approach to problem solving. Such approaches can easily lead to fragmented programs that have little chance of providing the kind of integrated, holistic strategies that are necessary to provide effective solutions. Lists of factors may also suggest causality when a direct causal relationship does not exist. (p. 5)

Listing factors was certainly a consideration for me in my research. Although a list raises the possibility of inclusion/exclusion associated with the factors identified, I chose to use tables to summarize what research participants told in their stories for ease of comparison between mainstream and Indigenous data on high school completion, and also between the three different groupings of people who took part in talking circles and interviews: students, adults and Elders. Also, the tables pull together the factors I identified in four sections with my thematic description of the research data

In the next chapter, I discuss what I heard from research participants about question two, goals and purposes of education, and question three, supports and gaps to completion of high school.

Chapter 5: Journey through the Stories Participants Told Me:

Questions Two and Three

> Completing high school adds reasons to finish like a purpose for life, or an identity. It adds hope to be successful. Students have a purpose to be educated from the book and also learning their identity as to who they are. There is a spiritual power they can grasp on and that is seeing them through what is pulling them into problems. They learn how to get their morals, and they learn about themselves as an Indigenous person. It is the higher power. (Elder 3)

In this chapter, I discuss what I heard about research question two on the purposes of education, and question three on supports and gaps for high school completion.

Question Two: Purposes of Education

Student Stories about Purposes of Education

Students were asked why it was important for them to go to school, and further, why it was important to complete high school to understand their goals and how education could help them achieve their goals. As in chapter four, these questions were asked in a respectful way using protocols established within Indigenous research methodology, as I discussed in chapter two on research methodology. I used probing when needed to have the students feel comfortable with telling stories about themselves personally, a sibling or relative, or friend who has experienced or contemplated leaving school. Student responses were often brief, but poignant, and in their own youthful language. The following is what they said.

"I Love School"

Some students expressed their aesthetic enjoyment for going to school. I discussed the aesthetic purpose of education introduced by Hodgkinson (1991) earlier in

my thesis in chapter two as one of the three purposes of education that has rapidly

evolved in the last century.

> I want to get an education. I love school. (Why is it important to finish high school?) I need to finish high school and get other opportunities. My future is on the line. I want to do something else. I go to school because I like school. (School 1 – Student 3)

"I Want a Good Job"

A number of students spoke about education helping them to gain more

opportunities to get a good job.

> I want to get an education. To get a job. (Why is it important to finish high school?) I need a high school diploma so I can be a forensic scientist like CSI. I want to make money to have other things. (School 1 – Student 5)

> To get a good education to be at a higher level. I need good grades to be an engineer. (Why is it important to finish high school?) To get a degree I need to finish high school. Then I can get a good job. (School 1 Student 1)

> School is important. If you don't have an education, you can't get a good job to get good money. You can't pay all your bills, and taxes. You can't do anything. (School 2 – Student 7)

> I should do it to get better money. You have a wider selection of jobs for working; not just McDonalds. It's about a lot of things. Like making sure you have experience in other places than school. (School 2 – Student 6)

"To Make My Family Proud"

A number of students told stories about the pride of completing school. Many

spoke about their goal of being the first in their family to complete high school and

how this provided a strong incentive to complete.

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I want to make my family and friends proud. I want to succeed and get a good job so I don't have to live off other people. (Why is it important to finish high school?) You need to have your own life; be respectable. (School 1 – Student 6)

I want to have a career. I'm going to be the first one in my family to finish high school. It is important for my family, for me to finish high school. (School 2 – Student 3)

"To Have a Good Life"

Students spoke about the "good life", which has been recognized by many

Aboriginal people, organizations and in political documents for Aboriginal people to

achieve success (*Indian control of Indian education*, 1972, in Statement of the Indian

philosophy of education). "The good life" was a term that had intergenerational impact

in many Indigenous communities.

I want to have a good life. I want a good future. To make my family proud. I want to have a house, a car, a family. (Why is it important to finish high school?) "I have lots of dreams." (School 1 - Student 4)

I need a decent education to have a decent life. It makes it easier. I want to get a house and stuff. I want to get established. (School 2 – Student 6)

I want to get a good education; for a good career. I have plans to get a woman and have a chance at having a family. I want to accomplish something. (Why is it important to finish high school?) I want to finish high school to do something I'm good at. (School 2 – Student 4)

Education is key to success. I want my own money. Don't want to collect welfare. I don't want to depend on my mom and dad; I want to be independent and make my own money. (School 1 Student 2)

I want to get an education, to succeed in life. (School 1 – Student 8)

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I want to go to a higher level. I can't do that if I don't finish high school. I want to get a good education. I need good grades for Math and all of the other subjects. To have a job and, oh yeah, other reasons like to have a good life. I don't want to be like other people on my reserve. (School 2 – Student 2)

One student spoke about wanting to better themselves from negative experiences

that other Indigenous people they know have faced.

I don't want to be like other people on my reserve. They faced residential school. Now they're stuck at home. I want to travel and see other things. (School 1 Student 2)

Determination

Students spoke about the internal drive that motivated them to complete school.

I have to go to school. I have to finish high school. (Why is it important to finish high school?) You will know more than you did in junior high. (School 1 – Student 7)

Family Responsibilities

A number of students identified their responsibilities to their families that many

took on at such a young age.

I want to finish high school so I can look after my family. (School 2 – Student 5)

If you don't pass high school, life wouldn't be good. You need to feed your family. School can do that. (School 2 – Student 7)

The following diagram in a Medicine Wheel format represents the four purposes
of education. The format is congruent with the holistic approach of the Medicine Wheel
used by the research participants in their work on high school completion.

Analysis of Stories about Purposes of Education

**Diagram 3: Purposes of
Education**

Aesthetic
Education

Economic
Education

Ideology
Mainstream

Ideology
Aboriginal
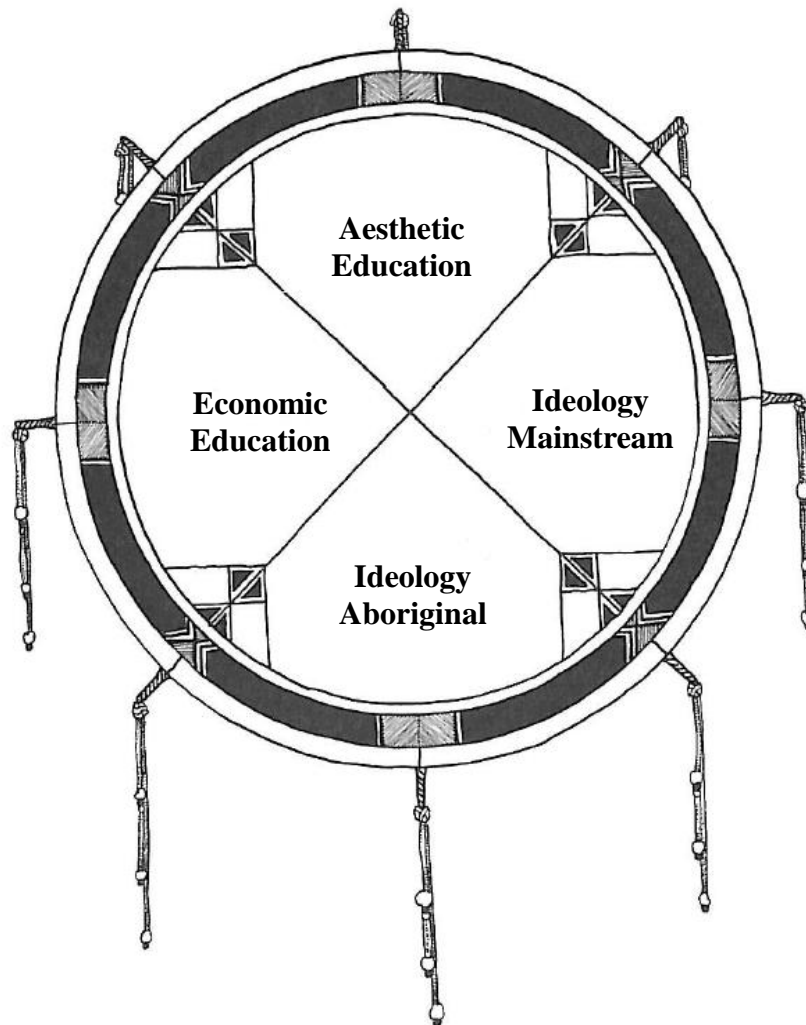
Purposes of education and completing high school were identified in four broad categories that could encourage Aboriginal students to finish school. They were:

- aesthetic education (associated with self-fulfillment and the enjoyment of life),
- economic education (for the purpose of making money, which determines the economic status of the learner),
- ideological education of mainstream society (for the purpose of transmitting the dominant culture of society),
- ideological education of Aboriginal people (for the purpose of transmitting Aboriginal culture, traditions, and Indigenous knowledge).

I identified the first three categories of the purposes of public education similarly to various scholars in the literature that have described goals for schools in mainstream society (Hodgkinson, 1991). The fourth category, ideological education of Aboriginal people, was identified by research participants as education being provided for the purpose of transmitting Aboriginal culture and Indigenous knowledge deemed essential to preserve Indigenous ways of life. This fourth category was similar in the student, adult and Elder stories about the purposes of education, with varying degrees of emphasis. This category can be congruent or in conflict with goals of education for mainstream society. Through a critical lens, research participants can become aware of power issues and find supports they need to achieve their personal and collective community goals in order to maintain their Indigenous ways of being and democratic equality (Laboree, 1997) in mainstream education.

To use a holistic approach, I continue with the adult stories, and then those of the Elders in the section that follows, about the purposes of education question.

Adult Stories about Purposes of Education

In the adult talking circle and individual interviews, I asked similar questions as those I asked the students about the purpose of education from the perspective of adult support for their particular student(s): Why is it important for your student to go to school? Why is it important to finish high school? These questions also were asked in a respectful way using protocols within Indigenous research methodology informed by a critical lens. Their stories were as follows.

Aesthetic Education

Adults told stories associated with self-fulfilment and the enjoyment of life of the students they supported in the program in various aspects, such as self-fulfillment, enjoyment of life, pride and the love of learning.

Self-fulfillment

Students can make connections. There are lots of goals for education, such as relevance. People live longer. They contribute to society and make the world a better place. (Why is it important to finish high school?) Students can go to post-secondary to find their passion in life. They can become global citizens. They gain exposure. It can open their minds and they can contribute and give back to society. (Adult 3)

Education opens doors. Students have more opportunities. They build relationships and learn how others act and react. Education builds character and students learn commitment. They stay focused through adversities. It makes them stronger to face other things as a young adult and with their families. (Adult 4)

If students don't go to school, it closes doors and limits opportunities. At school, they learn so many life lessons. For example, they get up in the morning; they learn to work hard. They learn to do homework. They can sit there for an hour; learn discipline. Students learn to problem solve and to articulate and express themselves.

(Why is it important to finish high school?) If they don't continue, it can stunt that growth. (Adult 6)

School will help them with their future. They can build their lives, and get the best chance to finish. School goes by in three year cycles; there are changes every three years. It is a smart goal to finish high school. I try not to stress my kids at home about school like as I was at home. There are more opportunities for kids with education. With education students will have a better life and better opportunities. They can try things out in schools; to get the hunger. Many doors open and there are more limits to everything. As a parent, you can encourage your kids that they can do it (finish high school). They are like a little sponge. They can use high school for all kinds of knowledge. They can learn to cook and to learn computers. (Adult 8)

Enjoyment of Life

When students are going to school, they don't think that learning is relevant for a lot of the kids. There are lots of things they can get excited about and that will open their minds. They don't learn just on the Internet. If they didn't go to school, they wouldn't realize that they have a passion in what they learn in school. (Why is it important to finish high school?) Students can increase their knowledge base. They have a huge advantage to finish high school and go beyond to post-secondary. (Adult 5)

Sense of Pride

 In school now, options are amazing. There is fashion design and culinary arts. Students can see what is available for their future. There are so many ways to go. (Why is it important to finish high school?) Students can expand their interests into post-secondary. They build friendships in high school. The high school environment is one of school spirit, and being in a group of people with great teachers. When I finished high school, it was a great sense of accomplishment. I completed 12 years of school and got the diploma. My mother was so happy. My graduation was a great day. I had such a sense of pride. I could go on to post-secondary and get more education. (Adult 7)

"I Love to Learn"

We want to survive and this is where we are going to get the skills to do it. And to the few who said, "just because I love to learn", it depends who teaches them education. Like for my kids education is fun and education is the pursuit of knowledge, the understanding and the knowing of yourself. And that is how they

pursue everything. Then education becomes a fun thing to do. Not a painful
thing to do. We certainly learn lots from the kids. They really are a great source
to get insight from. To what is happening now and what are some of the solutions
for what they are dealing with. (Adult 9)

Economic Education

Adults shared stories about the perceived main purpose of education being to "get

a job" and how schooling could be designed to meet this purpose practically to raise the

economic status of Aboriginal students.

> They need to have an education to get a good job. They need a job in order to
> live. (An agency) was brought into do a workshop for the students. Students
> don't need a high school diploma to work for them. It is important to finish high
> school, but kids know they can go there (the agency) without high school. They
> think someone will take me. But they have to have something to fall back on, so
> I'm split on that. (Adult 1)

> (Why is it important to finish high school?) They can go to post-secondary and
> beyond. (Adult 2)

> Education is for practicality. Education is to raise your standard of living and
> quality of life. It doesn't necessarily mean that happiness will come from big
> bucks. (Adult 3)

> It increases their training more job wise and as they are starting to go to work.
> In schools they should push these things, like resume writing, a cover letter,
> and stuff I didn't do in school. (Adult 8)

Ideological Education of Mainstream Society

Adults shared stories about the purpose of education to transmit the dominant

culture of mainstream society. In many instances, this purpose was perceived as

indoctrination by mainstream society, which often clashed with the purpose of education

to transmit the culture of Aboriginal people.

Citizenship, Life Skills

(Why is it important to finish high school?) When students finish high school the end result is they get a good job; they learn good communication and when they are out in society, they can relate to people. They learn to socialize and to become a good citizen. It all starts in schools. (Adult 1)

It is not just academics that happens at school. Students learn to interact with other people. They learn about themselves, and acquire other skills that are not just the academics. I believe it is important. They will become global citizens. They get connected on the Internet. They get connected on a whole different level. (Adult 2)

Clashes, Conflict with Mainstream Indoctrination

Mainstream indoctrination often clashes in those sort of things (indoctrination of Aboriginal people). Somebody's grandmother gets sick and dies; half the school doesn't show up next day and the school goes nuts. Oh you can't go to that funeral; that's not your grandmother. No but she was an important part of our community. Or she was the aunt of my mother; we have to go. We know that when someone dies, you go there not just to say goodbye but to support the whole family during this difficult time. That's the tradition. And the community. They (people in mainstream society) don't have this concept. The whole town (Indigenous community) can shut things down and go off. Take the day off to commemorate someone in the community. So when you're in a school system here, they don't see that. They see it as, oh, they're just trying to get a day off. So we get those cultural rubs. (Adult 9)

Also when there is conflict, people come to me and I advise them. When they get into conflict with someone, they will say that it might not have anything to do with their positions, it might have to do with if they are trying to impress something upon a non-Aboriginal. A non-Aboriginal person assumes you are trying to get their power. So it becomes vicious very quickly. They aren't into sharing. Or if they come into a talking circle or are trying to have a one-on-one to have a conversation with one another and they are thinking that you're there to garner more information to pursue legal action. (Adult 9)

Ideological Education of Aboriginal People

Adults talked about the need for education systems that represent dominant

cultural norms to reconsider purposes of ideological education that are not inclusive of

transmitting Aboriginal culture, traditions, and Indigenous knowledge that are deemed

essential to preserve Indigenous ways of being. They included being grounded in

Aboriginal culture, traditions and Indigenous knowledge.

"Getting Grounded"

Purposes of education are indoctrination. Indoctrination is a bit of an extreme word. Getting an education and a sense of getting grounded in who you are, and understanding the social traditions and knowledge base that your people have and value. Indigenous people have a set of values and missions that are often a counterpoint to Western ways; the hierarchal neoliberal, Western liberal traditions. We don't put the individual over the collective for example. The individuality is not something that is celebrated. Most Indigenous people anywhere in the world believe this. Also we don't put the collective over the individual as well. Because really they are at a balance with each other. There is always that movement between each other; it has to balance itself out. That's where the Indigenous stuff is. (Adult 9)

At the ATA (Alberta Teachers' Association) they published a book, *Education is our buffalo*. From it, we learn education is the thing now that will provide us with a livelihood. (Adult 2)

Aboriginal Culture, Traditions, Indigenous Knowledge

The message that I get from students is that being educated is being traditional. 'Cause our people were always seeking knowledge and information. When we used to have our gatherings at the Pohona here in Edmonton, or the Rendezvous for Métis people, we didn't get there just to buy and sell things from each other. We went there to exchange cultural knowledge, wisdom, insight, understanding of the land. We often would make treaties or relationships with other nations of people where we would send our kids to go live with them. To learn because then they would come back and share that knowledge with them. That's how we can make things better. (Adult 9)

The kids have to understand and the parents have to understand that being educated is not selling out to the white system but it has to be parallel with an Indigenous foundation. I don't want to sound like a cliché or a bumper sticker. But education or training without a cultural foundation is assimilation. And that's why we have to have it. (Adult 9)

Adults told stories about claiming Indigenous space and the importance of

relationships. All groups spoke about the ultimate goal of having a good life.

Indigenous Space

The importance of Indigenous space rears its head again. Aboriginal people want
to know who they are. You can't stop that child who has been adopted out or
fostered out will eventually go back and try to find the path of their people. Not
necessarily to join them but to know where they come from. And that's a
fundamental right, human right. It's a human need. So we need to be able to
have that. That's the place where people can turn. To show them and get some
resources. Those parents being white parents have a tremendous responsibility
and are doing an awesome job in raising our children, and being there to have a
good chance at life and get a good education. But what they are missing is that
cultural component and that root to fix themselves to again. (Adult 9)

Relational

So it's a relational thing again. So the individual relates to the collective and how
the collective relates back to the individual. Now when we teach this in school or
we teach this in ceremony or in tradition things. We each take part in the round
dance where we relate back and forth. Each of us is in ceremony, the round
dance, and the giveaway, which is giving back to the community if you were
successful. If you have a lot of stuff you can give back and redistribute so that
people who don't have much can have a bit more. And also if you are at the other
end, where you don't have a lot suddenly can have more from the community. Or
if you are sick the community can say so-and-so is sick; let's get him something
to eat. Let's be sure he has something to eat. They share, make sure they are
taken care of. Because that's part of the indoctrination of our people. It's part of
the education process. (Adult 9)

Resolving Issues through Mediation

Our attempts are at mediation. The way I've been taught, or the way other people
have been taught is that the first step in mediation to solve issues is to sit down
and talk in a good way. Now let's talk about the issue and the problem. Most
times that solves the issue by creating if they are open, or in some litigation they
might say something, so it becomes very combative very easy. You don't really
get to address the issues in much depth other than going through the legal process.
And that makes it even more cold. (Adult 9)

"To Have a Good Life"

(Why should students finish high school?) If we go back to the early interpretations of education and what it means to Aboriginal people or treaty people or Indigenous people, they say very much that same thing as the child said, "to have a good life." And in the opening paragraph of Indian Control of Indian Education, 1972, that is what they talk about. That's the first line: so that our children could have a good life. That is what education means to Indian people. To have a good life: that's what it means. And that is fundamentally the truth. It might mean a job, or current political way to express that or at least a way of talking about their experiences. (Adult 9)

Elder Stories about Purposes of Education

I asked the Elders the same questions that I asked the adults in a similar respectful manner: Why is it important for your student to go to school? Why is it important to finish high school? Elders told their stories about goals of education and the dreams they had for urban Aboriginal students to complete school and take their rightful place in society. Their responses were categorized according to aesthetic education, economic education, ideological education within mainstream society and ideological education of Aboriginal people in a similar manner as those identified by the adults who participated in the research experience.

Aesthetic Education

"You must have a dream"

I tell them, "By finishing high school, you can get a better paying job and function in the real world. If this feels good, then that is your plan. What will you do then if you only go to grade 9 or 10? You must have a goal or a dream." (Elder 1)

Honor and Pride

It is an honor for me to see the (native student) graduates at university; it was a great day with 500 graduates. That is why it is important to finish high school (and go beyond). (Elder 1)

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Finishing high school used to be a dream as an Indigenous person. Now we have more pride to see that your child can finish high school. It falls back on you as an Indigenous person and it reflects that pride. You have to finish school, and go beyond. (Elder 3)

Economic Education

Finishing high school is about getting a better job. They can make more money. I ask them, "How long are you going to do your job? What about all the little jobs?" McDonalds is at the back of their minds. They are scared of their first job. Some day it will finally get to the front of things. (Elder 1)

It is easier to get a good paying job with more education, and have a better resume and the kind of job you want. They can get a job in their field and what they like to do. The main reason for education is to have a career that they want to do with a degree. (Elder 2)

Ideological Education of Mainstream Society

Finishing high school comes from hearing it in the classroom, from their friends and even their non-native friends. (Elder 1)

A teacher told my granddaughter, "Oh you want to finish high school." So she finished and became a pharmacist. My grade 9 grandson wants to be a pastry cook. He can come and cook for me every day. He saw it on TV; he didn't find cooking here from me. His mother makes good meals for them. (Elder 1)

In today's society we are taught if you don't finish high school, what will you do? You will have low pay and low jobs that nobody wants. Now going beyond high school is to be successful in terms of society. (Elder 3)

Ideological Education of Aboriginal People

Elders told stories about the importance of education to transmit ideological goals of Indigenous peoples and how education can be a vehicle to advance Indigenous ideology.

