

**Mapping the Experiences and Effects of Colonial Material Deprivation in First Nations  
Early Childhood Education**

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## Abstract

Although considerable attention over the past 50 years has been paid to decolonizing First Nations primary and secondary education in Canada, a similar unsettling of colonialism within early childhood education theory, philosophy, and policy has not yet been undertaken. Indeed, and despite “unsettling” colonial theory and policy on Indigenous populations on a global scale, no such similar examination has been undertaken in Canada.

Weaving together the fields of critical Indigenous and governmentality studies and critical theory, this dissertation seeks to methodologically trace the philosophy and objectives of Indigenous early childhood education throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries by situating it within the broader socio-historical and political context of First Nations education in Canada. To do this, this dissertation focuses on the experiences and perspectives of the Kee Tas Kee Now Tribal Council First Nations, and the newly formed Kee Tas Kee Now Tribal Council Education Authority (KTCEA), vis-a-vis early childhood development and education in their respective communities. This research took a mixed-methods approach where I weaved together a Critical Ethnographic Case study with Indigenous Research Methodology to elevate the voices and perspectives of the research participants. In total, I conducted eleven (11) semi-structured interviews with First Nations early childhood educators and administrators, KTCEA K-12 educators, and health program leadership. 80% of research participants for this research are Indigenous.

The questions that guided this research were: (1) In what ways have shifts in government policy and philosophy positively or negatively impacted First Nations ECD within the context of Indigenous Peoples’ self-determination in Canada and autonomy and the maintenance of social order? (2) In what ways have First Nations communities actively or

passively resisted these shifts? and (3) How can First Nations resistance within the context of First Nations ECD inform program and policy development in the future?

Similar to colonial policy frameworks within and across other social systems, where material deprivation has been used to shape and affect the pace and contours of assimilation, I argue that the sphere of First Nations early childhood education is also a site of prolonged and normalized site of material deprivation on a massive scale. This research questions and disrupts the neutrality and presumed benevolence of early childhood education philosophy and theory that informs current policy and program development for First Nations early childhood programs and services. This research concludes with an uncovering of the ways in which the failures of government manifest in the conditions of deep material deprivation endured by many First Nations children, which can and should be understood as one of the major contributors to the observed later poor social and economic outcomes. This early deprivation results in the maintenance of hierarchies of disadvantage and the social positioning of First Nations peoples as the underclass. This research also finds that, despite centuries of colonization and deprivation, First Nations peoples and communities have adapted through micro-resistance strategies to meet the needs of their communities and to arrest the tide of eurocentrism within education. This research concludes that decolonizing the philosophies of early childhood is understood less as the tracing of eurocentric philosophies, and more of a purposeful uncovering of the “real and symbolic violence of settler colonialism” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 3) through underfunding and deprivation. This work contributes to a growing body of scholarly work (Mosby, 2013; Mosby & Galloway, 2017; Daschuk, 2006, 2019; Neu & Therrien, 2003; Shewell, 2004) that identifies the contours and depths of deprivation by the government within First Nations early childhood education as a tool of oppression for First Nations peoples and

identifies system-level interventions in which First Nations communities can move forward to support current and future generations.

## **Preface**

This thesis is an original work by Tibetha Kemble. No part of this thesis has been previously published. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Ethics Board, Project Name “DECOLONIZING THE PHILOSOPHY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD,” No. Pro00073639, February 10, 2017.

## **Dedication**

For Annette, Patricia, and Nitânis.

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## **Glossary of Terms**

AFN: Assembly of First Nations

AHSOR: Aboriginal Head Start On Reserve

AHSUNC: Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities

APTN: Aboriginal Peoples Television Network

ASQ: Ages and Stages Questionnaire

BCCE: Building Collaboration and Capacity in Education

BOFF: Band Operated Funding Formula

DIAND: Department of Indian and Northern Development

ECD: Early Childhood Development

ECE: Early Childhood Education

ECS: Early Childhood Services

EDPS: Educational Policy Studies

ESA: Education Services Agreement

ESE: Elementary and Secondary Education

FNEA: First Nations Education Authority

FNPP: First Nations Partnership Programs

ICIE: Indian Control of Indian Education

IFNE: Innovations in First Nations Education

INAC: Indian and Northern Affairs Canada

IRM: Indigenous Research Methodology

KTC: Kee Tas Kee Now Tribal Council

KTCEA: Kee Tas Kee Now Tribal Council Education Authority

LTSAP: Long Term Strategic Action Plan

LSBC: Local School Board Committee

MOU: Memorandum of Understanding

NHS: National Household Survey

NSD: Northland School Division

OAG: Office of the Auditor General of Canada

OECD: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

PHAC: Public Health Agency of Canada

RCAP: Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples

REA: Regional Education Agreement

TRC: Truth and Reconciliation Commission

## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

This dissertation focuses on the experiences and perspectives of the Kee Tas Kee Now Tribal Council First Nations, and the newly formed Kee Tas Kee Now Tribal Council Education Authority, vis-a-vis early childhood development and education in their respective communities. This work is principally concerned with understanding and articulating the primary philosophy that undergirds early childhood education in First Nations communities as a means of building on the continuum of scholarly work dedicated to decolonizing Indigenous Peoples' education in Canada.

The objective of this research is to understand and identify any key early childhood philosophical theories within First Nations early childhood education that support and advance colonialism in ways that influence child development and behaviours so that they either conform Indigenous children to a dominant eurocentric ideology (eurocentrism), or reform to a desired end state (assimilation). The research questions that guided this research are:

1. In what ways have shifts in government policy and philosophy positively or negatively impacted First Nations ECD within the context of First Nations people's self-determination and autonomy and the maintenance of social order?
2. In what ways have First Nations communities actively or passively resisted these shifts?
3. How can First Nations resistance within the context of First Nations ECD inform program and policy development in the future?

The motivation for undertaking this research emerged from two sources. The first motivation arose from the unanswered questions I was left with after completing my Master's research on the Aboriginal<sup>1</sup> Head Start On Reserve (AHSOR) program. As a result of my research I concluded that, unlike comparative large-scale early intervention and education programs in the U.S., the Government of Canada was not assessing the extent to which the AHSOR was meeting its stated goals and objectives, nor was it evaluating the AHSOR's specific program outcomes on First Nations child development over time. As such, there was neither an understanding of the effectiveness of the AHSOR on First Nations child development, nor on

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this manuscript, I use the terms Indigenous, Aboriginal, and First Nations. For the most part, the term Indigenous is used to specify Indigenous Peoples of Canada; however, given the historical nature of the programs and documents I cite, the term Aboriginal appears throughout. In cases where programs such as the Aboriginal Head Start On Reserve (AHSOR) is cited and/or discussed, the term Aboriginal is used. Further in some instances I cite literature or discuss programs such as the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, and in these instances, the term Aboriginal is also used in its original form within the text.

First Nations children's school readiness; both important indicators of later success at school-entry and as they progress through the K–12 education system. My Master's research also identified lack of access, as well as poor monitoring, evaluation, and oversight of the ASHOR as a key factor in the reproduction of the disproportionately poor outcomes observed among the Indigenous population across health, education, child welfare, and the justice systems. Coming to this understanding was key to my awareness of: (1) the failure of the government to uphold its responsibilities and as a Treaty partner to act and be in good relation with Indigenous Peoples, and (2) the impact of the absence of rigorous policy and program frameworks and how this contributed to the cycles of oppression of Indigenous Peoples.

The second motivation arose from the understanding that although a significant amount of work had been done to decolonize K–12 education (see Battiste, 2013), a similar level of focus directed at decolonizing Indigenous early childhood had not been advanced.

I entered into this research with the intention of building on the work of Battiste (2013) and others who have articulated the powerful ways in which eurocentrism embedded within curricula dispossess Indigenous Peoples from their traditional ways of knowing and being and, as a result, advances the project of colonization through epistemic racism. Much of the literature reviewed for the purposes of this research, however, points to two important gaps. The first is that although non-Indigenous early childhood development programs have a range of philosophical origins, as evidenced in the literature, Indigenous early childhood education within the on-reserve context have very few. Aside vague policy and program frameworks that direct some early learning and development activities in programs such as the AHSOR, which has one undergirding philosophy of 'readiness', for the most part, the First Nations communities who participated in this research had woven traditional Indigenous philosophies in early childhood through their respective epistemologies, languages, values, and beliefs around non-Indigenous program frameworks, while maintaining and upholding their rights, traditions, and cultures as First Peoples. Furthermore, they were doing what they could with the limited resources they were given to ensure their children had what they needed to be successful. In that respect, there was a somewhat limited view of the ways in which eurocentric philosophy was embedded within Indigenous early childhood education as part of the larger colonial project of assimilation through education.

The second gap also emerged from the review of existing literature on Indigenous early learning and care in Canada. The review identified the ways in which early childhood was once also viewed by colonial governments as a tool for assimilation; however, over time the focus on early childhood waned, and in some respects was deeply misunderstood and misinterpreted. Furthermore, this literature also identified various responsive program elements within existing Indigenous early learning environments such as quality and self-determination, as well as approaches to the design and delivery of early childhood programs within First Nations communities. However, while the literature provides insights into the landscape of Indigenous approaches to the design and delivery of responsive and supportive approaches to early learning and care for Indigenous children, these scopes of literature did not uncover the ways in which colonialism operated within it. That is, there were very few, if any, discernable aspects of early childhood education where eurocentric philosophy was embedded, unlike the curricula within western mainstream K-12 education. As a result, this stage of development along the continuum of lifelong learning (and within the realm of Indigenous people's education) remained largely uninterrogated as a site of oppression and assimilation. Hence, a goal that emerged during this research process was to propose alternate, decolonized, and First Nations-centered possibilities for First Nations children that will disrupt the foundations and apparatuses of power.

Through participant interviews, no single theory of child development emerged dramatically; however, upon closer examination and analysis of the interview transcripts, constructivism, and the role of neuroscience emerged. This work revealed the ways in which the material deprivation endured by many First Nations children as a result of the failures of government significantly undermined their success in the early years and as they progressed through the K-12 system and into adulthood. The complexity of these failures, coupled with the persistent deprivation many Indigenous children endure throughout childhood, can be understood as one of the major contributors to later poor social and economic outcomes throughout the rest of First Nations children's lives<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, and as a result of these factors combined, it could be argued that the policy and funding deficit in which Indigenous early learning and care rests is a key part of the process of colonization that emerges across all social systems.

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<sup>2</sup> In several places throughout this dissertation, I have been careful to avoid declarative statements that universalize a state of deprivation among Indigenous children. Indeed, not every First Nation, Metis, or Inuit child is living in poverty and many Indigenous children are thriving and flourishing within their communities of origin.

Although I initially planned to engage with multiple First Nations communities in multiple case studies for this work, because of the existing relationship established between the KTC First Nations leadership and myself, I inquired directly and was granted permission to engage with all five (5) KTC First Nations for this study. Over the course of two years from 2017–2019, I worked with the KTC First Nations, and the KTC Education Authority, directly on an instrumental case study using semi-structured interviews with eleven (11) interview participants and experts from various KTC First Nations communities. Furthermore, while I initially also planned to examine policies, procedures, and other government documents in addition to participant interviews to understand the scope of change in colonial government objectives over time, what occurred instead was a more organic and richly informed process of gathering stories from interview participants and analyzing transcripts of our discussions for more meaningful themes and insights.

It was through this process that I came to understand the funding and policy deficit in which early childhood education in First Nations communities is situated, and that addresses the gaps in the literature about the philosophy of Indigenous early childhood education. More precisely, this deficit is where I came to understand how the philosophy of early childhood within First Nations communities was less concerned with intrusion and imposition of eurocentric ideology (as is the case for K–12 education) that intends to shape conduct of Indigenous Peoples towards assimilation, and more specifically concerned with the philosophy of deprivation that has served as the backdrop of the settler-colonial relationship since before and after the settlement of what is now known as Canada. The philosophy of deprivation, therefore, is traced back to a technique of government that advances the process of colonization within First Nations early childhood education through the absence of early childhood program policies or frameworks. The process of colonization is further advanced by not attending to or redressing the impacts of colonization that surround the child and the environments in which they must live and develop. Indeed, vague policy and program frameworks, coupled with vastly inequitable funding regimes across all social systems on-reserve and historical and ongoing trauma endured by parents remains largely unaddressed. These are instead downloaded and translated as ‘disengagement’ and are examples of the absence of government conduct. The absence of government conduct in this sense has, as its outcome, the shaping and mobilizing of ‘the self and community efforts within early childhood education around the manifestations of

colonialism that emerge in the forms of children being unprepared for school, and with regards to the vast numbers of Indigenous children who were deemed to have special needs. Rather, the behaviours of the community are focused on, and are mobilized around, attending to the manifestations of the failures of government, or the conduct of government. In essence, government, through their neglect and omission, have shaped the conduct of First Nations peoples and communities through distraction by deprivation, yet the overarching intent remains the same: assimilation and the reification of First Nations peoples as the underclass.

Despite the absence of a substantively equal funding base compared to non-First Nations children, the KTC First Nations; however, continued to develop and deliver community-based early learning and care programs against the backdrop of the philosophy of deprivation, while maintaining and strengthening the continuity of their respective languages, cultures, beliefs, and traditions. A key understanding that emerged from this research is that despite the contexts and conditions under which First Nations communities are expected to survive, and where children are expected to thrive, First Nations children on-reserve are placed on the losing edge of development relative to non-Indigenous children. This plays a significant role in later social and economic outcomes of First Nations peoples and communities on a massive scale.

## **Chapter Objectives**

The goal of this chapter is to frame this research by articulating the problem posited by various levels of government regarding early childhood development (ECD), particularly for Indigenous children, given the known positive correlation between ECD and later developmental and social outcomes. The objective is to highlight governmental shifts within Indigenous early childhood policy and philosophy over time by examining key policies and their theoretical and pedagogical underpinnings that have shaped early childhood education for Indigenous Peoples in Canada historically and in the present. Here I draw upon primary authors whose work has made important contributions in describing and analyzing the contours of early childhood education policy in Canada and also in New Zealand.

The chapter is structured as follows, the first section begins with the historical context of education for Indigenous children in Canada, focusing on the broad objectives and agendas that underpin colonial policy. Here I draw on policy documents by UNICEF who position ECD as a targeted investment that will produce cost-savings for governments, especially for groups within

society who, because of their low social location, place a burden later in life on government programs and services. This is followed by a statistical overview of the Indigenous population, and the Indigenous-child population in particular, who, given the rate of projected growth over time, present the greatest challenge to all levels of government. The final section of this chapter provides a brief overview of the objectives of this research, the theoretical frameworks that frame and position these objectives, followed by the anticipated significance of this work.

### **Historical Overview of First Nations Education**

On June 3, 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) concluded its mandate with the release of the final report and Calls to Action as a means of redressing the “legacy of residential schools and [to] advance the process of reconciliation” (TRC, 2015, p. 1). To achieve a state of reconciliation, the TRC contends that Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples must establish and maintain a mutually beneficial relationship that is aware of the past, the harm inflicted, and that takes action to change behaviour (TRC, 2015, p. 10). To ensure this process does not repeat “mistakes of the past” (TRC, 2015, p. 17), the TRC articulates that the principles, norms, and standards embedded within the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (United Nations, 2007) serve as a powerful framework for reconciliation. Most significantly, the TRC states that education will be the key to restoring the relationship between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Peoples in two ways. Firstly, under the Legacy areas of the Calls to Action, the TRC articulates a vision for the future where First Nations, Métis, and Inuit elementary, secondary, and post-secondary learners have equitable access to well-funded, high-quality education regardless of residence. To achieve this, the TRC Calls on all levels of government, as well as post-secondary institutions, to address the long-standing gaps in education and employment outcomes that arise principally from the chronic underfunding of Indigenous people’s education for more than seven decades. Secondly, under the Reconciliation areas of the Calls to Action, the TRC calls to all levels of government to make appropriate modifications to the content of education including curriculum, pedagogy, as well as structural changes to the funding and leadership regimes of post-secondary institutions. The intent of these calls to action is to make structural, ideological, and philosophical reforms that disrupt the roots of social inequity that have disproportionately plague Indigenous Peoples in Canada. With regards to early childhood education, or Call to Action #12, the TRC pays only

sparse attention to the role of Indigenous early childhood education in both the empowerment and rebuilding of Indigenous societies and to the emerging understanding (Battiste, 2002; Battiste, 2013) that decolonizing the ideological and philosophical foundations of early childhood and practice holds the greatest promise to affect the trajectory of social and structural inequalities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples in Canada.

Against the backdrop of the Calls to Action, the goal of this research was to examine the ways in which colonial philosophy of education embedded within early childhood education, coupled with an examination of early childhood education policy in particular, exerts and maintains control over the material and social conditions of Indigenous Peoples. I argue that the overarching colonial philosophy of material and social deprivation within the sphere of Indigenous early childhood serves to undermine cultural transmission of values, beliefs, and practices, in order to maintain deep social inequities. The two theoretical frameworks used for this research support the principle assertion of this research, namely, that governmental processes are neither benign nor neutral, but have a specific and intended purpose so as to achieve the subjugation of Indigenous Peoples as the underclass.

### **Background/Context: Framing the Problem**

Increased attention by the general public and all levels of government has been placed on early childhood development (ECD) in response to the known positive correlation to a child's participation in ECD programs in their formative years to improved social, economic, health, and other long-term outcomes experienced by ECD participants later in life. As national and global research contends (UNICEF, 2012a; UNICEF 2012b; Duncan et al., 2007), ECD plays a significant role in a child's ability to be ready-for-school at school entry; prepared for normative schooling within K–12 educational environments; and equipped with the social, emotional, and behavioural attitudes that ensure broader success at home, within their respective communities, and in society-at large as adults. Most notably, with the global rise of inequality (Dollar, 2002; Vieira, 2012; Chomsky, 1999) coupled with the troubling yet vast numbers of children who live in impoverished and vulnerable conditions, ECD programs have become increasingly important to governments given the widely acknowledged cost-savings of early interventions on the lives of impoverished children and families to later savings to over-burdened government-funded social programs and services.

Within the Canadian context, the recognition of the importance of ECD has recently re-emerged as an important aspect of the learning and developmental trajectory of young children. For instance, in the 2015 federal election campaign, the Liberal Party of Canada promised to establish and fund a National Early Learning and Child Care Framework “that meets the needs of Canadian families, wherever they live” by making investments that ensure “affordable, high-quality, flexible, and fully inclusive child care for Canadian families” (Liberal Party of Canada, 2015, p. 13). Several years after this election commitment was made, the Liberal party of Canada announced the release of the Multilateral Early Learning and Care Framework, and the Indigenous Early Learning and Care Framework in 2017 and 2018 respectively, in order to “set the foundation for governments to work toward a shared long term vision where all children can experience the enriching environment of quality early learning and child care that supports children’s development to reach their full potential” (Government of Canada, 2018a). Further, the federal government committed to “work to[gether to] co-develop a transformative Indigenous framework that reflects the unique cultures, aspirations and needs of First Nations, Inuit and Métis children across Canada” (Government of Canada, 2018a). For many, the formal establishment of both frameworks responds to the rising awareness of the lack of accessible and affordable national, provincial, and/or regional support, programs, and services for children in their earliest years. Even more, commitments to investments in ECD are responsive to the understanding that “children are the foundation of sustainable development” (UNICEF, n.d., para. 1) of nations and play a “vital role in building human capital” (n.d., para. 1). UNICEF further states,

Economic analysis from the developed and developing world is converging on a set of conclusions, with the main being that investing in the earliest years leads to some of the highest rates of return to families, societies, and countries.... [ECD] is important because they help mitigate the impact of early adverse experiences, which if not addressed lead to poor health, poor educational attainment, economic dependency, increased violence and crime... all of which add to the cost and burden in society. (UNICEF, 2013, para. 1)

In this regard, ECD has become widely acknowledged as the most effective and practical investment made by governments who work to alleviate and/or mitigate ‘adverse experiences’ such as poverty, marginalization, and exclusion without having to adjust or disrupt deep, systemic, and systematic inequalities within society. At the same time, investments in ECD also

enable governments to make targeted investments that secure a sustainable, reliable, and able-bodied future workforce. Increasing numbers of children and youth who would otherwise have been excluded due to social and economic marginalization, are now provided with the early education that will equip them with the skills, aptitudes, abilities, and knowledge that would have been lost.

While a significant amount of research has indeed confirmed the importance of ECD on the lives of children, what has yet to be fully articulated is the extent to which – especially within the Canadian context and in direct relation to the Indigenous Peoples of Canada – early childhood development remains largely uncontested as “bias free”, “apolitical”, “neutral”, or “value free” aspect of education and educational policy in Canada (Derman-Sparks et al., 2015; de Leeuw & Greenwood, 2014, in May et al., 2014, p xxii). Indeed, and as previously noted, ECD has served, and continues to serve, as a means by which governments can achieve cost-savings on social programs while simultaneously building a workforce for the future sustainability of the nation. It is my contention that this is purposefully achieved by manipulating policy to respond to the social and material conditions necessary to maintain the productive capacity of the nation whilst maintaining and reproducing the social order. When situated against the backdrop of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, the National Indian Brotherhood’s *Indian Control of Indian Education*, and the Calls to Action by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, ECD theory and policy in Canada can therefore be understood as part the larger colonial enterprise of coercion and assimilation that continues to have a devastating impact on Indigenous Peoples (Battiste, 2013).