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Goal to Work with Aboriginal People

My other granddaughter goes to Faculté St. Jean. She said to me, "Grandma, I want to be a better French speaker and be good at writing French and learn Cree. I want to be a doctor who works with Aboriginal people. (Elder 1)

Fighting Welfare Lines

I push education. My grandfather was 97 when passed away; one uncle had five degrees. My grandfather said, "Nobody owes you a living. You have to go to work. No one will come here and give it to you. Why are you standing in the welfare line? You have two hands, and a strong head. (Elder 1)

"You Can Go to the Moon"

You can go to the moon," I tell the kids. "You will go someplace, or be a doctor who has a cure for diabetes, or you can go to be a principal." You know what the kids are going through at school nowadays. They don't go to school, or sleep in. I told one of my students, "Now let's go. I'm not leaving until you are up and go to school." Now he is a vice-principal today in the Catholic system. He went somewhere to study and I saw him at Sacred Heart Church. I said to him, "Hello, how are you?" His face got red; and now he is the vice-principal chasing students and getting them out of bed. (Elder 1)

Adopt the Western Way

Elders say we can't go to our old ways to survive off the land. There is little to survive with. We must go to the best ways we know to adopt the Western way. That is education. We can adopt the ways white people think. That is education. We can maintain our survival. The more education our people get, the better we can help ourselves, our communities. The old people recognized this to endure the ways of the Western world. It is the right time for the right thing in the right place. When kids have purpose for education, it is a reason to finish high school. (Elder 2)

Education is Our Buffalo

The benefit is a good job to take care of your family and to do whatever else you need to do. It is also about our community, and other things. Education is our buffalo. (Elder 2)

Conflicts with Mainstream Society

I had to go back to get upgraded and finish my degree later on as an adult to achieve what I wanted to do. I have experience as a parent, not just high school, and now further, like university. I tell the students, "Life doesn't end there after you finish high school; you have to plan university. You will hit rock bottom if you go into the trades without high school and education. You can build yourself up a ladder in a corporation, or you can stay on the bottom of the ladder in the corporation." Now Indigenous people are starting to believe that university is the next level. There can be financial barriers. Society believes that university is free if you are Indigenous; they painted this on us. They believe that Indigenous people have free education, free dentists, etc., but that is not their reality. If they go to Indian Affairs, they say, "Sorry, go back to your band." "They might say, "Ok, we will look at it and put you on the list." It goes back to the politics and favoured family of the band. Urban people look at bands, especially at the royalties, and say, "What you get is tax free so what is your complaint? (Elder 3)

Identity, Spirituality, Indigenous Ways of Knowing

It adds reasons to finish like a purpose for life, or an identity. It adds hope to be successful. Students have a purpose to be educated from the book and also learning their identity as to who they are. There is a spiritual power they can grasp on and that is seeing them through what is pulling them into problems. They learn how to get their morals, and they learn about themselves as an Indigenous person. It is the higher power, for example, at (an Edmonton) school they can't learn at a higher level, the problem's about learning, unless they use sweetgrass and tobacco. It reflects on Indigenous people. We utilize these tools, and our way of knowing and understanding it. We utilize the protocols in everyday living. Students take home the knowledge with them. There is a health issue in smoking cigarettes; it is because of peer pressure and for girls it is more to do with weight. There are some aspects from home – parents smoke at home and the kids were, too. For Indigenous people tobacco was sacred; tobacco came as a medicine. Elders offered it and put it back to Mother Earth; it was not to indulge. Nowadays tobacco and Elders is touchy; a vast majority of Indigenous people do indulge in smoking. It is not right or wrong. They put the blame on their Elders. Their Elders and parents lived to 80 or 100 years old but they worked physical. There is no real physical activity now. I was part of the last generation of physical activity and being part of the balance to be in the outdoors. We have the balance of the four directions. Even though they smoked, they smoked a smaller amount. There are more chemicals today in cigarettes. Drugs were created that started addiction, like cocaine to get them addicted. Old tobacco didn't have these things in it like rat poison, tar, etc. (Elder 3)

Understanding the Purposes of Education

By examining purposes for education, students and their support systems found ways to set goals to work through barriers to high school completion. As I have discussed earlier, educational purposes have been identified in four categories:

1. aesthetic education,
2. economic education,
3. ideological education of mainstream society,
4. ideological education of Aboriginal people.

The ideological education of Aboriginal people was the purpose that was different from other studies on purposes of education, such as *Educational leadership: The moral art*, (Hodgkinson, 1991). This purpose was specific to Aboriginal students and their families and communities and had many aspects that have been identified by the research participants.

Question Three: Supports and Gaps

Student Stories about Supports

Students were asked what supports were available to help them go to school and to finish high school and what was missing that could support them to complete high school. First I asked: What is currently being done to help you finish high school? Students responded with the following stories about their perceived supports.

Family, foster families, friends

Students spoke about their family and foster families, and their personal friends who supported them to complete high school.

My family wants me to succeed in school; that helps me. (School 1 – Student 6)

What's helping me is the support from my family and friends.
(School 1 – Student 8)

My foster home helps me, and in the school. (Educational Mentor).
(School 2 – Student 2)

Aboriginal Youth & Family Well-being & Education Society, Support Programs

Students described support programs and the Aboriginal Youth & Family Well-

being & Education Society education mentors who helped them to stay in school.

Workers help us like (the Education Mentor) and other people who come to this
school to help us. (School 1- Student 2)

Lots of people help us like those from the program thing (AY&FW&ES) and
moms and dads. (School 1 – Student 3)

There is some after school programs. They help with studies and stuff. I get help
with homework and lunch in (Education Mentor's) room; (who) helps you.
(School 2 – Student 6)

Teachers, Educators

Students discussed how teachers and other educators helped them to finish school.

Friends, family and some teachers help us. (School 1 – Student 4)

Education is helping me. (School 1 - Student 5)

My teachers help every day. (School 2 – Student 4)

My mom is helping me finish school, and all the teachers. (School 2 – Student 5)

Teachers are helping me finish school. We don't use anything yet. They know
what we need to know. (School 2 – Student 7)

The following diagram in a Medicine Wheel format represents supports to high school completion. The format is congruent with the holistic approach of the Medicine Wheel used by the research participants in their work on high school completion.

Analysis of Stories about Supports for High School Completion

**Diagram 4:
Supports**

Family/foster
homes, friends

Significant
adult in
schools

Teachers,
educators,
board policies

Holistic
Indigenous
programs,
Elders
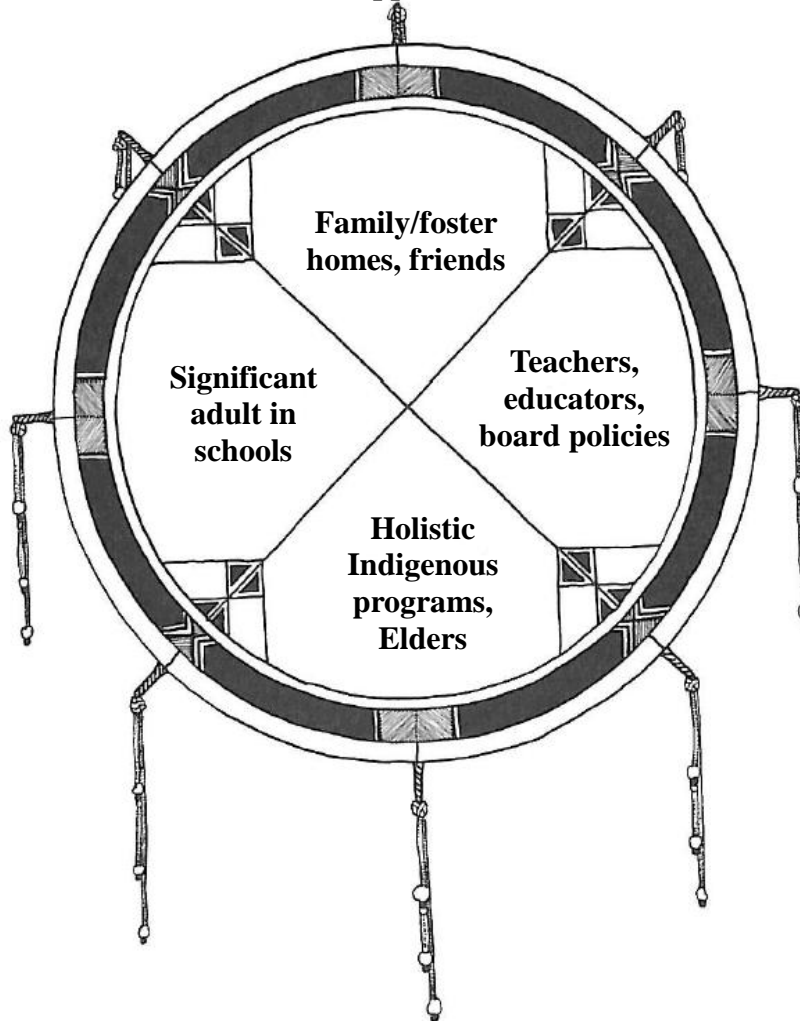
Supports have been identified by research participants in four categories that are portrayed in the Medicine Wheel diagram above.

1. family/foster families and friends,
2. teachers and educators, school board policies
3. holistic Indigenous programs with cultural foundations/Elders,
4. a significant adult in schools.

To use a holistic approach, I continue with the adult stories, and then those of the

Elders in the sections that follow, about supports for high school completion.

Adult Stories about Supports

In the adult talking circle and individual interviews, I asked similar questions

about the supports and gaps from the perspective of support for their particular student(s):

What is currently being done to help urban Aboriginal students finish high school? What

is missing? These questions also were asked in a respectful way using protocols within

Indigenous research methodology in critical theory research. By understanding supports

perceived by students and their support systems, ways can be found to work through

barriers to high school completion. Their stories about supports were as follows.

Teachers, School Systems, School Programs, School Board Policies and Practices

Adults shared how educators, and school board policies and practices provided

support for Aboriginal students to stay in school.

> We (Edmonton Public Schools) increased our staff from four to eleven people in
> the last 1 ½ years. We have targeted severely high school completion over the
> last few years. We host a gathering of grade 10, 11, 12 Aboriginal students. We
> get them together and tell them this is your graduating class. We ask them, "How
> do we help each other?" The kids don't see each other and don't know there are
> more Aboriginal students than themselves sometimes, so they know they aren't
> alone. They play cultural hand games; have lunches and ceremonies in the
> schools. More than ever in the history of Edmonton Public Schools the
> graduation rates for Aboriginal students is going up yearly. We have board policy
> on assessment, with regulations attached. We must allow smudging in schools
> now. There is more interest in the trustees now on Aboriginal student success.
> We have an open door policy to support Aboriginal students. (Adult 2)

Holistic Indigenous Programs with Cultural Foundations/Elders

Adults told various stories about supports provided by holistic Indigenous

programs based on cultural foundations, such as those offered by the Aboriginal Youth &

Family Well-being & Education Society, that helped students complete high school.

> Organizations like AY&FW&ES help Aboriginal kids finish high school. I help parents of the kids in our program to be involved in their kid's education. I attend parent/teacher interviews with our students' parents. I help kids along their way, to understand the work. The program's tutors help. Passing each subject is the bottom line. (Adult 1)

> Students need cultural and emotional support, too. Teachers can only do so much because their plates are full. It's not the same for the mentor or liaison as for the assistant principal. The mentor has more one on one time. Supports are there, but not as strong as in some other places. Our program is not just for the brain; it is for the heart, and spirit. It is for the whole child. We take a counsellor point of view. (Adult 3)

> I wasn't aware of what was going on at the high school level. We (AY&FW&ES) ask what our youth feel about gatherings and activities. We ask them how they are represented in their schools, and do they feel segregated. We are doing all kinds of things in junior high and elementary, especially the transitions work with partners from elementary to junior high and junior high to high school. Some things we do are student led. If they are not done in one school, they are done in others. Student groups are growing and getting a life of their own. There are more demands for things, such as novel studies for Aboriginal students. They are more engaging, not like Caucasian novels in schools. When I meet with principals (some) say (they) don't want to start some of the things in our program because students (might) feel segregated; but our kids say to us, "Do them", so we do things together with the students. You can get defensive as an Aboriginal person. We are looking at how what we are doing with the kids is encouraging the family to feel more excited about what is going on in the school. Kids want someone to feel excited about what they are doing in school. Families might feel negative about school for different reasons. If parent gets a call for negative reasons, they become detached from the school. (Adult 4)

> Indigenous activities help connect students to their identity and heritage. It keeps them going forward and to hope. (Adult 6)

We take the initiative to work with Aboriginal students. It has an impact on their education. It encourages them to work harder. We get them back up to par with mainstream students and get out of a rut. The teacher is there for the students. We (our organization) work with four schools and I have worked in three of them. It is different in each school; the kids are great in each school. The native humor is great; kids are similar and great. (Adult 7)

Within schools we have programs and Aboriginal learning centers. They have an Elders' Council that helps formulate and draft their direct relationship documents between them and the trustees. So they meet on a regular basis: the trustees and the Elders. They provide advisement like hiring and things like that. They integrate Elders into the process. So it's there. There are new developments in curriculum being developed. I'm hearing my son coming home with his school chum. I'm standing here with my wife making dinner and they starting asking questions about treaties, these little white kids say, "What's this sweat lodge thing?" They ask these questions because it's a safe house. They know that. They can ask any questions they want. I'm going to give a really respectful answer. They talk about ideas and concepts and they like it, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. It takes a bit of pressure off my son and daughter having to be the official ones and have all the answers for the classroom. They still get that mind you. But at least it's in the curriculum. And they are starting to see now that there are role models in the texts and that sort of thing. And some of them know they are related. So it's all really positive in that regard. (Adult 9)

Support Programs

Adults described various support programs and initiatives that made a difference in students staying in school.

We have different organizations in the schools to help, for example with intramurals and sports. Kids are there for this when they might be missing other days when there are no sports. Every kid is different. (Adult 5)

There are more Aboriginal programs in schools nowadays. Aboriginal students aren't alone; they are part of a group and the school, too. They are not isolated; they can be integrated and part of other things. We need to keep a balance, and have mentors, tutors, and support workers too. Academics build the love of learning. A child can contribute in the classroom and connect to teachers and others. (Adult 3)

Significant Adult in Schools

There is some support for kids in the school or community. There are support workers in the schools, and teachers. The community hall sent a community letter that says it is pretty open for most everything. In school the tutor helps him out. The tutors are there to help out and to talk to. (Adult 8)

Elder Stories about Supports

I asked the Elders the same questions that I asked the adults in a similar respectful

manner: What is currently being done to help urban Aboriginal students finish high

school? What is missing?" Elders told their stories about supports for urban Aboriginal

students to complete school and take their rightful place in society in a similar manner as

those identified by the adults who participated in the research experience.

Teachers, School Systems, School Programs, School Board Policies and Practices, Provision of Basic Needs for Students

> AY&FW&ES has a small budget for food and a drink, so the kids know. But they might not know it is limited and the staff is limited and there is only so much you can do. Different agencies are trying to help the students. Yes there are good people out there. The secretaries have been here for 30 years, yes bringing food in from the church. I say, "I am glad you are here because I know the kids will get something to eat." They must be hungry, how can they study? The electricity has been cut off (at home). The kids smell at school and they can't have a bath. I do the mending of their things and bring them back (to school). (Elder 1)

> A long time ago (a Métis Elder) started a hot lunch program to keep kids in school in the early '70s; it was to get money to cook food in the schools for the kids. Then the Sacred Circle started to get Aboriginal people into schools to help kids and their families. The program was in the public schools in Edmonton. Then the program educated the teachers as it was slowly getting into the schools. But it was not enough. Then part of Awasis (program) evolved, with a good turnover into the program. Now there are some Aboriginal kids in all schools, while before Aboriginal kids could only go into some schools. There is more acceptance, and more cultures now in the schools. Now we have a moiré of Aboriginal culture in schools, and language. Most of the schools now have Aboriginal days and events. It helps to turn some attitudes around. The White Braid Society showed Aboriginal

dance in schools. It helped show the pride and other cultures got a better appreciation. It stressed a better treatment for the Aboriginal kids. It is bringing a better understanding of the kids to the teachers and administrators, but it is not enough. (Elder 2)

Some After-school Programs

What's being done today to help are effective after school programs; they   have sports, and crafts teaching and put the importance to help yourself understand. I am involved with one small project that is aimed at helping the student. Programs are designed to help themselves in life; they have to go back to natural law and instil it and grow with it. (Elder 3)

Holistic Indigenous Programs with Cultural Foundations/Elders

Elder Support in Schools

I went to a graduation of the girl my daughter took in and lots of people said, "Hello." My daughter said, "My goodness, wherever you go they know you." I tell her, "I pay them." There are many good sympathetic teachers.
(Elder 1)

I am willing to work with anyone who wants to know the knowledge, especially the Cree culture that I am part of it. To teach the kids who live in an urban environment, and also to teach the educators. It is better for both sides to work together. (Elder 2)

Understanding the Supports for High school Completion

Supports were identified by students, adults and Elders in four categories:

1. family/foster families and friends,
2. teachers and educators, school board policies
3. holistic Indigenous programs with cultural foundations/Elders,
4. a significant adult in schools.

Students and adults shared how important it was for the youth to have the support of

family and friends, especially if the parents were involved in schools. Also, students,

adults and Elders told stories about the importance of the teachers in their schools,

especially Aboriginal teachers and administrators, Elders and for organizations,

specifically the Aboriginal Youth & Family Well-being & Education Society and

community programs to be involved in schools that provide holistic Indigenous

programs, with cultural programs, basic needs, intramurals, after school programs and

help with Aboriginal students. A significant adult in the school was cited in student,

adult and Elder stories as paramount for support for the Aboriginal students in the school.

Student Stories about Gaps

I asked: What is missing to help you finish high school? Students responded

with the following stories.

Being Unaware

Lack of awareness of available supports was a large factor that students identified

as missing to support them in completing high school.

I don't know what is missing. (School 1 – Student 2)

What's missing is I don't know what's on the line (what is at stake).
(School 1 – Student 6)

We don't know the stuff we need to know to say what's missing.
(School 2 – Student 7)

Lack of teacher support, Lack of respect of teachers

Students told stories about missing teacher support and respect of teachers as gaps

in support for them to compete high school.

What's missing is the respect of teachers and others. (School 1 – Student 5)

A free education; not able to go to college. (School 1 – Student 3)

What's missing is that some people might not support us and the program. (School 1 – Student 4)

And what is missing is support from the teachers. (School 1 – Student 8)

I don't know what is missing. Some teachers are pushing people too far; we're rushed and can't go back to ask if we don't understand it. It's kind of pointless. I try to ask; I put my hand up and they ignore me. Others put their hands down. We do something new every two classes and then we move on. They say, "Anyways, let's get going on." If you missed something that day they say, "Get the work from someone else." People get too embarrassed to ask; they stay quiet. They don't want to be an outcast. I feel not important. (School 2 – Student 5)

What's missing – I think everything is there, but people don't want to listen and some people are too embarrassed to ask questions. They feel stupid. (School 2 – Student 6)


Family

What's missing is my mom. (School 2 – Student 2)

What's missing is my dad. A real family would help. (School 2 – Student 4)

What's missing is my brother because he would help me with my homework, all the time. I didn't get time to ask him everything. He isn't living with us anymore. I would say, "It's hard to understand this," and he would help me. (School 2 – Student 7)

The following diagram in Medicine Wheel format represents the four categories of gaps to complete high school. The format is congruent with the holistic approach of the Medicine Wheel used by the research participants in their work on high school completion.

Analysis of Stories about Gaps for High School Completion

Diagram 5: Gaps to Complete High School
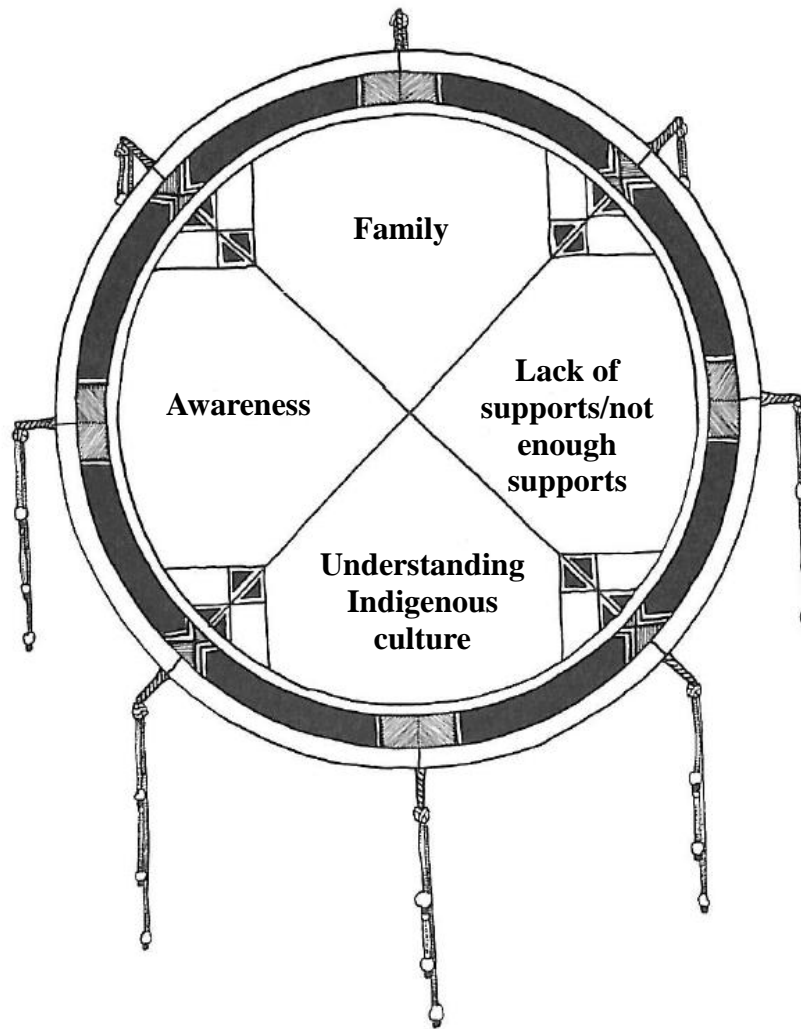
Gaps have been identified by research participants in four categories that are

portrayed in the Medicine Wheel diagram above.

1. family
2. lack of supports/not enough supports
3. awareness
4. understanding Indigenous culture.

To use a holistic approach, I continue with the adult stories, and then those of the Elders in the sections that follow, about gaps for high school completion.

Adult Stories about Gaps

Adults were asked what is missing to support Aboriginal students to complete high school? Often their stories described lack of awareness of available supports, expressed as "what is out there?, how will we know if we get there?, who is ultimately responsible for Aboriginal education?" And there is "not enough" of the previously identified supports, such as holistic Indigenous policies and practices based on cultural foundations; or lack of understanding of Indigenous culture and practices by mainstream society.

"What is out there?"

Knowing what is available, Parental awareness

There are programs out there; you just need to get out and look for them to find them. If my kids want to go to dance classes, or hockey, there is help everywhere. (You have to find it) Since my arthritis I am a homebody. I found a way when I got to the city. There is a big chain and you have to find out for yourself what is there. Somebody else will know. In my son's school, the subjects change fast. Maybe he fell behind and wanted to quit. We found out through his friend that his Social Studies was dropping. Maybe the computer game needed to be taken away so his (Social) studies could be brought back up; his Math is good. He was sick and missed a few days. He got sick continuously; he didn't get his flu shot. After school, I would let him have snack and work at the table at the studies. He was strong enough to study. I set rules and was stern. The rules are as long as it (homework) gets done, he could have the games after. (Adult 8)

I try to get hold of the teacher, principal, or AY&FW&ES when I have questions. I am always there and ask questions, but sometimes I am too shy to ask questions. As a young mom I was always working and the last four years I can't do any labor because of my arthritis. I want to get up on my feet and get off welfare and show my kids. I want to go to training in office administration. I just need to

know where to look and to try. In schools they will do their best if parents are there as much as they can. It all has to do with the home. (Adult 8)

"Not enough" Supports

More organizations like Aboriginal Youth & Family Well-being & Education Society. (Adult 1)

What's missing is there needs to be more organizations or more of us being there for the Aboriginal kids such as help with tutoring, and support workers for the students and parents. (Adult 1)

More Aboriginal Teachers, Principals, Support Workers

What is missing is that we need more Aboriginal teachers, principals and support staff up and down the line. We know they are out there. We are making Edmonton Public Schools a friendlier place to work for Aboriginal educators. (Adult 2)

What is missing is there are lots of gaps such as the right personnel. They do not just have the background, but they can connect to the students. They care about the students. (Adult 3)

What is missing is we need more Aboriginal teachers in schools, more Aboriginal principals, and more Aboriginal staff. (Adult 5)

Accountability to Measure Success of Programs

What is missing is accountability for what is going on in the schools. We are asking the families if schools are doing good; if they are really making a difference. We can measure success in different ways, such as a child's attitude or what is going on in homes. It is more than just what is going on in academics. Organizations say they are delivering a program; so we can follow up and see if they are really making a change, a difference with kids. How will we know if we are successful? (Adult 4)

We need the students to be fulfilling their potential. We need teachers and staff to recognize this and encourage them. We don't really know our numbers. There might be some pockets in Alberta where they do know. We do know our numbers

in Edmonton Public Schools as compared to other jurisdictions. Numbers isn't the only indication of success, but our numbers keep going up. (Adult 7)

Adults spoke about gaps in terms of poverty limiting access to programs, lack of teacher support and training, issues of power and control and Aboriginal identity.