### **Articulating the Impact: A Statistical Profile of Indigenous Peoples in Canada**

The recent National Household Survey (NHS) (Statistics Canada, 2013b) highlights important demographic trends in respect of the Indigenous population in Canada. Namely, Statistics Canada confirmed previous demographic estimates that suggested that not only would Indigenous peoples be the youngest group of people in Canada, but that this population would also likely increase at a rate that far exceeded their non-Indigenous counterparts (Malenfant & Morency, 2011). In a summary of the 2011 NHS, Statistics Canada (2013b) estimates that between 2006–2011 the Indigenous population in Canada increased by 20.1% from 1,168,300 to over 1,400,000 (p. 4). Whereas Indigenous peoples once only accounted for 2.8% of the total

population in Canada in 1996, they now represent over 4.3%; thus, representing a rate of growth nearly four times that of their non-Indigenous counterparts. By 2016, the Indigenous population in Canada had increased from 1,169,435 in 2006 to over 1,673,700 in 2016 (Statistics Canada, 2020) representing a 43 percent change over the course of 10 years.

According to the 2016 Census, the majority (58.3%, 977,230) of the Indigenous population in Canada is represented by First Nations people. Métis people are the second largest Indigenous group (587,545 persons) and represent more than 35% of the total Indigenous population. The smallest Indigenous identity groups identified in the 2016 Census were the Inuit (65,025 persons) and represented approximately 4% of the total Indigenous population (Statistics Canada, 2017a).

### ***Statistical Profile of First Nations Children and the Elderly in Canada***

Another important finding in the 2016 Census was that the Indigenous population was significantly younger than the rest of Canada and that,

Around one-third of First Nations people (29.2%) were 14 years of age or younger in 2016—over four times the proportion of those 65 years of age and older (6.4%). For Métis, 22.3% of the population was 14 years of age or younger, compared with 8.7% who were 65 years of age and older. Among Inuit, one-third (33.0%) were 14 years of age or younger, while 4.7% were 65 years of age and older. (Statistics Canada, 2017a).

In comparative terms, the proportion of Indigenous children under the age of 14 was nearly double that of non-Indigenous children in that “there were 5.2 million non-Aboriginal children aged 14 and under in Canada, representing 16.5% of the non-Aboriginal population” (Statistics Canada, 2013b, p. 15). The National Household Survey and the 2016 Census also reveal other important trends in that there appears to be an inverse trend in the data for Indigenous Peoples and non-Indigenous people in respect of their aging and/or senior population. According to Statistics Canada (2013b), there are far fewer Indigenous Peoples over the age of 65 (5.9% of the total Indigenous population) in comparison to non-Indigenous peoples whose elderly/senior population was nearly double (14.2%). Thus, data from the NHS suggests that while Canada’s non-Indigenous population is characterised by a large cohort of senior citizens and a smaller cohort of children under the age of 14, the Indigenous population; however, is

directly inverse in that the elderly Indigenous population is shrinking while the younger population is increasing at an unprecedented, and paralleled, rate.

Considering that the population of Indigenous Peoples at the turn of the century was estimated to be scarcely more than 100,000 (Trovato & Romaniuk, 2014; Trovato & Aylsworth, 2012), the substantial population growth among Indigenous peoples in Canada represents resurgence in the face of centuries of ongoing colonial violence enacted by the federal government through various policies and carried out by other levels of government and or faith-based institutions. Even further, while the population growth is indeed significant, these data sets also present considerable challenges to all levels of government in respect of meeting the growing demands by Indigenous peoples for programs and services within the on and off reserve contexts to address the persistent economic, social, health, and other disparities (or “gaps”). Although the vast disparities in outcomes between First Nations and non-First Nations peoples was first chronicled and articulated by H. B. Hawthorn in his report entitled *A Survey of Contemporary Indians* in 1967, very little has changed in relation to the social, economic, and educational outcomes of First Nations peoples within Canada despite numerous and repeated calls to action. Moreover, and with special consideration to low levels of educational achievement (Statistics Canada, 2013b; The Senate, 2011), higher incidences of child welfare apprehensions (Tromce et al, 2004; Mandell et al, 2007; Blackstock, 2005; Bennett et al, 2005), the disproportionate depths of poverty (Wilson & Macdonald, 2010; Silver, 2014; Mackinnon, 2013; Collin & Jensen, 2009), high unemployment levels (Statistics Canada, 2011; Mendelson, 2004; Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC), 2013), and disproportionate and increasing rates of incarceration among Indigenous groups in Canada (Correctional Services Canada, 2013; Justice Canada, 2020), some have argued that the vast delta between First Nations peoples and all others is so wide it can be called nothing short of a crisis (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015).

Despite increased attention by various levels of government about the detrimental social and economic costs of these gaps, the National Council on Welfare (2007) concludes “To date, no governmental response had made major inroads into the issues” (p. 9) and that “Sadly not much has changed ...despite a succession of agreements and publications geared towards improving the living conditions of Aboriginal people” (p. 9). For the most part, the widening gap in all social outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada over the past

six decades carries significant social and economic costs. In a report for the Centre for the Study of Living Standards, Sharpe, Arsenault, Lapointe & Cowan (2009) concluded:

the fiscal cost of the Aboriginal population's above average use of government services related to subpar levels of social well-being was an estimated \$6.2 billion in fiscal year 2006 [and] Assuming the fiscal cost grows at the same rate as the Aboriginal population, it is expected to increase to \$8.4 billion (2006 dollars) in 2026. (p. vii)

Sharpe et al. (2009) further contend:

If... the Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal employment rate gap and employment income gaps at each level of educational attainment were eliminated, the potential contribution of Aboriginal Canadians to Canadian GDP over the 2001–2026 period would increase to \$401 billion, or up to a 00.68 percentage point increase in annual average output growth rate. (p. vi)

As concern related to the rising social and economic costs of the Indigenous/non-Indigenous gap increases (coupled with the knowledge and awareness of a burgeoning population boom), a plethora of government interventions and preventative measures (see: Social Programs, Government of Canada, 2012a) have been undertaken in both urban and on-reserve contexts as a means of primarily curbing and controlling federal and provincial fiscal expenditures and secondarily, to work towards some measure of social justice through the improvement of social parity between the groups. However, while there continues to be a strong focus on social programming (i.e.: Income Assistance, Work-for-Welfare, National Child Benefit) to achieve these objectives, it has been widely recognized and accepted amongst stakeholders that education holds the most significant promise in fostering the necessary changes that would, presumably, lend towards lasting social, educational, and economic change. This is due, in large part, to the role of education and the propensity to “lift up” and/or alleviate a wide array of social maladies (i.e. high unemployment, low enrolment in post-secondary education, high rates of social dependency – to name only a few) that, more often than not, affect society's racialized underclass.

The last six decades of educational policy reform and intervention in respect of Indigenous Peoples have been marked by intense focus on improving educational outcomes of Indigenous students, and of First Nations students specifically (AANDC, 2014), in the hopes of altering the negative life-trajectories that affect far too many First Nations people across Canada.

However, despite this increased focus and attention, the “very serious problem with the provision of First Nations education has persisted” (The Senate, 2011, p. 1) culminating what the Senate has called a state of “crisis” (p. 1) in education where for some First Nations communities a “staggering 7 out of 10 students will not graduate from high school this year” (p. 1). The Office of the Auditor General of Canada (2018) also notes that despite positive reform efforts by First Nations themselves, the pervasive underfunding of First Nations education by the federal government has led to worsened graduation rates and student outcomes.

### ***Shifting the Focus of Education Reform: On-Reserve Early Childhood Education in Canada***

As efforts to affect improvements in educational outcomes for First Nations students is ongoing, and have thus far focussed almost singularly on the K–12 environment and structural reform (AANDC, 2014), there is growing recognition among Indigenous communities (Assembly of First Nations [AFN], 2012a) and “sense among some educational stakeholders that a critical part of the solution lay outside the purview of K–12 education, namely, within early preschool years” (Preston et al., 2011, p. 4). Preston et al. (2011) contend that the “provision of quality early childhood education holds educational, social, economic and political potential for Aboriginal peoples” (p. 13) since:

Aboriginal early childhood education is about preparing children to be better equipped to start school, thereby creating the potential for parity in educational achievement between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal learners...especially in terms of high school graduation...[and it is] a critical first step. (p. 13)

The conclusions made by Preston et al. (2011) reflect a growing trend among those within the field of education and educational policy, most notably among those who work with “vulnerable” or “at-risk” populations, that suggests that the provision of early childhood education (ECE) is a “powerful framework for improving equity in access to education and in learning outcomes, especially for marginalized children” (UNICEF, 2012b, p. 17). Even further, other national and international studies (Janus & Duku, 2007; Janus & Hughes, 2010; UNICEF, 2011; Duncan et al., 2007) similarly conclude that ECD and school readiness have been shown to improve, among other things, success in school and school completion, later skill

development, and the acquisition of academic and labour-market competencies among the most disadvantaged groups.

Early childhood, therefore, has come to be understood as a critical site of preparation and intervention for millions of marginalized children globally who would have otherwise not had the same opportunities for early school success, as well as the strong foundations for later success in adulthood. It is unsurprising that local and national governments are focusing on providing early years programming to those most likely to be impacted by social and structural inequality so as to positively affect and reduce later social and economic costs. For Indigenous Peoples; however, both locally and abroad, state intervention at any stage of development, and perhaps most especially in the early years, is viewed cautiously. Against the backdrop of centuries of colonization and failed attempts at assimilation primarily through western education, as well as the long history of resistance by Indigenous Peoples to the imposition of non-Indigenous education, Indigenous early childhood education has remained largely out of view of the broader assimilation agenda within education. However, given the depth and breadth of social and economic inequalities between Indigenous Peoples and all others in Canada, as well as the protracted struggle for control over First Nations education, Indigenous early childhood must also be viewed within the broader assimilatory framework.

### **Theoretical and Methodological Frameworks**

This research identifies the ways in which early childhood education theory and philosophy have shifted over time to meet government expectations in the maintenance of social order, and social reproduction of, Indigenous Peoples. My research examines the impact of government influence over First Nations early childhood development programs, policies, and philosophies and explores the depth and nature of responses by First Nations communities. Using Foucault's theory of governmentality as the theoretical framework and Marx's notion of historical materialism as the methodological approach to the study of human societies and the maintenance of the material, social, and political conditions of societies, my research examines the ways in which the current economic and social conditions of First Nations peoples are upheld through various "institutions, procedures, analyses, and reflections [in education that] . . . allow the exercise of . . . specific, albeit complex forms, of power" (Foucault, 1991b, p. 102) that generate mentalities of rule over a territory and its peoples. Drawing on Tuhiwai-Smith

(2012), Foley (2002) and Foley & Valenzuela (2005), an Indigenous participatory critical ethnography methodology enabled me to examine in depth the ways in which Indigenous communities have resisted.

### **Researcher Position: My Story**

My birth name is Babygirl Stonechild and I am the daughter of Annette Marie Stonechild. I am a registered member of the Piapot Cree First Nation which is located in the southern part of Saskatchewan, just northeast of the city of Regina. Aside from the history I've gathered over the years about Chief Piapot (or Payipwât, or Kisikawasan), and the demography and governance profiles about the Piapot First Nation that I've monitored over the years on the Department of Indigenous and Northern Affairs' website, I know very little about my people and my community. In fact, I have never known my own people deeply, nor have I known the land, the customs, traditions, ceremonies, language, cosmologies or any other social/spiritual practices inherent to the peoples to whom I belong.

I was adopted from my community as a newborn and placed in the care of the Government of Saskatchewan in the summer of 1977. Three weeks later I was adopted into a non-Indigenous home in the City of Edmonton by two loving and caring parents who provided, nurtured, and loved me. My adoptive parents did the best they could to expose me to Indigenous culture in my early years and my dad, a teacher at the school, would take me to the Ben Calf Robe powwow, which, at the time, was held in the small gym at the school in Northeast Edmonton. I recall these moments vividly.

I remember the blue haze that covered the gym from cigarette smoke.

I remember men with jet black hair, carefully woven into braids, tied tightly at the ends with pieces of leather, that hung long and proud at the sides of their heads.

I remember the big drums.

I remember the singing.

I remember the regalia and the dances.

I remember that I wore sneakers and everyone else wore moccasins.

I remember that it felt alien to me.

But as I grew older and as my awareness about the various social policies enacted by the provincial and federal governments in respect of Indigenous Peoples throughout this time (and

most especially regarding Indigenous children), I grew increasingly curious about the context surrounding my adoption. And although my adoption records are now open to me, my curiosity remains, and I am rightfully cautious about what these records tell me. What questions I do have about my adoption rest squarely on the shoulders of my adoptive dad who is an old man now. In true form, he has been open to answering my questions using what little memory he has of that time, more than forty years ago.

Here's what I've learned so far:

(1) There were a lot of Indigenous kids in care at the time of my adoption.

Me: "What do you mean there were a lot of 'us'?"

Dad: "Beth, there were just so many of you. There were so many."

(2) He remembers advertisements in the paper about adopting "native kids."

(3) He remembers the sense of urgency by government agencies to get kids into adoptive homes.

My dad has always had a good sense of humour and although he jokes that it was "vogue" to adopt "native kids" in the late 70s, I know that he speaks of the undercurrent and pressure by the provincial and federal governments to try and solve the Indian problem through, among other things, adoption. I know that he speaks about social trends. I know that he means government policy.

Having said all this, given the timing of my adoption; the political backdrop within the Prairie provinces throughout this time; and the prevailing racist assumption about Indigenous Peoples as inferior and unable to care properly for their children, I am reluctant to say that my early years were without interference and/or apolitical. My childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood was, as is the case for thousands of other Indigenous children adopted out, were the product of policy.

I know that now.

It is part of my identity.

And it is upon me to share this part of my identity so that I can locate myself within the context of this research. I don't share this with you in order to justify my lack of connection, or awareness or knowledge of my people. And by justify, I mean that it has been my experience that when people find out I am adopted, they ask probing questions to see if I have taken the steps to "reclaim" my identity as an Indigenous person.

“Do you speak your language?”

“Have you gone back home?”

“Do you know your relations?”

For those who ask, I have come to understand that for many Indigenous identity means traditions, culture, language, and ceremony. As a number of other Indigenous people adopted out before or during the same time period have shared, reclaiming these parts of themselves has been paramount to reclaiming their identity. And I respect their path, but it is not my own. At least not yet.

But I don't long for customs, or ceremonies and I don't long to speak an Indigenous language. And I implore you to not interpret this as being flippant. Rather, I say it to be truthful and as a way of demonstrating what I believe to be the most fundamental part of my identity and experience as a First Nations woman and the driving force behind both this research and my own life. That is, the relationship between power and policy; the relationship between Indigenous women, their children, and government policy. My heart, mind, soul, and consciousness longs for something entirely different.

I long for what could have been.

I long for a life without political interference.

I long for my mother.

### ***On Joseph Boyden, Hayden King, and the Politics of Identity***

In late 2016, controversy surrounded the claims to Indigenous ancestry, and therefore Indigenous identity, by Canadian author Joseph Boyden. Following an investigative report by Jorge Barrera of the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN), it was determined that the claims Boyden had made both in the recent and distant past about his Indigenous identity could not, in fact, be supported by any ‘evidence’ and that his claims to Indigenous ancestry (and therefore his identity) went uncontested given the relative “ambiguity” (King, 2016, para. 3) about Indigenous identity in Canada. In the weeks and months that followed the release of APTN's story, anger and frustration among the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit about Boyden's misappropriation and fraud as a First Nations person, grew to deafening levels.

Although I tried in earnest to disconnect myself from the seemingly endless debates, anger-filled blogs, and news articles about the level of harm enacted by Boyden through his

misappropriation; I was unable to avoid it all. One day in particular I received a notification that Hayden King had written an op-ed piece for the Globe and Mail regarding the Joseph Boyden controversy.

King frames his article by listing the “ethnic-frauds...playing Indian” who have come before Boyden including: Andrea Smith, Susan Taffè Reed, Ward Churchill, Margaret Seltzer, and Archie Belaney, Espera Oscar deCorti, and Johnny Depp, to name only a few. King then transitions to describe, in his view, the pernicious effects of ethnic misrepresentation (or ethnic fraud) that emanate from a non-Indigenous person representing himself/herself as Indigenous. More simply, King suggests that Boyden’s misappropriation contributes, if not presents another barrier, to reconciliation as Boyden was merely another white person speaking *to* other white people *about* Indigenous people. King concludes by suggesting that Boyden most egregiously took up “time, spaces, and resources” (King, 2016, para. 8) that could have been filled by an Indigenous person.

As I do with most pieces of literature, I read and digested what King had to say, careful to consider each point. As I neared the end, I was struck by one passage in particular:

Ethnic fraud alienates those struggling to find their identities. Indigenous identity has been fragmented by maze-like colonial categories. So this discussion is not easy. **For those adopted or taken away from their communities**, or those dealing with assimilation’s toll; there are the light-skinned and light-eyed, the tens of thousands raised in cities, and of course the utterly devastating insistence on blood quantum by the federal government. **Many of the individuals trying to make their way back are all the more confused by the inconsistent and shifting parameters set by prominent ethnic frauds.** (King, 2016, para. 10, emphasis added)

As I read this passage I recoiled in disbelief that another Indigenous person could take it upon themselves to assume what I may be, or have, experienced in relation to my own identity-formation. I was insulted by the insinuation that as an adoptee, he believed that my experience positioned me as vulnerable; as someone waiting for someone else to define me, for someone else to lay down the parameters of my identity, for someone to tell what kind of Indian to be.

Maybe some of us adoptees are confused; maybe we’re not. Maybe some of us are trying to make our way back to our communities and relations; maybe we’re not. Maybe some of us adoptees are longing for someone to come along and tell us who to be; maybe we’re not. What I

know for certain is that I can't define someone else's identity or experience; I can only speak on my own. And what I do know is this: I'm not lost and I am certainly not confused. Nor am I waiting for someone to lay down the parameters of my identity so that I can work at making myself into the Indian other people have in mind.

The identity I have carved out for myself is borne out of a desire to define who I am based on my own experience and in a way that is not disingenuous to myself or others. It is also borne out of an understanding that identity politics between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada has been, and remains, one of the central means to our ongoing oppression.

One of my favourite authors, Thomas King, understands this well. In his video entitled "I'm Not the Indian You Had In Mind" (2007), King masterfully explores the notion of a fixed understanding of Indian people, and Indian identity in particular. He draws our attention to the understanding that there are two kinds of Indians; the one non-Indigenous people have come to rely on, the fixed Indian, with the "Rush of wind, darkening tide. With wolf and eagle by his side...the warrior wild in the video store. The movies we all adore. The clichés we can rewind." And the other kind of Indian, the one we didn't quite have in mind, "the one who lives just down the street. The one you are disinclined to meet." In King's later work entitled *The Inconvenient Indian* (2012), he explores Indigenous identity further with the notion of Live Indians, Dead Indians, and Legal Indians. For Live Indians, King (2012) states,

For us Live Indians, being invisible is annoying enough, but to be inauthentic is crushing. If it will help, I'm willing to apologize for the antenna on that house in Acoma. I've already shaved off my moustache, so that should no longer be an issue. If I didn't live in the middle of a city, I'd have a horse. Maybe two. I sing with a drum group. I've been to sweats. I have friends on a number of reservations and reserves around North America. I'm diabetic. If you can think of something else I can do to help, let me know.

But I know nothing will help. In order to maintain the cult and sanctity of the Dead Indian, North America has decided that Live Indians living today cannot be genuine Indians....Dead Indians are Garden of Eden-variety Indians. Pure, Noble, Innocent. Perfectly authentic. Jean-Jacques Rousseau Indians. Not a feather out of place. Live Indians are fallen Indians, modern, contemporary copies, not authentic Indians at all, Indians by biological association only. (p. 64-65)

In my own way, I've experienced what King describes when he talks about non-Indians wanting to preserve the Dead Indian as the *preferred* kind of Indian. As a professional working in First Nations education in Alberta I am often asked about my location, or how I came to be, in relation to the work I am either undertaking or participating in. Just as soon as their interest in me grows once they find out I am a descendant of a Dead Indian, it soon fades when I tell them I am a Live Indian who has never known their community; never lived on reserve; never learned the traditions and ceremonies of my people. And I assume that their interest fades because I can't give them the beads and feathers they so desire, nor am I able to share the "secrets" of Indigenous epistemology and ontology to help inform their work.

There is, in my experience, an insatiable desire by non-Indigenous people to hear from Indigenous Peoples about their ways of life and ways of being, if only so that they can "include" this perspective in their policies, frameworks, and curriculum and move on. But I can only tell them about the life I've lived as a construct — as a matter of policy. I can only tell them about and reflect back to them something that is generally beyond what they are willing to change. That is, the profound sense of loss both for my culture, language, traditions, customs, and for the life that could have been: a life without interference, a life with the biological mother I never knew. And I further suspect that their interest in me fades because I am not asking to belong. Rather, I am asking for systemic change and for the dismantling of privilege, domination, and oppression that emanates from policy, power, and privilege. I am seeking system-level changes that require all the people operating within it to let go.

Although King (2012) refers to the construction of Indian identity constructed by non-Indians who long for the Dead Indian because "the Dead Indian is who North America wants to be" (p. 73), I suggest that it is not only non-Indians who want to maintain the Live vs. Dead Indian vs. Legal Indians dichotomy. There are parameters set by Indigenous Peoples too and I understand that. These First Nations-defined parameters help First Nations rebuild and maintain the traditions, cultures, customs, ceremonies, and languages that have been the targets of deadly Indian-policy since before and after Confederation. I respect that because I understand it — it's important work. But in trying to maintain authenticity to Indigenous ways of knowing and being by laying down what is, and what is not, the right kind of Indian, we leave a lot of people out of the fold. I'm out of the fold. Here again, Thomas King (2003) understands and articulates

Indigenous authenticity that both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people pursue in order to uphold the ideal and authentic Indian. King (2003) states:

Yet, in the absence of visual confirmation, these “touchstones” — race, culture, language, blood — still form a kind of authenticity test, a racial-reality game that contemporary Native people are forced to play. And here are some of the questions:

Do you speak your native language? Fluency is the key. No fluency, no Indian.

Do you participate in your tribe’s ceremonies? Being a singer or a dancer is a plus, but not absolutely required.

Are you full blood?

Are you status Indian?

Are you enrolled?

You may suspect me of a hyperbole, but many of these were questions that I was asked by a selection committee when I applied for a Ford Foundation Grant for American Indians in order to complete my Ph.D. I’ve told this story a number of times at various events, and each time I’ve told it, one or two non-natives have come up to me afterwards and apologized for the stereotypical attitudes of a few misguided Whites. But the truth of the matter is that the selection committee was composed entirely of Native people. And the joke, if there is one, is that most of the committee couldn’t pass the test, either, for these questions were not designed to measure academic potential or to ensure diversity, they were designed to **exclude**. For the real value of authenticity is in the rarity of a thing. (p. 55–56, emphasis added)

I lean on King’s words here to help me express that the way in which I locate and identify myself does not mean I am working to destroy Indigenous identity or culture; what I am saying is that the identity parameters set out equally by Indigenous groups by their very nature also have the same effect of excluding and are, in some respects, counter to the notion of self-determination outlined under Article 3 of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*.

And so, what does all this mean? I suppose it means that it has taken me some time to feel comfortable locating myself this way. I know that what I am expressing here isn’t popular,

but I also know that Indigenous Peoples have long experienced the push and pull over their identities and ultimately, who others want us to be and, sometimes, who we want each other to be. And in order to honour myself and my experiences, I situate myself this way and I resist the tide to become and represent myself to the world in any other way than who I am, and I suspect that there are others like me.

The First Nations Caring Society estimates that there are approximately 165,000 (First Nations Caring Society, 2017) Indigenous children in care across Canada right now. Even more, Indigenous children are not only overrepresented (First Nations Caring Society, 2015) in the child welfare system, but they are also more likely than all other children to be taken into care (Sherlock, 2017; Palmater, 2017). What this means, tragically, is that there are thousands of Indigenous children throughout the provinces and territories whose lives are being interrupted and who may similarly never experience what could have been. And if these children make it out of the system alive (Henton, 2014; Humphreys, 2014, Palmater, 2017), I know that their journey, perhaps like mine, to claiming who they are and who they want to be is a long one. It is my hope however, that in sharing my position and location this way, a safe space is created for those who travel the same path.

Yet, despite the contention surrounding Indigenous identity and identity-formation in relation to culture that I've explored above, I remain an Indigenous person and a First Nations woman with unique experiences and a deep interconnection to the broader Indigenous community. I recognize that locating myself this way I am showing respect for the cultural protocol that Kovach (2009) suggests is, for many, an intuitive process and one that "clarifies one's perspective on the world" (p. 110). It also means that I am respecting an "Indigenous knowledge system that tells us that we can only interpret the world from the place of our experience" (Kovach, 2009, p. 110), which for me, means I acknowledge and respect the fact that I am the descendent of a long line of Indigenous women whose experiences live through me. With this connection, then, lies a responsibility to honour Indigenous ways of knowing and being and an even deeper responsibility as a researcher to honour, respect, and undertake research that causes no harm, and that places myself and my work "firmly in a relational context" (Wilson, 2007).

### **Anticipated educational significance of the work**

Within the Canadian context, an unsettling of colonial spaces within early childhood development theory, philosophy, and policy has not yet been undertaken. Indeed, and despite “unsettling” of colonial theory and policy on Indigenous populations on a global scale in countries such as New Zealand, Australia, China, and India – no such similar examination has been undertaken in Canada. The significance of this work, therefore, will be twofold: (1) the questioning of the neutrality and presumed benevolence of early childhood developmental philosophy and theory that informs current policy and program development for Indigenous early childhood programs and services; and (2) the uncovering of the ways in which the failures of government manifest in the conditions of deep material deprivation endured by First Nations children which can and should be understood as one of the major contributors to later poor social and economic outcomes throughout the rest of Indigenous children’s lives. This early deprivation results in the continuation of systemic anti-Indigenous racism that maintains hierarchies of disadvantage and the social positioning of Indigenous Peoples as the underclass. Therefore, this work contributes to a growing body of knowledge within the field of Critical Indigenous studies where “Indigenous centred approaches to knowledge production are thriving and where the object of study is colonizing power in its multiple forms, where the gaze is on Indigenous issues or on Western knowledge production” (Moreton-Robinson, 2016, p. 4). Given the ways in which this research examines and maps historical contexts to inform and guide the present analysis of Indigenous early childhood, this research supports and advances the field of Critical Indigenous Studies because of the ways in which it “asks new questions of old problems, recognizing that the diachronic exists in everyday practice and that history requires further evaluation” (p. 4). In exploring the exact conditions of our oppression as Indigenous Peoples, this research also contributes to the growing body of scholarly work (Mosby, 2013; Mosby & Galloway, 2017; Daschuk, 2006, 2013, 2019; Neu & Therrien, 2003; Shewell, 2004) that identifies the contours and maps the location of Indigenous early childhood education in the constellation of genocide of Indigenous Peoples in Canada.

## **Assumptions, Limitations and Delimitations**

### ***Assumptions***

This research emanates from my own observations working within the field of First Nations education for the past 5 years and within provincial and federal governments for

approximately 15 years. I have become aware of the extent to which both provincial and federal governments, policy makers, and senior officials alike pay scant attention to the ways in which systemic inequality within education, and the privileging of dominant narratives, philosophies and ideologies, upholds and maintains and positions Indigenous Peoples as the underclass. The lack of critical questioning about the ways in which policy, coupled with the lack of access to programs and services, as well as the colonial philosophical underpinning, serves as the primary mechanism to undermine, intervene and control the lives, behaviour, and conduct of Indigenous Peoples on the part of government was the primary has been perhaps the most troubling of all, and has driven of this work from the start.

A recent example of this is my work on the Government of Alberta's response to Premier Notley's call to Cabinet to renew and improve relationships with Indigenous Peoples by undertaking a review of Ministry policies, programs and legislation that may require changes based on the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. As task forces and special working groups were established, I was selected in 2016 to be part of a government response to early intervention, and early learning and care for Indigenous children. As work on these issues began, and as recommendations began to formulate, I urged the committees to consider not simply the extension or expansion of individually-focused programs and services, but rather to examine the ways in which policies systematically discriminate against Indigenous Peoples and fail to consider the ways in which the lived reality of Indigenous Peoples, and our collective oppression through policy. As such, I urged the committees to consider these as a means of are arresting the overflow of intervention, apprehension, and discrimination of Indigenous Peoples, writ-large. I raised the issue of the manner in which the child intervention system fails to consider the lived reality of Indigenous Peoples as systemically and systematically disadvantaged and used the example of the way in which "neglect" is defined by the Ministry of Children's Services.

When I raised this to the committee, I argued that the definition of neglect fails to consider Indigenous Peoples as inherently and systematically vulnerable to being considered neglectful, and therefore in need of intervention, simply because of the ways in which the legacy of colonialism and ongoing oppression through dispossession and dislocation operate and dictate the lived realities of Indigenous Peoples. I argued that Indigenous parents are disproportionately considered neglectful not because of their lack of care and attention, but because of systemic

poverty and oppression that mediate and dictate the extent to which parents can “care” for their children in the manner prescribed by the government. For example, while neglect is deemed to have occurred if a child is underweight, hungry, or have poor hygiene, what, if anything, is said for the ways in which the system creates and/or mediates an Indigenous parent’s level of income, employability and/or level of poverty that disables parents from being able to provide the care the system demands?

Within the field of education, I have asked similar questions of the system and answers generally aren’t sufficient to quiet my discomfort. I have come to recognize that policy, and the philosophies and theories that underpin them, are more powerful than most would consider. It is within this view, and it is because of my experiences thus far, that this research begins.

### ***Limitations and Delimitations***

Given the scope outlined in the research methods and design, this research does not intend to assert the findings as applicable to all First Nations communities in Alberta. This research examines the extent to which, if at all, First Nations communities have responded to the shifts within ECD policies and programs over time. This research will speak to the ways in which the KTC First Nations have responded. Further, generalizability is limited given the size of the sample of communities which is limited due to the intensity of involvement and observation that critical ethnography requires. However, it is important to note that while academia imposes limits on the extent of generalizability due to factors such as sample size, I, personally, don’t believe that the conclusions of this research can not be understood as a reality for other First Nations communities in Alberta and across Canada. More specifically, while the experiences of colonialism and the contours of settler colonial violence may be uniquely experienced by each community, the undercurrent of material deprivation remains the same and can be understood as generalizable. In that respect, while I recognize the limits imposed on generalizability by academia, I push back against this tide.

### **Chapter Summary**

The purpose of this chapter was to frame my research by articulating the problem posited by various levels of government regarding early childhood development (ECD), and most especially for Indigenous children, given the known positive correlation between ECD and later developmental and social outcomes. I began this chapter by providing a brief historical

context of education for Indigenous children in Canada, focusing on the broad objectives and agendas that underpin colonial policy. I followed this by providing a statistical overview of the Indigenous population, and the Indigenous-child population in particular, given the rate of projected growth over time, which serves as the impetus for increased attention and focus by governments and the challenge this presents to all levels of government in respect of improving the social and educational outcomes of Indigenous Peoples. The final section of this chapter provides an overview of the objectives of this research, the theoretical frameworks that frame and position these objectives, followed by the anticipated significance of this work.

## **Dissertation Structure**

Chapter 2 provides a contextual and historical overview of the KTC First Nations, as well as outlines the process they undertook between 2015–2018 to establish their own First Nations Education Authority. This historical overview articulates the provisions of the *Indian Act* that govern First Nations education, as well as the funding regime/formula that has largely been attributed to the disproportionately poor educational outcomes among First Nations students in Canada. I then move to describing the evolution of the KTC Education Authority from single schoolhouses in each respective community, and/or the relationship and education services agreements in place with the local off-reserve public-school authority, to an amalgamation of schools governed by the KTC First Nations leadership under an autonomous First Nations education authority.

Chapter 3 provides a review of the existing historical and contemporary literature to identify the key theoretical and pedagogical underpinnings, as well as key policies, that have shaped early childhood education for Indigenous Peoples in Canada. Chapter 3 begins with the historical context of education for Indigenous children in Canada, focusing on the broad objectives and agendas that shaped colonial policy. This is followed by an overview of the prevailing themes within Indigenous early childhood development policy documents that serve as an undercurrent for programs and services for Indigenous children in the early years.

Chapter 4 outlines and briefly explores the main traditions within qualitative research, before moving onto an exploration and articulation of Indigenous Research Methodology that serves (through its values, principles, and objectives) as the critical overarching methodology for this work. From here an examination of critical ethnography — a branch, or extension of

ethnography — is undertaken. Critical ethnography is the primary research methodology used in this research and is largely informed by critical theory, which aligns with the theoretical perspective of this research and focuses on power-relations and domination by clarifying the “conditions of oppression, opening avenues of resistance, and refashioning liberating ideals” (Bronner, 2017, p. 8). Against the backdrop of the protracted settler-colonial relationship between Indigenous Peoples and the crown, critical ethnography allows me to explore and map the power relations in ways that generally are out of view with other methodologies. Chapter 4 moves to exploring the five stages of Critical Qualitative Research and the ways in which I implemented these within the context of my research and to outline the design and methods used for this research.

Chapter 5 describes my research journey, the various processes I undertook as part of this study, and the methods I used to gather data from KTC First Nations participants. Chapter 5 also provides participant profiles for each of the 11 interview participants and describes some additional community meetings that helped to shape and guide this work as it progressed. I include some personal observations about the research process, and reflections about the expectations of the community in respect to this work. I conclude by articulating the shift in approach to gathering stories, and the use of storytelling methods, to help deepen the meaning and my own understanding of participant’s transcripts.

Chapter 6 explores the findings from the research interviews and the Talking Circle by thematically analyzing interview participant transcripts. The purpose of this is to give voice to the themes identified in the transcripts so that the stories, experiences, and perspectives of research participants that they shared with me are elevated and prioritized. As opposed to semi-structured interviews, research participants and I engaged in a less formal, conversational interview, and the depth and breadth of their responses tended to be rich with contextual and historical information, as well as deep personal insights and reflections that, in a formal and normative analytic framework, would otherwise have been excluded. Chapter 6 also articulates the shift in my view and understanding of decolonization of early childhood education is that it is not necessarily within policies, guidelines, or actions by community/program staff and administration themselves, but rather through the ways in which the community has persisted, resisted, and thrived over time despite the relentless tide of colonialism.

Chapter 7 explores my journey to understanding systemic oppression and decolonization within the scope of this research, and within my personal and professional life. Although not typical within academic research, I approach this final chapter first by way of an epilogue to help situate the reader and to deepen an understanding of the shifts in thinking and behaviour that took place throughout the course of this research journey. This chapter concludes with my recommendations that are responsive to the needs of Indigenous Peoples and communities, and that seek to support and strengthen the work within Indigenous early childhood education for current and future generations.

## Chapter 2: Setting the Context

### Chapter Objectives

Chapter 2 contextualizes the process I undertook to identify possible research partners and provides a historical overview of the KTC First Nations and the approach they undertook between 2015–2018 to establish their own First Nations Education Authority. This historical overview articulates the provisions of the Indian Act that govern First Nations education, as well as the funding regime/formula that has largely been attributed to the disproportionately poor educational outcomes among First Nations students in Canada. This is followed by a description of the evolution of the KTC Education Authority from single schoolhouses in each respective community, to an amalgamation of schools governed by the KTC First Nations leadership under an autonomous First Nations Education Authority.

### Overview

As part of my research process, in the spring of 2018, I created a short list of First Nations communities across three Treaty areas in Alberta who had amalgamated into a First Nation Education Authority, and with whom I had established a working relationship over the course of my career in federal and provincial public service. In total, requests and meeting invitations to discuss this research were sent to two (2) First Nations Education Authorities (FNEA) in Treaty 6, one (1) in Treaty 7, and one (1) in Treaty 8. Given the immediate and ongoing operational pressures of First Nations and FNEAs, responses to these invitations were low; however, ongoing communication was maintained with two interested FNEAs; one in Treaty 6 and another in Treaty 8 territory, respectively. Over the course of three months, communications with the FNEA in Treaty 6 waned and communications with the FNEA in Treaty 8 increased.

Given the level of expressed interest by the one FNEA in Treaty 8 FNEA, the focus of my research centred on working alongside First Nations within this Tribal Council, and the newly established Kee Tas Kee Now Tribal Council Education Authority (KTCEA).

## About the Kee Tas Kee Now Tribal Council

The Kee Tas Kee Now Tribal Council comprises five (5) member nations located in Northern Alberta within the traditional territory of Treaty No. 8 (see Figure 1). KTC member First Nations include: Loon River First Nation (#476<sup>3</sup>), Lubicon Lake Band (#453), Peerless Trout First Nation (#478), Whitefish Lake First Nation (#459) and the Woodland Cree First Nation (#474).

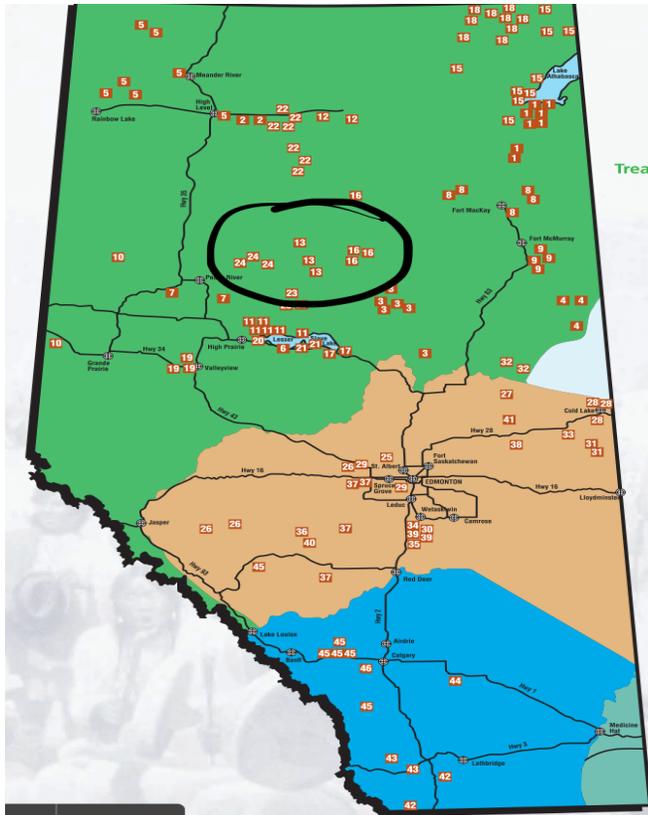


Figure 1: First Nations in Alberta

KTC was established in 1995 to “facilitate joint action by the member Nations on matters of mutual concern” with the primary role of the Tribal Council centred on providing “guidance and support to the individual member First Nations in developing and achieving success in the management and administration of their own programs with the intent of developing self-

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<sup>3</sup> # denotes Indian band#. According to the Department of Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, a band number is “A unique three-digit administrative code used by the Department in the Indian Register to identify a body of registered Indians. In most cases this will identify a Band, but it can also include a Self-Governing First Nation, or in some cases a sub-grouping of a larger band” (Government of Canada, 2020b, n.p.)

reliance” (Kee Tas Kee Now Tribal Council, 2020, para 3.) According to the Government of Canada, a Tribal Council is defined as:

a grouping of bands, (bands as defined by the *Indian Act*), with common interests who voluntarily join together to provide advisory and/or program services to member bands. Tribal Councils are mandated by band councils to deliver advisory services for which funding is provided. Advisory services are defined as the provision to member bands of specific knowledge, expertise and/or assistance in the following fields: band government, financial management, community planning, technical services and economic development.

To be eligible for funding, a new or existing Tribal Council would normally have a minimum of five affiliated bands. Exceptions may be granted by Indigenous and Northern Affairs if the member band councils are able to satisfy the department that there exists a valid social, cultural, geographic or economic reason which would justify the formation of a council of less than five bands. Tribal Councils must also be legally incorporated and accountable to their member bands through representation of each band in decision making and ongoing review of service delivery. (Government of Canada, 2020b, n.p.)

### **The Kee Tas Kee Now Tribal Council Education Authority**

Prior to 2016, each of the KTC First Nations had delegated authority to operate their own band-operated schools for the delivery of education to First Nation students on-reserve pursuant to section 114(2) of the *Indian Act* (Government of Canada, 1985) which specifies, “(2) The Minister may, in accordance with this Act, establish, operate and maintain schools for Indian children.”

Before elaborating the movement from independent band-operated schools to a comprehensive First Nations Education Authority for the KTC First Nations, the section to immediately follow examines the foundations of band-operated schools to contextualize and develop an understanding of the long-standing issues inherent with this mode of educational delivery (ie. school house) vis-a-vis subsequent movements by First Nations towards greater local control of on-reserve education since the 1970s.