Lack of Participation in Programs Due to Poverty

We question how poverty affects students in our programs. Is it an issue? Intramurals helps kids who can't afford fees to be on teams. It would help if they could waive fees. Money is an issue. Schools will waive fees for lunch program for destitute kids, and offer kids food if the family doesn't have it, Schools bend over backwards to help students. We can't deny participation due to poverty. (Adult 5)

Lack of Teacher Support for Students

The students need to be brave enough to ask questions of teachers; teachers need to tell them they don't have to be scared and can come to me, and if I don't know I will find out for you. When you think you are going to be in trouble, then speak to me right away. They can be open and comforting and say to the students that they can mention anything to me. (Adult 8)

Lack of Care and Attention

What's missing is attention, pure attention. Every kid needs care; attention and care. They need comfort; they need that hug. If you stop that then they stop growing. (Adult 8)

Teacher Training is Outdated and Incorrect

The practicality of learning Social Studies classes I have attended as a speaker is the teacher is speaking about Indians using nomenclature that is really outdated, and yet these are fresh students. (Adult 9)

I also think that we are falling short on some of the teaching methods, and how we teach the teachers to work with our students. 'cause some of that nomenclature and misunderstanding of our treaty rights is not being brought forward. (Adult 9)

Teachers are eager; they want to help and reach out to the Aboriginal people. So we have to teach them how to connect with our people and connect with them as well. That's going to be key. (Adult 9)

Differing Ideologies, Power and Control

The ideology of the nation state as well. The predominant ideology, which in this case in Alberta is conservative, and I've heard conservative politicians as early as last summer say to me directly, "Having a hot lunch program for these Aboriginal students isn't going to have a whole lot of matter." I said, "Because they are poor, a lot of them are coming to school hungry. You cannot learn when you are hungry." Then some politician says, "Ah, there we are teaching them they get a free lunch." That's just the raw facts. That's what we have to deal with. (Adult 9)

Politics, Misuse of Aboriginal Identity

And then inside of that, politically in that structure then, you have the issue of control. One (of which is) bureaucrats who measure their success by how much money they control; how much space they control. There are racists within the system who don't want to see that control in the hands of Aboriginal people and they will undermine the Aboriginal people they are supposed to work with. So it's not a great environment. We've got somebody who authenticated this so … That's the difference between Aboriginal and Indigenous. You can have an Aboriginal person who doesn't give a hill of beans to their Indigenous traditions or culture. They're in it to make money and to rise in the system, and I've seen it. (Adult 9)

Adults told stories about culture clash between mainstream and Indigenous

cultures, historical significance of Indigenous peoples, political context, relationships and

relationality, and Aboriginal policy gaps.

Lack of Understanding of Indigenous Culture

Lack of/Not enough Indigenous Cultural and History Programming

What is missing is we need more of them (Indigenous activities). Maybe they are there or not there; we don't really know. We need to show kids opportunities for what happens afterwards (after school completion). We didn't learn about Aboriginal history or culture when we were in school. Too much ignorance breeds negativity. (Adult 6)

What is missing is a sense of belonging in a school especially high school. The Aboriginal students might not have many friends. It might be hard for them to keep going. Cultural things are missing in high schools. (Adult 7)

Lack of Aboriginal and Indigenous Meaning, Hiring Practices Gaps

So we have to say there is a difference between Aboriginal and Indigenous. And we should have that discussion and put it out there. What do you mean by that term? Aboriginal. I've seen job applications called for, or job applications go out to hire in school systems Aboriginal descendants, or people with an Aboriginal lived experience. That is what it was. I had to laugh at that one; what the heck is an Aboriginal lived experience? Because they can't say; this is the only province where you cannot ask for particular people to apply. Because the Human Rights Commission doesn't give that exemption. Across the whole country they will say, "with the exemption of marginalized people", like the Aboriginal community, or gay/lesbian/transgender and disabled people. These are the three grey areas. The exemptions are put out in advertisements saying Aboriginal people can apply, except in Alberta. So you get somebody who digs out that their great-grandfather who died a hundred years ago... and suddenly they are Aboriginal. They're not a part of any community; they are not known by anyone. They are not tied to any culture or traditions. But I have Aboriginal identity and nobody can take that away from me. And then they are usually the ones who are hauled out to do battle against our own people. (Adult 9)

Indigenous Identity, Cultural foundation, Reductionism

For example, when the FNMI policy was being written, they didn't like my message that I was talking about. You know, Indigenous identity and cultural foundation. "That's not important", they actually said. "We are more interested in the financial and political end of things." (I said) "That counts, but for me; it is the other way. It is the identity of the person, because any political end is always moved by that, and identity is moved by that. We deal with that important stuff later, or more leaving out non-status people." There are a lot of people who are non-status here. They don't want to be involved in political organizations. But we need to recognize that. (reductionism) (Adult 9)

Lack of Indigenous Relationships and Relationality

Where should we start? We are looking at kids and students who are the core of our vision. We have to think of it in terms of relationships and relationality. That's based on identity formation and the relationship with the teacher and the learning environment. When we take those out we see first of all the environment. I go back to the point of Indigenous space; what does that mean?

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At the Center is Indigenous space. It had a physical location where people could go to; see themselves reflected all over the place. They would bring in a speaker, and Elder, and have a pipe ceremony. Have these things where the kids can plug themselves in. And that they can jump off that platform and go swimming in the vast knowledge. Then they would come back and get recharged. That's the relationship aspect; these teachers are not being taught about Indigenous thought. It is a different philosophy and the way that has to be taught to that batch of teachers about Aboriginal people. Because we are still learning that teaching the teachers is from a Western format. They also have to be awoken to the fact that Canada is a multicultural dynamic environment; it is not a melting pot. We are not trying to go after the American dream here. We are not trying to become Americans or Canadians whatever that means. That is in fact wherever you are standing. That's what makes it beautiful. We can still be who we are and define it by region or territory and that sort of thing. It is the nationalistic idea that is separating the driving force for everybody to want a Canadian identity. We are all different kinds of people who come together around a certain set of tenets. That defines us as that union of Canadians which is a beautiful story. It is more definable as Kanata, which is "sacred place". In order to have a sacred place you have to have your relationships in order. So then the teachers realize that ok, but they also have to learn the history of Indigenous experience. (Adult 9)

Political Meaning of First Nations, Aboriginals, Métis, Land-based, Historical Context of Nationhood

First Nations is a political term. And as I do a little research on this, people who were there at the Ministers' conference were broad and said First Nations is really a reference to the reserve. Reserve was replaced with First Nation. It is about the land. The land is a First Nations base. It's not the people who are First Nations; it's the land base. We no longer refer to them as separate: the band or reserve. (For instance) we call it Sucker Creek First Nations. It doesn't mean that the people living on Sucker Creek are First Nations. They are Cree. So now you are getting to the words pulled out. First Nations doesn't adequately define our people and it shouldn't define our people that way. And then you have Aboriginals being used a lot now. We should recognize them as First Nations. We should say the Métis are the Métis. Maybe they are Red River Métis or the Athabasca Métis or whatever identifiable group that they declare themselves based on their own historical context. And it's their own right. Each Nation should identify themselves. And they also as international law goes, since time immemorial, be recognized that way by another nation. Then Métis Settlements might come into a union to identify themselves as one nation of people who have spread themselves out over a number of miles. They identify their people and augment that by family relationships and all these things. Like the Lac Ste. Anne Belcourts, and L'Hirondelles. That's where my grandmother comes from. She was born there. Sam Cunningham started up the Lac. Ste. Anne Rifles who

marched with Louis Riel. So, we most likely are related. And that makes for good relationships. When we are here working on the world we can turn to each other and say you are saying the same thing I am. (Adult 9)

Gaps in Aboriginal Policy

The other aspect of all of that when you are altogether is the political angle, the gaps in Aboriginal policy. When we get money and I've seen this happen too is as soon as money is hauled out and we are around the table. Well guess what? The machinery starts to work again and suddenly people get in there and say, "Well you can't spend it on this or that. We can't get money to pay out. We can't give…" We say, "Hold the phone here." They say, "Oh no, it's our policy. We can't smudge because we have a policy against smoking." Well we aren't smoking. Then we have the political route. We don't have the policy to combat that, or to give the authority to that Aboriginal support center to do the work that Indians need to do for the rest of their services. (Adult 9)

Elders Stories about Gaps

Elders told stories about gaps in similar categories as the adults did in terms of "not enough" supports such as Aboriginal teachers and administrators, and training, service gaps for students and families, basic needs and adequate funding.

"Not enough" Supports

Not Enough Aboriginal Teachers, Principals

There are not enough Aboriginal workers in the schools, and Aboriginal teachers need to be equal with other teachers. They are not necessarily happy with their job. In terms of Aboriginal administrators, there are not enough Aboriginal administrators that I know of. (Elder 2)

Teachers as Role Models

We need more role models as teachers out there to see the Aboriginal students and see they can do things too. Teachers will say, "Yes you can." (Elder 1)

Teacher Training, Training for Post-secondary Administrators, Staff Orientation

It's a long winding path to teach educators about what is Aboriginal and about the kids. (Elder 1)

We give teacher training to help their students to stay in schools. We give intensive workshops to teach these kids in schools. Aboriginal people are the fastest growing population as far as kids go. And these young people will have kids. (Elder 2)

We have provided some programs for the deans of universities, and teacher preparation courses. Also we were in schools, and communities. Sometimes we give an orientation to staff when they start a job, to understand the kids, especially when the Aboriginal population is a high number. In some schools the Aboriginal population is 30%. We invite all the teachers to be part of the orientation. We teach them to make the kids feel welcome in schools. When I was younger I felt unwelcome in a number of areas in the schools. Now I come in and do what I was expected to do, and now I think this is my land and I have a right to be here. (Elder 2)

Support of Administrators

Some administrator says these kids should learn to budget; but they are hungry today. He says feed them cold beans. They do not understand. They say feed them sardines. Administrators don't know, or don't care; but they (teachers) want to educate them. The staff under him have to follow what he says even if they are Aboriginal and he isn't, or (teachers) might lose their jobs. (Elder 1)

Supports for Students and Families

Students are our future. We need to support the kids and their families. I meet with the families to keep kids in school. If kids are good in an area, then we (need to) steer the schools to keep those programs going. (Elder 2)

Gaps in Services

I am a broken record. Well what is missing is what services they are getting. (Elder 1)

Provision of Basic Needs

If I work at the school, I say, "Watch that one; see if you are in the dining room, what are they eating. Give them some food and say this is left over from my lunch. Don't make them feel embarrassed. I had a jar of peanut butter and jam to feed the kids." The school and churches have the food bank. (Elder 1)

They learn to budget, or go to the food bank; it's available for them only at certain times. What is there to budget; they have nothing? They need a ride to get to the food bank because they can't take the food on the bus. Unless they (parents) take their kids out of school to carry things home they can't go; they have no transportation. If kids have something happen to them, then the parents are frustrated because they can't even put food on the table. Some Aboriginal kids tell me, "Some kids are calling me a dummy, because I missed so much school I couldn't do the work." (Elder 1)

Funding Gaps for Programs

Funding is such a key; also who is leading government. Sometimes government gives a pot of money for Aboriginal programs, but it is such a little amount that everyone fights over. Pilot projects can't keep going. Higher ups need to support them to keep them going. (Elder 3)

Elders told stories about the lack of understanding Indigenous culture and traditional knowledge, and the gap in meaningful cultural awareness training based on traditional knowledges and traditional teachings. These gaps are germane to power and control issues in terms of who controls knowledge.

Lack of Understanding of Indigenous Culture

Understanding Indigenous Culture

We have to remind everyone whose land is this. We are the caretakers. We don't own the land; that is not how creation is. We are the caretaker for the land. I talk about this. A piece of paper doesn't let us own it. Only when you are born on the land is when you are rightful owners and look after it. We are downtrodden by those who come to this land. We are a humble people and especially when teachers are hired to teach and don't know the culture of the Aboriginal kids. (Elder 2)

Maintaining Traditional Knowledge

We are losing some of our Elders. Who will continue the journey? We share the knowledge of our own people. There is a great resurgence of our ceremonies and learning the journeys. We walk the walk and talk the talk. We are true to the traditions and lead by example. Part of teaching the protocols of traditions is when people are invited to teach the protocols. People who follow the way and live the life lead by example. They are there, and people will find them. They volunteer their life away. There is not enough time. It is tiring. We now have Aboriginal liaisons in schools that bring the community in and the parents. Parents were too intimidated to go into the schools. Now the resource people and workers in the system get the parents in and the communities. It is a combination of who gets into the schools. They get a certain amount of money for Aboriginal kids in schools, and sometimes we have to push to get this money to the right place. (Elder 2)

Another thing that is missing is it is great we have National Aboriginal Day and to celebrate it. In some places it might be celebrated for a week, or a month, but remember we are Aboriginal every day, not just June 21.
(Elder 2)

More Cultural Awareness, Traditional Teaching and Traditional Knowledge

Other gaps are that we need more cultural awareness to teach these kids, and camps to help these kids. We need money set aside for traditional teaching and traditional knowledge. It is more helpful than going to a recreation camp. We need to bring more traditional people brought into schools to teach about traditional teachings. Aboriginal Day is different than this; it is a celebration, with little programs that are different. It is too short. We go from 10 am.-2 pm. In four hours we went through 400 kids, in stations. They only got 20 minutes per station. It was too action-oriented with not enough time. The kids might have retained only two percent of what I taught them. (Elder 2)

What is missing is natural law; the spiritual aspect of ceremonies and understanding them. We have to go back to grass roots of ceremony, to sweat lodges, the sun dance, feasts, and pipe ceremonies. We have Inuit kids in our schools and need to go back to their traditions, such as throat singing. The Métis smudge, and take part in sweats. We have to ask them what they believe in and that is what you have to follow. We cannot tell them that this is the better way; what is your background and what helps you in a better way is the right thing to do. I have twenty percent non-Aboriginal students in my program; they are white, Caucasians, and Orientals. They have to understand the traditions. We are all given a certain lifestyle of praying, of God and our religion, or spirituality. We

tell them to understand your own people, and their ways of praying. It is a stepping stone; their ways to use in their smudging and ceremonies, in their culture and the Nations' culture and their tribes. What is missing is their connection to their own tribes. (Elder 3)

Who Controls Knowledge

Government people are in charge. The Aboriginal people need to be allowed to bring their dance, and the Inuit throat singers, the Dene drummers, the Métis jig, and pow-wows. There are just a handful (of Aboriginal people) willing to bring their own teachers. (Elder 3)

Understanding the Gaps for High School Completion

Gaps were identified by students, adults and Elders in four categories:

1. family
2. lack of supports/not enough supports
3. awareness
4. understanding Indigenous culture.

Students told poignant stories about missing a family or family member, or in a small voice how important it would be to have a real family. Students, adults and Elders spoke about the lack of, or not enough of, particular supports and services in schools, or not being aware generally about available supports and services. Also, they spoke about lack of teacher support and archaic, or politically incorrect, teacher training for Aboriginal education. Adults and Elders told stories about cultural disconnects between mainstream and Aboriginal epistemology and ontology that resulted in gaps in Aboriginal policy and practices in education. Adults told stories of hiring policy gaps and Students, adults and Elders spoke about poverty and not being to access programs because of the lack of adequate funding support.

In the next chapter, I discuss what I heard from research participants about question four on awareness, and question five on solutions to complete high school.

Chapter 6: Journey through the Stories Participants Told Me:

Questions Four and Five

> I want to know what kind of life I would have if I don't finish high school.
> I want to know what to learn. (School 1 – Student 3)

> It would be good to have a parent. My friend's parents encouraged her to finish
> school. (School 1 – Student 1)

In this chapter, I discuss what I heard about research question four on awareness, and question five on solutions for high school completion.

Question Four: Awareness

Student Stories about Awareness

Students told stories about becoming aware of what they needed to know to complete high school and continue with their dreams. This awareness created "ah-ha" moments where students could become open to a more critical understanding of their positions as Aboriginal students, and was key to self-empowerment and social transformation in seeking to complete high school. Their critical awareness could be likened to the work of Paulo Freire's liberation theory that raised conscientization which led to transformation of oppressed people.

I asked students the question, what do you need to know about to help you finish high school? The following was what the students said.

Knowledge is Power

> I want to know what kind of life I would have if I don't finish high school. I want
> to know what to learn. (School 1 – Student 3)

I need science and math in grade 12. In high school you get to do courses you want. You need CALM, English, science, social, phys ed, and options. Most of the subjects are really hard. You need so many points just to pass. It might be hard or maybe not. If I find it hard, I will be so stressed. (School 2 – Student 7)

Self-Awareness: What is out there? What helps; what hinders?

I need to know how to ask those questions, put it into words to ask someone for help. I want to know about help that will boost my mark in math, but I don't want to go to summer school. I don't want to be dumb and fail. Sometimes I forget to ask for homework if I missed school. It gets too hard to do if it builds. I need some help in math, social, science and little bit in language arts.
(School 2 – Student 6)

I want them to know that I can do it if I try hard. I just need to know what.
(School 1 – Student 4)

I need help in math and social, and an option like robotics to finish school. It is hard to do. I need help in math and science. (School 2 – Student 2)

I got to write math and the provincial exams in grade 9. (School 1 – Student 3)

Support and Relationships

I need to listen to what teachers say and do it. They know what I have to do to finish school. (School 1 - Student 2)

I have family and teachers that will help me finish school. (School 1 – Student 8)

I want to know that I have support, of getting everything done in school. (School 1 – Student 9)

The following diagram in a Medicine Wheel format represents the four categories identified for awareness. The format is congruent with the holistic approach of the Medicine Wheel used by the research participants in their work on high school completion.

Analysis of Stories about Awareness

Diagram 6: Awareness

Self-awareness

Knowledge is power

Support and Relationship

Knowing our Aboriginal students
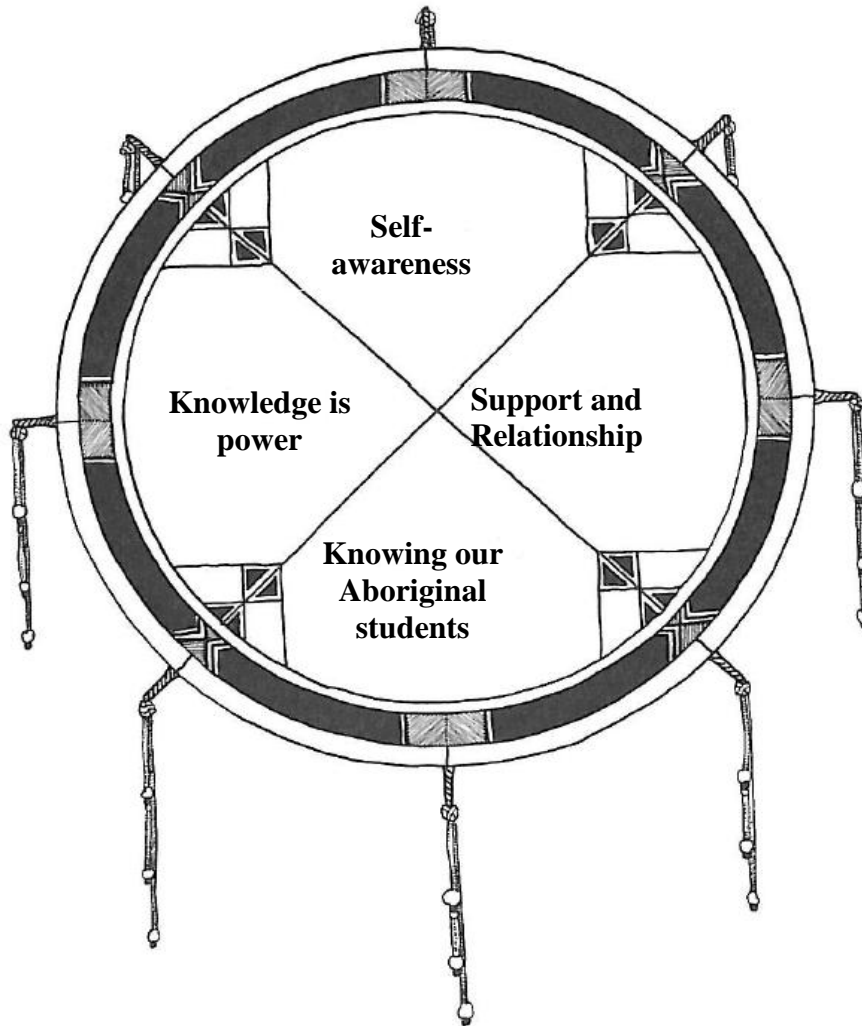
The stories that were told by students becoming aware of what they needed to know to complete high school were identified in four broad categories. They were:

1. knowledge is power,
2. self-awareness: what is out there? what helps; what hinders?
3. support and relationships,
4. knowing our Indigenous students and their cultural needs.

These four categories were similar in the student stories, and adult and Elder stories with varying degrees of emphasis. Interestingly, research participants identified a lack of awareness of available supports as a gap for high school completion.

I used a similar holistic approach as I did in the previous research questions by continuing with the adult stories, and then those of the Elders, about awareness. Following the stories, I summarized what the research participants said about awareness of available supports.

Adult Stories about Awareness

Adults also were asked about their awareness of what the students in the program needed to empower them to complete high school. Awareness was perceived as a huge gap to support the urban Aboriginal students in the program. I posed the same question as I did with students: What do you need to know about to help your student finish high school? Adults responded with the following stories about knowledge as power.

Knowledge is Power

It would help everyone to stay aware with what is out there. The more information we can give to kids about what is out there, the better. (Adult 1)

I know that knowledge is power and I want to keep in touch with what is going on. (Adult 3)

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You know we did some Aboriginal awareness training. I went off and did that for three years, every fall. And with everyone they said it was a profound experience. They saw education of Aboriginal people in a different light. They are willing to work with it. And it is interesting because some of those people will call me up still. They will say, "I'm trying to bring this idea forward but the administration won't let me." So they run into the same political things. Our advocates and our allies are feeling the same pushback that you and I are feeling when we try to push something forward. It is a systemic thing. (Adult 9)

Adults told stories about being self-aware in terms of what is available as supports that will help and hinder the success of Aboriginal education, and the need for positive relationships to support Aboriginal students and their families in schools.

Self-Awareness: What is out there? What helps; what hinders?