## ***Band-Operated Schools***

First Nations control of education on-reserve in the current/present context arises, in part, from the work of the National Indian Brotherhood (now, Assembly of First Nations) who, in 1972, issued the now seminal document entitled *Indian Control of Indian Education* in response to the 1969 White Paper which sought the elimination of the special status of First Nation peoples. Indian Control of Indian Education (ICIE) was, according to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 1996), a “watershed in Aboriginal education” (RCAP, 1996, p. 407), and a clear articulation of the inherent rights of First Nation people to educate themselves, and the assertion of rights to control and direct the education of First Nation people:

We are the best judges of the kind of school programs which can contribute to these goals without causing damage to the child...We must, therefore, reclaim our right to direct the education of our children... We assert that only Indian people can develop a suitable philosophy of education based on Indian values adapted to modern living. (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972, p. 3)

At the time of the development of ICIE, First Nations leaders were emerging and reacting to the “deplorable conditions of their people” (Kirkness, 1999, p. 17), including the disastrously poor educational outcomes of First Nations people on-reserve. At the time, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Indian Affairs (Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, 1971) reported the following in respect of the educational outcomes among First Nations people:

- drop-out rate four times the national average (96% of Indian children never finished high school) (p. 3)
- A related unemployment rate averaging 50% for adult males, going as high as 90% in some communities (p. 3)
- "Inaccuracies and omissions" relating to the Indian contribution to Canadian history in textbooks used in federal and provincial schools (p. 6)
- An age-grade retardation rooted in language conflict and early disadvantage, which accelerated as the child progressed through the primary and elementary grades (p. 16)

- Less than 15% of the teachers had specialized training in cross-cultural education and less than 10% had any knowledge of an Indian language (p. 16)
- The majority of Indian parents were uninformed about the implication of decisions made to transfer children from reserve schools to provincial schools (p. 5)

In addition to the failures of the Indian Residential School system that was designed to assimilate and 'educate' Indian children, the federal government had also failed to provide for and administer an effective educational program for First Nations people (Assembly of First Nations, 2010) since the beginning of the Indian Residential School system era and the subsequent closures of schools that began in the 1960s, with the last closure in 1996. By the early 1970s, concerns about the gap in educational outcomes were raised by the Standing Senate Committee on Indian Affairs and Northern Development where they noted, "education of Indian and Eskimo young people, and in particular Indian young people, has suffered from the day-to-day, year-to-year improvisation attitude of successive governments which regarded Indian education as a passing thing, soon to be handed over to the provinces" (Annual Reports of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, 1971, p. 4). Recommendations made by the Committee at the time state,

in light of the result record of the federal schools and provincial systems, that the Government must immediately, and in full consultation and partnership with Indian and Eskimo people of Canada, develop a Federal education system as free from the deficiencies afflicting our present program as is humanly possible... (p. 5)

However, by 1981, the federal government had not made meaningful progress towards improving the education 'system' on-reserve, and as the same committee notes in their 1985 report to the House of Commons,

The 1981 Census of Canada indicates that the overall level of education for Native people is still lower than for other Canadians and that the pattern of educational training is different. Fewer Native people obtain a high school diploma than non-Native people and consequently post-secondary education is much less common in the Native population. (Government of Canada, 1981, p. 53)

According to Kirkness (1999), the observed failures within Indian education was attributed to several factors, namely: the absence of:

a clear philosophy of education with goals and objectives, failure to provide a meaningful program based on Indian reality, a lack of qualified teaching staff and inadequate facilities, and, most important, the absence of parental involvement in the education of their children. (p. 17)

While the federal government at the time accepted the principles of ICIE by “building schools and taking steps for communities to manage and operate schools,” (Assembly of First Nations [AFN], 2012b, p. 2), funding and policy decisions remained within the sphere and control of the federal government. As the Assembly of First Nations (AFN, 2012b) and Kirkness (1999) point out, the deep and persistently poor outcomes in First Nations education rests with the lack of a meaningful legislative foundation since the *Indian Act* provides:

no legal basis for the transfer of education from the control of the Minister of Indian Affairs to Indian bands. It authorizes the Minister to enter into agreements with public or separate school boards, provincial/territorial governments, religious or charitable organizations, but not with Indian Bands. The present authority allowing Indian Bands to administer education funds derives from various Treasury Board authorities, covering a range of educational and student support services, which extend from kindergarten to postsecondary school programs. (Kirkness, 1999, p. 20)

The lack of legislative base, according to Kirkness (1999), does not permit the transfer of education by the Minister so that First Nations can both control and operate schools. Rather, under the regime of the time, First Nations education operated under a problematic “dual administration” (pp. 20–21) and formed the foundation for what are now “Band Operated schools” (p. 21, emphasis in original) that delimit the power of First Nations to have “power over [and] to exercise directing influence” (p. 21).

The Assembly of First Nations (2012c) further states that in a 1986 report by the Auditor General, responsibility for First Nations Elementary and Secondary Education was reified as resting solely with the Minister of Indian Affairs, who,

11.67 ...provide[s] specific educational services to Indian children between the ages of 6 and 17 inclusive who ordinarily reside on a reserve or on lands belonging to the Crown. Authority to manage specific educational programs comes from the Appropriation Acts, Treasury Board Minutes and Orders in Council.

11.68 The objective for the Elementary/Secondary Education activity, stated by the Department in the 1985-86 Estimates, was: **to ensure that all eligible Indians and Inuit have access to a quality and range of elementary/secondary education that is relevant to the social, economic and cultural needs and conditions of the individuals, bands and communities being served.**

Despite the clear position of the Minister of Indian Affairs at the time as to his acceptance of ICIE, exclusive control remained painfully out of reach “because the Indian Act has not been amended, there is no legal basis for transferring control of education to Indian bands” (AFN, 2012a, p. 4). As the National Indian Brotherhood elaborated in ICIE, exclusive control over education for Indian people must

give way to an education authority with the control of funds and consequent authority which are necessary for an effective decision-making body. The Federal Government must take the required steps to transfer to local Bands the authority and the funds which are allotted for Indian education. (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972, pp. 6–7)

The transfer of authority would actualize the vision for Local Control wherein bands and Education Authorities would be responsible for:

- budgeting, spending and establishing priorities
- determining the types of school facilities required to meet local needs: e.g. day school, residence, group home, nursery, kindergarten, high school;
- directing staff hiring and curriculum development with special concern for Indian languages and culture;
- administering the physical plant;
- developing adult education and upgrading courses;
- negotiating agreements with provincial/territorial or separate school jurisdictions for the kind of services necessary for local requirements;
- co-operation and evaluation of education programs both on and off the reserve; providing counselling services.

According to the Assembly of First Nations (2012a), in the late 1980s the Auditor General of Canada raised concerns about the existing framework for First Nations education stating,

Through enabling legislation Parliament confers on a Department an obligation to do certain things. In the absence of enabling legislation, as is the case for the above services to Indians, DIAND's obligations are not defined and therefore it cannot be held accountable to Parliament. (Auditor General of Canada, 1988, Chapter 14, Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, paragraph 14.26, in AFN, 2012a, n.p.)

What the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) made clear in 2015 was that the government's interpretation of control bore little resemblance to the vision of ICIE and that the "government's version of Indian control meant the devolution of federal Indian education programs to First Nations, without the benefit of adequate funding or statutory authority...[and that] when devolution began, it was designed to occur without any additional expense" (TRC, 2015, p. 77).

### ***First Nation Education Funding***

The 2011 Report of the National Panel on First Nation Elementary and Secondary Education for Students on Reserve states that the

current system — or rather non-system of First Nations education — has its basis in history...[and in] the early 1970s, following the dissolution of the residential school system, and the devolution of First Nations education to individual First Nations, virtually no thought was given to the necessary supporting structure for the delivery of First Nations education. There was no clear funding policy, no service provision and no legislation, standards or regulations to enshrine and protect the rights of a child to a quality education and to set the education governance and accountability framework. (National Panel, 2011, p. 9)

In the years between 1970 and 1987, the federal government downloaded the responsibility for the delivery of education to First Nations without a corresponding and coherent funding and accountability framework. In 1987, the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) developed a national funding formula (Band Operated Funding Formula (BOFF)) that remained in place until 1996, at which point it was capped at a growth rate of 2% per year, regardless of changes in demography of a First Nation or rising inflation rates. Spurred on by a looming national fiscal crisis in 1996–97, First Nations education funding, in addition to funding for social welfare and child and family services, was capped initially as a temporary

measure yet remained in place long after the budget was balanced. According to Drummond & Rosenbluth (2013),

At 2 per cent growth, the expansion in core appropriations just matched the pace of inflation, leaving the funding unchanged in real terms. But the 29 per cent growth of the First Nations population between 1996 and 2006 means that the real per student funding declined 3–4 per cent annually. (p. 4)

Shortly following the release of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples in 1996 and amidst growing frustration among First Nations about the impacts of the funding cap, the federal government established a suite of proposal-based education programs in 1998 designed to supplement First Nations education funding. Between 1998 and 2012, federal funding for core and proposal-based education funding was estimated to have had a 4 per cent growth rate (Drummond & Rosenbluth, 2013, p. 6); however, the Assembly of First Nations (2012c) contends that when population growth and inflation are properly taken into consideration, the annual increase in federal education funding would need to be at least 6.3%. The AFN further estimates that for the 2010–11 fiscal year, the national funding shortfall was \$747 million dollars, and a cumulative funding shortfall of \$3 billion since 1996 (p. 1).

As articulated above, a significant disparity exists in the overall funding for K–12 education between Indigenous learners who reside on-reserve and all others. Although the funding gap in First Nations education is not new, the cumulative impacts of the existing funding formula on the educational outcomes of First Nations learners cannot be understated. A 1988 report by the Standing Senate Committee on Indian Affairs and Northern Development articulated,

Native groups told the Committee that more funds are required for federal and band-operated schools. They argue that reinstated students are putting an additional burden on an already underfunded system.

The new funding formula introduced by D.I.A.N.D. in 1987 has actually led to cutbacks for many band schools, according to these groups, resulting in higher teacher-pupil ratios, restricted curriculum and a lack of special services such as guidance counselors. The Committee was told that the new funding formula merely redistributes the already inadequate funds when more funds are required throughout Canada and that the current lack of funds tends to penalize bands

wishing to control their own education systems. (Parliament of Canada, 1988, p. 55)

Despite these early warning signals and calls to action, 25 years later the 2011 National Panel on First Nation Elementary and Secondary Education for Students on Reserve made clear, “There is much dissatisfaction with the existing system of funding First Nation education. First Nations, school administrators and teachers and the Government of Canada are all critical of the status quo, although perhaps for different reasons” (National Panel, 2011, p. 38) as it relates to the structural and financial changes that will enable education “reform.[that is] based on strong, positive education outcomes” (p. 38).

The impact of underfunded education is most acutely visible in the persistent gap in educational outcomes between First Nations students on-reserve and all others. As the Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples reported in 2011,

the Auditor General of Canada estimated that it would take over twenty years, at the current rate of progress, for First Nations students to reach parity in academic achievement with other Canadians. This number rose to 28 years in a 2004 follow-up report, due to rapidly improving outcomes in the broader Canadian population. (The Senate, 2011, p. 16)

Despite countless recommendations to the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs since the early 1970s about specific measures to close the achievement gap, an additional report by the Office of the Auditor General of Canada (OAG, 2004) noted that,

Meanwhile, the proportion of high school graduates has risen steadily in the general population across Canada but not among First Nations students living on reserves. Based on census data from 2011 and 2006, **the education gap is widening**. The proportion of high school graduates over the age of 15 is 41 percent among First Nations members living on reserves, compared with 77 percent for Canadians as a whole. In 2004, we noted that at existing rates, it would take **28 years for First Nations communities to reach the national average. More recent trends suggest that the time needed may still be longer.** (para 4.17, emphasis added)

The gap in educational outcomes as reported by the Office of the Auditor General (OAG) of Canada and the Standing Senate Committee becomes increasingly dire with the knowledge that the 2018 OAG Report which determined that the reported graduation rates for on-reserve

First Nations students was “inaccurate” in that “it reported a graduation rate that included only students enrolled in their final year of high school. This means that the reported graduation rate was overstated because students who dropped out in grades 9, 10, and 11 were excluded from the department’s calculation” (2018, para. 5.94). Moreover, the OAG further determined, after recalculating using complete departmental data, that

On average, about one in two (46%) First Nations students graduated. However, our calculations showed that, on average, only about one in four (24%) students who started Grade 9 actually completed high school within four years. In our view, anyone relying on departmental information would not be fully informed. For example, the Department reported that graduation rates between the 2014–15 and 2015–16 fiscal year had improved - while we found that they had worsened. (2018, para 5.95)

### ***Scope of Federal Education Funding for On Reserve Education: Band-Operated Funding Formula***

The current Band Operated Funding Formula (BOFF) was developed in 1987 and was based on the Ontario provincial funding model for education and was intended to meet/respond to the educational needs of all First Nations, and all First Nations students, across Canada.

According to VanAvery-Albert (n.d.), the BOFF,

provides funding on the basis of a multiplication of the number of units (number of students) times a given unit cost (tuition rate) for instructional services. This amount is then enhanced by a number of additional factors,” including a) teachers b) paraprofessionals c) administrative support d) other services e) professional development f) education leave g) cultural education h) special education i) advice and assistance j) other costs k) boards/committees/authorities – bands. (p. 3)

The original per student allocation was determined after the total allocation for First Nations schools was known (listed above); meaning that the list of “additional factors” was not designed as a total per student amount, but rather something left to First Nations to determine on their own. The per student funding allocation, therefore, is expected to support “the majority of services including teachers’ salaries, books and supplies, instructional materials and core curriculum requirements” (Van Avery-Albert, n.d., p. 3) without consideration for instructional

services, student transportation, student counselling, and most significantly, capital infrastructure, repairs and maintenance. Phillips (2015) identifies that while INAC provides a somewhat comprehensive list of eligible expenses under instructional services, it is not exhaustive and First Nations are “unable to bill the federal government for the actual cost of the operation of their schools” (p. 134).

According to Mendelson (2008), the “terms and conditions of the Band Operated and Federal Schools program through which most primary and secondary education funding has been paid include a requirement of comparability as a condition of payment” (p. 5). Interestingly, while the federal government avoids assuming any funding accountability or responsibility, it does however, place conditional funding requirements on Band Councils,

In the case of band-operated or federal schools, the [Band] Council shall ensure that programs comparable to provincially recognized programs of study are provided, and that only provincially certified teachers are employed. The Council shall also ensure that the education standards allow students to transfer without penalty to an equivalent grade in another school within the school system of the province in which the school is located. (Mendelson, p. 5)

As Mendelson (2008) further explores, “a search of Departmental documents found no policy statement in which the Department committed itself to fund First Nations schools at a level which would permit ‘provincial comparability’ — only statements of comparability as a general goal” (p. 6).

### ***Impacts and Outcomes of the Band Operated Funding Formula***

As described above, governmental funding instruments, such as the BOFF, tend to operate only in one direction, yet the Department itself sets out an important educational agenda for itself and the First Nations communities it has a fiduciary responsibility to. The purpose of the Department of Indigenous Services Canada’s Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) Program, for example, is to provide

eligible students living on reserve with education programs comparable to those that are required in provincial schools by the statutes, regulations or policies of the province in which the reserve is located. The objective is that eligible students will receive a comparable education to other Canadians within the same province of residence and

achieve similar educational outcomes to other Canadians, and with attendant socio-economic benefits to themselves, their communities and Canada. (Government of Canada, 2012)

Through the ESE Program, First Nations are provided funding to support instructional services from kindergarten through to adult learners. Funding for instructional services is provided by way of

various funding agreements and pays for the costs of on-reserve students attending schools (on or off reserves); student support services such as transportation, counselling, accommodation, and financial assistance; school administration and evaluation; and First Nations school boards. Under current departmental policy, First Nations schools are required, at a minimum, to follow provincially recognized programs of study, hire provincially certified teachers, and follow education standards that allow students to transfer to an equivalent grade in another school within the province in which the reserve is located. (Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2004)

While it is clear that the federal government intends to support K–12 education for First Nations learners on-reserve, in reality “INAC’s core funding mechanisms do not account for important cost drivers related to the operation of band schools” (Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer, 2016, p. 19), nor does it provide funding to First Nations schools on a substantive equality basis to address the socio-economic impacts of historic discrimination and marginalization that are distinct to Indigenous Peoples. Moreover, federal band-operated funding does not account for remoteness, second-language instruction, or the true cost of special needs instruction (p. 19). Perhaps most strikingly, federal funding “mechanisms favour students living on reserve attending provincial schools” (p. 19) under education services, or tuition, agreements where federal funding covers the actual cost of education services delivery in the respective province or territory.

### ***Core & Proposal Based Funding***

In addition to the general ESE Program, the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs introduced additional funding to supplement education allocations for First Nations. According to Drummond & Rosenbluth (2013), shortly after the release of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples in 1996, the federal government actioned several proposal-based programs

that fund K–12 education on-reserve including the New Paths for Education and the Special Education Program that were designed to meet demand in First Nations communities. In later years, as First Nations and the federal government inched towards greater on-reserve education reform, additional proposal-based funding initiatives were added such as the First Nations Student Success Program and the Education Partnerships Program.

However, there are inherent challenges, such as an immense administration burden, with funding First Nations education via a host of proposal-based programs rather than through core funding through contribution agreements. As the federal government expressed in 2019 under the “New policy and funding approach for First Nations kindergarten to grade 12 education,” it plans to develop a new approach that will,

replace outdated proposal-based programs with improved access to predictable core funding; ensure base funding is comparable to provincial systems across the country; provide First Nations schools with \$1,500 per student, per year, to support language and culture programming; provide new resources which will support full-time kindergarten in every First Nations school for children aged 4 and 5; and ensure special education funding is more predictable, with fewer application-based requirements. (Government of Canada, 2019b, n.p.)

The Government of Canada (2019b) also indicated that they will make changes to two proposal-based programs (First Nations Student Success Program and New Paths to Education) and will subsequently roll \$360 million into “core funding [thereby] reducing the administrative burden and providing more predictable funding” (2019b, n.p.). While these are important and necessary changes, it remains unclear as to whether these changes will transform on-reserve education to the extent needed to redress more than 60 years of underfunding and all related impacts. As White-Eye (2019) states, any substantive change may be impeded by the fact that “there is no funding to govern education; the resources that are there may boil down to a wage increase for some First Nations; few supports for sustainable long-term change to student outcomes; yet, full responsibility for the whole system” (p. 1–2).

### ***Per Student Federal Funding Shortfall***

Although the Government of Canada provides on-reserve education funding through the BOFF as well as a suite of proposal-based initiatives, the well-documented and pervasive

disparity in K–12 education funding between First Nations students and all others still exists; with the most apparent gap in education funding exists at the per-student level. As described above, the gap in educational outcomes between First Nations students on reserves and all others arises principally from the differential and discriminatory provision of funding on a per student basis. A 1971 Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development report acknowledged the inadequacies of both the federal and provincial governments vis-a-vis First Nation students' success that have "condemned succeeding generations of Indian students to a disadvantaged status within the school system as well as into the adult society into which they graduate" (Minutes of Proceedings and Evidence of the Standing Committee on Indian Affairs and Northern Development, 1971, p. 4).

While the Department downplays the expectation of provincial comparability in programs and services to First Nations students, it does not concurrently provide adequate funding to Band Councils to do so. However, and perhaps ironically, the federal government provides funding to provincial school boards for First Nations students who reside on-reserve and attend a provincial or private school. A 2009 report commissioned by the First Nations Education Council estimates that in 2006, "INAC spent roughly \$1.2 billion on First Nations education to support an estimated 119,000 students living on reserve" (First Nations Education Council, 2009, p. 12) with an estimated allocation of \$698.4 million allocated to support First Nations schools and the remaining \$483.7 million allocated to "support First Nations students attending provincial or private schools" (p. 13).

### ***Tuition Agreements / Education Services Agreements***

As previously noted, until the 1970s the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs was primarily responsible for the delivery of education on reserve. According to Tsuji (1998), where no primary or secondary educational facilities existed, INAC obtained educational services from provincial school boards on behalf of First Nations through tuition agreements (p. 1). According to an Executive Summary on Tuition Agreements published by the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs in 1981,

A tuition agreement is a service contract whereby an education authority agrees to provide education to Indian children. The purchasers of the services are DIAND, usually with the written concurrence of the Indian people, or an Indian Band. The education

authorities involved are provincial departments of education or individual school boards. (Government of Canada, 1981, p. 1)

Tuition agreements are intended to address the costs associated with education service delivery to First Nation students who live on-reserve and attend provincial schools as they outline the types of services to be provided by the provincial school board for a given tuition fee and the provincial school board agreed to “take on pupils not within their jurisdiction... by choice not by obligation” (Beck, 1997, in Tsuji, 1998, p. 1). While tuition agreements are seemingly recent, there is a slow, progressive history of challenges with provincial tuition agreements that underpins the current reality today. With the protracted history of underfunded schools on-reserve, the impacts of the prolonged per-student funding shortfall on educational outcomes, as well as the fact that some First Nations communities lack secondary education facilities, a significant proportion of First Nation students have opted to leave on-reserve band-operated schools to attend provincially funded and operated schools in nearby (sometimes) cities and towns. This phenomenon is not new and as early as 1971, the Standing Senate Committee on Indian Affairs and Northern Development noted that “at the present approximately 65% of Indian students attend provincial schools with the remaining 35% attending federal schools” (The Annual Reports of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, 1971, p. 4). By the early 2000s, the trend in First Nations students attending provincial schools had shifted somewhat, with both the Assembly of First Nations and the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development both noting:

- “Approximately 31% of First Nations students attended off-reserve provincial schools, and 5% attended either a private or federal school” (Assembly of First Nations, 2012b, p. 2)
- “Some 60 percent of students who live on reserve attend band-operated schools. The other 40 percent go to provincially run schools that are governed by provincial legislation or to private schools” (Government of Canada, 2011, p. 3)

### ***Phases of Tuition Agreement Devolution***

According to Raptis (2008), authority over public schooling in Canada was conferred upon the provinces with the signing of the 1867 British North America Act, which also granted the federal government jurisdiction over Indian affairs (p. 118). In that respect, until the 1951 amendments to the *Indian Act* were made, most Indigenous children were educated separately

from non-Indigenous children. However, with changing social attitudes about individual rights and freedoms following WWII, the Canadian government was prompted to “reconsider such discriminatory practices and, acting on the recommendations of the Special Joint Committee of the Senate and the House of Commons, the federal government adopted a policy of promoting the education of Indigenous children in “association with other children” (p. 119). The 1951 *Indian Act* Amendments enabled the Minister of Indian Affairs to enter into agreements with provincial governments and school boards for the delivery of education for First Nations children living on-reserve. According to Burns (1998), throughout this period, education pertaining specifically to First Nations people...moved from a federal government policy of segregation and assimilation to a theme of normative integration of First Nations students into publicly funded schools. The 1950s marked the beginning of the Master Tuition Agreement approach to schooling, which was negotiated bilaterally between the Department of Indian Affairs and local provincial school boards on behalf of First Nations. (p. 55)

Burns (1998) suggests that the Department of Indian and Northern Development (DIAND) has “moved through a three-phase process of tuition agreement negotiations change pertaining to provincial school boards/First Nations tuition schooling of status Indian children” (p. 55). Initially, DIAND, and the Minister of Indian Affairs, was the sole agent in the bilateral negotiations with provincial school boards vis-a-vis tuition agreement for First Nations students. In what was characteristic of that time, Indigenous Peoples were excluded from the negotiations process, in addition to nearly “all other aspects of Native life” (p. 55). This phase was soon followed by one where First Nations were involved in the decision-making process; however, Indigenous freedom to act autonomously was undermined by the fact that DIAND and the Minister acted as co-representatives in the negotiations with provincial school boards. As Burns (1998) characterizes it, “the overall process continued to be paternalistic, coercive, racist, and discriminatory ...and tuition agreements were obviously designed to serve the interests of provincial school boards” (p. 55). This is perhaps best exemplified by a special submission to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples in 1993 by the Secwepemc First Nation on the issue of Tuition Agreements which states,

Until 1992, the tuition for public school education for most on-reserve, status Indians was paid for by the Department of Indian Affairs directly to the Province of B.C. The services

for those students were determined by existing provincial education policy. On June 10, the master agreement which provided for the payment of this tuition ended. The master agreement is a federal-provincial agreement reached without the consent of bands in B.C. It is considered desirable by bands that any new tuition agreement be arrived at with their consent.

Under the current situation, the federal government believes it has fulfilled its obligation if it ensures that a seat has been purchased in a public school within the provincial system.

The nature of the federal obligation with respect to the public education of First Nations people has remained unchanged since the issuing of an Order in Council on tuition payments in 1963...this order related directly to the responsibilities of the Minister of Indian Affairs as described by the Indian Act. ...First Nations are simply the flow-through mechanism for federal funds on the way to provincial treasuries...[and] there is a real discrepancy between what tuition rate is charged to on-reserve First Nations and non-First Nations.

We have a number of specific recommendations:

1. The legal nature of the fiduciary responsibility of the federal government with respect to education decision-making must be clarified, particularly in the area of obtaining informed consent of First Nations before negotiating special interests.
2. First Nations must have full representation and involvement in negotiations about the kind and quality of education programs and services covered by tuition agreements, whether local or general in nature. (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1993, p. 154–155)

The final phase, or the current phase, is considered devolutionary. According to a 1988 Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development report, devolution “is the policy of the federal government to devolve, over time, responsibility for the delivery of programs and services to the Indian bands” (Parliament of Canada, 1988, p. 54). However, the

responsibility for the delivery of programs does not include “any legislative or administrative changes and does not incorporate an increase in funding levels for the program involved” (p. 54). Devolution of the provision of education programs and services by the federal government, including tuition agreements, means that the federal government is “not a mandated participant in tuition agreement negotiations...and First Nations have been given the mandate to negotiate agreements themselves on behalf of their own communities for students attending school off-reserve” (p. 56). According to the Chiefs of Ontario (2013), “Most First Nations have since been developing and negotiating agreements directly with district school boards” (p. 29); however, and as is the case in a few First Nations in Ontario and across Canada, AANDC is directly involved in the tuition agreement process on behalf of First Nations themselves.

According to the Department of Indigenous Services’ 2019/20 National Program Guidelines for the Elementary and Secondary Education Program, recipients of federal funding, “shall ensure that students ordinarily resident on reserve have access to elementary and secondary instructional services in a First Nations school, a federal school, a provincial school or a private or independent school” (Government of Canada, 2019c, n.p.). In the case of a provincial school board delivering education to a First Nation student who is ordinarily resident on reserve, funding is provided with the understanding that,

the recipient shall enter into a local education agreement or tuition agreement with the applicable provincial school, school district or school board operating the respective provincial school. The recipient must maintain the local education agreement or tuition agreement in good standing by making payments as required by each agreement (unless otherwise prescribed by the province). (Government of Canada, 2019b, section 6 (d))

### ***Challenges with Tuition Agreements***

A variety of concerns regarding tuition agreements have consistently been raised both by First Nations, provincial school boards, and the Auditor General of Canada. In 1981, a Departmental Audit of Tuition Agreements was undertaken at the request of the Auditor General. Aspects of tuition agreements such as (1) Communications, (2) Contents of Agreements, (3) Negotiations, (4) Perspectives of Others, and (5) Payment Verification Procedures, and (6) Timing of Payments (Government of Canada, 1981) were reviewed and the following determinations were made:

- “Examples of inconsistencies [in communications] include the method of determining the eligibility of Indians; terms of payment; information required in support of invoices and verification procedures for these invoices” (p. 5)
- “The Department should attempt to limit its liability to the school boards involved” (p. 7)
- “The Department should continue to sign agreements which specify rates which are based on actual operating costs of the school board” (p. 8)
- “When the Department obtains a special service that is not included in the basic tuition rate, there should be an agreement that describes the service, the method of calculating the cost and any impact this has on the calculation of the basic tuition rate” (p. 10)
- A practice of periodic reviews, say every three years, should be enforced so that agreement terms are familiar to all those responsible for enforcement of the agreement” (p. 11)

By 2000, these identified and limited challenges had taken on a new shape and a 2000 Report of the Auditor General of Canada noted that a master agreement had been developed between the Department and a provincial Ministry of Education in 1992 but had expired and not renewed (Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2000, p. 18). Additional concerns were observed in the fact that umbrella agreements did not set out expectations or standards and that as a result, the “quality, consistency, scope and cost of education for Indian students” (p. 18) was compromised. The Auditor General also noted that the implementation of agreements “had resulted in disputes in non-payment of fees by the First Nation to the province” that resulted in outstanding amounts paid to provincial school boards totalling more than 6.3 million dollars (p. 19). Lastly, it was noted that the Department failed to provide written criteria for education funding agreements, inadequate monitoring of agreements in place between First Nations and provincial school boards, and a clear lack of standards for the agreements themselves. As a result, the Auditor General contends that the Department not only failed to ensure the appropriateness of the education provided to First Nations students, but also the costs associated with the provision of education (p. 19). The final recommendations to the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development in 2000 included the following:

4.90 Indian and Northern Affairs Canada in consultation with First Nations should develop and implement an action plan to address opportunities for operational improvements relating to:

- The lack of education funding agreements
- The resolution of agreements in dispute
- The lack of written criteria in the selection of education funding agreements
- Nominal role verification and use; and
- Consultation on pedagogical matters. (Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2000, p. 21)

The challenges with tuition agreements were once again identified in the 2004 Auditor General Report and in 2005, the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs responded with an Education Action Plan (Government of Canada, 2005) that outlined, among other things, the strategies, identified roles and responsibilities, funding, accountability, performance measurement, monitoring and reporting (p. 6). In respect to the longstanding issues with tuition agreements made by the Auditor General of Canada, the Department of Indian Affairs notes in their plan that it is “also strengthening internal processes and procedures designed to ensure a more consistent departmental application of the terms and conditions of tuition agreements and education program requirements to provide reliable information on the actual costs of delivering education” (p. 14).

By 2011, circumstances and identified challenges with tuition agreements had not been resolved and in their report entitled *Reforming First Nations Education: From Crisis to Hope*, the Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples made clear that in addition to the lack of equitable funding for on-reserve education, the Department was exacerbating the crisis in on-reserve education by paying “substantially higher fees for First Nations students attending public schools through tuition arrangements with provincial and territorial school boards than it pays for students on nearby reserves” (The Senate, 2011, p. 36). A report by Bains drafted in 2014 highlights additional challenges related to tuition agreements including, but not limited to, the overbilling by provincial school authorities to First Nations communities. Bains (2014) notes “one case where the provincial school board acknowledged that they were overbilling a First Nation by \$700,000” (p. 16) that was only identified by the Department after a First Nation noted an anticipated deficit. Bains goes on to note,

Another Ontario school board was found to have been charging in excess of the base tuition fee without any authority to do so. In this instance, the First Nation was overcharged \$1.3 million over three years for services it was already paying for through

the base tuition fee (Ontario, Auditor General, 2012). Other communities have found that their local school board in Ontario has been overidentifying First Nations students as special needs, and therefore charging additional costs related to specialized equipment and services that are unnecessary and that the student does not end up receiving once in school. (p. 16)

### ***Tuition/Education Services Agreements in Alberta***

Very little information exists as to the history and evolution of tuition/education services agreements between provincial school boards and First Nations/First Nations Education Authorities in Alberta. However, following the last (or current) phase of tuition agreements for First Nations education, a number of documents exist that point to an established practice of the development and implementation of tuition agreements for First Nations students who reside on-reserve and attend a provincial school in Alberta. These will be outlined briefly below.

#### ***Legislation***

British North America Act (Constitution Act).

The British North American Act (now the Constitution Act, 1867), Section 91 (24), gives the federal government exclusive authority over Indians and lands reserved for Indians; and Section 93 states that provinces have authority to make laws in education.

The Indian Act.

Section 114–122 of the Indian Act (Government of Canada, 1985) is the current legislative authority the federal government uses in respect of education for First Nations children on-reserve. Key provisions of the Indian Act vis-a-vis education include:

114. The Minister may

Agreements with provinces, etc.

- 114 (1) The Governor in Council may authorize the Minister, in accordance with this Act, to enter into agreements on behalf of Her Majesty for the education in accordance with this Act of Indian children, with
  - (a) the government of a province;
  - (d) a public or separate school board.

- (2) The Minister may, in accordance with this Act, establish, operate and maintain schools for Indian children. (p. 64)

115. The Minister may

- (a) provide for and make regulations with respect to standards for buildings, equipment, teaching, education, inspection and discipline in connection with schools; and
- (b) provide for the transportation of children to and from school.

116 (1) Subject to section 117, every Indian child who has attained the age of seven years shall attend school.

(2) The Minister may

- (a) require an Indian who has attained the age of six years to attend school; and
- (b) require an Indian who becomes sixteen years of age during the school term to continue to attend school until the end of that term. (p. 64)

While the Indian Act provides limited parameters on its scope of responsibility for education, the Assembly of First Nations (2012b) identifies key areas left unaddressed to support primary and secondary education for First Nations students, and that would support and improve educational outcomes,

The Indian Act makes no provision for supporting culturally and linguistically relevant education or ‘quality’ education and makes no guarantees for adequate and sustainable funding. There is no statement for the education of preschoolers. After the age of 16, the federal government supports some status Indians to attend post-secondary programs (Post-Secondary Student Support Program), as a matter of social policy. (p. 1)

Education Act, Alberta.

Section 13(1–3) of the Alberta Education Act (Education Act, 2012) stipulates that the Government of Alberta enables provincial boards to

(2) charge tuition fees in respect of an individual who attends a school operated by the board and who is not a resident student of the board or any other board or the Government.

(3) Where a board may charge a tuition fee under subsection (2), the board may determine the amount of the tuition fee. (p. 27)

Section 63 (2) and (3) of the Alberta Education Act (Education Act, 2012) also stipulates that the Government of Alberta may

(2) The Minister may, by order, establish requirements or standards that apply to education services agreements between a board and (a) the Government of Canada or an agent of the Government of Canada, or (b) a council of a band as defined in the Indian Act (Canada) or a person authorized by the council of a band, for the education of Indian children.

(3) Where a board enters into an agreement with respect to the education of Indian children pursuant to subsection (2), the agreement must meet the requirements or standards established by the Minister. (p. 64)

### **Memorandum of Understanding for First Nations Education in Alberta**

The identified issues concerning tuition agreements at a national level are no less acute at the regional level and in the province of Alberta specifically. As a means of working collaboratively to improve educational outcomes among First Nations students in Alberta, regardless of residence, including addressing long standing issues and shortcomings regarding tuition agreements, on February 24, 2010, three levels of government in Alberta (federal, provincial and First Nation) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to achieve the vision for First Nations Education in Alberta where, “First Nations students are achieving or exceeding the full educational outcomes, levels and successes of all other students in Alberta” (Government of Alberta, 2010a, p. 3). The purpose of the Alberta/First Nations Education MOU is to support improved educational outcomes among First Nations and all others given the known and persistent gaps in education.

Commitment 2(5) and 2(6) of the MOU outlines that “The Parties agree to continue work on addressing ongoing issues related to tuition or educational services agreements including, where appropriate, the implementation of new tuition or educational services agreements” (Government of Alberta, 2010a, p. 5) and that the parties will develop a Long Term Strategic Action Plan for First Nations Education in Alberta “...which propose measures for the

restructuring of First Nation education in Alberta in order to improve First Nation student outcomes” (p. 6).

### ***Long Term Strategic Action Plan (LTSAP)***

The accompanying LTSAP to the MOU articulates that the plan is to be “considered a statement of intent for actions to be undertaken by the parties that will help implement the commitments made under the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)” (Government of Alberta, 2010a, p. 1). The LTSAP outlines federal and provincial roles in respect of the implementation of the MOU and articulates that in respect of tuition agreements that “both Canada and Alberta will support the development of collaborative frameworks between First Nations Education Authorities and Provincial School Boards that will support joint planning and actions to improve student success” (p. 1).

To support and advance this work, the Government of Alberta developed the Building Collaboration and Capacity in Education Grant program in 2016 that provided \$20 million in provincial enhancement funding to support enhanced collaboration, coordination and capacity building between education stakeholders. Funding under the BCCE was made available to First Nations, First Nations organizations providing education services and “public, separate and charter school authorities who have existing Education Services Agreements for First Nations students who reside on-reserve and attend provincial schools” (Government of Alberta, 2016, p. 1).

### ***2019–2020 Ministry of Education Annual Report: Outcome Two***

As a partner in First Nations education, the provincial Ministry of Education reports on progress and outcomes vis-a-vis First Nation, Métis, and Inuit learner success. The 2019–2020 Ministry of Education Annual Report notes the following in respect of the funding provided to First Nations to support the collaborative development of Education Services Agreements under the BCCE Grant Program (now Innovations in First Nations Education, IFNE):

In order to streamline access to the provincial education system by students living on-reserve, work continued to strengthen Education Service Agreements (ESAs). During the year, Alberta Education and the federal government discussed ways to harmonize and strengthen funding approaches so that First Nations students have access to the provincial education system and receive the required services and supports. Alberta Education also

supported First Nations and provincial school authorities in their discussions regarding new ESAs. (Government of Alberta, 2020, p. 52)

Despite provincial and federal investments, coupled with the MOU and LTSAP on First Nations Education in Alberta, there appears to be little movement towards establishing Education Services Agreements that meaningfully contribute to more positive educational outcomes, standardized agreements, service standards, or accountability mechanisms.

### **Kee Tas Kee Now Tribal Council and Northland School Division: A Brief History**

Having explored the complexities of on-reserve education, as well as the historical underpinnings of the current “crisis” in First Nations education, this section explores the relationship between the Kee Tas Kee Now Tribal Council and the Northland School Division, the primary provider of education programs and services to KTC First Nations students who either reside on-reserve and attend a provincial school, or who are members of KTC First Nations, live-off reserve, and attend a Northland School Division school. The purpose of this is to foreground the movement of KTC from individually operated band schools to a coordinated First Nations Education Authority that provides comprehensive education programs and services that are comparable to, and in some instances in excess of, provincial standards of education to support improved educational outcomes of KTC First Nations students and to exercise jurisdiction and control of First Nations education.

#### ***Northland School Division: Overview***

The Northland School Division (NSD) is situated in northern Alberta throughout much of the ancestral lands of what is now known as Treaty No. 6 and Treaty No. 8. The NSD school jurisdiction boundaries span approximately 288,000 kilometres and are responsible for the operation of 23 schools, serving approximately 2,900 K–12 students in Northern Alberta. Of this student population, approximately “57 percent are provincial students and 43 per cent are federal supported students” (Government of Alberta, 2010b, p. 15). In addition to operating schools located in local municipalities, the NSD also operates schools located in First Nation communities and Métis settlements.

### *The Early Years: 1958 to 1965*

According to the Northland School Division (NSD, n.d.), in the years from 1958 to 1960 “a number of circumstances occurred which focused attention on the educational needs of Aboriginal and other children in the forested region of Northern Alberta, particularly that area ...between the Peace and Athabasca Rivers both of Lac La Biche” (para. 1). At that time, educational programs were being provided in the following types of schools:

- schools operated by the federal government where Métis children were accepted as a matter of courtesy by not by right;
- mission schools ...which operated with limited government assistance;
- Métis colony schools financed by the Department of Education but operated by the Department of Public Welfare; and
- Isolated independent public and separate school districts providing local service. (NSD, n.d., para. 2)

Throughout this time, however, two factors precipitated increased government involvement in the operation and management of schools in the Northland region. Namely, increased enrolment by First Nations students into schools in the region, and the decision by the federal government that Métis students could no longer be accommodated in these schools without a formal agreement to provide for staff and classrooms to meet rising demand. As a result, four school districts were initially established to facilitate these changes and mission schools, who could also not meet rising demands and costs, appealed for and received another eight public school districts.

### *The 1960s to the 2000s*

On December 30, 1960, the then Minister of education established the Northland School Division that comprised over 30 school districts and approximately 20 schools (NSD, n.d., para. 6). The Northland School Division was created as an operating entity by the provincial government in 1960 and was initially governed by a provincially appointed official trustee and superintendent. In 1965, the Alberta legislature proclaimed the first Northland School Division Act which changed the management structure by calling for the appointment of a superintendent and five trustees who would effectively replace the official trustee. The five appointed trustees were given a term of three years and included an appointment from the Department of Education (University of Alberta), one representative from the Department of Education, one from

Municipal Affairs, one from Public Welfare, and one resident from the Northland area. The purpose of cross-sectional appointments was to provide for the coordination of government services to the students attending schools within the boundaries of the Northland School Division.

The Northland School Division Act was amended in 1968 and called for the appointment of seven trustees, five of which were to be residents of the Northland School Division and then in 1970, as a result of amendments to the School Act, the Northland School Division appointed its first locally appointed superintendent. The Northland School Division Act was again amended in 1976 to allow for the creation of subdivisions within the existing division.

The Northland School Division Act was passed by the provincial legislature in 1983 and it created a governance and operating structure that includes:

- deeming adult persons living on-reserve to be an elector;
- providing for the election of a local school board committee of three to five members for each of the Northland's 23 schools;
- establishing a corporate board of 23 members comprised of persons elected as chairs of the local school board committees;
- Appointing the Auditor General as the auditor for the board.

This model remained in place until 2010 when the then Minister of Education appointed Dr. Colin Kelly as the Official Trustee of the Northland School Division and fired the Board of 23 education trustees who would effectively replace the Board. At the same time, the then Minister of Education also appointed a 3-person team to conduct an inquiry into the daily operations of the Northland School Division Board.

### ***Northland School Division: Challenges & Opportunities***

Almost since its inception, the Northland School Division has faced significant challenges and beginning in 1969, several studies, investigations and inquiries (1980, 2010) and engagement and audit activities (2012, 2015) have been undertaken to review jurisdiction-specific operational issues.

Among the most widely publicized issues in relation to the Northland School Division are those related to attendance, student achievement, central administration and leadership, financial and capital management, governance, and boundaries. Shortly after the then Minister of

Education, the Honourable Dave Hancock, released the 23-member board in 2010, a report was issued by the Northland School Division Inquiry Team (Government of Alberta, 2010b) that made 48 division-specific recommendations to improve areas where there were notable and identifiable concerns. These will be explored briefly below.

### ***Student Learning Outcomes and Achievement Results***

As the 2010 NSD Inquiry Team report articulates, one of the primary reasons for the inquiry being established was that “NSD’s student learning outcomes in literacy and numeracy are weak, not only in comparison to general provincial and northern-tier jurisdictions in general, but also with respect to other FNMI students in other neighbouring school jurisdictions in Northern Alberta” (Government of Alberta 2010b, p. 30).

The Northland School Division Inquiry Team Report (2010) for example, indicates that only 40.4 percent of NSD students achieved acceptable standards on aggregated Grade 3, 6, and 9 Provincial Achievement Tests compared to 76.8 percent for the province as a whole. The gap in educational achievement outcomes was further noted in the area of math, where achievement results were noted to be declining between the years of 2004 to 2009 (from 50.4 percent in 2004 to 34.6 percent in 2009). Perhaps the most notable gap was in the area of high school completion within three years. The 2010 NSD Inquiry Team report further notes that for students in NSD, the 3-year completion rate was 19.4 percent compared to 70.7 percent for the province writ large.

The gap in educational outcomes for NSD students appears to be associated with “poor attendance, lack of initial learning readiness, English language challenges, high teacher turnover, and lack of ongoing parental support and engagement” (NSD Inquiry Team Report, 2010, p. 27). Attendance was highlighted as a significant contributor to low educational achievement outcomes and the NSD report contends that the average NSD student missed approximately 240 days of school by the end of Grade 6 — or nearly a full year of school.