It would help knowing what is out there, such as what are other post-secondary opportunities. For example, (specific organization) - I don't want students to have an attitude about dropping out and getting into the trades before finishing high school. (Adult 1)

I need to know a lot, so that I can keep myself open. I want to know what is out there, for instance what different organizations help Aboriginal students and how can I be aware of them and of the trends for Aboriginal student success. (Adult 3)

It helps to be part of other agencies and know what is going on, such as to meet other people first hand and see the agency and how they are running it. It would help to know the other agencies, their track record, and how they are making referrals. We can send emails, attend community events, and share programs being started. It would help to stay connected. (Adult 4)

I want to know how to keep guiding my kids, because I don't know how and can't see the future how to be prepared to help them, especially the older children. They will get smarter and older. I need to keep up my smarts for the computer. I give my best shot to the best of my ability. There are things we don't know about. Where do we go to find out what is there? Is there somewhere to go or will we get shut down? You will figure out a way and be at ease and not worry; you will find the way. They are learning earlier and earlier. What we knew at grade 8, they do now at grade 6. There are probably lots of adults who want to know. Everything changes a lot. (Adult 8)

I need to know what the teachers are being taught, because we need to examine it...that's a very big issue for me. (Adult 8)

It's everything else that happens outside of the classroom that's associated with it has a significant bearing on the success of the student. So you know the curriculum is one thing. Content is not enough. Content is good, but isn't the only thing that makes education successful. The other aspect of this whole thing is the administrators. What kind of training are they getting? (Adult 9)

Support and Relationships

I have the time, to build relationships in workshops. We play games; and get to know the kids so it is easy to work with them. (Adult 5)

It helps to build relationships with the kids, and find out what are their likes and dislikes, and their subjects. We can ask them what they want in their workshops, what cultural events, and guest speakers and plan powwows. We can build a camaraderie with the kids. We laugh a lot; joke a lot; and share humor with them. We provide a bus ticket at the end of the day, so they will be there next day on time. Most of the time they are. On Tuesdays and Thursdays we have hot lunch. We get up to 20 kids. In the morning they have a granola bar. They know they can always come to see me. It helps knowing their needs. We communicate with them and their families. Building positive relationships is important. It helps to be aware of many things at different levels. (Adult 7)

We also have to support the parents. We have to figure out what the parents are missing. Because today even if you have a fully functioning Aboriginal family, you still have the mom and the dad out. It is more and more chances that they both have to go out to work full time almost, so we have to ask them, "What are you missing in terms of supporting you for your kids in that school, and while they are going to that school?" We can find out how we can plug them into the process. So they are aware of where their kids are at. And particularly with single moms. You know we have to be able to find out what kinds of supports they need to be properly addressing education and for the kids. Showing positive support for the kids to stay in school. Those are the things I would like to know in order to be able to promote and advocate for...because education isn't just in the classroom. And we have to learn that. (Adult 9)

Adults told stories about the importance of getting to know the Aboriginal students and their cultural needs and wants.

Knowing our Indigenous Students and their Cultural Needs

What sort of different avenues are there for students that they can take, especially for Aboriginal kids? (Adult 1)

We need to know who our Aboriginal kids are, and to put a face to a name. We need to track our kids to 2020. (How do you get to know your students?) Sometimes they do self identify, from year to year in Edmonton Public Schools. But sometimes in the tracking system student numbers are wrong and we have to clean them up every year. (Adult 2)

I go to cultural things. We have pride that we share with our Aboriginal people in our country. (Adult 3)

Knowing our students' background and interests, and knowing their name and where they come from can help me work with our students. It is non- threatening meeting them in the home. It makes them feel comfortable. I start with where I am from, and find out how we are related. It would help to know what their needs are; their daily needs, and what is getting in the way of them going to school. (Adult 4)

It helps knowing about the students before you start working with them. You can build a relationship with the students and find out what is holding them back. You can know the kid. It might not get you anywhere, and they might not trust me. They need to be comfortable to make mistakes in front of me, at a personal level. How can a teacher do that? A teacher has 20 - 25 kids and struggles with that. (Adult 5)

It helps knowing your kids, and the opportunities and directions you can point them to. You can help them with knowing what they can be involved in and be engaged with. It helps to be adaptable to all situations that might come up with them. (Adult 6)

I need to know how the kids are feeling. All of the stuff we are doing; all of the stuff that is happening now. Are the kids feeling safer; are they feeling more in touch with who they are in the classroom? Are they feeling respected? And I think we have to create other indicators that measure high school completion. There should be happiness indicators. (Adult 9)

Elder Stories about Awareness

Elders also were asked about their awareness of what the students in the program needed to help them complete high school. I asked them the same question: What do you need to know to help your student finish high school? They spoke about traditions and responsibility of remaining connected. Elders shared the following stories in similar categories as the adults did.

Knowledge is Power

> If I hear of something that will help students, I run it off and give a copy to the teacher. The words are there in policies but are they doing it? How can you let everybody know what is being done and can be done - by word of mouth, the moccasin telegraph, or phone one another. (Elder 1)

Self-Awareness: What is out there? What helps; what hinders?

> It would help to see other students and what they are doing. It would help to know if someone is working in an association or a dentist's office and sees the students that they do know how to help them. I tell a student, "If you were to talk to them, you don't have to be scared." Students don't know what a city has out there. (Elder 1)

Support and Relationships

> It would help to know what will support you in your growth; what I really have for support systems. What agencies are out there helping Indigenous students? I know that Métis Child and Family Services has a contract with schools. So I can tap into that agency and we can work together. I am starting to learn or hear about others, yet they are limited where they can work. (Elder 3)

Knowing our Indigenous Students and their Cultural Needs

> Aboriginal people are moving into cities, and not all of them want to self-identify, so how do we know they are there with their children. They close schools, and stopped the program from Kindergarten to grade 1, 2, and 3 because they didn't get enough students. It wasn't advertised. They stopped doing the pipe

ceremony. They only did the pipe ceremony once and the principal thinks we know everything now. (Elder 1)

When I feel something is lacking then I go to my ceremonies. We have our teachers and our traditions. I go from within to what needs to be done. It comes out if it needs to be done. (Elder 2)

It's all about money at the end of the day. They can't continue, or they are always writing proposals. It is a double-edged sword. It is not just government; it is also Elders. Certain ones come into this environment. They come into an agency, as a self-proclaimed Elder. They are popcorn Elders – they pop up where they can make a buck. It's all about the money, not the spirituality. It's not just the Elders, but the dance troupes too. Métis and pow-wow dancers - the first thing they say is, "What kind of budget does the school have?" Sometimes not all the dancers come out as promised for the $1500 they charged. They did not keep the promise they made. They say, "You have an expense account; what are you worried about?" We can't abuse it. We are looking down the road. Accountability is our number one responsibility. They need to be more dedicated, especially if a promise is made. The problem is making sure what is being promised does happen. (Elder 3)

Understanding Awareness for High School Completion

By understanding awareness, a critical lens could be used to examine what was needed to empower students to complete high school. Awareness was identified by students, adults and Elders in four categories. They were:

1. knowledge is power
2. self-awareness: what is out there? what helps; what hinders?
3. supports and relationships
4. knowing our Indigenous students and their cultural needs

Question Five: Solutions

Student Stories about Solutions

Students told what further solutions there were that could help them complete

high school and continue with their dreams. I asked the question, what can further be

done to help you finish high school? The following is was what they said.

"It Would Be Good to Have a Parent"

It would be good to have a parent. My friend's parents encouraged her to finish
school. (School 1 – Student 1)

Friends

I only have one friend. I would like more. I want everyone to do well.
(School 2 – Student 3)

Get Rid of Drugs, Alcohol

Get rid of people who do bad things – drugs and alcohol pull you away – make it
all be gone. (School 1 – Student 7)

Racism

Racism be gone. Some teachers, school board, are racist and pick on some kids –
it's just the way they are. (School 1 – Student 9)

Trust

Someone that you can trust that can help you through your work that you don't
understand. I would make myself smart for everything. Not everyone is perfect; I
can't get everything I want. Just got to believe I am good at it. It may happen. If
I think about it, I might be good at it. If I am confident, I can achieve something
if I want to do it. I can do it if I want to do it. (School 2 – Student 2)

I want people who don't put us down, to support us and we can trust.
(School 2 – Student 4)

Suitable Teachers, No Bullying

It would be good to have suitable teachers for kids. Get the kind of teachers who want to listen to your questions, and your past, stop the bullying and help you read better. (School 1 – Student 1)

It would help to encourage teachers not put down kids, to believe in them, and make sure kids can do it. Help them do what they want to do.
(School 1 – Student 2)

Schools should hire teachers who aren't dream crushers. The b-boxer – your dream crusher took it away. In class my friend was being a b-boxer and the teacher told her to stop it and he tore up her stuff. If you make students want to come to school, kids will actually show up. (School 1 – Student 6)

Stay in School, Good Attendance

Attendance, last year I didn't have good attendance; this year I have good attendance and go to school. I like this school better. I did come some to the other school, but I didn't like it. If you are old enough to drop out and run away when you're 16; don't. Wait and finish; you're so close. You spend half your life in school so you might as well get something out of it. (School 1 – Student 3)

Support of Teachers/Those with Authority, Others

We should get more support from people like teachers and people of authority – higher up people should be more fun, more interesting and fun.
(School 1 – Student 4)

Getting teachers and people who understand the problems you are facing at school and home. (School 1 – Student 8)

Self-Empowerment

To know you've got the power for solutions. Now I go to school more often.
(School 1 – Student 5)

People put themselves down. They should stop it and stand up and say that I don't like it (being picked on) and it isn't going to happen. I would like to have

less distractions, so I could focus only on school work and not everything else I'm doing. I get jumbled up in other things and only get one thing done. I'm so busy and do so much homework; more homework than school in a day. It ruins people's social lives. It's hard to focus on homework and one time I missed doing one page of my homework. There should be a no homework policy at all schools. It is hard to do the homework, or sometimes I forgot to take it home.
(School 2 – Student 6)

I try to keep up with all the work and the homework. In high school they won't tolerate any of this (not doing homework). You might not pass high school if you don't do homework. You might have to start a grade over again. Get it done in class and you will have no homework. If you get lots done today, you will have less things to do tomorrow. Stay right on the ball. If you don't have any homework left, you could be outside and won't be stuck inside. You can go home and do other things. (School 2 – Student 7)

The following diagram in a Medicine Wheel format represents the four categories identified for solutions. The format is congruent with the holistic approach of the Medicine Wheel used by the research participants in their work on high school completion.

Analysis of Stories about Solutions

Diagram 7: Solutions

Family

Personal

School

Demographic
Factors
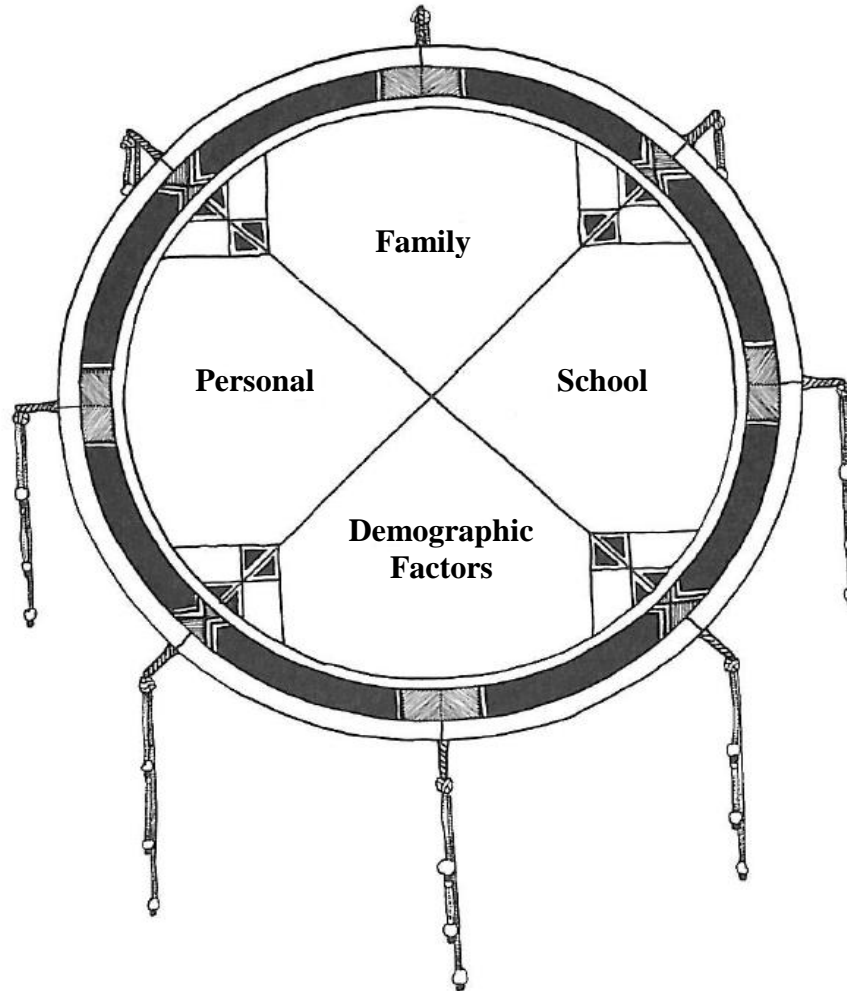
The stories that were told by students about solutions to help them complete high

school were identified in four broad categories. They were:

1. family characteristics,
2. school-related characteristics,
3. personal-related characteristics,
4. demographic factors affecting Aboriginal people.

These four categories were similar in the student stories, and adult and Elder stories with

varying degrees of emphasis. Interestingly, research participants identified solutions in

similar categories as those identified for barriers and challenges to high school

completion, most likely as answers to problems.

To use a holistic approach, I used a similar approach as the previous research

questions by continuing with the adult stories, and then those of the Elders, about

solutions. Following the stories, I summarized what the research participants said about

solutions to the barriers and challenges they faced.

Adult Stories about Solutions

Adults also were asked about solutions for them to help the students in the

program complete high school. I posed the same question: What can further be done to

help the student in your care finish high school? Adults responded with the following

stories about solutions in areas of family characteristics, such as parental involvement or

extended family support.

Family Characteristics

100% Parental Involvement

I would like 100% parental involvement and totally committed to their child's
education; there would be no lack of involvement. (Adult 7)

Extended Families

When the mother and father went out to work, hunting and collecting and things
like that, the kids were often left behind with grandparents. Today when we see
that happening in the urban areas, we see the parents forcing the grandparents to
be with the children. But when we look at it again with a lens of an Indigenous
context, we start to realize, "Hold it here. What better group of people to leave
your kids with?" 'Cause why? Traditionally they are more patient. Secondly,
they can do the cultural transference stuff here. Because we are missing that right

now. This nuclear family thing has really torn apart the extended family relationship. So we don't have the uncles and grandparents able to support and nurture the youth to the right end. Basically some of the two parent families aren't around anymore 'cause they have to go to work. And the kids are latch key kids. And they are left to go off to school and to defend themselves with what little knowledge they have every day. So there is wisdom..The control: it's Residential Schools 2.0. (two point o). (Adult 9)

Adults told stories about solutions for school-related characteristics, such as

transportation, helpful staff, center for the arts and adequate funding for programs.

School-Related Characteristics

Transportation

It would be good to have free transportation for every kid to go to school. (Adult 2)

I would like to have transportation available for everyone from Kindergarten - grade 12; it would make everyone's day. (Adult 5)

Helpful Personnel

It is key to have the personnel there for the students to help them with what they need to finish high school. (Adult 3)

I would like to be with every teacher in every classroom; be a fly on the wall, to see how the students interact in the classroom. Then I could understand the he said-she said students tell me about. Sometimes they can't articulate it, but they feel it and will jut withdraw rather than deal with problems. (Adult 4)

"Money Isn't an Issue", No Poverty, Coding and Labelling are Gone

My dream would be that money isn't an issue. There would be no poverty. Families don't fall through the cracks. There would be enough money for the arts, and sports. There would be after-school programs, and social programs for the Aboriginal students. Coding and labelling problems would be gone. There would be more that just teachers in classrooms to help students. We would share more knowledge, and have more time. There would be less constraints with money. (Adult 6)

Center for the Arts

I would like to have a center for the arts for our Aboriginal students, not a drop-in center, but where they can express themselves. (Adult 4)

Adults told additional stories about solutions for school-related characteristics to revamp the education system, such as a separate Indigenous school system with Indigenous school governance based on a vision for successful Aboriginal education.

Revamp the Education System

Once Indigenous people start moving forwards their concepts and understandings in the public schools system, they will change the public system. They will bring it back to a human centered thing. And I believe that it will benefit everybody who is involved. This classroom becomes a place of nurturing learning, not so much trying to get them to become something else. I believe the whole education system needs to be revamped. (Adult 9)

Urban Scape

It (revamping the education system) doesn't mean that they go off and teach whatever they like. No Elder ever talks that way, or has ever talked that way. They say, "You know we have to become strong like two people in the ways of the world today." And we've moved into a new territory, a new land and we have to figure out how to work with that land. What tools do we need to survive while we are there? But we aren't going to forget who we are and what we are bringing into this new land. And that's our identity, our ceremonies and traditions. But now we are in a new territory. It's called the urban scape. And now just like the red-tailed hawk has learned how to hunt from buildings now, we are learning how to use the highways, the perches on the posts as hunting territory. I've watched them when I walk my dogs. It's there. And the Elders are noticing an increase in these animals learning how to live in this environment. And that's where we are at. It's still a red-tailed hawk, but it is an urban red-tailed hawk. The same things with us. What we have not brought with us as we have been forced into this new scape is our knowledge, is our traditions that ground us. They will be grounded. There is so much wisdom then in what our people used to do so long ago. (Adult 9)

Separate Indigenous School System

I always get pushed back on this, not by everyone, but by some of our people and non-Aboriginal people is a separate Indigenous school system based on the cultural traditions: Cree, Blackfoot, Dene, and it would be part of the school system, like the Catholic system where you can go if you want to be enriched in the Catholic faith and identity. You can get a good education. We can do the same thing. It gives the option for Aboriginal people who want to participate in it or not; they can go to the public school. Say they do go to the public school; guess what? There is going to be an Indigenous piece in there that also needs to be funded and supported. Where they can plug into their identity. You've got to have at least some of that connection. We have that obligation to make sure that their space is there. And that there is access to that knowledge. Those are the two things that I think will really support us; what we need to do. And I know this brings up a number of issues for people, but you know what in the Edmonton Public School Board we have Hispanic and bilingual schools. We have Chinese bilingual schools. You know we have all these other schools. We have francophone schools and a Catholic separate school system. So we need to be able to have our own. It's well within our right. We should have that. (Adult 9)

School Governance

When you look at (school name) and I was there when it was starting. I was critical because I said you are bringing in a Frederick Douglas school. It's a black school from the Bronx. You're are bringing in that model here and putting an Aboriginal name on it. I said, "Ok, I'll give you that, but how are you governing it?" Because my theory, my thesis is as it has always been the way that you govern your schools is what determines what it is. So how are you utilizing Elders; how are you utilizing community; and how are you utilizing your instructors and your resource people into the governance of it. Because it isn't just a school; how are you connecting the school with the parents and how are you getting them into the policy making? I was told, "Well I talked to the Elders; isn't this Indigenous enough for you?" And I said, "Well no; it's not." And so lo and behold, they have a high turnover rate, a lot of discontent, and within the environment that is there, they go running from the school. Because it isn't an Indigenous school; it's just a (school district) with an Aboriginal name on it. There are some improvements. I like the school. I wish that it stays. But it has to rethink how it governs itself so it really provides a support to the staff that is there. And I think that is critical. I was critical of the space when they went there. (Adult 9)

Future Look of Indigenous Education

We need to sit down now and say with the government what education should look like in 20 years from now? And we design it. Because we get lost in the anger and the frustrations, the political fights. Métis saying this about First Nations and First Nations saying this about Métis, and the Inuit. "Oh you don't count." No, no. We need to sit down and say this is serious. What is our education going to look like in 20 years from now? You map it all out; you create the vision. And over the course of over another generation what else do we have to sacrifice? At least our great-grandchildren will have something that they can move into that makes sense for them. That means how do we include the public and private school systems to feed our children into that direction? And how does an Indigenous system work? What will it do? Will it be a separate structure? Will it be a various combination of Nations with a similar curriculum? But those are the discussions that we need to have and we aren't having them. We need to be challenging the education system. Language systems that are trying to teach our people our own languages – they are using a European language lens. That's not doing us any favors in the long run. That way we know that our Nations will be moving in a certain direction to build an education system that is respectful and positive to the students. That doesn't mean that we don't build the skills to become successful to become computer analysts of the future. We need our plumbers, as well as political leaders, as well as we need medicine people, as well as we need our doctors, as well as everyone else. The foundation of Indigenous thought needs to be laid out and integrated into an education system that makes sense. But we're not even at that table yet where we can sit down and say what do we mean by Indigenous? Over the last ten years that I have worked in the education system here in Edmonton, I sit down and try to tell them Indigenous. I have always got to explain what do I mean by Indigenous. Indigenous - define it and so you know 'cause that word is not used in Canada. It's always Aboriginal. But they don't realize that Indigenous has a philosophical, spiritual definition to it. It is beyond blood quantum; it's a relationship you have with your culture. For Aboriginal people it is a way of seeing life. It is a relationship with our culture. It is holistic, relational, responsible, pragmatic, ultra democratic because this 50 plus one democratic voting system we have here is not democratic at all. It is totally manipulated. Indigenous is consensus driven which is a relationship building exercise of its own right. When we start to use those definitions, we start to create something that is unique. Everything that we can share with each other, absolutely. There are some sacred things that we shouldn't share, and some things that we can't. But that's the dialogue, and the dialogue doesn't just end; it continues. It's an on-going dialogue; always looking at what we have and what we need to do. And I've seen that happen with the Red Paper and the White Paper responses. I've been with the Elders when they were advising their political responses. When they would go out and have think tanks, they would go out with the ceremony and talk about what they saw and what they experienced and how that tied into the strategy to be played out. (Adult 9)

Adults suggested solutions for personal-related characteristics, such as

mentors and role models in schools.

Personal-Related Characteristics

Mentors

Everyone needs a mentor; someone to look up to inspire you. Not for kids to mimic, but to encourage kids. We have so many roles in our jobs working with youth. (Adult 1)

Role Models

I would like to see enough positive role models in schools. It seems the way things are in schools, we have to do something else, or we can't build relationships. Maybe we could have smaller classrooms; then we could have talking circles, and could have fun in smaller classes. (Adult 5)

No More Gangs

Get rid of the bad things on the streets, and teach our kids about being street smart. I read SOS (self help) books with my kids. I teach them that a gang is not part of anything. It is just a bunch of people trying to get away with bad things. I teach them to get past school being boring; there are some things you just need to get through. Everything is what you make of it. It's your own work. I teach them that school is in three year segments. Kids can work in three year goals at a time through their school life that changes every three years. You mature within those three years and as kids get older; they get very connected. As a kid I lost my way and my doubts were there. Our world is messed up and we need to take care of it. Keep working with our Aboriginal kids and make school work for them. Promise to work with them with whatever we can do at different levels to help them. (Adult 8)

Adults told stories for solutions for demographic factors facing Aboriginal people,

such as adding more Aboriginal representation in schools, equity for Aboriginal students,

a holistic way of learning, including Indigenous ways of knowing, that will empower

Indigenous people in schools.