### ***Central Administration and Leadership***

The NSD report contends that many of the challenges experienced by the School Division can be traced to the retirement of the Superintendent in 2008 which, in their view, weakened the leadership above and beyond the extent to which it has already been compromised by the authority and decision-making authority that had been granted to Local School Board Committees.

Throughout their consultations, the NSD report notes that “during a number of our discussions...having a board that has been primarily Aboriginal does not appear to have situated power and authority with Aboriginal people given that most, if not all, senior administrators have not been Aboriginal” (Government of Alberta, 2010b, p. 36). Through that lens, the NSD report recommends that NSD be redefined as a special-purpose system for Indigenous education and that there be a requirement, over time, for persons in leadership roles to have Indigenous heritage and language fluency along with a demonstrated skill in dealing effectively with Indigenous cultures.

Lastly, the NSD report suggests that concerns pertaining to student achievement also arise from the limited implementation of the principles of good governance with special consideration to confidentiality and conflict of interest. Further, the NSD report states that “the Inquiry frequently heard about parents going directly to the LSBC rather than communicating first and foremost with teachers and principals [that led to] a breakdown in good governance and communication” (Government of Alberta, 2010b). LSBC are frequently cited throughout the report as being central to many of the challenges faced by NSD in terms of it being an effective and well-governed division. Further, greater control and better decision-making by the Division, as opposed to LSBC, as it relates to contract-renewal, teacher hiring etc., would enable more effective school operations and improvement in student outcomes, teacher retention, internal management and financial oversight, and greater engagement by parents with NSD school staff.

### ***Financial and Capital Management***

The NSD Inquiry report indicates that the financial condition of Northland School Division has deteriorated rapidly since 2009. Since the majority of their operating revenue comes from tuition payments — which, given the variable payment schedule, has made it challenging for NSD to maintain a working capital balance. However, the report did also note that the NSD does receive a higher level of resources per pupil from the Government of Alberta (funding manual rates) and suggested that the central issue for NSD going forward was that they make more effective use of the available resources to improve student outcomes. Further, that effective budgeting and management decision-making in this regard was constrained by a lack of financial management data and governance oversight.

With regards to capital management, the NSD Inquiry Report notes that despite having low pupil/teacher ratios, the capital assets owned by the NSD, such as school inventory and

teacher housing, were in dire need of repair or replacement. Lastly, and perhaps most significantly, the report goes on to note that as opposed to operating from a standpoint of strong and strategic leadership oversight, the NSD is controlled and micro-managed by the Corporate Board and by the Local School Board Committees, creating an environment where upward delegation of management from staff is taking place with great frequency.

### ***Governance***

In comparison to other Alberta school jurisdictions that typically have five to nine-member school boards, the NSD has a large number of elected officials (more than 100) for the size of the jurisdiction (approximately 2,900 students). Operating costs for the governance aspect of the NSD (i.e. the Corporate Board and the Local School Board Trustees) is approximately \$900,000 per year and consumes a substantial portion of NSD's administration budget.

Despite the decision-making authority provided to the community and the corporate levels through the NSD Act, the NSD Inquiry Team suggests that this has not resulted in "broad based community engagement to support student learning" (Government of Alberta, 2010b, p. 47). The report goes on to state that the responsibilities of the Corporate Board are not fully understood, and accountability to the communities that they represent is poor. This problem is further compounded by elected officials who hold their positions for long periods of time. The NSD Inquiry Report goes on to say that the Corporate Board did not "function effectively as a Board of Trustees...its size appeared to make it unwieldy and unfocused and contributed to its ineffectiveness and that a "core group of veteran trustees [had] formed controlling factions" (Government of Alberta, 2010b, p. 47). The report also noted that the governance roles and responsibilities appear "to have been consistently blurred such that the board chair and the LSBC (local school board committees) were becoming involved in management, operational, and administrative matters that in an ideal governance model should be left to the superintendent and principals" (Government of Alberta, 2010b, p. 47). Overall, the NSD report contends that the Board and LSBC were taking on and performing management rather than governance functions.

The recommendations emanating from this report to address these, and other, governance issues, include:

- That Alberta Education entrench governance policies and procedures in a Ministerial Order to ensure that those in governance positions focus on governance activities;

- The Government of Alberta amend the Northland School Division Act to establish a 9-member Board of Trustees; seven of whom would be elected by direct election (ward system), one other be a First Nations representative nominated pursuant to an Education Agreement (with Treaty 8) and one other be a Métis representative nominated by the Métis Settlements General Council (\*both of the First Nation and Métis representatives would be appointed to the board by the Minister of Education);
- That the limit of not more than two consecutive three-year terms be set for Board of Trustees;
- That a non-voting member of the Board of Trustees be appointed by the Minister of Education as a process observer to coach and facilitate organizational change and that the new structure remains intact;
- That Alberta Education support a governance structure that fosters a sense of ownership at parent and community levels;
- That the provincial government amend the NSD Act to expand Local School Board Committees to include parent and teacher representation and that their role be consistent with that of a School Council;
- That a Council of Chair of the newly constituted Local Boards meet twice yearly with the Board of Trustees (Government of Alberta, 2010b, p. 45).

### ***Boundaries***

It has been proposed that schools be realigned with those outside of the NSD jurisdiction. The NSD Inquiry Report notes that concerns “were expressed that if schools were realigned into neighbouring jurisdictions, there would be an ensuing school closure because of the new jurisdiction’s school closure policies and processes (Government of Alberta, 2010b, p. 45). This concern was compounded by a perceived loss of focus of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit concerns and, as a result, racism and prejudice were likely to be experienced by students attending new schools.

Neighbouring jurisdictions also expressed some reservations about a boundary realignment stating that “without appropriate consultative arrangements and without clear understanding about how funding differentials would be addressed” (Government of Alberta, 2010b, p. 45), boundary alignment would be untenable. There was also some expressed concern about the extensive powers of Local School Board Committees as being unacceptable within

their local governance structure and that unless socio-economic conditions, parental engagement, and student truancy issues were addressed, the success of boundary alignment would be compromised and student success would be impaired. To address these issues, the NSD Inquiry Report made three recommendations:

- Alberta Education appoint a facilitator to work with the Anzac school and Fort McMurray Public school district regarding realignment of Anzac to Fort McMurray.
- That Alberta Education initiate a process for transferring Red Earth Creek School to Peace River School Division;
- That NSD initiate school closure proceedings at Keg River (Government of Alberta, 2010b, p. 8).

### ***2015 & Beyond***

Despite the NSD Inquiry Team Report in 2010, implementation of the recommendations proved challenging, if not untenable. By 2015, persistent problems encountered by the NSD had not changed considerably and as the Auditor General of Alberta (2015) reported, “we found the Division has no operational plan with short-and-long-term targets to improve student attendance...[and that] the Department of Education has not provided purposeful oversight” (p. 10).

On July 13, 2016, the Minister of Education announced the appointment of Lois Byers as official trustee for the NSD in order to bring strategic leadership, fiduciary oversight, and issues management that is deemed necessary to transition the division to an elected board. In the two years since her appointment, NSD would go on to undertake the necessary steps to restore a Board of Trustees to the Division and to amend (replace) the NSD Act. Engagement with local First Nations and Métis communities took place throughout this time and in October 2017 a School Board Trustee election was held in order to elect one trustee for each of the 11 wards of the NSD.

### **2012 Partnership Agreement between Kee Tas Kee Now Tribal Council and the Northland School Division**

On March 20, 2012, the Kee Tas Kee Now Tribal Council and the Northland School Division signed a Partnership Agreement that, among other things, reflected the partners’ “commitment to meet the contents of this partnership to the benefit of students and student

outcomes” (Government of Alberta, 2012, p. 1). At the core of this agreement was the parties’ mutual understanding and agreement to “work together in a new relationship intended to further improve educational opportunities and outcomes for students attending First Nations schools and students attending provincial Northland School Division schools” (p. 2). Further, the stated purpose of the agreement was to “develop a framework within which the Parties will collaborate on a number of initiatives between KTC and NSD...[to] improve education service delivery” (p. 2).

The Partnership Agreement took on a number of longstanding and pervasive issues that underpinned the persistent education outcome gap for First Nations learners such as a lack of second-level services (or, “school board like services” [p. 3]) including “curriculum support, instructional coaching...professional support for teachers, student services such as special education services, and principal professional development” (p. 3). The agreement also specifies the “development of wrap-around services which refers to a philosophy of care that includes a definable planning process...that results in comprehensive, coordinated supports and services to achieve improved learning outcomes and improved quality of life” (p. 3). As articulated previously, at the federal and provincial levels, given the shared responsibility for the delivery of educational services to First Nations students, there have been attempts to hold both the federal Department of Indian and Northern Affairs and provincial school boards accountable. In the KTC/NSD Partnership Agreement, the parties specify not only a framework for the partnership, but also transparency and accountability mechanisms and measures to ensure outcomes are being achieved. In order to support the Partnership Agreement, the parties conclude by articulating the necessity of dialogue with the Governments of Canada and Alberta “for the purposes of securing the necessary financial support to ensure the successful implementation of this agreement” (p. 5).

### ***Structural Changes to First Nations Education 2013–2019***

In 2013, the Government of Canada released the long-awaited and much-anticipated draft education legislation for on-reserve education entitled *Working Together for First Nation Students A Proposal for a Bill on First Nation Education* (2013) shortly following the work completed in 2012 with the Discussion Guide and the Draft Blueprint. The proposed legislation also intended to address long-standing issues within First Nations education and to follow through on its commitment to “working with First Nations to develop a First Nations Education

Act to support improved quality of education and better results for First Nations students on-reserve” (p. 4).

Although the Act failed to garner support from First Nations and First Nations Education Authorities across the country given the lack of specificity on funding regulations and comparative regional per student allocations, it did provide a cursory summative and formative accounting for the cumulative and longstanding issues within First Nations education including, but not limited to: access, governance, operations, and funding.

Since then, the Government of Canada has advanced a number of proposals designed to improve First Nations Education and following the release of the TRC Calls to Action in 2015, it embarked on a series of engagement sessions throughout 2016–2018 with First Nations across the country on transforming education on-reserve (Government of Canada, 2019b).

### **Establishing the Kee Tas Kee Now Tribal Council Education Authority**

While larger structural changes were being proposed and contemplated at the national level with respect to First Nations education, at the regional level, the Kee Tas Kee Now Tribal Council embarked on their own unique path forward towards establishing their own First Nations Education Authority in 2015. This section will briefly explore the process and work undertaken by the KTC First Nations in establishing their own First Nations Education Authority.

### ***First Nations Education Authorities: The Alberta First Nations MOU and the Long Term Strategic Action Plan***

Before entering into the next section, I should make clear that as a federal employee with the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, I was a member of the MOU for First Nations Education in Alberta Working Group throughout 2010–2014 and was one of the developers of the Long Term Strategic Action Plan. In 2015, I joined the newly established (and now defunct), provincial Ministry of Education’s First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Division where I later developed the Building Capacity and Collaboration in Education Grant Program — a \$20-million dollar provincial grant program designed to advance the Government of Alberta’s commitments under the MOU for First Nations Education in Alberta. Throughout my time with the Ministry of Education, I was also responsible for supporting the work of interested First Nations in establishing Education Authorities for which the provincial government not only helped lead the process, but also provided funding support. As a result of my work with both

levels of government over the last decade in education, I have been able to work alongside a number of First Nations in Alberta as they work towards greater local control and self-determination within education and gain a deeper level of insight into the process of establishing a First Nation Education Authority in Alberta. The level of granularity provided in the next section arises as a result of my experience in government and First Nations education during the period of 2010–2017 and as a lead with supporting the Kee Tas Kee Now Tribal Council in establishing a First Nations Education Authority between 2015–2017.

### *Advancing the Commitments*

Commitment #2(6) of the Memorandum of Understanding for First Nations Education in Alberta specifies:

The Parties agree to develop a long term strategic action for First Nations education in Alberta based on the aforementioned reviews and analyses, which propose measures for the restructuring of First Nations education in Alberta in order to improve First Nation student outcomes. (Government of Alberta, 2010a, p. 6)

Shortly following the signing of the MOU, a small working group was struck and tasked with developing the Long Term Strategic Action Plan (LTSAP) with the intent that this would serve as a “statement of intent for action to be undertaken by the parties that will help implement the commitments made under the Memorandum of Understanding for First Nations Education in Alberta (Government of Alberta, 2013, p. 1). Through a Joint Action Plan, the measures proposed in the LTSAP were to enable First Nations to restructure “First Nations education in Alberta...including: the development of a First Nations Education System...[and] empowering First Nation Chiefs and Councils to establish/delegate First Nations Education Authorities to foster best practices in the delivery of First Nations education” (p. 1).

The significance of a First Nations Education Authority (FNEA) cannot be understated. As the Assembly of First Nations stated in 1988, First Nations Education Authorities are an exercise of the inherent right to education that recognizes First Nations sovereignty (p. 1), federal obligations to education under the treaties (p. 2), the end of paternalism (p. 4), the provision of education that is aligned with the values of Indigenous Peoples (p. 6), and an end to the “history of federal disruption” (p. 10) in education. Education Authorities, the Assembly of First Nations (1988) suggests,

First Nations education authorities have a legal base from which they have the authority to manage their education programs -- First Nations are sovereign nations recognized by the Crown and the Government of Canada in treaties. The jurisdiction over education is an inherent right of self-government. First Nations may appoint, elect, or delegate an education authority with the legal status to operate education programs and negotiate contracts with teaching and administrative staff. (Assembly of First Nations, 1988, p. 6–7)

Although First Nations have been exercising control over education for some time (Government of Canada, 2018a), establishing a FNEAs with delegated authority to deliver comprehensive programs and services, similar to local provincial school boards, was somewhat out of reach for a number of First Nations in Alberta. However, the LTSAP was one mechanism, coupled with the commitments by provincial and federal governments to provide resources to support (Government of Alberta, 2013) agreed-upon strategic initiatives such as undertaking the process of establishing an FNEA. As previously noted, the BCCE Grant Program was developed and launched in 2016 to

increase opportunities for First Nations students to receive coordinated education programs and services that are responsive to their needs by enhancing collaboration, coordination, and capacity building among education stakeholders. This supports the Government of Alberta's commitments under the Memorandum of Understanding for First Nations Education in Alberta to pursue targeted and strategic funding opportunities to increase the success of First Nations students who reside in a First Nations community and attend a provincial school. (Government of Alberta, 2016, n.p)

The Government of Alberta, in an unprecedented move, made a commitment to provide \$20m in funding to support improved educational outcomes for First Nations students attending either band operated or provincial school through strategic initiatives and enhanced partnership and collaboration. The BCCE program was one of the mechanisms that the Kee Tas Kee Now Tribal Council used to develop an initial plan to improve coordination and collaboration with the Northland School Division (2016) and then later to bring the Kee Tas Kee Now Tribal Council member Nations together to discuss the establishment of an FNEA.

### ***Moving Forward: Establishing the KTC First Nations Education Authority***

In the Spring of 2016, the KTC First Nations expressed interest to the Government of Alberta in its desire to explore the establishment of their own First Nation Education Authority. Prior to this, the KTC First Nations operated three independent band-operated schools that, like the school-house model intends, was insufficient in terms of meeting the substantive needs of their local learner population, and with the remaining three on-reserve schools operated by the Northland School Division. The KTC First Nations have long recognized the power of partnership and collaboration as a group of First Nations under a Tribal Council and used this as a mechanism to come together early in 2016 to advance FNEA discussions. A small working group made up of representatives from each member of the First Nation of the Kee Tas Kee Now Tribal Council, the Government of Alberta, and the Government of Canada, came together throughout the remainder of 2016 and into 2017 to advance discussions about the establishment of the Kee Tas Kee Now Tribal Council Education Authority.

### ***KTCEA and Government of Alberta Framework Agreement (2016)***

To support and advance the establishment of the KTCEA, in 2016 the KTC First Nations and the Government of Alberta's Ministry of Education signed a \$1.7 million Framework Agreement to "improving attendance and high school graduation rates" (Canadian Press, 2016, para. 1), as well as to "make curriculum more culturally relevant by including traditional skills such as hunting and fishing" (para. 2) and "bolster literacy, math and science skills, including protecting the environment" (para. 3). In this first of its kind agreement, the Government of Alberta provided funding for on-reserve First Nations education as a means of enhancing, not replacing, federal funding — a longstanding issue of jurisdiction between all three levels of government, as well as an ongoing matter of contention between the federal government and First Nations over the "off-loading" of treaty obligations, such as education, to the provinces. However, with the provision of funding as an enhancement to, not a replacement of, federal funding, the Government of Canada is not able to reduce funding to the KTCEA as a result of a duplication of funding in the short term, and an abdication of responsibility for funding comprehensive First Nations education over the long term.

***KTCEA is formally established***

Information provided by the KTCEA indicates that the KTC Education Committee was formed in 2017 and tasked with developing and implementing an Education Authority work plan (Kee Tas Kee Now Tribal Council, 2019) and to developing a “Governance Structure [and] Appropriate Administrative Structure, Determine Ratification Process, Incorporation Process, and Community Engagement” (p. 6). On January 10, 2017, “a resolution was passed to approve the Memorandum of Association and the Articles of Association” (p. 7) and Band Council Resolutions were subsequently passed which “authoriz[ed] the Chiefs to approve and be shareholders in a non-profit, incorporated Education Authority — KTCEA” (p. 7).

The establishment of the KTCEA in 2017, enabled 3 KTC First Nations schools under the Authority, and the remaining NSD operated schools under the Authority in later years. In a presentation to the Assembly of First Nations in 2019, the KTC describes the transition from dispersed and independent schools to an amalgamation of KTCEA operated schools (Kee Tas Kee Now Tribal Council, 2019, pp. 8–9) as follows (Figure 2):

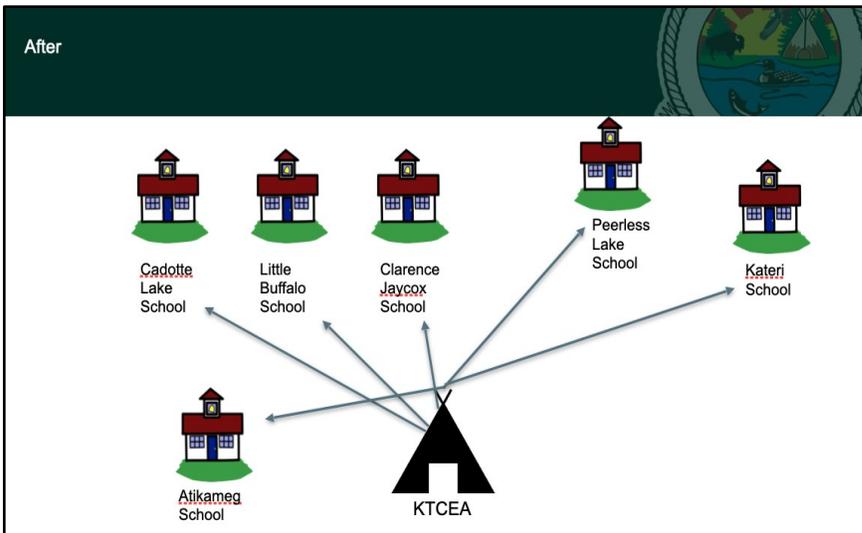


Figure 2: KTC schools after amalgamation under the Education Authority

Under the KTCEA, member Nations’ leadership delegated their authority to the KTCEA which then became a “separate not-for-profit legal entity under the Companies Act of Alberta” (KTCEA, 2019b, para. 4.) who assumed authority to “operate and maintain all six community schools. Each Nation continues to retain ownership of the schools and the land they are on”

(2019b, para. 1). Additionally, the KTCEA was governed by a Board of Directors made up of Chief and Council representatives from each member Nation (Kee Tas Kee Now Tribal Council, 2019). Shortly after the KTCEA was established, it assumed control

over the administration of three band-operated schools (Clarence Jaycox, Cadotte, Atikameg) for the 2017–2018 school year. In the 2018–2019 school year, KTCEA took over the administration of the three remaining on-reserve schools (Little Buffalo, Peerless Lake and Kateri) which had been previously operated by Northland School Division (2019b, para. 6)

In assuming control, the KTCEA was entrusted with the responsibility to ensure that the Loon River, Woodland Cree, Lubicon, Whitefish Lake, and Peerless Trout First Nations students receive an education responsive to their unique needs by:

- Strengthening Nehiyawewin (Cree) in our schools;
- Developing resources and courses that reflect diverse Indigenous and community perspectives;
- Focusing on student retention, attendance, literacy, numeracy and improved teacher retention; and
- Improving student well-being through nutrition and athletic programs. (KTCEA, 2019b)

The establishment of the KTCEA enabled all KTC First Nations to provide comprehensive, wrap-around supports and education services in the same way as a provincial school board to leverage and share resources, and to affect greater efficiency and effectiveness, while also prioritizing the unique needs of KTC First Nations students, and strengthening Indigenous knowledge transmission and preservation. As the KTC First Nations (Kee Tas Kee Now Tribal Council, 2019) presentation to the AFN describes, the KTCEA would take on the responsibility for second-level services that were absent from the individual school-house model such as:

- Finance
- Human Resources
- Education Services Agreements
- Transportation
- Operations and Maintenance
- IT Support

- Partnerships and intergovernmental agreements
- Board administration
- Strategic Planning
- Professional learning and mentorship (p. 12)

***KTCEA: Indigenous Services Canada and the Regional Education Agreement***

According to the KTC First Nations Tribal Council, the “KTC Multi-year Block Funding Agreement was set to expire on March 31, 2019” (Kee Tas Kee Now Tribal Council. (2019, October 9). In anticipation of this, the KTCEA sent a letter to the Government of Canada in 2018 “inviting REA (Regional Education Agreement) negotiations” (p. 16). Shortly after, REA working group meetings took place in late 2018 and an agreement was completed, and formally signed on July 18, 2019 (p. 16).

As part of their larger work on First Nations Education Transformation, the Government of Canada has committed to a new policy and funding approach with First Nations wherein proposal-based programs would be replaced to “improve access and predictable core funding, and where base funding is comparable to provincial systems across the country” (Government of Canada, 2019). Additionally, this new approach provides First Nations with a \$1,500 per capita increase to “support language and culture programming, and additional funding to support full-time kindergarten in every First Nation for children aged 4 and 5” (2019, para. 1). Of greatest significance is the funding formula which, as described previously, has been grossly inadequate and highly inequitable. The new funding formula would finally be taken into consideration and be updated annually to “account for student population growth and other education cost changes such as: teachers’ salaries and benefits, remoteness, and school size” (2019, para. 2). The Government of Canada also committed to work with regions to adapt the formulas to meet the needs of local and remote communities.

With respect to local and regional education agreements, the Government of Canada further states that it will work in partnership with First Nations to develop “Treaty-based, regional and local education agreements that respond to the education goals and priorities of First Nations” (2019, para. 3). Unlike previous and limited funding agreements, regional education agreements will support comprehensive funding to support First Nations elementary and secondary education, including special education...and mutual accountability mechanisms” (2019, para. 3).

On July 18, 2019, an REA was signed between the “Chiefs of the Loon River, Woodland Cree, Lubicon, Whitefish Lake, and Peerless Trout First Nations and the Minister of Indigenous Services Canada” (KTCEA, 2019d, p. 1). Under this agreement, roles and responsibilities of KTCEA and the federal government are identified and recognizes the KTCEA as the delegated authority of the five KTC member Nations. The REA further, and significantly, establishes a predictable, sustainable, stable and flexible funding that will meet the needs of all KTCEA students (2019b, p. 2). Using this as a foundation, the REA will move forward with the creation of a new KTCEA funding formula, which includes the following provisions: core funding for ten years; new and quality educational programs to foster academic achievement; funding comparability to neighbouring provincial school divisions; enhanced funding for Nehiyewewin instruction and programming; funding for full-day K4 and K5; protection against funding decreases during the 10-year term of the Agreement; and inclusion of a provision for future discussions to explore further funding enhancements. (2019b, p. 2)

In a presentation to the AFN in 2019, the KTCEA explains that the REA is a “vehicle for a more flexible and equitable funding model to better support KTCEA K–12 students” (KTC Tribal Council, 2019, p. 17). The REA enabled the KTC to pull education out of the KTC Multi-year funding agreement with the federal government and to have, instead, education funded separately (2019, p. 18) with an “**increase in the overall guaranteed funding for education**” (2019, p. 18, emphasis in original). Under this approach, a new “federal funding formula was applied, based on the provincial funding framework, with **specific adaptations for KTCEA** to consider northern, remote, and linguistic factors” (2019, emphasis in original).

As the KTCEA explores, “Through the REA, new funding will be invested in KTCEA school programming, staff retention and the training of community members to become teachers and school leaders” (2019b, p. 5) and will see an annual budget increase of nearly 50% (KTCEA, 2019a, p. 2). Also, under the REA, the KTCEA will be “able to increase its capacity to bring the School Authority more in line with other small school districts in the region...[and] allow for an increase in staff capacity, leadership and expertise to support KTCEA growth, evolution, and programming” (p. 5).

### *Current Status of the KTCEA*

According to the KTCEA Policy Manual (KTCEA, 2020), the Education Authority has been delegated authority and since becoming an incorporated Education Authority on March 10, 2017, the entity has also developed Articles of Association, Memorandum of Association and Band Council Resolutions signed by all five member KTC First Nations. KTCEA (2020) further notes that it has

signed Administrative Agreements with each of the five member First Nations describing KTCEA's administrative services for the schools and teacherages." KTCEA now operates independently under "its own Board of Directors ...and receives guidance and oversight from Kee Tas Kee Now Tribal Council..Government funding is also received by KTC and is provided to KTCEA through a sub-agreement. (p. 2)

The Education Authority has also developed a comprehensive policy manual (2020) that guides and directs: (1) Legal Foundations and KTCEA Vision, Mission and Values; (2) Board Governance and Responsibilities, (3) Respectful, Caring, and Safe Schools and Workplaces; (4) Onîkîhîkomâwak Niskâwâsimôwin (School Parent Advisory Circles); (5) Delegation of Authority to the Superintendent; (6) Role of the Superintendent; (7) Age of Eligibility, Student Right of Access and Students' Rights; (8) Parent/Guardians Rights and Responsibilities; (9) Curriculum and Instruction; (10) Inclusive Education and Student Supports; (11) Pimohtawahasowin (Student Transportation); (12) Human Resources; (13) Technology and Student Information; (14) Temporary School Closures/Community Use of Schools; (15) Emergency Preparedness and Business Continuity; (16) Finance; and (17) Capital Assets and Planning.

Since 2018, the KTCEA has served approximately 1,200 KTC First Nations students in 6 KTCEA operated schools and has seen important and early signs of success. As Muzyka (2018) notes, "Attendance and graduation rates in the schools have improved" (para. 13) and the pooling of resources has helped improve education outcomes and are expected to expand land-based learning and Indigenous language options.

The success of the KTCEA from its inception in 2017 to now (2021) is strengthened by the work that has been done on developing and articulating a Mission, Vision and Strategic Plan (Figure 3: KTCEA Strategic Plan).

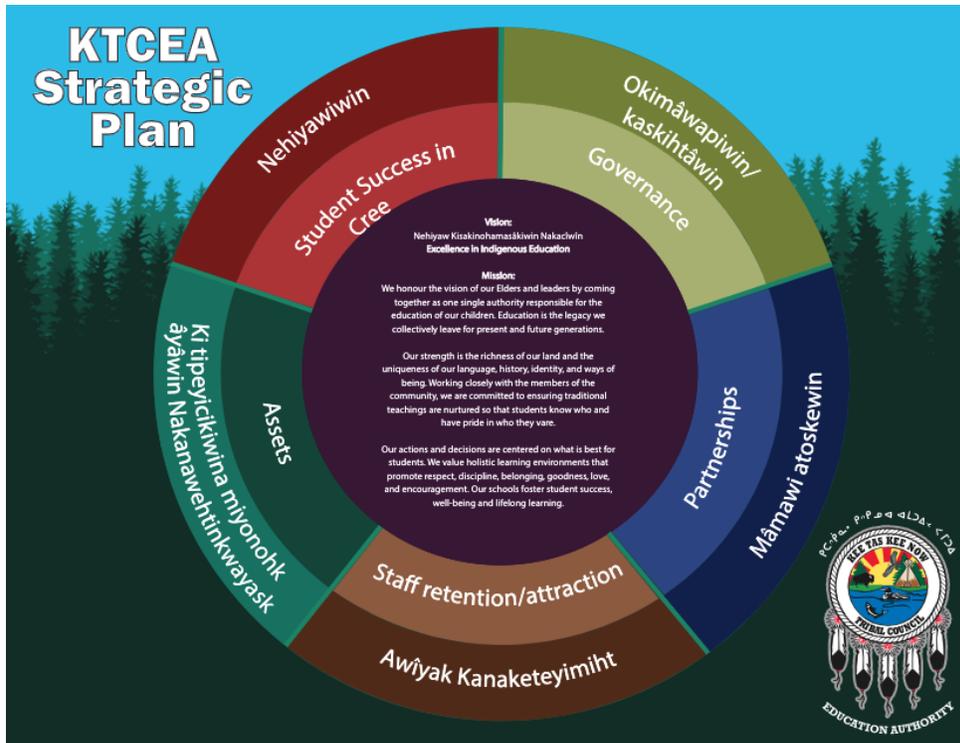


Figure 3: KTCEA Strategic Plan (Source: Kee Tas Kee Now Tribal Council Education Authority, 2019d)

### Intersections and Exploring Research Partnerships: 2017–2018

In 2017, I ended my employment with the Government of Alberta as a Senior Education Manager with the Ministry of Education’s First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Division to take on a role with the Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry. In the time between 2017 and 2018, and as a result of the relationships developed as part of my work with the provincial government, I inquired with the newly established Education Authority leadership if they would be interested in participating in the research process as part of the completion requirements for my PhD. I was subsequently invited to the first KTCEA Board of Directors Meeting on December 18, 2018 to present the scope of my research proposal and to seek approval from the Board to conduct my research with the KTCEA First Nations. Motion #03-12-13-2018 (Kee Tas Kee Now Tribal Council Education Authority, 2018) was presented to the Board of Directors which stated:

Moved by Chief Thunder to formalize that KTCEA approves and welcomes the work of Tibetha Kemble in research of Early Childhood Development needs of the KTC Nations.

Seconded by Chief Sharpe. All In Favor. CARRIED. Ivan thanked Tibetha for her presentation and that you have access to our communities for your research. (p. 3–4)

Receiving approval from the Board of Directors to initiate my research and work with KTCEA First Nations was the first step of my research process.

### **Chapter Summary**

The intent of this chapter was to properly historicize the complexity and challenges of First Nations education, outline some of the major structural shifts over time, as well as the changes the Kee Tas Kee Now Tribal Council undertook over the course of three decades, and more recently throughout 2017–2020, to assume control and sovereignty over education for the KTC First Nations. The next chapter focuses on the research process, methods, methodology and outcomes of the community-based research I completed during the spring and summer of 2019.

## Chapter 3: Mapping Indigenous Early Childhood

### Chapter Objectives

The objective of this chapter is to identify the key policies and their theoretical and pedagogical underpinnings that have shaped early childhood education for Indigenous Peoples in Canada historically and in the present. Here I draw upon key authors whose work has made important contributions in describing and analyzing the contours of early childhood education policy in Canada and also in New Zealand. A focus on early childhood within New Zealand, as opposed to Australia or the U.S., was included given the focus of this population of children contained within one key author's research.

This chapter is structured as follows; the first section begins with the historical context of education for Indigenous children in Canada, focusing on the broad objectives and agendas that shaped colonial policy. Here I draw primarily on the work of Prochner, whose research informs the history of infant schools and kindergarten for Indigenous children between 1800–1900, as well as the policy document, the Hawthorn Report, which was the first to demarcate the differences, from a non-Indigenous perspective, between Indian and non-Indian children in their early years. This is followed by an examination of the contemporary context where I draw on the work of Greenwood (2009), Ackerman (2010), Kemble (2013), and Robertson (2015) whose research informs various aspects of the current context of Indigenous ECD in Canada such as the notion of “good care” (Greenwood, 2009) for Indigenous children; the Image of the Child (Ackerman, 2010) from a Plains Cree perspective; and lastly, how existing ECD programs (i.e. Aboriginal Head Start On Reserve (Kemble, 2013)) and Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities (Robertson, 2015) outline the contours of contemporary early childhood development for Indigenous children in Canada. This section is followed by an overview of the prevailing themes within Indigenous early childhood development policy documents that serve as an undercurrent for programs and services for Indigenous children in the early years.

The remaining sections of this chapter provide an overview of the main theoretical positions by key theorists within early childhood development theory that have shaped ECD programs and policy, and that are principally relied on. To demonstrate the ways in which these main theories not only continue to operate within contemporary ECD policy and practice but also fail to consider the lived experiences and realities of Indigenous children in particular, I provide a brief and critical discussion of each of these main theories in relation to Indigenous children.

## A Brief History of Indigenous Early Childhood Education in Canada

To date, there exists no large-scale study or examination of the history of early childhood education (ECE) for First Nations children in Canada. Prochner (2009); however, has detailed the foundations and history of ECE in respect of Indigenous children between the 1800s and 1900s in Canada. Prochner (2009) writes that in the “ten years from 1825 to 1835 [there was] tremendous missionary activity among Indigenous Peoples around the world” (p. 53) and that education was viewed as an evangelizing strategy where “infant schools for Indigenous children [could]... make such endeavours possible” (p. 53). The missionaries also hoped to “develop a generation of native leaders who would encourage more and more converts to the Christian faith and European way of life” (Prochner, 2009, p. 91). May et al. (2014) later describes that at the Mohawk Village school at Grand River,

The overarching focus of schooling for Indian children was on literacy as a means of evangelism, so we do know considerable attention was paid to reading and reciting scriptures. Infant school teacher Chappell Porter claimed that most of her 54 students at the Mackinaw mission ‘learned to read and recite passages of Scripture’ in nine months, indicating that her students were highly motivated and that her infant school teaching methods were effective. (p. 163)

With the failure of the *Gradual Civilization Act* of 1857 that sought the removal of the special status of Indian peoples towards enfranchisement, missionaries and federal officials remained largely focused on assimilating Indigenous Peoples, and Indigenous children especially, through education and through indoctrination into the belief that the individualistic European worldview took precedence – and was thus superior – over the communal view held by Indigenous Peoples. At the time, it was believed that the most effective means of achieving these primary objectives would best be achieved through the establishment of Indian Infant schools rather than on Indian adults. The rejection of the *Gradual Assimilation Act* and failure to assimilate Indians into the body politic led missionaries to become increasingly interested in “remaking” children so that later assimilative efforts would not be akin to “putting new wine into old bottles” (Prochner, 2009, p. 60). As Prochner (2009) has described, this would eventually give way to “a curriculum of cultural replacement” (p. 60) and towards realizing the colonial goal of creating “a perfect civilization of the rising generation of Indians” (p. 62).

Governments set out to achieve the goal of assimilation by segregating children not only from their parents and communities but also from mainstream society into infant and residential schools. The devastating effects for many young children forced into these schools often resulted in children returning to their home communities with a disrupted or even severed relationship with their parents who were assumed to be “poor models” (Prochner, 2009, p. 99) and “...by blunt intrusion of institutional life during a critical stage of their development” (p. 84). Given the poor quality of education that Indian children received in these early schools,

Children also left these institutions ill-prepared to take what was believed to be their proper place in European society, often placing a double-exclusion burden on children who, through no fault of their own, could neither occupy a space within their home communities or in society at large. (Prochner, 2009, p. 84)

Infant schools soon gave way to Kindergarten and by 1894 missionaries viewed this form of education as “[the key] to lifting them out of their old ways of indolence” (Prochner, 2009, p. 139). As Hailmann (in Prochner, 2009) reflects on a common view at the time:

The old Indians cling to the customs and traditions of their tribe...but in kindergarten we take these dark-skinned boys and girls while they are impressionable, and through its pleasant teaching form habits of observation and thought, preparing them for the...teachers who will come after us. (p. 139)

As Prochner describes, infant schools and kindergarten education throughout this time also focused on deterring or counteracting behaviour that “they may have imbibed at home” (Prochner, 2009, p. 45) so that a moral and religious foundation could be set and so that their later labour would not be lost. As time passed, both infant schools and kindergarten for Indian children became imbued with the notion that early education was a means to achieve social order among Indian peoples and to detract from criminal or deviant behaviour later in life and, when understood in this way, was viewed as a critical and cost-effective measure since “[early] formation is cheaper than reformation” (Prochner, 2009, p. 169).

By the mid-1900s, federal officials once again began examining the best way to educate the Indian child and in a 1931 House of Commons debate and in a statement by Member of Parliament R.R. Knight it was noted:

Let me make myself perfectly clear. I admit immediately that the churches have done marvellous work...and without that pioneer work northern Indians would be largely

pagan and unlettered... The Indians, I think, feel the time has come for the government to take over a good many of those functions which the missionary was asked to perform but which I do not think are in the sphere of the church... The problem is how education may be best brought to the Indian child. I believe it should be brought to him and not that he should be brought it. How are we best to introduce the world to these children in the development of their bodies, their minds and their intellects through the media of science, literature, history and such handwork, I believe, should be an important part of the education of these people, who are accustomed to use their hands and who are used to living in the open spaces. Such an education would aid Indian children in their enjoyment of life, and their ability to be independent in earning a living. (Indian Act, 1931, p. 725)

### **Articulating the Shift in Early Childhood Education and Indian Children: 1990s and Beyond**

The period between the 1930s and 1960s were largely silent on the issue of early childhood education and Indian children; however, with the release of the Hawthorn report in 1966, renewed interest was ignited given Hawthorn's observations and recommendations to the federal government. This is well demonstrated in Hawthorn's (1967) report that states,

There is no question that schooling presents a clear discontinuity of experience for the Indian child; such discontinuity contributes to the retardation of 80 per cent of the Indian children in first grade and to the average age-grade retardation of a minimum 2.5 years for all individuals. (1967, p. 108)

Although similarly noted by Greenwood in the early 2000s, Hawthorn's report was the first of its kind to remark on Indigenous early childhood development in his work entitled *The Education of the Indian child* (Hawthorn, 1967, pp. 105–106) which chronicles and demarcated the variances between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children in terms of environmental socialization and the psychological environment in which both groups of children are raised.

Hawthorn also expressed that these variances and the extent to which Indian children were deprived of stimulation in development of new abilities would have significant implications. Namely, that

Environmental deprivation may have a levelling effect on the individual's

achievement of certain skills and abilities [but] this is as applicable to the middle-class child who is restricted by routines and over-scheduling, as it is to the Indian child whose experiential deprivation is due to different causes. Such deprivation does not imply that children who are deficient will not be able to learn skills after bypassing them but it does mean if they have not learned them during the optimum period for development they will take longer to do so when given the opportunity. (Hawthorn, 1967, p. 114)

From this perspective, Hawthorn noted:

If pre-school education were made available to Indian students and if ungraded primary classes were the rule rather than the exception, it is conceivable that the Indian child might be able to overcome his initial retardation on school entry and avoid accumulating a deficit. If schools could offer remedial training to all children from grade one on, it is also possible that Indian children would benefit greatly and that age-grade retardation could be much reduced. (p. 133)

Lastly, in Hawthorn's discussion pertaining to the "Sanctions for Learning" (p. 114) as a result of the Indian child's psychological environment Indian children have not had the "necessary corrective feedback" (p. 114) or requisite level of responsiveness and attentiveness by the Indian parent and as such, these conditions "lessens his facility in learning to read" (p. 114) and engage properly in the formal education process. Moreover, Hawthorn asserts,

The Indian child by contrast has had none of this pre-school conditioning and does not share the expectation of his peers with regard to the demands and behaviour of the teacher and his expectations. He therefore has to learn to do a task whether or not he is interested, to complete it, to do it within a given time limit and to accept punishment for not meeting these expectations. All of these factors interfere with the actual performance of the assigned task. They also reduce motivation. When the child has experienced negative sanctions for not meeting expectations and when his hope of achieving competence is constantly negated, he simply stops trying. (p. 115)

The observations (among others) made within Hawthorn's report on the Education of the Indian Child regarding the conditions experienced by Indian children within Indian communities, coupled with what Hawthorn perceived to be a state of deprivation, formed part of the foundations of the federal government's (under the leadership of then Prime Minister Pierre

Elliot Trudeau and then Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs, Jean Chretien) 1969 White Paper (AANDC, 1969) that proposed the elimination of all special rights that were perceived to lead to the inequalities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

Although the 1969 White Paper was the first of its kind to acknowledge the social inequality experienced by Indigenous peoples in Canada, it did not, however, make any recognition of the inherent rights of Indigenous peoples to be self-determining nor did it make any provision for meaningful participation in the decision-making process in respect of policies and/or structural changes that would begin to address the deep and persistent inequalities within Canadian society. In response, First Nations groups and leaders came together to form a response and in 1973 the National Indian Brotherhood (now known as the Assembly of First Nations) issued a counter-narrative to the White Paper — and its specific dismissive and paternalistic views of Indian children, parents, and communities — with the release of Indian Control of Indian Education (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972).

For the first time, First Nations people articulated their vision, values, role of parents, and guiding philosophy of Indian education. Moreover, for the first time, First Nations peoples stated their reclamation of

our right to direct the education of our children...[where] we assert that only Indian peoples can develop a suitable philosophy of education based on Indian values adapted to modern living...[and that] The time has come for a radical change in Indian education. Our aim is to make education relevant to the philosophy and needs of the Indian people. We want education to give our children a strong sense of identity, with confidence in their personal worth and ability. (pp. 2–3)

In the decades between the late 1970s and the early 1990s, very little discussion in relation to ECE and Indigenous children took place at the national or regional levels. However, following the Liberal Party's Red Book commitments and the call for a National Child Care Strategy that emerged in the mid-1990s, a renewed interest on the part of Indigenous and non-Indigenous governments emerged. Largely informed by the RCAP (AANDC, 1996) and the Early Years Study by McCain and Mustard (1999), discussions around Indigenous ECD and ECD programs for young children on-reserve began to slowly emerge. Most notably among these was the establishment of the Aboriginal Head Start On-Reserve (AHSOR) (discussed later) designed to meet the developmental needs of young children on-reserve. While the AHSOR has

been in active operation for nearly twenty years, discussions as to the overall progress of student participants as well as community-driven objectives remain largely unexamined despite the growing federal investment and the numbers of children on-reserve who are participating in the program. The establishment of this program (and a growing number of others in First Nations communities across Canada), has formed the foundation for current discussions about contemporary and future practice in early childhood education and care in Canada.