Demographic Factors Facing Aboriginal People

More Aboriginal Agencies, More Aboriginal Teachers, More Aboriginal Representation in Schools

We need a combination of everything that has been said. We need more organizations like us. We need more Aboriginal teachers, who our kids could identify with. (Adult 1)

I would like to see more Aboriginal representation and support in all schools. (Adult 7)

Equity for Aboriginal Students

We could use a change of philosophy in our school district to one of equity. This is our country. We have to make it work here; we are not immigrants who can go back to somewhere else. Special attention has to be given to our Aboriginal students. (Adult 2)

Elders

We can have a much larger role for Elders such as an Elders' council for Edmonton Public Schools and then we can tap into the wisdom of our Elders. (Adult 2)

Self-Determination

Students would have self- determination at the end of the day, and will be fine on their own when get out of the school social network. (Adult 6)

Give them the hopes and dreams to want to finish high school themselves. (Adult 8)

Holistic Way of Learning

I would like to see a more holistic way of learning rather than Western mainstream thinking. I would like to see a different mentality and different learning styles for teachers. It is 2010 and we are still trying to work with our Aboriginal kids in ways that don't work. Aboriginal kids are still quitting school at high rates. We are facing the same issues, back in the day of residential schools. The issues are still here. I want 100% of our Aboriginal students to finish high school. (Adult 7)

Indigenous Culture

Teach everyone to care about Mother Earth and our kids, and neighbours kids, and community. In the white world we need to tell people that our knowledge is what we know and you don't know. (Adult 8)

Empower the People

We are no longer an agrarian society moving into an industrial society; we are an industrial society. We are now an information society. So all these things have changed. A lot of people are trying to hold on to what was. We say we are facing a paradigm shift here. And the wise ones who figure it out will be the ones who will get ahead in the game and will be a nation of benefit; the front on the world stage. The power has to shift for this to happen; it will always be there. When I look at it politically... when you empower the people; in other words you recognize their voice; they will chart the direction and have more political power. Rather than trying to control it, and force the people in a certain direction; that can't happen to the longevity; it isn't there. And we have to do a lot more empowerment, particularly with Aboriginal communities, to influence the education system. (Adult 9)

Indigenous Ways of Knowing

Having a strong Indigenous foundation to the education process has to be examined and defined by Indigenous people. Aboriginal can pass sometimes as Indigenous but often time it is not. It's just a non-Indigenous perspective of Indigenous people in the context. Our histories have to be driven by our own people. Our ways of knowing and seeing have to be brought in the methodologies within the schools. That still hasn't happened. We've got another couple of generations to go yet before we actually see a fully functioning Indigenous education system within what we have here today, or as a part of. We don't lose culture; culture loses us. That's what our Elders say. It's when we stop practicing the ceremonies then we disconnect ourselves. If we go back to doing them, we see these resurgences. As it happens then we reconnect ourselves within that source; then we start to get informed about who we are. And I believe that. (Adult 9)

Elder Stories about Solutions

Elders also were asked about solutions for them to help the students in the program complete high school. As I did with the adults, I posed the same question: What can further be done to help the students in your care finish high school? Elders spoke about answers to problems that Aboriginal students were facing in urban settings. Elders shared the following stories.

Family Characteristics

Relationship Building between Parents and the Student

What really could help them is to go back to the parents, and build a relationship between the parents and student, that is mutual. It would be successful for the parents and the student. A percentage of responsibility goes back to the parents. There are misunderstandings because the parent doesn't understand the problems, for example bullying because of peer pressure. The way he dresses and the way he looks, or his size could be reasons for being bullied. Parents have the fear to approach the students. It is a shared responsibility between the parent and students so they can learn to grow together. (Elder 3)

Helping Parents

I have only a handful of parent interviews to attend. I tell parents to step up to the plate to understand the importance of education and where the teachers are coming from. (Elder 3)

School-Related Characteristics

Traditional Teaching

The only perfect thing is the Creator. In a perfect world, to make life easier for Aboriginal kids, we have to go back to our ways of traditional teachers to try to come together to share the respect and honour of each other. If we do this as adults, it is easier for the kids. (Elder 2)

Maintaining Agencies and Programs

Can Aboriginal Youth & Family Well-being & Education Society keep going? They have faced so many school closures. The program itself is very viable. The coordinators of the program should pull in the community more to get their support, and the teachers. It is an important program; but it is hard to keep volunteers coming. They have to start to pull the community together more, especially the parents. They need to make a stronger case to the funders. This community is different from the parent community, and the community where the school is. We need to bring in the people, especially the parents, then the Aboriginal organizations, then the MLAs (Members of the Legislative Assembly) and the M.P. (Member of Parliament). Bring them all together, and plan an event to put a stronghold for the program to continue. Ask for the leadership of these organizations to come to the event, or send someone to represent the organization. It is always a good thing to have some culture at the event, and to serve a meal cooked by volunteers. People can bring some stuff. What could work is to have all the kids in the program to make something. Or they could put on a play to show the students' hardships and their successes. It makes it difficult for the leaders to say no to coming. They could plan things with the kids who have good ideas. They can tell what this association is about and hear about the events that keep going. They need to get some money and tell the stories about the students. We don't always know what is going on. Sometimes we hear about available funds and then we work to make things going to get these funds. Sometimes educators and administrators don't know there is a pot of money. We need more people for the program. It is tiring sometimes, except the kids are energizing. Staying in school is their ambition. (Elder 2)

Funding for Aboriginal Students

Another thing is the Indigenous special needs kids who come with a price tag that government sets aside for them. They come with a dollar sign, and these schools are entitled to it. The focus is not for the Indigenous kids, it is for the dollars that come with the students. It is frustrating for the workers in the program, and for the parents, and for the frontline workers who are working with the kids and who know. (Elder 3)

Personal-Related Characteristics

Setting Goals

They need to set goals, about themselves. Students put themselves last; they do things for their family, or their school. They put themselves last, and their goals. We need to bring back the importance of themselves to be a good strong

individual. Then they can bring out themselves, and set goals to be far reaching, not just a short term ahead. (Elder 2)

Remaining Connected

How can we let each other to know what is out there and keep going on? At the end of the day, it is knowing what you can provide to society. We can use help at looking at (Aboriginal students) dropping out of school from a bigger picture, and then end up protecting our children in society. (Elder 3)

Equality, Respect, Honor, Self-Esteem

It would be good to have a place where everyone is equal; treated the same. It is something to look forward to bring back respect, and bring back the honour. It is seldom talked about. I spoke about honour and the students didn't know what that is because it has been lost. The only time we hear about honour is the honour song. We have to get back to this way of life for students to bring back their self esteem. (Elder 2)

Alcohol and Drugs

In the problems of dropouts, students might be indulging in alcohol or drugs and don't realize the consequences later, such as (pregnant) women and their children. (Elder 3)

Elders told stories about solutions for demographic factors facing Aboriginal

people, such as discrimination, racism, labeling and classism.

Demographic Factors Facing Aboriginal People

Facing Discrimination

Make them feel good about themselves. If they don't, all the books won't help. Plant the seeds so they will really grow. Some of the students look native and some don't; don't discriminate. When my daughter was young she would dance in her jingle dress. When she got on the floor, she got up and got dancing. I have pictures when she started dancing, and when her father died she quit jingle dancing. He was at the Royal Alexandra Hospital and remembering that he never went to any of the kids' things until he was sick. He was crying because of what he missed. I told him, "You were ashamed and didn't want to share the culture."

Now my granddaughter is going to be a dancer. For now she is devoting her time to her studies, but she will get back into her dancing. She attended a French bilingual school, and studied hard. She got marks in the 80s and 90s. She will make a good helper. (Elder 1)

At my grandson's school, someone used bear spray. He got sick, so they phoned me to come get him. I had trouble picking him up because of my bad knees and they wouldn't bring the kid down the stairs and we had only two blocks to come home. The next day all the students were in the gym, and when I came in they said to me, "How are you feeling?" My grandson told me in the gym some girl said, "I think it was the native kid that used the bear spray". He said, "Grandma, I am the only native kid in the school." I said to him, "Was it you?" He said, "Grandma, I don't know what bear spray is." See, he is already targeted, because he is native. (Elder 1)

Indigenous Background

Some students when they get their education they think they are better than anyone else. I told my granddaughter, "Don't ever get that way. Students make sacrifices of time and money to get their education, and the community sometimes doesn't want you back. When you come back to my community, the reserve, to the gravesite, you will see your dad is there and I am going to be there. Your background will hit you in the nose. You belong there. (Elder 1)

Holistic Approach

Students need to know where they came from. Some students don't feel good about themselves. I tell them they need is all four directions to be whole; it will give the strength to get through their problems. (Elder 1)

Elders' Involvement

It seems there are so many things on a person's plate. I am thinking about I have to do this and that. I have to put in my garden and I am sitting there watching soccer and football. I come home so tired. I wake up this morning and it is raining and I didn't get the things in my garden. (Elder 1)

What keeps me going today is spirituality and if the kids get the spirituality that will keep them going and their families. (Elder 3)

Racism, Discrimination, Labelling

Kids are facing racism – it might not be labelled as racism, but the realities of conflicts stem back to the lifestyle and how you dress and behave, for example if student dress as a punk and are Aboriginal. Teachers will place a judgement on you and treat you a certain way; it's not just the dress but the behaviour pattern, too. It is discrimination; for example, health is a big issue. A student might be borderline Tourettes and have Autism. They might be experiencing side effects, and because they are Aboriginal people think it is a medical problem and that student might become labelled. Instead they should look at the source of the problem, have them tested and understand if they have ADHD or not. Parents have excuses such as "I can't afford it", or "not my kid." It reflects back on me as a parent, so I build a block. Aboriginal students with FAS become labelled; they are not treated for the symptoms. In conflicts students become labelled without people knowing their history. (Elder 3)

Urban Issues, Classism

We are faced with dilemmas in society and education today. In the urban inner city we have Indigenous kids. They come from surrounding communities, or from within the outskirts. They might come from a little bit higher class and be from upcoming communities where the government can provide the money for the schools to operate. But to get the money to these schools, they need to close the poor inner city schools. If they are a little bit wealthier, they have more tax dollars to answer to these people, and then they have to close those inner city schools where our kids go. The government says we have these other kids over there, so we can relocate your inner city kids and bus them to the other school. It becomes a class issue, so the Indigenous students drop out because they get tired of the battle to keep that inner city school going. (Elder 3)

Understanding Solutions for High School Completion

Solutions to the barriers to high school completion were identified by students, adults and Elders involved in the research in similar categories to those identified for barriers and challenges to high school completion. The four categories were:

- family background,
- school-related characteristics,
- personal-related characteristics,
- demographic factors facing Aboriginal people.

By understanding solutions suggested, a critical lens could be used to examine what is needed to empower students to complete high school.

The following chapter presents a melding of voices from the research that addresses the research question: How can we create enabling conditions in terms of policy and practice for urban Aboriginal students to complete high school in Alberta.

Chapter 7: The Journey Unfolds - Creating Enabling Conditions

> The foundation of Indigenous thought needs to be laid out and integrated into an education system that makes sense… Our ways of knowing and seeing have to be brought in the methodologies within the schools. (Adult 9)

This chapter presents an analysis with a melding of voices from the research findings that address the research question: How can we create enabling conditions in terms of policy and practice for urban Aboriginal students to complete high school in Alberta? It also addresses the three sub-questions:

- How are the barriers to high school completion articulated by the Ministry of Education and school boards, urban Aboriginal students, their parents and community?

- What are the assumptions about the purpose of public education in Alberta?

- What solutions are available for urban Aboriginal students to address issues of power and hegemonic control when seeking to complete high school?

The following melding of voices is informed by the research participants in this study, the concepts explored in the literature review, and the research methodology.

I begin this chapter by examining what the research says about the sub-questions with regard to:

1. barriers and challenges that urban Aboriginal students face to complete high school;

2. purpose of education as it relates to goal setting, and critical theory;

3. responses to issues of power and control that provide solutions in enabling urban Aboriginal students to complete high school.

Findings relating to these three sub-questions provide practical ways that Aboriginal students in urban settings can overcome adversities and reveal a melding of voices that

address the overarching research question about policy and practice to support urban

Aboriginal students to complete high school.

Sub-question 1: Barriers to High School Completion

In order to explore barriers to high school completion, I will first examine how

these barriers are articulated by the Ministry of Education and school boards, urban

Aboriginal students, their parents and community.

The Ministry of Education published a document in 2007 entitled *Promising*

practices for keeping kids in school that summarized previous documents about barriers

to high school completion published by Alberta Education, such as the various barriers to

high school completion reports, and other researched articles on barriers in terms of risk

factors for dropouts. Articles that were summarized included *The silent epidemic:*

Perspectives of high school dropouts, a report written for the Bill and Melinda Gates

Foundation in March 2006; *What your community can do to end its drop-out crisis:*

Learnings from research and practice, a report prepared for the National Summit on

America's silent epidemic in 2007; *Early school leavers: Understanding the lived reality*

of student disengagement from secondary school, a report written for the Ontario

Ministry of Education and Training; *Dropout risk factors and exemplary programs: A*

technical report, a report prepared by National Dropout Prevention Center at Clemson

University and Communities in Schools in 2007; *Identifying potential dropouts: Key*

lessons for building an early warning data system, a white paper written for Achieve Inc.

in 2006; and "An early warning system", *Educational Leadership,* October, 2007,

pp. 28 – 33. The Alberta Education document, which summarized the various articles

and reports in a literature review, identified risk factors for dropping out of school that

were related to the home and family, to the student's characteristics and/or to school

practices in three categories:

- family related factors, including:
  - poverty,
  - high family mobility,
  - low parental education,
  - large number of siblings,
  - minority group status,
  - household stress,
  - inadequate parental guidance and supervision,
  - non-English language background,
  - siblings who have dropped out.

- personal characteristics that made a student at risk of not completing school, including
  - low literacy level,
  - over age for grade,
  - poor attendance for any reason,
  - having a disability,
  - feelings of isolation and alienation,
  - no school-engaged friends,
  - no involvement in extracurricular activities,
  - substance abuse.

- school practices that increased the risk of dropping out, including:
  - ineffective discipline systems that are perceived to be arbitrary and unfair,
  - negative school climate that fosters or allows discrimination or bullying,
  - repeated use of exclusionary discipline practice such as suspension,
  - retention without adequate support,
  - passive instructional strategies rather than active learning,
  - disregard of student learning styles and disabilities,
  - learning that isn't personalized,
  - no one in the school who gives students in difficulty the sense that someone cares, wants them to come to school, will check up on them and help solve their problems,
  - irrelevant curriculum. (Issue 1, Winter 2007)

The three categories of factors articulated by the Ministry of Education in 2007 is

a synthesis of various reports from a literature review on high school completion and

were similar in a broad sense to the categories of barriers and challenges to complete high

school identified by students, adults and Elders as factors that could have prevented

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students from finishing school. The three categories explicated above become incongruent between mainstream education and Indigenous education, however, because of cultural disconnects facing urban Aboriginal students. The research participants also shared their personal challenges and barriers in the same three categories articulated by the Ministry of Education. I noted that their personal challenges tell stories about cultural disconnects and social inequities that oppress marginalized people. The participants' stories reveal several various categories of challenges to high school completion:

- Family Background:
  - two parent caregiver families with lenient parents;
  - single parent families with a mother who cannot make her children go to school/the children are afraid of the single parent mother in a child welfare case/ the single parent mother has lost her Aboriginal culture and identity in an urban environment;
  - a family with a grandmother caregiver who has lost her Aboriginal culture and identity in the urban environment;
  - foster home or group home environment where a student may have been bounced from home to home;
  - no caregivers with no family;
  - tired caregivers;
  - home with no food, no clothes and the rent is not paid;
  - the girl child works in the home;
  - problems at home;
  - the guardian or parents had bad personal experiences in schools;
  - the parents don't get involved in their children's education;
  - parents pull their children out of school;
  - children have no support at home/the father and/or mother are not listening/there is no one to talk to at home;
  - parents or family are drinking;
  - siblings and/or relatives have quit school.

- Personal-related Characteristics:
  - imbalanced priorities;
  - peer pressure;
  - mental, physical, sexual abuse and incest;
  - teen pregnancy "babies having babies";
  - child apprehension (children removed from the home by social service agencies);
  - addictions – drugs, alcohol, and smoking;
  - violence – fighting or stabbings.

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- School-related Characteristics:
  - poor relationships with teachers;
  - poor relationships in classrooms, such as irrelevant curriculum content, academics that are "too hard", or Aboriginal content is not infused into the curriculum so urban Aboriginal students do not see themselves in the curriculum;
  - poor relationships with peers in the hallways, playground, or school yard;
  - urban Aboriginal students are having trouble in school;
  - experiencing stress or frustration in schools;
  - feel school is "too gay, dumb, stupid" – not interesting, boring, irrelevant;
  - "dream crushers" – teachers and/or administrators tell students they won't make it or can't be what they dream of becoming, or are labeled by teachers;
  - "too much drama" (bullying);
  - friends quit school – peer pressure and influence;
  - teachers or schools were not welcoming – students felt trapped;
  - no significant adult in schools;
  - girls do poorly in Mathematics and Science;
  - students face embarrassment in front of their peers;
  - students are legislated to go to school until they are 16 years old;
  - teachers are unprepared to teach Aboriginal students because they do not have the knowledge, skills or attributes ("teachers don't understand me);
  - teachers focus on the curriculum and not the students;
  - students lack engagement in classes;
  - archaic school system and buildings;
  - attendance issues – students would rather stay home to play videogames or excuses such as don't want to walk to school, or are late, truant or skip school or classes;
  - students face failure because they don't study or try on exams or class work;
  - students are placed in special education programs;
  - there is no help with homework;
  - teachers try to block culture in schools or question Aboriginal cultural practices such as smudging because they think smudging is a fire hazard, or consider offering tobacco in ceremony as smoking;
  - Aboriginal students face exclusion;
  - Aboriginal students are unhappy in schools and how they have been taught because educators haven't met their needs;
  - Residential school experiences, technical schools or boarding schools;
  - facing racism or prejudice in schools.

A fourth additional category that was identified by research participants was

barriers facing Indigenous people as a specific demographic group of people. I identified

this category as demographic factors. Some of the demographic factors that are barriers

to urban Aboriginal students, their families and communities included:

- racism,
- discrimination,
- prejudice,
- going from school to school (the churn),
- lack of sense of belonging,
- sexism (gender issues),
- gangs,
- fighting,
- alcohol and drug abuse,
- sexual and mental abuse,
- incest,
- classism (poverty),
- loss of pride,
- intergenerational Residential school effects,
- negative effects of colonization,
- assimilation,
- lack of Indigenous culture,
- lack of identity,
- urban lifestyle issues.

These barriers resulted from a complexity of issues in society that have been in existence

in Canada for over three hundred years and have resulted in Indigenous peoples being

marginalized (conversations with Elders, n.d., and Royal Commission on Aboriginal

Peoples, Oct. 1992). Power and control over marginalized Indigenous peoples have

become systemic in mainstream society that has been transposed into the education arena.

Some critical theorists from my literature review, who recognized that schools have an

ability to subjugate particular people are Michael Apple (1982), Peter McLaren (1989),

and Joe Kincheloe (2007). These critical theorists identified also that educators have the

potential to facilitate empowerment of all students, rather than continue the hegemony of

dominant society solely for the elite.

A question about when students decided to leave or do leave school was asked in my research to see if the research participants responses were congruent with other studies on high school completion. Students, adults and Elders shared that students did not think about quitting at any particular time. This was congruent with the Alberta Education document, *Promising practices for keeping kids in school*, which stated:

> Dropping out of school is rarely an event or determined by a single decision. Early school leaving is usually the culmination of a disengagement process that occurs over several years, and often begins in elementary school. (Issue 1, Winter 2007)

Another question asked the students to discuss if it would be easier to quit school on a reserve or Métis Settlement, or a city school, to try to discern if urban Aboriginal students from this research experienced a difference between the two types of schools. Interestingly, the three students who answered this question shared their stories about a more positive experience in a "Native" school. However, because there were only three students who shared their experience in the "churn" between Aboriginal schools and non-Aboriginal schools, there were not enough data to make a statement one way or the other.

Some gaps that urban Aboriginal students were facing in terms of what was missing to support them to complete high school were discussed as gaps in support for urban Aboriginal students to complete high school. They were:

- lack of family;
- lack of, or not enough, support;
- lack of understanding of Aboriginal culture(s);
- lack of awareness, or not knowing, what is available to support urban Aboriginal students.

It was important to note that these categories were not firmly delineated; often there was a combination, or interaction of factors that could have driven a student to quit school and became evident in the stories told by students, adults and Elders.

The lack of awareness, or not knowing about available support and support systems was an important factor identified in the research experience, and also in critical theory literature about what was missing to help marginalized people. Critical theorists, such as Freire (2002) on his work with oppressed people in Brazil, questioned social equality and equal access to education. Unequal access to education led to a lack of knowing that could identify power and control issues in terms of who owned the knowledge or who was privy to knowledge, and whose knowledge was validated in terms of worthiness by the ruling class. The concept of power and control in terms of knowledge acquisition is germane to critical theory literature. Research participants told stories about their lack of knowledge as gaps in support systems.

Sub-question 2: Purpose of Education Relating to Goal Setting and Critical Theory

Discussion during the research experience about the second sub-question on the purpose of public education in Alberta was important to the research experience so that students, adults and Elders could understand how the goals and dreams of urban Aboriginal students, and the hopes and dreams of the parents, community and educators who supported them could lead to conscientization (Freire, 1985, 2002) and suggest ways for empowerment of students to obtain their goals. Understanding the goals being served by educational policies and practice helped research participants to realize how education could be key in helping students achieve their goals or, conversely could serve as a hegemonic control that could maintain the social, political and economic status quo for Aboriginal students. Some students and their parents wondered what they had to give up culturally to be considered successful in today's mainstream society. Would their

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knowledge and epistemology be considered by others as worthy and viable? Or, would

their knowledge be considered suspect, thus creating conditions for them to be torn

between being true to their culture or having to consider total assimilation?

Social dimensions of inequality in Canada were discussed with participants as

patterns of stratification in terms of power blocs of racism, classism and sexism with

dominant societal beliefs tending to normalize the stratification and unequal access to

power and privilege. Critical theory rejects this stratification as a process of

normalization and reveals it as a means to dominate and control marginalized peoples

that could become evident in public policy, social structure and human behavior (Fleras,

2001, pp. 30 – 32). Research participants shared personal stories about the adversities

they experienced and the dreams they had of a better life. Education to them was a way

to get to that better life.

Purposes of education were identified in the literature by Hodgkinson (1991) in

three areas: aesthetic, economic and ideological. Other authors , such as Laboree (1997,

p. 39), identified the purpose of education as public goods and private goods for the

purpose of preparing citizens (public good), training workers (public and private good)

and preparing individuals to compete for social positions, or social mobility (private

good).   Critical theorists (Michael Apple ,1982; Giroux, 1986; Laboree, 1997, 2007;

Wallace, 2004) and others argue that schools have become places that reinforce social

inequality and have not reached the full purpose of education for democratic equality.

Globalization has further reinforced inequality in education policy and practice (Wallace,

2004). The work of these critical theorists inform my research analysis by identifying

how schools can reproduce a culture of dominance that reinforces social inequality, or

can become sites for resistance (Giroux, 1988, 1997, 2006, 2007), or centers for social

mobility that transforms social inequalities (McLaren, 1989). By identifying purposes of

education, Aboriginal students in my research can set goals and find their own answers

for their realities (Freire, 1975) through reflection and action.

Research participants identified purposes of education as:

- aesthetic, which refers to the love of learning and self-fulfillment –
    - self-fulfillment,
    - honor,
    - sense of pride,
    - "I love to learn",
    - "I love school",
    - to have a dream,
    - family responsibilities,
    - determination.

- economic with the purpose to make money and determine economic status –
    - get a job,
    - get a career,
    - higher education.

- ideological (for mainstream society) with the purpose of transmitting the dominant culture and beliefs of society
    - citizenship,
    - life skills,
    - clashes and conflicts with mainstream indoctrination,
    - adopt the Western way.

- ideological (for Aboriginal people) with the purpose of transmitting Aboriginal culture, traditions and Indigenous knowledge
    - getting grounded,
    - identity,
    - Aboriginal culture, traditions, Indigenous knowledge,
    - Indigenous space,
    - relational,
    - resolving issues through mediation,
    - work with Aboriginal people,
    - "To have a good life",
    - "fighting welfare lines",
    - "don't want to be like other people on my reserve",
    - "Education is our buffalo" (meaning traditionally the buffalo sustained prairie Indigenous people – in abundance they flourished, while in scarcity

they perished. Also, every part of the buffalo was useful and had a purpose (conversation with Elder, n.d.),

o Elders believe, "You can go to the moon",

o Elders believe, "You can do anything you want". These last two statements demonstrate the support of Elders for the Aboriginal students in their care.

Students, parents and Elders told stories that revealed the ideological purpose for Aboriginal people to transmit culture, traditions and Indigenous knowledge. The ideological purpose for Aboriginal people is different from mainstream society and often the incongruence causes cultural clashes. For instance, participants talked about completing high school "to have a good life"; they spoke about this purpose for education from a cultural viewpoint to validate and include their Indigenous knowledge in mainstream society and their own communities. Interestingly, the participants spoke about the good life in each talking circle and many interviews; the concept is engrained in their cultural teachings. Education is perceived as the way of ensuring a good life. One adult talked about the historical context of the good life for Indigenous peoples and how it relates to an individual's way of being. He stated:

> If we go back to the early interpretations of education and what it means to Aboriginal people or treaty people or Indigenous people, they say very much that same thing as the child said, "to have a good life." And in the opening paragraph of Indian Control of Indian Education, 1972, that is what they talk about. That's the first line: so that our children could have a good life. That is what education means to Indian people. To have a good life: that's what it means. And that is fundamentally the truth. It might mean a job, or current political way to express that or at least a way of talking about their experiences. (Adult 9)

In the previous section of my thesis, I discussed how Aboriginal students can use their personal purpose of education for awareness and action to resist the power blocs of racism, classism and sexism.

Sub-question 3: Solutions Enabling Urban Aboriginal Students to Complete High School Responding to Issues of Power and Control

The third sub-question was asked to identify how the participants would respond to problems that might keep urban Aboriginal students from completing high school as well as address issues of power and hegemonic control. Through a critical lens, power relations could be understood by revealing how the education system can reinforce the status quo, thus leaving the participants more aware and informed of the realities they face. Together, solutions could be identified and utilized to address their personal issues of power and control. This would be similar to Paulo Freire's liberation theory in critical theory that raised conscientization and led to transformation of marginalized people that lifted them out of oppression. In previous chapters, I shared stories that the students, adults and Elders told about supports that helped urban Aboriginal students go to school and complete high school when they were asked what is being done to help them. The four categories of supports were:

- family, foster homes, friends
- teachers, educators, support programs, board policies
- holistic Indigenous programs, culture, Elders
- significant adult in schools.

Participants shared other stories about solutions to breaking down the barriers to high school completion. For example, they were asked what could further be done to help Aboriginal students finish high school. Solutions identified by research participants were in similar categories as the reports in academic high school completion literature cited earlier. The solutions were about:

- family background
- school-related characteristics
- personal-related characteristics
- demographic factors facing Aboriginal people

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The categories were congruent with other documents on high school completion, such as Alberta Education's various barriers to high school completion documents, and other sources from the literature as discussed earlier in this thesis, including the first three categories on family background, school-related characteristics, and personal-related characteristics. A difference between the various documents on high school completion and the categories in this research was the addition of the fourth category on demographic factors facing Aboriginal people in response to issues of power and control, and the personal responses from the research participants in the other three categories on family background, school-related characteristics and personal-related characteristics specific to Aboriginal students that prevent urban Aboriginal students from achieving democratic equality in schools. The demographic factors that Aboriginal people face, such as racism and discrimination, create a hegemonic stronghold that reinforces social inequality in mainstream society and reveals a disconnect between Aboriginal education and mainstream education. Research participants identified personal solutions in educational policy and practice, and in mainstream society that could enable them to obtain social mobility through the hegemonic power blocs of racism, classism and sexism.

Research participants spoke of the significance of their family background in terms of family and friends. For example, one student participant stated, "I would like more friends." Another student participant said, "It would be good to have a parent", while other student participants would have liked helping parents that had a strong relationship with themselves. Earlier in the background section of the research participants, I discussed the intergenerational impact of residential schools that negatively affected family relationships. Residential school experiences impacted the parenting

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skills of some Aboriginal peoples who were taken from their homes as young children against their will, and the will of their parents and communities, and were denied access to their families and Aboriginal cultures. Student participants shared that the presence of a parent and/or a strong relationship with parents would help to break down barriers. Adult participants shared that because of the negative impact of residential schools, and racism and discrimination that many Aboriginal people have experienced, many Aboriginal parents are not comfortable with being involved in schools and their children's education. Often they do not feel competent to help their children with their schooling. Parents would like parental training about their children's schooling with an Aboriginal focus, offered in a "safe place". (I was told that many Aboriginal parents were intimidated and were not comfortable going into the "big blue building" (Edmonton Public Schools' offices).

Also, research participants spoke about the importance of many school-related characteristics for solutions to high school completion, and how they relate to issues of power and hegemonic control. For example, student participants spoke about the importance of having supportive teachers and administrators who are knowledgeable about traditional teachings; to students it is important to have a significant adult in the school to talk to, such as a teacher, Elder, or Education mentor from the Aboriginal Youth & Family Well-being & Education Society. Often, students are coming to schools hungry and are dealing with issues of racism and exclusion from educational programs and athletics; they do not see themselves or their cultures portrayed in educational programs. Solutions suggested by participants for meeting basic needs issues include breakfast and hot lunch programs, free transportation, anti-bullying programs, and

holistic Indigenous programs with visible Aboriginal culture and people. Adults and
Elders suggested adequate funding for Aboriginal education, and that school board
policies, governance and the entire education system be re-vamped to legitimize and
make space for Indigenous knowledge and Aboriginal people to address power and
control issues in school systems.

Additionally, participants spoke about personal-related characteristics for
solutions to high school completion issues. For example, student participants are looking
for self-empowerment to find power for solutions to their personal problems. Critical
theory provides a means for raising consciousness to challenge power blocs of racism,
classism and sexism, which has an implication for the role of schools (Marshall, 1998).
Students want to be able to stand up for themselves, set good goals, maintain good
attendance at school, keep up with school work and homework, and stay in school.
Ideally, they would like to get rid of drugs, alcohol and gangs. Students want to remain
connected to family, friends and community; students want to receive respect, honor and
equality from everyone they meet in schools. In order for these things to happen,
students realize that they need role models and mentors who will support them from the
education community as a whole. Participants identified Aboriginal culture and Elders as
other important aspects to maintain the holistic approach of the Medicine Wheel and its
teachings of the four directions of mental, spiritual, emotional and physical dimensions
that the Aboriginal Youth Family Well-being & Education Society uses to help each
other work through adversities.

Lastly, participants spoke about solutions that would address issues facing
Aboriginal people as a demographic group. For example, students, adults and Elders

want to eradicate racism, combat classism, and eliminate sexism. Systemic change is

suggested to develop a holistic human centered education system with cultural

foundations in which Aboriginal learners are included in classrooms where all students

are nurtured. Participants suggest that curriculum must include Aboriginal perspectives

and authentic contributions of Aboriginal peoples in the diverse history of Canada.

Answering the Research Question: Melding of Voices on Policy and Practice for Urban Aboriginal Students to Complete High School

The research question for this thesis was:

How can we create enabling conditions in terms of policy and practice for urban Aboriginal students to complete high school in Alberta?

There is some congruence and much more incongruence between what the policies-as-

stated[11] say, and what actually is being done, or policies-in-use[12], according to my

research participants. A number of participants have told me at different times, "When

are they going to do something?" (conversations with Elders, n.d.). I will explain why

Aboriginal Elders experience the disconnects between policies-as -stated and policies-in-

use, and what policies would look like if the situation was different and constructed

according to the Aboriginal points of view and ontologies.

Educational Policy Frameworks

Educational policy frameworks have been established by many governments and

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[11] Policies-as-stated in my thesis refers to what policies say about Aboriginal education.

[12] Policies-in-use refers to how policies about Aboriginal education are being implemented, or what is being done. From a critical theory perspective, there is some congruence between the two experienced by research participants; however, there is no real action occurring to improve Aboriginal education.

organizations to represent a commitment to improving educational outcomes: in this instance, to provide exemplary education for Aboriginal students to encourage better learning and much higher rate of high school completion. These initiatives resulted in many policies: some of them are congruent with the ideas espoused by research participants and others totally "miss the boat" (conversations with Elders, n.d.). For instance, policy frameworks typically have included specific strategies that were closely aligned to the needs of First Nations, Métis and Inuit students based on a holistic and integrated approach, which addressed overriding issues and were grounded in a culturally sensitive pedagogical approach relevant to Indigenous students' learning needs. However, when it comes to implementation of the policies, there is a disconnect or incongruence with what is being done; that is, the intentions of the policies did not match the policies as implemented. Education policies often provide "lip service", without actual forward direction, for implementation of exemplary education that is meaningful and displays successful outcomes for Aboriginal students (conversations with Métis Elders, n.d. and Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, Oct. 1992). Continual dismal educational results from year to year are being met with growing impatience, and as I have been told in many conversations, are not to be tolerated (conversations with Elders and Indigenous community, n.d.). Research participants reiterated that the infusion of First Nations, Métis and Inuit perspectives is imperative for curriculum content to promote visible Aboriginal identity, equity and respect for diversity. Relationships and partnerships are vital to the policy frameworks in order to engender encouragement of and enable learning from parental and community involvement, Elder teachings and support of educators. Education policies require support through adequate funding and

community development, realizing that community has many broad interpretations involving different groupings of people.

In chapters four, five and six, I developed summary tables of what my research participants told me in the talking circles and individual interviews about each of the research sub-questions. Then, I developed a holistic Medicine Wheel diagram for each of my sub-questions to summarize what the literature and participants said in four categories. Some congruence is displayed in three categories, or quadrants. Much of the incongruence is displayed in the fourth category or quadrant that I named "demographic factors facing Aboriginal people" for each sub-question. This quadrant provides a visual representation of what research participants conceptualized as the privileges of those in power, as demonstrated in federal and provincial practices and social issues affecting educational policies-in-use that marginalize Indigenous students. What research participants want in order to achieve educational success for Aboriginal students and what they see happening with regards to intention and action continues to be dissonant.

My research participants supported the intention of the policies-as-stated in the education policy documents: 1987 *Policy statement on Native education in Alberta,* 2000 *Strengthening relationships: The Government of Alberta's Aboriginal policy framework, and* 2002 *First Nations, Métis and Inuit education policy framework.* (I have included these policies in Appendix D). Many of my research participants were involved in the multiple deliberations either as an expert advisor, Elder, part of the round table discussions, or government proclamations. Although many research participants have experienced some congruence between the policies-as-stated and policies-in-use, since then, there is a general consensus that there is no real action that has been taken, or is

taking place in Indigenous education. The research participants' proof is the continued

reoccurrence of abysmal results for Aboriginal education in schools.

Why the Disconnect?

Aboriginal education is complex and the difficulty in achieving excellence for

Aboriginal students is exacerbated by a major disconnect in schools and administration.

To bridge the gap between policies-as-stated and policies-in-use, organizations such as

the Aboriginal Youth & Family Well-being & Education Society, provide a major role in

the development of meaningful Aboriginal education policy. They bring together a

community of interest, educational experience and training, and the desire for the

Aboriginal students in their care to complete high school. They know educational

policies, share the wisdom of Indigenous ways of knowing and being, and hold a sacred

shared responsibility in supporting their Indigenous youth to do well in schools.

Research participants shared the complexity in multi-faceted arenas that were

shared in their stories about the research questions. Also, research participants shared

their experiences in schools and communities that led to not seeing themselves included

in the educational curricula and other forms of marginalization. I portray the disconnects

that the research participants identified into four thematic areas: racism, cultural

incongruence, inadequate teacher preparation and training for administrators, and

inadequate funding and resource support in the following diagram on research melding of

community participants' voices. Then, I provide educational policy melding of

participants' voices that the Aboriginal Youth &Family Well-being & Education Society

suggested in the talking circles and interview other forms of marginalization for policies-

in-use to improve high school completion rates for urban Aboriginal students in the four

thematic areas.

The four thematic areas are portrayed in the following diagram.

Diagram 8: Research
Melding of Voices

Racism

Cultural
Incongruence

Adequate
Funding/
Resource
Support

Teacher
Preparation
Administrator
Training
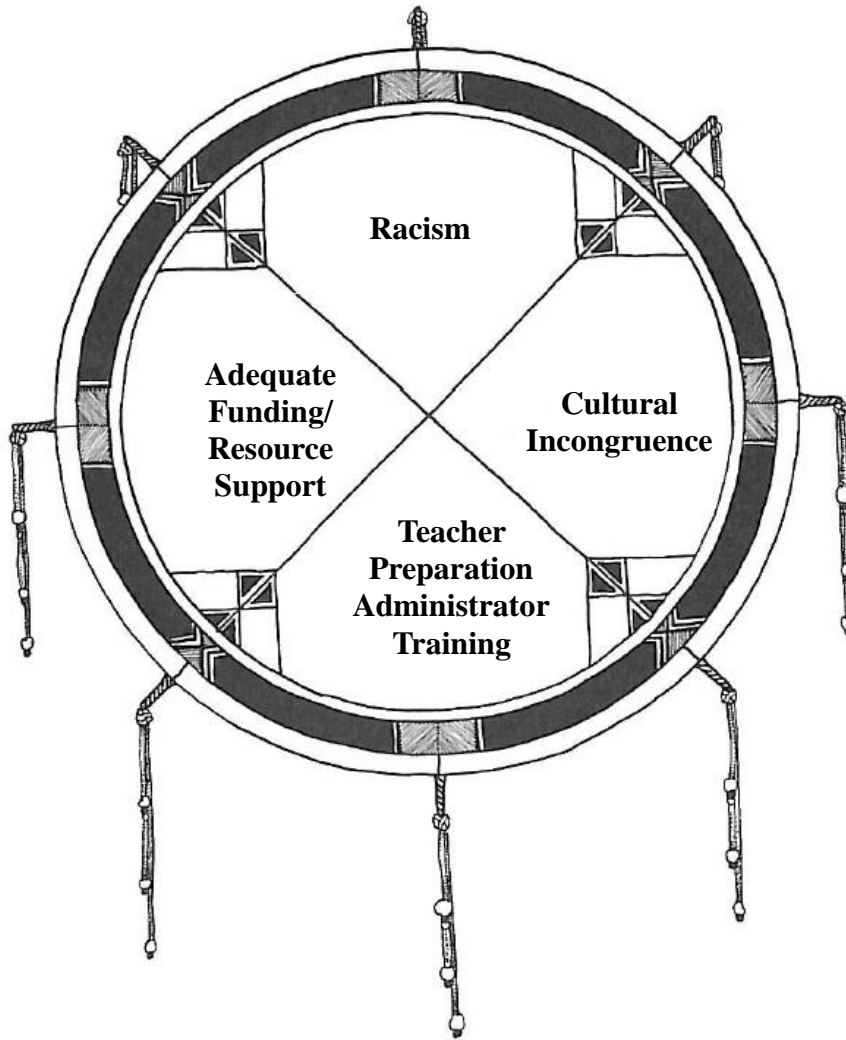
Combating Racism

What maintains the status quo in cultural disconnect for Aboriginal students is racism: the pitting of a dominant race in control of others. I spoke about racism as one of the power blocs maintaining hegemony in my earlier discussion of critical theory and critical pedagogy and it is a mechanism of power that Indigenous people have faced and still do face in mainstream society. Policies-as-stated talk about inclusion of Indigenous people; it is a reoccurring theme in various government policies, such as the 1987 *Policy statement on Native education in Alberta,* and 2000 *Strengthening relationships: The Government of Alberta's Aboriginal policy framework*, and the new rendition of the Aboriginal education policy*:* 2002 *First Nations, Métis and Inuit education policy framework.* However, research participants experience incongruence in the implementation of policies of inclusion because they see no real action. They are waiting still for "someone to do something". Racism is demonstrably alive and doing well in Alberta schools.

To combat racism, research participants suggested the following considerations for educational policy development to be included in policies-in-use. Note that the following melding of voices were not exhaustive, inclusive or exclusive, but do provide some direction for future action.

- Ensure that schools and school board buildings are inviting for Aboriginal parents and communities to feel welcome rather than intimidated.

- Ensure Aboriginal perspectives are embedded in curriculum documents to ensure that students can see themselves in relevant curriculum.

- Promote the diverse histories and contributions of Aboriginal peoples in the multicultural mosaic of Canada and Alberta.

- Promote communication and provide Aboriginal students, their families and communities, educators and support systems with current information in order to increase awareness about what is available for Aboriginal students to complete high school.

- Promote systemic change by changing and revamping the public school system to become human centered where the classroom becomes a place of nurturing learning.

- Develop a separate Indigenous school system operated by an Indigenous school board based on the cultural traditions where a student could become enriched in culture and identity, and would be part of the overarching school system.

Cultural Incongruence

Information shared during talking circles and interviews demonstrated that Aboriginal culture is negated in educational policies-in-use. To address cultural incongruence, research participants suggested the following considerations for educational policy development to be included in policies-in-use. Note as in the previous discussion on racism, the following melding of voices were not exhaustive, inclusive or exclusive but illustrative of what is possible based on my research findings.

- Promote and respect Aboriginal practices such as smudging, funeral attendance for Aboriginal community members, Elders' gifts, and giving of tobacco and cloth.

- Support holistic Indigenous programs with cultural foundations and Aboriginal language acquisition in schools.

- Involve Elders in schools in meaningful ways for students and Elders to develop and nurture the traditional teaching relationship of Elder-youth in Indigenous communities.

- Promote Indigenous ceremonies and connections of Indigenous students to their traditions, religions and native spirituality, and Indigenous knowledge.

- Promote character education, citizenship, problem-solving and discipline through programs for Aboriginal students.

- Support option programs such as cooking, computers, fashion design, culinary arts, communication programs, and others for Aboriginal students.

- Support life skill programs and other non-academic programs, such as self-esteem, conflict resolution, mediation, interpersonal skills, and career development for Aboriginal students.

- Provide traditional teaching, Aboriginal cultural foundations, and Indigenous knowledge programs or courses.

- Provide support mechanisms and support programs for urban Aboriginal students, such as tutoring, homework helpers, mentoring, liaison workers, and others.

- Encourage Aboriginal students to work at par with mainstream students.

- Promote programs for the whole child, including the brain, heart and spirit.

- Provide activities and gatherings for urban Aboriginal students to get together from various schools, and promote the establishment of student groups.

- Promote Aboriginal student-led programs and activities.

- Ask urban Aboriginal students to provide input into the programs and activities they want to do to encourage them to stay in school.

- Promote Aboriginal learning centers.

- Help parents of our Aboriginal students by attending parent/teacher interviews with them.

- Encourage Aboriginal parents to take an active role in the education of their children and stay aware of how their children are dong in school, or find someone who knows.

- Promote community programs that support Aboriginal people and families.

- Become aware of what is available for urban Aboriginal students in terms of services, agencies, organizations and government programs.

- Promote Elders' Councils to formulate their relationship and advisement with school trustees on Aboriginal education.

- Encourage significant adults in schools to talk with Aboriginal students.

- Help Aboriginal students find their way in an urban setting.

Teacher Preparation and Training for Administrators

Stories were told that teachers and administrators are inadequately prepared to meet to learning needs of Aboriginal students in school systems. To address teacher preparation and training for administrators, research participants suggested the following considerations for educational policy development to be included in policies-in-use. Note as in the two previous discussions on racism and cultural incongruence, the following melding of voices were not exhaustive, inclusive or exclusive.

- Ensure cultural awareness training, traditional teaching, and protocols of sharing traditional knowledge are available for teaching staff and administrators for more than one day a year on National Aboriginal Day.

- Adapt the curriculum to the learning styles of Aboriginal students, and teaching methods to match the interests and learning styles of Aboriginal students.

- Support the invitation of more traditional people to be brought into schools to teach about traditional teachings.

- Stop teaching inaccurate and outdated nomenclature and information about Indigenous peoples.

- Adopt hiring policies in school jurisdictions that encourage more Aboriginal support staff, teachers, administrators, support workers, liaison workers, school mentors, tutors, counselors and role models.

Adequate Funding and Resource Support

I heard from members of the Aboriginal Youth & Family Well-being & Education Society that adequate funding for Aboriginal education is a major issue. Also, other resource support issues were identified, such as limited access to resource people. Additionally, a general recurring theme of lack of awareness of what resources are

available emerged. Research participants identified awareness as a starting place to improve Aboriginal education policy. Knowledge is power.

To address adequate funding and resource support, research participants suggested the following considerations for educational policy development to be included in policies-in-use. Note as in the three previous discussions on racism, cultural incongruence, and teacher preparation and training for administrators, the following melding of voices were not exhaustive, inclusive or exclusive.

- Ensure adequate funding for Aboriginal programming and staff.

- Provide support for extra-curricular and co-curricular activities, and intramurals for urban Aboriginal students, including no cost programs, because students might be excluded due to poverty.

- Provide support to students and their families to promote staying in school.

- Fund services to provide basic needs such as school lunch programs, before and after-school programs, transportation and others.

- Provide core funding for support programs, inter-agencies, organizations that provide services for Aboriginal students, and staff -- rather than pilot projects or other projects that have a sunset, or are threatened to end -- so that they do not have to wonder where funding is coming from mid-year to support programs already in existence for the entire year.

In conclusion, this chapter provided an analysis of the data and answers to the three sub-questions of my research. Also, the chapter provided a melding of participants' voices for the research question: How can we create enabling conditions in terms of policy and practice for urban Aboriginal students to complete high school in Alberta? In the melding of participants' voices are solutions provided by the Aboriginal community for improving high school completion rates of urban Aboriginal students. The following chapter provides a conclusion to the thesis and suggested applications for the research.

Chapter 8: Completing the Journey of High School Completion of Urban Aboriginal Students

Aboriginal education gets a failing grade.

Our education system has failed these students. It has failed their communities. It has failed the next generation of children who will be born poor and disadvantaged because their parents haven't completed high school and can't provide for their needs. The public education system must do better by these students. We must stop the cycle. (Alberta School Boards Association, ACOL, 2003, p. 81)

The Commission firmly believes that this is one of the most pressing issues facing Alberta's education system. If we are unable to take action soon, the impact will be felt by generations of First Nations and Métis children for decades to come, and by Alberta's society as a whole. (p. 82)

In this chapter I summarize what I have learned in my research journey experience, provide direction for a way forward, explore where I might go from here with the research, consider what questions that are raised from the research still remain for consideration, and discuss further work that needs to be done in the area of high school completion for urban Aboriginal students to take their rightful place in society. Like a number of research participants who have shared about their desire "to have a good life", my journey continues.

What I Learned from the Research Experience

Personal Reflection

When I personally reflected on what I have learned from the research, I thought of the importance of the whole community working together to raise a child, or in this case working together to empower urban Aboriginal students to complete high school. In this research experience, the community included the urban Aboriginal students who attended Edmonton Public Schools and were in the Opportunities program that the Aboriginal

Youth & Family Well-being & Education Society operated in four schools. Important stakeholders who were part of the community included parents and extended family, Elders, Aboriginal community, educators, research community, agencies, and political organizations and governments as part of the whole community to raise a child. I am part of that community. The Aboriginal Youth & Family Well-being & Education Society is an organization which plays an important role that is central to policy development for high school completion of urban Aboriginal students by pursuing two goals: advocating for the practical development and application of policies-in-use on behalf of Aboriginal students, and working toward the success of Aboriginal students in schools. Their voices were heard and their stories were shared – some of them with heartaches and tears, and others with hope and pride. Together they would move mountains to support their Aboriginal youth to become at-promise of completing high school.

In the literature, similar accounts were told of Indigenous and other marginalized people seeking empowerment that could transform their situations by breaking down the power and control of ruling elites. When l looked at similar stories told by other Indigenous peoples of the world that experienced the power blocs of racism, classism and sexism, I realized that I did not have to look further than our local context to experience similar socioeconomic and political issues that are Canada's national embarrassment – the mistreatment of our Indigenous people. These multifaceted issues were shared by the research participants about their daily experiences in our school systems and society at large. The nature of the local context resonated in what was important in high school completion for urban Aboriginal students. While they might not have used this kind of language, the research participants used a critical perspective and saw the issues as they

were, head on, labeled the issues not the people, and, through communicative action (Habermas, 1979), discussed how they could assert their rights in society and schools to challenge hegemony, through the development of policies and practices in school systems that were relevant to Indigenous peoples. Freire (2002) termed this critical awareness as conscientization, or the process of becoming educated and liberated from dominant ideology by challenging the status quo.

Many of the stakeholders reiterated what the Alberta School Boards Association said in the *Alberta's Commission on Learning* (2003): "We must stop the cycle". Countless studies, including this one, demonstrate that we cannot do more of the same and hope that we will see different results for Aboriginal students; and policymakers cannot change the way they calculate statistics and declare that things are getting better. Politicians cannot hide behind data that is gathered but not shared – or worse yet, blame Aboriginal students for the dismal data. Not much has changed since the mid-1960s in Aboriginal education (conversations with Aboriginal community, n.d.), but this cannot continue.

Given the inertia in educational opportunities for Aboriginal young people, a systemic change must occur, and soon, that addresses the barriers experienced by Aboriginal students who have been a part of this study. Research participants and many authors in critical theory literature (e.g. Kincheloe, *Critical Multiculturalism* class; Giroux, 1997) discussed what those systemic changes could look like in school systems from their points of view. Critical theory provides a lens to examine how power is acted out in school systems that privilege some and not others. Who controls power? Who has the will and resources to implement systemic change? Educational policy that is simply

"window dressing" for Aboriginal education is not the answer. For example, Indigenous researchers, such as Linda Tuhawai Smith (1999), argue that Indigenous knowledge must be legitimized as inherent wisdom because the validation of knowledge production is central to the issue of who has power and control. Indigenous knowledge is grounded in a holistic approach of the Medicine Wheel that provides four dimensions -- mental, spiritual, emotional and physical -- for every person to balance in order for true learning to be developed.

Research participants and various authors in the literature dreamed of what education could look like to meet the needs of Aboriginal students and of what was needed to create enabling conditions in terms of including an Aboriginal ideological goal with the purpose of transmitting Aboriginal culture, traditions and Indigenous knowledge. Dr. Stan Wilson (2001) shared, "Rather than taking curriculum and infusing it with culture, we need to take culture as a starting point and infuse it with education" (conversation with conference participants, n.d.).

Intergenerational Stories and their Impact

Throughout the talking circles and individual interviews, research participants told stories about their educational goals "to have a good life". The ideological education of Aboriginal people for the purpose of transmitting Aboriginal culture, traditions and Indigenous knowledge was passed down through generations of Indigenous peoples since time immemorial. Having a good life was one such story. Students, adults and Elders shared how this important goal was a mainstay for education and the dreams of Aboriginal people. Interestingly, participants were in different talking circles or

individual interviews, and yet shared similar stories at different levels about the purpose

of education as having a good life, and also shared how political Indigenous people

shared the same dream for education of Indigenous children to have a good life. Stories

were told in youthful language by the students, in political language by the adults, and in

the language of wisdom by the Elders. The importance of "gathering, discovering, and

uncovering knowledge" (Cardinal, 2001, p. 182) through cellular memory was viable for

Indigenous peoples who used stories, symbols, dream work, circle work and Elders to

transmit Indigenous knowledge throughout the ages.

Conversely, research participants and various authors in the literature (Royal

Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, Oct. 1992; Ng-ug-i wa Thiong'o, 1993; May, 1999;

Smith, 1999; Judge Arnot, Rural Education Congress, 2005) shared stories of the

negative effects of residential schools, attempts at colonization of Indigenous peoples and

the negative intergenerational impact that our urban Aboriginal students, their parents and

community, and Elders still faced. One adult identified the continuous attempts at

control of Aboriginal people through colonization. Therefore, schools could be perceived

as positive or negative in terms of their intergenerational impact.

Awareness Theme

An awareness theme came up in a number of areas, such as gaps for high school

completion. Students told stories about wanting to know what they needed to be aware

of, and what was available to help them succeed. Also, they wanted their teachers and

others to know that they could succeed; to believe in them.

Awareness also added dimensions of knowing what supports were needed for urban Aboriginal students, the importance of relationships, and their cultural needs in order to fill the gaps and to determine viable solutions for the public problem of low high school completion rates of urban Aboriginal students. Elders told about their ways of sharing information to answer students' and adults' questions about "what is out there". Those ways included finding relevant information, copying and distributing print materials, using word of mouth, using the moccasin telegraph, or phoning each other. They thought about setting up a generic clearinghouse repository of information and the logistics of trying to keep such a repository current and complete.

Stories that Resonate

In the literature, Indigenous peoples throughout the world faced assimilationist policy, such as in New Zealand, Africa and South America. Smith (1999) recounted examples of Maori children being removed from their homes by the state. Also, African children faced colonial school experiences, such as if caught speaking in their own languages, they faced corporal punishment (Ng-ug-i wa Thiong'o, 1993). Paulo Freire shared his work in Brazil on education of the oppressed in order for them to have the potential of self-empowerment and, therefore, raise the possibility of the transformation of society. Power and control over Indigenous peoples throughout the world is a central theme in these stories.

Also, many stories told during the talking circles and interviews still ring in my ears and memory. Students used youthful street language to describe themselves, or the situations they found themselves in, such as "b-boxer", "too much drama (bullying)", or

"dream crushers". Other tiny almost indiscernible voices in the student talking circles, when asked why they wanted to finish high school answered, "So I can look after my family", or "You need to feed your family". They were aware at such a young age, because they were faced with responsibilities of providing sustenance for family members, and knew, therefore, how important it was for them to be able to do so in the future. Other students shared that they wanted to complete high school "to have a good life". Also, when asked what was missing to help them complete school, one student quietly shared, "It would be good to have a parent". Student stories provided barriers they face, and provided strategies that they can utilize to become at-promise of completing high school.

Adults used political language in their stories, such as "the churn", "Residential Schools 2.0, "urban scape", and "latch key kids". They talked about the "extended family relationship", "Aboriginal lived experience", "Indigenous space", and gathering places for Indigenous peoples in the city called "Pohona" or "Rendezvous (for Métis)" as cultural issues facing Aboriginal people in schools and society, and provided answers for these issues. Adults told personal stories of their own hardships in schools, and their dreams for their children and grandchildren to "have a good life", noting that education, in particular completing high school, was paramount to their dreams for their children.

Elders used the language of wisdom to tell stories of "standing in the welfare line", or "boys need coin". They talked about culture and traditions, such as "tobacco came as a medicine", "sweat lodges", "natural law", "our traditions ground us", "traditional teachers" and "grass roots of ceremony". Also, Elders shared stories about their ways of being, such as the "balance of the four directions" in the "Sacred Circle"

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(Medicine Wheel), "spiritual power", and "Mother Earth". They discussed "Education is our buffalo", and a "holistic way of learning", with their dreams for urban Aboriginal students who "can go to the moon", and "have a good life". Cultural congruence between Indigenous people and mainstream society is a central goal that Elders shared to close the gap for Aboriginal education. In my research, I learned the power of story in Indigenous communities.

Drawing Threads Together to Provide Direction for a Way Forward

Clearly we, the educational stakeholders, must stop the cycle of exclusion and lack of educational success for too many Aboriginal students. We cannot continue to do more of the same and expect improved results for Aboriginal education. My research points to four themes that require systemic change to improve policies-in-use for Aboriginal education: racism, cultural incongruence, teacher preparation and training for administrators, and adequate funding and resource support, with recommendations for systemic change. Organizations such as Aboriginal Youth & Family Well-being & Education Society provide direction for a way forward through their current practices and recommendations that could strengthen policies-in-use. Changing societal norms is going to take intent and painstaking work with many stakeholders onside, and an honest desire for societal institutions to want to make the changes required. It is going to take adequate core funding; if it is worth doing, it is worth funding. Power must be shared between mainstream society and Aboriginal peoples who sit at the table together as equals to guide what successful Aboriginal education will be. Only then will the gap be

closed between mainstream and Aboriginal education results, such as high school completion.

Where Do I Go from Here?

I will be going back to the community to share what was learned from our research experience. The community, in particular Aboriginal Youth & Family Well-being & Education Society members, is anxious to hear about what came out of their talking circles and individual interviews. Going back to the community is part of my responsibility within an Indigenous research methodology framework to maintain relationships much past the research experience, and also for the research community to determine the use for the knowledge gained from the research. This will enable future planning for community action based on the participants' stories and my findings. My research methodology included Indigenous research methodology informed by a critical lens with a goal of transformative action that could move theory into necessary actions in order to bring about the desired change such as urban Aboriginal students and their support systems taking action to support students in order for them to complete high school. I intend to stay involved in working with the Indigenous community in Edmonton and surrounding areas and will continue to advocate for urban Aboriginal students to complete high school. I am part of this community as the journey continues.

An action that we could take together is to take the research and move ahead in a multi-faceted community to continue policy setting directions and practical solutions at multi-levels: to turn policies-as-stated into policies-in-use. Parents and families, Elders, Aboriginal communities and educators could use the learnings and become empowered

as strong supportive voices in the education of our Aboriginal children. Together, we could utilize the stories for funding proposals to continue to expand the community that supports urban Aboriginal students, or to promote continuous on-going programming with core funding that does not face the threat of sun-setting or ending mid-year, promote adding staff to continue the vital work with Aboriginal youth, and promote future programming. Politically, we could promote the program locally to continue in Edmonton Public Schools, and to commence in other school systems, as some research participants suggested, in order to address the gaps in policy and practice and create enabling conditions for high school completion of urban Aboriginal students. Academically, I could continue to promote this thesis and work in the research community through publications and further research, and encourage more researchers to continue to study the field of high school completion of Indigenous peoples, either locally or in other contexts. The journey of my thesis will have been completed and added to the small body of research available in a local context that focuses on high school completion for urban Aboriginal students. However, the journey towards improving Aboriginal education continues, especially high school completion for urban Aboriginal students.

Further Research and Further Questions

There is a lot of work that remains to be done. I mentioned that there was little research that was published about creating enabling conditions for urban Aboriginal students to complete high school in Alberta. Available documents on educational policy and practice are fairly generic and are mainly contained in government documents. Further, there is a disconnect between policies-as-stated and policies-in-use. Other

jurisdictions might ask whether the local policies and practices the participants recommended in the research could be transferable in order to encourage high school completion for Aboriginal students in other contexts, or for other student groups. Since my research methodology is not generalizable, further research dependent upon the context would be needed to determine transferability.

Another aspect that arose from the research was in relation to the international scene. Indigenous communities in various parts of the world are facing similar experiences of domination in their respective educational systems. Indigenous knowledge was not legitimized and language was denied. Since language served for communication and as a purveyor of culture, to be denied one's own language was to deny one's own culture, knowledge and epistemology. Research could be undertaken in terms of comparing colonization experiences and how various Indigenous peoples throughout the world and in our local context have and are developing policies and practices to liberate marginalized peoples by finding solutions to public problems, such as completing high school. Other related research and questions could be determined by educators and their communities according to the seriousness of the issues.

Completing the Journey of High School Completion of Urban Aboriginal Students

I shared the journey, through my research, of urban Aboriginal students seeking to become at-promise of completing high school. My journey started by examining the literature on theoretical considerations in critical theory as it relates to social dimensions of racism, classism and sexism issues in terms of control over Aboriginal peoples. I focused on policy and practice documents on high school completion and how Aboriginal

students fit in this environment. I examined critical theory as an epistemology that enabled me to use a critical lens when analyzing the data obtained from the research for ways to seek empowerment of students. An Indigenous research methodology framework informed by critical theory with the goal of transformative action was my chosen methodology.

Research participants included students, adults and Elders involved in stay-in-school programs that the Aboriginal Youth & Family Well-being & Education Society operated in four schools in Edmonton Public Schools. Members of this organization shared valid information on barriers, Aboriginal education policy development, recommendations for policies-in-use and the desire for urban Aboriginal students to complete high school. Participants shared stories in talking circles and individual interviews about barriers to high school completion, their assumptions about the purpose of public education, and solutions available to address issues of power and hegemonic control when seeking ways to complete high school. All stakeholders shared dreams and desires for their urban Aboriginal students to become at-promise of completing high school, and "to have a good life".

The data were examined to answer the research question: How can we create enabling conditions in terms of policy and practice for urban Aboriginal students to complete high school in Alberta? Four major themes emerged from the research: racism, cultural incongruence, teacher preparation and training of administrators, and adequate funding and resource support with a melding of voices for systemic change that could create enabling conditions for Aboriginal education to improve, in particular, high school completion for urban Aboriginal students.

Chief Dan George shared dreams that Indigenous peoples had for their youth to take their rightful place in society, "to have a good life". He said:

> There is a longing in the heart of my people to reach out and grasp that which is needed for our survival. There is a longing among the young of my nation to secure for themselves and their people the skills that will provide them with a sense of worth and purpose. They will be our new warriors. Their training will be much longer and more demanding than it was in olden days. The long years of study will demand more determination, separation from home and family will demand endurance. But they will emerge with their hand held forward, not to receive welfare, but to grasp the place in society that is rightly ours.

<div align="right">

My heart soars, 1974, p. 91

</div>

The journey continues.

Ekosi!

Hay hay!

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Appendix A: Research Question and Sub-Questions

Research Question

How can we create enabling conditions in terms of policy and practice for urban

Aboriginal students to complete high school in Alberta?

Sub-Questions

- How are the barriers to high school completion articulated by the Ministry of

  Education and school boards, urban Aboriginal students, their parents and

  community?

- What are the assumptions about the purpose of public education in Alberta?

- What solutions are available for urban Aboriginal students to address issues of

  power and hegemonic control when seeking to complete high school?

Sample Open-Ended Questions for Talking Circles and Interviews

Talking Circle 1: Aboriginal Youth & Family Well-being & Education Society Students' Questions

1. Why would you think of quitting school? When did you start to think about quitting school?
(Barriers/Challenges)

2. Why is it important for you to go to school? Why is it important to finish high school?
(Goals/purpose of education)

3. What is currently being done to help you finish high school? What is missing?
(Supports/gaps)

4. What do you need to know about to help you finish high school?
(Awareness)

5. What can further be done to help you finish high school?
(Solutions)

Talking Circle 2: Aboriginal Youth & Family Well-being & Education Society Adults' Questions

1. Why would your student quit school? When would he/she start to think about quitting school?
(Barriers/Challenges)

2. Why is it important for your student to go to school? Why is it important to finish high school?
(Goals/purpose of education)

3. What is currently being done to help urban Aboriginal students finish high school? What is missing?
(Supports/gaps)

4. What do you need to know about to help your student finish high school?
(Awareness)

5. What can further be done to help your student finish high school?
(Solutions)

Date:

I am a graduate student at the University of Alberta in the Faculty of Education. As part of my doctoral program I am conducting a research study with participants of the Aboriginal Youth & Family Well-being & Education Society. The purpose of my study is to engage urban Aboriginal students and the people who support them to critically examine and identify existing structures that may marginalize them in completing high school. The title of my study is *Urban Aboriginal Students At-Promise of Completing High School.* The research is being undertaken because it has the potential to inform education policies and promising practices to high school completion and solutions to problems for urban Aboriginal students.

I will be conducting talking circles with two groups: 1)students involved in the program and 2)parents, families, Elders, community and educators who provide support to students in the program. The research will examine barriers to high school completion that urban Aboriginal students face and solutions to problems. Individual interviews will be held if some participants cannot attend a scheduled talking circle. Participants would be asked to attend one talking circle or one interview. Each talking circle or interview will last about two hours. Participation is on a voluntary basis. Confidentiality and anonymity of the research participants and data will be respected. Participants have the right to not participate in many portion of the research, or withdraw completely at any time and any data collected can be removed from the study. Research participants will not be subjected to risk of harm as a result of involvement in this research.

I plan to use a tape recorder and take notes at talking circles and interviews, where all participants are agreeable to be recorded. Your identity will not be connected to the information you provide. The research project will comply with the University of Alberta Standards for the protection of Human Research Participants. Should anyone other than me be involved in the research, such as a transcriber, they will be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement. The data obtained from the research will be stored for a time period of five years following the completion of the study in a locked filing cabinet in the home of the researcher in compliance with the a University of Alberta Standards. The data will be used for my doctoral research and perhaps for research articles, books, teaching, or presentations.

If you have any concerns about this research at any time, please contact my program supervisor, Dr. Janice Wallace, at (780) 492-2937.

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by the Faculties of Education, Extension, Augustana and Campus Saint Jean Research Ethics Board (EEASJ REB) at the University of Alberta. For questions

regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Chair of the EEASJ REB c/o (780) 492-2614.

I am providing two copies of this letter and consent form, one to be signed and returned and one for you to keep for you own records. Thank you for your interest in this research.

Sincerely,

Loraine Steele

_____

I, _____, consent to participate in the research outlined above.
         (print name)

_____ _____
           (signature)   (date)

Appendix D: Alberta Education Policy Statements for Aboriginal Education

1987 *Policy statement on Native Education in Alberta*

In March 1987, Alberta Education published the *Policy statement on Native*

Education in Alberta which stated:

> Alberta Education supports the development and delivery of programs and
> services which will:
> * provide enhanced and equal opportunities for Native students to acquire the
>   quality of education traditional in Alberta;
> * challenge Native students to learn and perform to the best of their abilities;
> * provide opportunities for Native students to study and experience their own
>   and other Native cultures and lifestyles;
> * provide opportunities for Native people to help guide and shape the education
>   of their children;
> * provide opportunities for students in Alberta's schools to recognize and
>   appreciate Native cultures, and their many contributions to our province and
>   society. (p. 4)

The Native education policy statement was intended to complement actions

already taken by the Government of Alberta "to provide each student enrolled in a

provincial school with a high standard of education that addresses his or her individual

needs and abilities" (p. 2). The policy statement also was intended to complement other

initiatives taken "to foster tolerance and understanding between peoples and pride in our

multi-cultural society" (p. 2). It was important to note that this policy statement was

intended for provincial schools only and not band-operated or federally administered

schools located on reserves.

The purpose of Native education in the 1987 policy statement was described in

the document as:

> The aim of Native Education is to develop the knowledge, the skills, and the
> positive attitudes of Native students so that they will be self-confident, capable,
> and committed to setting goals, to making informed choices, and acting in ways
> that will improve their own lives, and the life of both Native and non-Native
> communities throughout Alberta.

- Alberta Education recognizes that Native education must be attuned to the diverse needs, cultures, and life-styles of Native students so that they can build on their self-esteem, and gain a better understanding of themselves through the study of their own heritage and cultures.
- Alberta Education recognizes that Native histories, cultures, and life-styles must be included in the studies taken by Alberta students, so that they can benefit from the values and lifestyles of Native cultures.
- Alberta Education recognizes that conditions on the delivery of Native education must be flexible enough to meet the different needs of school communities throughout the province.
- Alberta Education recognizes that Native people must be involved in school activities. They must have opportunities to help guide and influence the education of their children.
- Alberta Education recognizes the importance of partnerships, and strong working relationships among schools, Native people, and the Alberta Government. Through partnerships, the quality of education provided to Native students in Alberta schools can be enhanced. (p. 3)

Alberta Education is committed to guiding schools toward meeting the particular and diverse needs of Native students, and will:
- Continue to work with native people and school boards to develop classroom materials that will complement subjects taken by students, and will encourage schools to user them as basic and recommended learning resources.
- Include and highlight aspects of Native heritage, cultures, and lifestyles in the studies that are to be taken by students in Alberta.
- Ensure that the programs offered and that the materials developed for students are consistent with new directions taken by Alberta Education.
- Support the development and delivery of extended Native studies for students who wish to explore and experience Native traditions and lifestyles.
- Encourage school boards to assist those students who need special or additional instruction in English as a Second Language.
- Assist school boards and native people to develop and deliver enrichment programs for exceptional children including the gifted and talented.
- Assist school boards and the native community to develop and deliver programs and services that will address the needs of students in isolated communities. (p. 3)

2000 *Strengthening relationships: The Government of Alberta's Aboriginal policy framework*

The Aboriginal policy framework set out the basic structure for existing and new Government of Alberta policies to address First Nations, Métis and other Aboriginal issues in Alberta. It set into motion the commitment of Government of Alberta to work in partnership with Aboriginal governments, organizations and people to implement the Aboriginal policy framework.

> The Framework's two goals address improving socio-economic opportunities for Aboriginal peoples and communities and clarifying roles and responsibilities of federal provincial and Aboriginal governments and communities.
>
> For each goal, the Framework lays out principles and commitments to action and calls for Government of Alberta Ministries to address Aboriginal issues in their business plans and report progress in their annual reports.
>
> Government of Alberta will work in partnership with First Nations, Métis and other Aboriginal communities, organizations, and people as well as with other governments, industry and other interested parties to facilitate the participation of First Nations, Métis and other Aboriginal people in the life and economy of our province… (excerpts from Executive Summary, p. 1)

Aboriginal people in Alberta told Government of Alberta

> …while there is a continuing need to address specific health, education, social and justice issues in their communities, social programming by itself has failed to address the underlying economic conditions that are the basis for much of the disparity in community and individual well-being.
>
> (excerpt from Socio-Economic Opportunities Goal: The Government of Alberta will work with Aboriginal people, federal and municipal governments, industry and other interested parties towards to goals of individual and community well-being and self-reliance. (p. 7)
>
> The 2000 *Strengthening relationships: The Government of Alberta's Aboriginal*

policy framework described a strategy that research participants could use to develop

educational practice to support urban Aboriginal students in completing high school. As

a socio-economic opportunity the strategy was developed around the following element:

> **Capacity building with regard to community, individual and entrepreneurial readiness**: Capacity building may include working with communities to improve the success rate of Aboriginal students in our schools and provide educational upgrading, job training and employment readiness for Aboriginal people. (p. 8)

2001 *Removing barriers to high school completion – Final report*

The *Removing barriers to high school completion – Final report* of September 2001 referred to *Strengthening relationships: The Government of Alberta's Aboriginal policy framework* by suggesting a key theme of "Success for Aboriginal students" with a related suggested outcome:

> Success for Aboriginal students – Cross cultural awareness and respecting Aboriginal cultures were major themes in focus group discussions and resource panel input. Bridging cultural differences and defining enlightened policy approaches in support of Aboriginal learners will continue to be a priority for the Department of Learning, and further suggested outcomes:
>
> Suggested outcomes were: outcomes from the *Removing barriers to high school completion – Final report* complement and support outcomes for increasing successful high school completion by Aboriginal students that emerge from *First Nations, Metis and Inuit Education policy framework* (February 2002) and *Strengthening relationships: The Government of Alberta's Aboriginal policy framework* (September 2000).
>
> Examples of suggested activities were: align outcomes identified in this report with those in the *First Nations, Métis and Inuit education policy framework* (February 2002) and *Strengthening relationships: The Government of Alberta's Aboriginal policy framework* (September 2000). (p. 27)

Issues or observations that were gleaned from the focus group and resource panel input for the barriers report included:

- The Aboriginal population has historically experienced higher school leaving rates compared to the general population Stats Can data (Galt, 2000) indicate that the percentage of early school leavers in the Aboriginal population remains unacceptably high. In 1996, 45% of Canadian Aboriginal people aged 20 – 29 had not completed high school.
- Program relevance was a sub-theme identified in nine focus groups that spoke of the need to adapt the curriculum to the learning styles, history and culture of Aboriginal people and the value of ensuring that teaching methods match students' interests and learning styles.
- Specific suggestions were made for supports for student involvement in extra-curricular activities, for more Aboriginal counselors and instructors, and for integrated support systems based on improved coordination of inter-agency services.

- An Aboriginal participant stated that psychological assessment tools need to be changed as they are not geared toward Native culture. (p. 27)

One of the resource panel experts who worked extensively with Aboriginal students was quoted in the section of the document on Resource Panel Input as saying:

…there are many reasons why Aboriginal students leave school, and there is not one "silver bullet" that will put it to rest, thus a multi-leveled and faceted approach will be needed. This person also argued that there needs to be more student supports like advising, career development, community service opportunities and work placement and suggested that more Aboriginal instructors need to be available to teach Aboriginal curriculum and to create a positive Aboriginal presence within each school.

Another resource expert reinforced the picture, from an insider's perspective, of the complex causation of early school leaving, and presents a rich description of the interplay between historical, cultural and interpersonal factors that militate against Aboriginal students staying in school. This study calls clearly for systemic change premised on positive relationships based on trust to counteract the alienation of Aboriginal students' experience.

Several Aboriginal staff employed by Edmonton Public Schools provided input again confirming the multiple causes of early school leaving and emphasizing the importance of awareness of Aboriginal culture by students and staff. One employee commented, "I believe that many early school leavers drop out mentally in the earlier grades, and physically drop out when they are sixteen." They pointed to the importance of developing culturally relevant curriculum. Other suggested supports included stronger involvement of the aboriginal community and families in education, and more Aboriginal staff in schools. Recommended student centered supports included: better linkages to work experience and mentoring programs, more scholarships, grants and awards, expanded access to sports and recreation programs, and improved grade 9 orientation to high school with a stronger emphasis on career planning. (p. 20)

The barriers report suggested alignment of policies for high school completion of Aboriginal students with the *First Nations, Métis and Inuit education policy framework* introduced in February 2002.

2002 *First Nations, Métis and Inuit education policy framework*

The *First Nations, Métis and Inuit education policy framework* was developed by

Alberta Education under the advice of the Native Education Policy Review Advisory

Committee to update the 1987 *Policy statement on Native education in Alberta* and in

alignment with the 2000 *Strengthening relationships: The Government of Alberta's*

Aboriginal policy framework. This policy document was in effect while *Alberta's*

Commission on Learning was published in 2003 with recommendations for high school

completion improvements. The policy statement of the 2002 policy framework was:

> Alberta Learning (now Education) commits to proactive collaboration and
> consultation with First Nations, Métis and Inuit parents and communities, and
> other key education, government, and community stakeholders to implement
> learner-focused strategies that will:
>
> - Increase and strengthen knowledge and understanding among all Albertans of
>   First Nations, Métis and Inuit governance, history, treaty and Aboriginal
>   rights, lands, cultures, and languages.
> - Provide First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners with access to culturally
>   relevant learning opportunities and quality support services.
> - Develop ministry capacity to address First Nations, Métis and Inuit learner
>   needs effectively.
> - Report progress on the achievement of expected long-term outcomes for First
>   Nations, Métis and Inuit people, and other Albertans. (pp. 9 - 10)

The policy statement was published with five goals, strategies to achieve the goals,

performance measures, and monitoring and reporting results. In the statement the

Department of Education placed the following data on high school graduation rates

according to Statistics Canada, which is different than provincial data because of

differing calculation methods.

> For example, in 1996 the high school graduation rate for First Nations, Métis and
> Inuit learners was 15% less than those individuals who did not report Aboriginal
> ancestry on the Census for Stats Canada. About 4% of First Nations, Métis and
> Inuit learners completed university compared to about 14% of individuals who
> did not report Aboriginal ancestry on the Census. (p. 11)

The Department of Education provided the following data for high school completion rates of First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners in provincial schools and for comparative data for non-Aboriginal learners.

- The 2009 – 2010 Education Annual Report indicates that high school completion rates among self-identified First Nations, Métis and Inuit students were: 47.3% in 2006 – 2007, 47.8% in 2007 – 2008 and 45.8% in 2008 – 2009 within five years of entering grade 10.
- In 2008 – 2009 the comparable provincial high school rate was 79% (data from Alberta Connects, spring 2011). (It is interesting to note that the difference between the high school completion data for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students was much more than 15% as reported above by Statistics Canada. Data were obtained by differing calculation methods.)

The five goals of the 2002 *First Nations, Métis and Inuit education policy framework* are:

Goal 1: High quality learning opportunities that are responsive, flexible, accessible, and affordable to the learner.
- Identify and reduce barriers preventing First Nations, Métis and Inuit learner and community access and success.
- Prepare and support educators to meet the needs of First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners and communities effectively.
- Use effective communication practices (e.g. Indigenous languages) to improve the information flow between government and First Nations, Métis and Inuit parents and communities.
- Strengthen the use, sharing, recognition and value of Indigenous knowledge and languages.
- Ensure education governance structures are representative of and responsive to First Nations, Métis and Inuit learner, parent community needs.

Goal 2: Excellence in learner achievement.
- Recognize and honor excellence in learner achievement and parental support.
- Maintain high achievement expectations for First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners.
- Increase the knowledge and understanding of First Nations, Métis and Inuit cultures, and increase the level of support to teachers, other instructors, and school and institution administrators and personnel.
- Raise the educational attainment of First Nations, Métis and Inuit people living in Alberta to levels comparable to that of the general Alberta population and to community expectations.
- Develop processes that will improve the reporting of First Nations, Métis and Inuit learner outcomes.

- Provide opportunities for parental participation in decisions affecting their children's education.
- Research, develop, share and implement with stakeholders successful teaching, learning and assessment models for First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners.

Goal 3: Learners are well-prepared for participation in post-secondary studies and the labor market.
- Increase the number of First Nations, Métis and Inuit high school graduates making a successful transition into a post-secondary diploma or degree program, apprenticeship training, or employment.
- Increase the number of career planning programs and services throughout the learning system.
- Provide choices and bridges to post-secondary learning opportunities for First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners participating in academic upgrading programs.
- Provide programs for First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners that reinforce cultural and linguistic identity, enhance character development, and develop life management skills.

Goal 4: Effective working relationships.
- Recognize and respect the role of, and invite participation from, Elders and community resource people.
- Respect and follow protocols during collaborative initiatives and consultation activities with First Nations, Métis and Inuit people.
- Support the capacity of school divisions and post-secondary institutions to dialogue, plan, and make decisions with First Nations, Métis or Inuit parents, authorities and communities.
- Develop and sustain meaningful relationships with First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners and parents, First Nations, Métis and Inuit Authorities, the federal government, school jurisdictions, post-secondary institutions, industry, and other stakeholders.

Goal 5: Highly responsive and responsible ministry.
- Report First Nations, Métis and Inuit learner achievements and results of the implementation of the policy framework.
- Develop and support ministry structures and practices that foster optimal working relationships with First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities including parents, and education authorities.
- Seek First Nations, Métis and Inuit community input on the ministry's three-year business plan.
- Support the capacity of First Nations, Métis and Inuit authorities to respond to the educational needs of learners within their communities.
- Raise awareness, understanding and respect of First Nations, Métis and Inuit worldviews among ministry staff and all Albertans. (pp. 11 – 14)

The strategies for achieving the five goals were:

Achieving Goal 1: High quality learning opportunities that are responsive, flexible, accessible, and affordable to the learner.

- Strategy 1.1 Increase the quantity and quality of First Nations, Métis and Inuit curriculum, language, learning and teaching resources.
- Strategy 1.2 Increase the availability of relevant K-12 and post-secondary information resources and services for First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners, parents and communities.
- Strategy 1.3 Encourage First Nations, Métis and Inuit participation in governance structures in school jurisdictions and post-secondary institutions.
- Strategy 1.4 Create mechanisms and consultative processes to improve First Nations, Métis and Inuit learner success.
- Strategy 1.5 Increase First Nations, Métis and Inuit learner access to post-secondary and other adult training opportunities and support services.
- Strategy 1.6 Ensure financial need is not a barrier to First Nations, Métis and Inuit learner participation.

Achieving Goal 2: Excellence in learner achievement.

- Strategy 2.1 Increase the attendance, retention and graduation rates of First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners attending provincial schools.
- Strategy 2.2 Increase the number of First Nations, Métis and Inuit teachers and school/institution personnel.
- Strategy 2.3 Increase awareness, knowledge and understanding of First Nations, Métis and Inuit history, lands, rights, languages, cultures, and contemporary perspectives on governance, education, science, wellness and other issues.
- Strategy 2.4 Facilitate the continuous development and delivery of First Nations, Métis and Inuit courses and professional development opportunities for aspiring and existing administrators, teachers/instructors and school/institution personnel.
- Strategy 2.5 Improve mechanisms to measure First Nations, Métis and Inuit learner success.
- Strategy 2.6 Improve the assessment of First Nations, Métis and Inuit leaner achievement.

Achieving Goal 3: Learners are well prepared for participation in post-secondary studies and the labor market.

- Strategy 3.1 Increase literacy opportunities for First Nations, Métis and Inuit children and adults.
- Strategy 3.2 Support arrangements to increase First Nations, Métis and Inuit learner enrolment in post-secondary programs of study.
- Strategy 3.3 Increase the linkages between education and employment for First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners.

- Strategy 3.4 Work with stakeholders to provide relevant career and labor market information resources and services to First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners, parents and communities.

Achieving Goal 4: Effective working relationships.
- Strategy 4.1 Establish mechanisms to increase First Nations, Métis and Inuit participation in policy development, decision-making, accountability, and issue resolution (e.g. increase collaboration and consultation).
- Strategy 4.2 Build working relationships that will contribute to quality learning opportunities for First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners (e.g. build relationships to support a First Nations, Métis and Inuit Learning Resource Council).
- Strategy 4.3 Identify and reduce barriers to First Nations, Métis and Inuit learner success.

Achieving Goal 5: Highly responsive and responsible ministry.
- Strategy 5.1 Enhance performance measurement, performance assessment and results reporting.
- Strategy 5.2 Improve ministry coordination and capacity to respond effectively to opportunities and challenges associated with issues of importance to First Nations, Métis and Inuit people.
- Strategy 5.3 Improve communication practices with First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities and organizations.
- Strategy 5.4 Improve ministry awareness and understanding of First Nations, Métis and Inuit history, lands, rights, languages, and cultures. (pp. 16 – 20)

Appendix E: Tables of Summaries of Stories Provided by Research Participants

Table 1: Summary of Barriers to High School Completion

Legend: 1 = student responses
2 = adult responses
3 = Elder responses

Family Background
Two parent caregivers – maybe lenient parents **1, 2, 3**
Single parent caregiver – mother, can't make children go to school, afraid of mother in child welfare cases, mother loss of culture and identity in urban environment **2, 3**
Grandmother caregiver, loss of culture and identity in urban environment **2, 3**
Foster home, group home **1, 2, 3**
No caregivers, family aren't there **2, 3**
Tired caregivers **2**
No food, no clothes, rent not paid **3**
Girl child works in the home **2**
Problems at home **1, 2, 3**
Guardian, parent had bad experiences in schools **2, 3**
Parents don't get involved in children's education **2, 3**
Adults don't value education **2, 3**
Parents pull kids out of school **3**
No support at home, father/mother not listening, no one to talk to at home **2, 3**
Parents/family are drinking **1, 2, 3**
Siblings, relatives quit school **1, 2, 3**

School-Related Characteristics
Poor relationships with teachers **1, 2, 3**
Poor relationships in classrooms – curriculum content, academics "too hard", Aboriginal culture not infused in curriculum **1, 2, 3**
Poor relationships with peers – in hallways, playgrounds, school yard **2, 3**
Trouble in school **1, 2, 3**
Stress, frustration in schools **1, 2**
"Too gay, dumb, stupid" (Not interesting, boring, irrelevant) **1, 2, 3**
"Dream crushers" (teachers/administration tell students they won't make it; can't be what they dream of becoming), labeling by teachers **1, 2, 3**
"Too much drama" (bullying) **1, 2**
Friends quit school – peer influence **1, 2, 3**
"Teachers/Schools Weren't Welcoming, I Felt Trapped" **1, 2, 3**
No significant adult in schools **2**
Girls do poorly in Mathematics and Science **2**
Embarrassment in front of peers **1, 2**
Legislated to go to school until 16 years of age **2**
Teachers unprepared to teach Aboriginal students (lack of KSAs – Knowledge, Skills, Attributes), "teachers don't understand me" **1, 2, 3**
Teachers focus on curriculum, not students **2**
Lack of student engagement in classes **2**
Archaic education system, buildings **2**
Attendance, rather stay at home to play videogames, don't want to walk to school, other excuses, truancy, lateness, skip school/class **1, 2, 3**
Failure, don't study or try on exams, class work **1, 2, 3**
Placement in special education program **1, 2**

No help with homework **1, 2**
Teachers try to block culture in schools, question cultural practices, e.g. think smudging is a fire hazard, offering tobacco as smoking **2, 3**
Exclusion **2, 3**
Suspension/expulsion **1, 2, 3**
Unhappy in schools and how have been taught, educators haven't met their needs **1, 2, 3**
Residential school experiences (including boarding schools, technical schools) **2, 3**
Facing racism, prejudice in schools **1, 3**

Personal-Related Characteristics
Imbalanced priorities **1, 2, 3**
Peer pressure **1, 2, 3**
Mental, physical, sexual abuse, incest **1, 2, 3**
Teen pregnancy – "babies having babies", child apprehension (removed) **1, 2, 3**
Addictions – drugs, alcohol, smoking **1, 2, 3**
Violence – fighting, stabbings **2, 3**

Demographic Factors Facing Aboriginal People
"The Churn" – students move between provincial and federal schools **1, 2, 3**
Classism - poverty and loss of pride **2, 3**
Racism, discrimination, prejudice **1, 2, 3**
Lack of sense of belonging **1, 2, 3**
Sexism, gender **1, 2, 3**

Sexual and mental abuse, incest **1, 2, 3**
Gangs **2, 3**
Residential schools **1, 2, 3**
Negative effects of colonization **2, 3**
Assimilation **2, 3**
Lack of Indigenous culture, lack of identity **1, 2, 3**
Urban lifestyle issues – boys need "coin", girls need to prove themselves **3**

Table 2: Summary of Goals and Purposes of Education

Legend: 1 = student responses
           2 = adult responses
           3 = Elder responses

Aesthetic Education
Self-fulfillment **2**
Honor, sense of pride **1, 2, 3**
"I love to learn", "I love school" **1, 2**
To have a dream **3**
Family responsibilities **1**
Determination **1**

Economic Education
Get a job **1, 2, 3**
Get a career **1, 2, 3**
Higher education **1, 2, 3**

Ideology of Education by Mainstream Society
Citizenship **2, 3**
Life skills **2, 3**
Clashes, conflict with mainstream indoctrination **2, 3**
Adopt Western way **2, 3**

Ideology of Education of Aboriginal People
Getting grounded **2**
Identity, Aboriginal culture, traditions, Indigenous knowledge **2, 3**
Indigenous space **2**
Relational **2**
Resolving issues through mediation **2**
Work with Aboriginal people **1 , 2, 3**
"To have a good life" **1, 2, 3**
"Fighting welfare lines", "Don't want to be like other people on my reserve" **1, 2, 3**
"Education is our buffalo" **3**
"You can go to the moon", do anything you want **3**

Table 3: Summary of Supports for High School Completion

Legend: 1 = student responses
2 = adult responses
3 = Elder responses

Family, Foster homes, Friends
Family, mom, dad, brothers **1, 2**
Foster family **1**
Friends **1**
Parental involvement in schools **1, 2**

Teachers, Educators, Support Programs, Board Policies
Teachers **1, 2, 3**
Education **1**
Homework helpers **1**
Some provision of basic needs for students, some programs, such as limited food and beverages **3**
Hot lunch programs, after school programs, intramurals, sports **1, 2, 3**
Targeted high school completion by school board **2**
School board policy and regulations on assessment for learning **2**
Community programs **2**
Support programs with different organizations in schools **2**

Holistic Indigenous Programs, Culture, Elders
Aboriginal Youth & Family Well-being & Education Society **1, 2, 3**
Education mentors, program's tutors, liaison worker, support workers **1, 2**
Inclusion/integration of Aboriginal students in programs (not isolated) **2**
Aboriginal learning center in schools **2**
Elders' Council – relationship with Elders and trustees, meetings and policy documents, integrate Elders into advisement processes such as hiring, holistic Elder support in schools, work together **2, 3**
Elders teach educators/teachers **3**
Increased number of Aboriginal staff in schools **2**
Curriculum development with Indigenous focus, see Aboriginal people as role models in texts/materials **2**
Hosted Aboriginal students' gatherings **2**
Cultural events such as Aboriginal day celebrations, ceremonies, Aboriginal cultural practices, crafts, dance, language, natural law, Sacred Circle teachings **2, 3**
Trustees interest in Aboriginal student awareness **2**
Open door policy to support Aboriginal students **2**
Program's focus on passing each subject **2**
Program operates in schools and classrooms **2**
Holistic program for the heart, spirit and brain **2**
Counsellor point of view **2**
Transitions work from elementary to junior high, junior high to high school **2**
Student led activities/events, native humor **2**
Connected Indigenous activities raises identity, heritage, hope, Aboriginal pride **2, 3**
Encourage Aboriginal students to work at par with mainstream students **2**

Significant Adult in Schools
Elders **2, 3**
Education mentors **1, 2**
Support workers **2**
Tutors **2**
Tutors **1, 2**
Teachers **1, 2**
Significant adult to talk to **2**

Table 4: Summary of Gaps for High School Completion

Legend: 1 = student responses
         2 = adult responses
         3 = Elder responses

Family
Dad **1**
Real family **1**
Brother – helped with homework **1**

Lack of Supports, not enough supports
Lack of teacher support/lack of teacher respect **1, 2**
Support of administrators **3**
Lack of support of some people, more supports for students and families **1, 3**
Lack of finances to attend college ("free education") **1**
Funding gaps for programs **3**
Gaps in services, provision of basic needs **3**
Too embarrassed to ask for help in school, feel "stupid" **1**
Being rushed in school **1**
More organizations like AY&FW&ES **2**
More Aboriginal teachers, principals, support staff **2, 3**
Teachers as role models **2**
Accountability to measure success of programs **2**
Lack of participation in programs due to poverty **2**

Lack of care and attention **2**
Teacher training outdated and incorrect, training for post-secondary administrators, staff orientation **2, 3**
Differing ideologies, power and control **2**
Policies, misuse of Aboriginal identity **2**

Lack of Understanding of Indigenous Culture
Lack of Aboriginal and Indigenous meaning, understanding Indigenous culture **2, 3**
Maintaining traditional knowledge **3**
More cultural awareness, traditional teachings and traditional knowledge **3**
Hiring policies gaps **2**
Lack of/enough Indigenous cultural and history programming **2**
Indigenous identity, cultural foundation, reductionism **2**
Lack of Indigenous relationships and relationality **2**
Political meaning – First Nations, Aboriginal, Métis, land-based **2**
Historical context of nationhood **2**
Gaps in Aboriginal policy **2**
Who controls knowledge? **3**

Awareness/"What is Out There?"
Don't know what is missing **1**
Don't know what is at stake ("on the line") **1**
Don't know what is available **1, 2**

Where to look for available programs **2**
Parental awareness, "finding my way in the city" **2**
Staying aware of how children are doing in school, finding someone who knows **2**

Table 5: Summary of Awareness for High School Completion

Legend: 1 = student responses
2 = adult responses
3 = Elder responses

Knowledge is Power
What to learn **1**
What kind of life if I don't finish high school **1**
Fear of unknown **1**
Be aware of what is available/out there/going on **1, 2, 3**
Have information to give to students **2**
Knowledge is power **2**
Aboriginal awareness training **2**
Political challenges **2**
Systemic pushbacks **2**
Education policies **3**
Keeping everyone aware/what's being done/can be done **3**

Self-Awareness – What is out there? What helps, what hinders?
How to ask questions/ask for help/ask for homework **1**
Fear of failure/don't be afraid **1, 3**
What do I need to know **1**
Need help in certain courses/provincial exams **1**
What is out there/where do I find out **2, 3**

Post-secondary opportunities **2**
Don't want kids to drop out to pursue trades **2**
Need knowledge to stay "open" **2**
What organizations/agencies help Aboriginal students/stay connected/share programs **2**
Trends in Aboriginal student success **2**
Parents-how to guide own children, Elders how to help students **2, 3**
Computer knowledge **2**
What are teachers being taught/administrators' training **2**
Curriculum content **2**
What happens outside classroom **2**
Be aware of many things at many levels **2, 3**

Support and Relationships
Students want to know they have support/belief they can do it **1**
Parents' support **1**
Teachers know what is needed **1**
Build positive relationships with students/positive support to stay in school **2**
Find out what are student likes/dislikes **2**
Provide breakfast, hot lunch program, snacks, bus tickets **2**
Student input into program 2
Communication with students and parents **2**
Support parents and single moms/what parents are missing/involve parents in the program **2**
Education isn't just in the classroom **2**

What support/agencies are out there –tap into them **3**

Knowing our Indigenous Students and their Cultural Needs
Get to know our kids in the program/- backgrounds and interests/put names to faces/tracking students/self-identification **2, 3**
What avenues are there for Aboriginal kids **2**
Attend/perform cultural events, ceremonies and traditions **2, 3**
Pride of Aboriginal people **2**
Tante ohci kiya-where are you from and our relatives **2**
Non-threatening meetings in the home **2**
Being comfortable with students **2**
Knowing students' daily needs/what is in the way of going to school **2**
Building trust **2**
Personal relationships **2**
Students feel safe, respected, in touch with who they are **2**
Happiness indicators, other indicators to measure high school completion **2**
"It's all about money" – budgets **3**
Accountability – promises are kept **3**

Table 6: Summary of Solutions for High School Completion

Legend: 1 = student responses
           2 = adult responses
           3 = Elder responses

Family Background
"It would be good to have a parent" **1**
Friends – would like more **1**
100% parental involvement **2**
Extended families **2**
Relationship building between parent and the student **3**
Helping parents **3**

School-Related Characteristics
Someone to trust in schools **1**
Suitable teacher **1**
No bullying **1**
Encourage kids **1**
Stay in school **1**
Support of teachers, those with authority and others **1**
Free transportation **2**
Helpful personnel in schools **2**
No poverty, "money isn't an issue" **2**
Coding and labeling are gone **2**

Build center for the arts **2**
Revamp education system **2**
Urban scape **2**
Separate Indigenous school system **2**
School governance **2**
Future look for Indigenous education **2**
Traditional teaching **3**
Maintaining agencies and programs **3**
Funding for schools for Aboriginal students **3**

Personal-Related Characteristics
Get rid of drugs, alcohol **1, 3**
Good attendance **1**
Stay in schools **1**
Self-Empowerment – power for solutions **1**
Stand up for yourself **1**
Keep up with school work and homework **1**
Mentors **2**
Role models **2**
No more gangs **2**
Setting goals **3**
Remaining connected **3**
Equality, respect, honor, self-esteem **3**

Demographic Factors Facing Aboriginal People
Racism **1, 3**
Control – Residential schools 2.0 (two point 0) **2**
More Aboriginal agencies, teachers, representation in schools **2**
Equity for Aboriginal students **2**
Elders' role **2, 3**
Self-determination **2**
Holistic way of learning/approach **2, 3**
Indigenous culture included **2**
Empowering the people **2**
Indigenous ways of knowing **2**
Facing discrimination, labelling **3**
Indigenous background **3**
Urban issues, classism **3**