### **Other Contributions in the Literature to Early Childhood Development and Indigenous Children**

Before outlining the major themes within contemporary policy documents pertaining to Indigenous ECD, an overview of the existing diverse academic contributions to emerging understandings of early childhood development for Indigenous children is provided. An overview of each contribution is provided and will outline the overarching topic examined within each pertaining to a specific realm (i.e. quality, image of the child, Aboriginal Head Start, Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities) within early childhood education for Indigenous children in Canada.

#### ***Quality and Self-Determination within Indigenous ECD***

Greenwood has written the most extensively on ECD and Indigenous children and her work has focused almost exclusively on articulating the notions of quality and good care within ECD from an Indigenous perspective, and more recently an attendant focus on cultural safety within early childhood programs (Gerlach, Browne, & Greenwood, 2017). Starting in 2000, Greenwood & Shawana (2000) examine the notion of quality within Indigenous ECD and assert “First Nations quality child care is multifaceted and embedded within a context that is inherent to each characteristic of quality care” (p. 56). Further, Greenwood & Shawana (2000) assert that quality, within the context of the needs and aspirations of Indigenous Peoples within programs and services must incorporate Elders, the incorporation of meaningful and culturally-responsive skill-building activities, culturally-relevant teacher training, the incorporation and local language and culture, the incorporation of “community-certified caregivers” (p. 72) and the development of First Nations-specific ECD legislation that responds and respects jurisdiction and authority of Indigenous Peoples pursuant to S. 35 of the Canadian constitution.

These principles are later reflected in Greenwood's (2006) article "Children Are a Gift to Us" where she again asserts that meaningful quality ECD for Indigenous children is both self-determined and culturally and context specific, "anchored in Aboriginal ways of knowing and being: in order to close the circle around Aboriginal children's care and development" (p. 27). Greenwood (2009) later asserts in her doctoral dissertation *Places for the Good Care of Children: A Discussion of Indigenous Cultural Considerations and Early Childhood in Canada and New Zealand*, where she articulates that the ECD and Indigenous children in Canada is a contested site and must be decolonized. As such, Indigenous ECD frameworks must embed the "beliefs, contexts, and potentials" (p. 235) of Indigenous communities, so that ECD within Indigenous communities is "culture- and nation-specific, and in which sit traditions, social roles, collaboration and cross cultural possibilities, and integrity" (p. 235). As a result, according to Greenwood, the notion of "good care" within Indigenous ECD is one where Indigenous children "live Indigenous values everyday" (p. 235) and where "communities seize[ing] opportunities to create change" (p. 235).

### ***The Image of the Child from a Plains Cree Perspective***

Ackerman (2010) makes an important contribution to an alternate, Indigenous-and Plains Cree-specific, understanding of the prevailing notion of the Image of the Child. Centred around the spirit of the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education, which depends on establishing a "locally created image of the child within a cultural context" (p. 3), Ackerman seeks to identify the ways in which the Plains Cree construct their own Image of the Child through interviews with Plains Cree Elders and teachers.

Through her work, Ackerman (2010) states that the Plains Cree and Reggio Emilia Image of the Child are "similar" (p. 93) in that they both "acknowledge the child's ability to communicate and learn from the moment of birth" (p. 93). Secondly, both notions believe that "the child is an important and contributing member of the community" (p. 93) where children are recognized as important members of the community, and lastly, both "believe that children are excellent resources regarding the nature of childhood" (p. 93); where children are central to teaching adults how to listen and care for them. The central difference, Ackerman states, is that "the Plains Cree image of the child is centered on a spiritual orientation, which can only be fully actualized when accompanied by Plains Cree culture and language" (p. 94). This principal

difference between the two notions of the image of the child, presents a challenge to early childhood educators working with Plains Cree children.

***Aboriginal Head Start on Reserve (AHSOR) and Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities (AHSUNC)***

All matters pertaining to Indians, and land reserved for Indians, falls under the exclusive jurisdiction of the federal government and the *Indian Act*. K–12 education falls within the mandate of the federal department of Indigenous and Northern Affairs and typically covers education for Indian children between the ages of 6 to 16; whereas early childhood development falls within the mandate of the federal department of Health since the focus is on children outside the mandate of the Indian Act and as it is viewed as a determinant/contributor to the health and social development of young children.

There are two main ECD programs for Indian children under the age of 6 in both the on and off reserve contexts; namely, the Aboriginal Head Start On-Reserve (AHSOR) and the Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities (AHSUNC), respectively. Both programs are well-established and have been in operation in on and off reserve contexts for more than 20 years. However, despite the popularity of both programs, very little is known about the extent to which they are meeting their stated purpose and objectives and affecting the extent to school readiness in young Indigenous children (Kemble, 2013), and if the evaluation framework for the AHSUNC is a culturally-responsive instructive model for impact evaluations of ECD programs for Indigenous children.

As I described in, *First Nation, Dead Last: Reframing the Aboriginal Head Start On Reserve through the Lens of Policy Texts and Statistical Representations* (Kemble, 2013) I stated that despite the popularity and wide usage of the AHSOR within First Nations communities in Canada, very little is known about the extent to which the program is affecting the levels of school-readiness among young Indigenous children. To date, no systematic or longitudinal analysis of the effectiveness of AHSOR has occurred, and the evaluations have been undertaken generally are limited to one aspect of the program's core components (i.e. language) as opposed to whether Indigenous children are equipped to enter school, or are 'school-ready' which has important implications for future developmental, educational, and social outcomes of Indigenous children.

Robertson (2015) states in her work *Cultural Approaches to Evaluating Indigenous Early Intervention Programs: A Case Study of Aboriginal Head Start* that “The federal government requires that their funded programs demonstrate success for targeted outcomes to qualify for continuing funding. AHSUNC was required by the 1995 Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat (TBCS) to conduct periodic formative evaluations (process and administrative) and a national summative (impact) evaluation” (p. 34). As such, Robertson (2015) participated in the design and development of the 2003–2006 AHSUNC National Impact Evaluation that was both participatory and culturally-responsive. Her work contributed to the understanding that the National Impact Evaluation for the AHSUNC program was “culturally responsive in that it comprises design elements that respect diversity, meaningful participation, and community control” (p. 243) due to its partnership and participation with Indigenous communities and is a useful model for cross-cultural program evaluations in the future.

Although diverse, each of the scholarly contributions described above contributes in its own ways to emerging understanding of various elements/aspects of ECD for Indigenous children and communities. These are important contributions given the greater focus by the recent release of the National Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework (Government of Canada, 2018b) and Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework (Government of Canada, 2018a). As work on implementing the developing National Indigenous Framework continues, undoubtedly these contributions will guide and impact the development of community-driven, culturally-responsive approaches to the design, implementation, and evaluation of ECD programs and services for Indigenous children in the on and off reserve contexts.

### **Indigenous Early Childhood Development: Articulating the Themes**

Within the Canadian context, there are two primary sources of literature as they pertain to Indigenous children and early childhood education: theoretical (scholarly, non-government) and non-theoretical research (government). A discussion about the themes that emerged throughout the literature will be presented in the section to immediately follow and will demonstrate the various, yet often interrelated, connections between the two sources. The conclusion will outline general remarks about the main assumptions within the literature and will outline areas for future research.

Although there is a growing body of non-theoretical literature available on the topic of early childhood education and care in Canada, this particular body of knowledge typically excludes discussions pertaining to specific issue of early childhood development and Indigenous children. Given the scope of this particular literature review which focuses narrowly on early childhood education and Indigenous children in Canada, forty documents/articles were reviewed, all of which contained three broad and overriding themes related to: (1) early childhood as an investment, (2) quality, and (3) school-readiness. Here I draw on the work of Mustard and McCain whose work can be seen as foundational to ECD within the Canadian context throughout the 1990s into present day.

### ***Early Childhood Development as a Human Capital Investment***

Most, if not all, of the non-theoretical literature on investment in ECD, remark that ECD is a powerful tool to enhance the well-being of children but more importantly that it is a useful investment that “is key to a strong economy and healthy civic society” (National Children’s Alliance, 1998). Given that the Indigenous population is the youngest and fastest growing segment of Canadian society, a significant proportion of the literature reviewed herein note the potentially deleterious impact to Canada’s economy and society should adequate investments not be made. This notion, however, is troubled by the concurrent awareness that Indigenous peoples, and First Nations people on-reserve, are among the most disadvantaged, marginalized (Doherty et al., 2003) and thus, the most challenging aspect to a shifting economy that must be adaptable, robust, and flexible.

The most influential documents that have shaped the direction of early childhood development in Canada are those by McCain and Mustard (1999) and McCain, Mustard and Shanker (2007) entitled *Reversing the Real Brain Drain: Early Years Study Report* and the *Early Years Study Report 2: Putting Science into Action*, respectively. Taking a neuroscientific and ‘conforming to society’ position, McCain and Mustard (1999) assert

There are critical periods when a young child requires appropriate stimulation for the brain to establish neural pathways in the brain for optimal development. Many of these critical periods are over or waning by the time a child is six years old.... [and] There is disturbing evidence that children who do not receive the nutrition and stimulation necessary for good development in the earliest months and years may have

great difficulty overcoming deficits later. Once the critical periods for brain development are passed, providing the child has not experienced extreme neglect, it is possible to develop the brain's capacity to compensate – but it is difficult to achieve its full potential. Children who receive inadequate or disruptive stimulation will be more likely to develop learning, behavioural or emotional problems in later stages of life (including increased juvenile delinquency and crime in males). (p. 6)

McCain and Mustard (1999) contend that the first six years of a child's life are the most important influence on brain development on subsequent learning and behaviour. This was reaffirmed in 2020 by McCain, with added refinements that suggest the first 2000 days of a child's life not only “set the foundation, but there is much more to come. During the second 1000 days from about age 2 to 5 years, elaborate, interconnected neural networks come online to support uniquely human capacities” (p. 8). These first 2000 days are important for ensuring children are ready for school, and so that they are equipped with the tools needed for daily living. The first 2000 days, according to McCain, have prepared children for the first, second and third industrial revolutions and that the first 2000 days within the current context, will support children to participate in the “fourth industrial revolution” (p. 10). This new period is characterised as requiring

Digital fluency, knowledge of STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) and literacy are essential. So are the soft skills that enable people to leverage their uniquely human abilities such as getting along with others, adaptability, understanding and taking the perspective of others. All these skills can be grounded in the thinking, well-being and language skills acquired during the preschool years. (p. 10)

Given the changing nature of Canadian society (i.e. increased maternal employment, slowed economic growth, decreased federal transfer payments, and the decline in birth rates among the general population), McCain and Mustard (1999) conclude that “our future depends on our ability to manage the complex interplay of the emerging new economy, changing social environments and the impact of change on individuals, particularly those who are most vulnerable in their formative early years – our children” (p. 8). Further, as governments work towards investing in and developing a competent and capable population, Canada will have the ability to “cope with the socio-economic change [that is]...critical for future economic growth” (p. 8). To preface and support their arguments, McCain and Mustard (1999) cite various

international documents that highlight the significance and importance of investment in ECD in Canada such as Mary Eming Young (1996, in McCain & Mustard, 1999), who articulate

A great many local, and a number of national, efforts have already proven that early childhood development (ECD) programs can be a wise investment...ECD programs enhance school-readiness, increase the efficiency of primary school investments and human capital formation, foster valued social behaviours, reduce social welfare costs, stimulate community development, and help mothers become income earners. (p. 4)

McCain and Mustard (1999) conclude that early investments by provincial governments will be increasingly cost-effective “than paying for remediation later in life, such as treatment programs and support services for problems that are rooted in poor early development” (p. 13).

In later discussions about the importance of investments, McCain et al. (2007) point out,

The evidence is compelling and overwhelming.... If properly linked to labour, health, and social services, early childhood programs can deliver additional outcomes, such as enhanced maternal employment, less family poverty, better parenting skills, and greater family and community cohesion. Quality early childhood programs are not only good for children and families, they are good for the bottom line. (p. 135)

This was later reaffirmed by McCain in 2020, who added the societal benefits of reducing “gender and income inequality” (McCain, 2020, p. 32) in Canada. Although not discussed initially in the first Early Years study, by 2020, McCain highlights the role of poverty and inequality which contributes to “Families with few opportunities often find it difficult to set their children up for success” (p. 31). McCain elaborates further to suggest that access to quality education within the early years, when “complemented by quality schooling, can break this [poverty] cycle” (p. 31). The notion that ECD could eliminate social and economic disparities between majority and minority groups was also articulated by McCain in 2007 who suggested that “early childhood development programs help to overcome socioeconomic disparities by levelling the playing field for all children before they enter primary school” (p. 136). The reports by McCain and Mustard (1999), McCain et al. (2007), and McCain (2020) highlight the impact that minority groups pose to greater social cohesion and economic growth and stability of the nation given the propensity of such groups to have low-income and single-parent-household status. Furthermore, while certain groups such as new immigrants have “caught up to the average

Canadian income within 10-to-15 years of their arrival in Canada” (p. 67), other groups — such as Indigenous peoples — have problematic outcomes in relation to low-income status in that they have remained persistently high over time. The persistence and high prevalence of these indicators among the Indigenous population in Canada, coupled with the “sorry state of early childhood development” (Battle & Torjman, 2000, p. 3) and the “jumble of early childhood initiatives that sometimes compete for participants and attention in local communities” (McCain et al., 1999, p.111–112), both pose a significant threat not only to social cohesion towards national economic goals but towards Canadian pluralism (McCain et al., p. 71; McCain, 2020, p. 2). The McCain and Mustard (1999) report formed the foundation for further exploration into the need for investment in ECD within the Canadian context.

Largely unstated; however, are the ways in which these studies position the family unit as the “locus of improvement” as opposed to problematizing systems-issues and/or “structural change or the provision of services” (Penn, 2017, p. 59). Through this lens, the family unit is positioned as almost solely responsible for fostering and producing the skills that are intricately linked to later productivity and poor families in particular “have failed to perform this task well” (Penn, 2017, p. 59). According to Penn (2017), the failures of the poor to equip their children to be future productive workers “retards the growth of the quality of the workforce” (p. 59).

Subsequent investment in and development of ECD programs in Canada are widely based on McCain and Mustard’s observations as well as on the growing awareness amongst federal government officials about the impact of the first few years of life and the related costs to growing social costs related to welfare dependency and poor health outcomes (Harris, 1999; Black, 1993) of minority and other low-income groups such as Indigenous peoples.

Although provincial governments undertook the development of a wide array of ECD programs and services in the period between the 1990s and 2000s, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Country Report published in 2004 highlighted Canada’s dismal record in relation to the provision of quality, universal, and effective early childhood programming for all children in Canada. Moreover, while the OECD noted “it is clear that Canada did not make great progress in early education and care during the 1990s... [and] Canada is still at an early stage in the development of professional early childhood services” (OECD Directorate for Education, 2004, p. 56) and

national and provincial policy for the early education and care of young children in Canada is still in its initial stages... [and]...over the coming years, significant energies and funding will need to be invested in the field to create a universal system in tune with the needs of a full employment economy (p. 6).

The OECD's principal findings highlighted above support their overarching recommendation that "further investment in the promotion of early childhood development and the support of parental workforce participation or employment training" (p. 43) is necessary for low-income groups and Indigenous peoples to move away from welfare dependency and earn higher incomes so that a reduction in expenditures and the use of "expensive health and social services" (p. 59) can take place.

With regards to Indigenous children, the OECD (2004) report found that a lack of adequate investment and access to early childhood education (ECE) was counterintuitive to the understanding that ECE programming was the most beneficial to highly vulnerable groups and that without adequate investment, the Indigenous population would "remain a highly marginalized population, many of whose children suffer the problems associated with erosion of cultural identity, poverty, and dislocation" (p. 62). This conclusion is later affirmed by Elek et al. (2020) who suggest that "Effective early childhood education programs targeting Indigenous children's learning, development or wellbeing have the potential to improve children's language outcomes as well as their development and school readiness, thus assist in counteracting the ongoing effects of colonialism" (p. 12). Effective and high quality ECE programs were also later affirmed as particularly important for Indigenous children who, according to Elek et al. (2020) stand to "benefit greatly" (p. 11); however, Elek et al., further contend that specific considerations, as opposed to universal design of ECE programs, must be made to attend to the needs and experiences of Indigenous children

due to the historical and cultural contexts in which Indigenous children grow up, universal or more widely targeted programs may not achieve the same outcomes among Indigenous children as for other children. In addition, programs designed specifically for Indigenous children should be designed so as not to risk further perpetuating the effects of systemic, structural and individual racism arising from histories of colonisation, the effects of which include language loss and disconnection from cultural heritage.

(Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care, 2012; Skutnabb-Kangas & May 2016, in Elek et al., 2020, p. 12)

In response to the OECD's numerous negative conclusions about the state of ECE in Canada, Canada released its Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology report entitled *Early Childhood Education and Care: Time to Act* (The Senate, 2009). While Canada acknowledges that the OECD found positive outcomes in relation to the depth and extent of research on early childhood development and learning, Canada further recognizes that "Canada's rankings were a disappointment to many [given that the] ...data showed that child poverty rates were largely unchanged in Canada, while the presence of vulnerable children among Canadian families if all incomes persisted" (p. 10). The Senate committee's report provided several recommendations to the federal government as to how to address the numerous concerns outlined by the OECD in 2004 and articulated the need to increase investment to improve access for low-income and Indigenous peoples since "early childhood services are particularly important for such children, and contribute strongly to their health, social and cognitive development, as well as to social inclusion of their families and their future participation in society" (p. 45).

Describing the challenges to population health, Richards (2008) and Boivin and Hertzman (2012), similarly conclude that children who face obstacles to health and healthy development (such as family poverty, "inappropriate care", and child maltreatment) are more likely to "experience a broad range of impairments later in life [and]...these difficulties may have dire consequences for the individual and society" (Boivin & Hertzman, p. i). Richards (2008) asserts that "A marginalized community, such as Indigenous, living in a modern economy can only escape poverty through an educational transformation [and a] major undertaking by parents, teachers and community leaders to improve [these conditions] ...is required. In the case of children of parents with low education attainment, early childhood education programs provide significant benefits" (p. 2). Thus, for Richards (2008), investments in the early years, especially for Indigenous children from adverse social and economic environments, has the capacity to enable children to escape the conditions of deep poverty that not only affect their health, but more specifically their educational outcomes. For Boivin and Hertzman (2012), investing in the early years

may be the best way to reduce health inequalities across the life course... [and a] consensus among economists has emerged that economic return on investment in the early years, through enhanced school success, reduced criminality, and improved well-being are potentially greater than any other investment in health, education, or human development that a wealthy society can make” (Heckman, 2006, in Boivin & Hertzman, 2012).

For these reasons, Boivin and Hertzman (2012) assert, investment in the early years for Indigenous peoples will help “tackle unhealthy behaviours” that lead to poor health and educational outcomes. On the subject of ECD investments as an effective tool to alleviate and/or alter the negative life trajectories that emanate from the persistence of family poverty, Gerlach, Grey Smith, and Schneider (2008) and Statistics Canada (2008) both highlight the potential of increased federal investment into ECD for Indigenous children. These assertions generally emanate from global studies on the effects of ECE/ECD on poverty, such as those made by UNICEF (2006), that suggest that the deficit caused by poverty has a multiplying effect and that children raised in “poverty complete far less education than middle class children, due in part to their lowered ability to learn in school....However, if we are committed to reducing poverty, and increasing the chances of all children for success, we must invest in the early years” (p. 1). In doing so, UNICEF (2006) suggests that the social and educational maladies caused by poverty such as “undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies and learning environments that do not provide enough responsive stimulation and nurturance” countries can be curtailed through enhanced efficient delivery of ECE/ECD to disadvantaged children so as to avoid these children from “developing more slowly, or failing to develop critical thinking and learning skills” (UNICEF, p. 10). Gerlach et al. (2008) similarly conclude that “only through a comprehensive plan supported by investment can First Nations finally and forever break free from the prison of poverty” (Fontaine, 2006 in Gerlach et al., p. 38).

### ***Quality in Indigenous Early Childhood Education***

The notion of quality in ECE for Indigenous children in Canada has a relatively short history that can be attributed, in part, to the limited number of programs and services available to Indigenous children in Canada. However, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) (AANDC, 1996) was the first to articulate and define “quality” ECD within the Indigenous

context. The RCAP (AANDC, 1996) argued that “quality” within ECD as inclusive of “culturally appropriate...education options...[that] support...parents and families in the home, language immersion, co-operative arrangements in-home day care, day care centres, involvement with elders, and other community activities” (AANDC, 1996, para. 12). Later definitions of quality in Indigenous ECD emanated from the Government of Canada’s Multilateral Framework for Early Learning and Child Care (2018b) that brought a \$1.05 billion-dollar investment over five years to “improve the availability and affordability of quality learning and child care for children under the age of 6” (p. 2) in Canada. This agreement committed Canada to work with the provinces and territories on the development of a national vision to guide the development of a framework for early learning and childcare in Canada that centered around the four principles of quality, universally inclusive, accessible, and developmental (QUAD). Although these principles were largely agreed to, and while there was also a broad consensus on the need to develop a national action plan, there were some questions as to how QUAD principles would be contextualized within Indigenous communities given that the Framework only loosely defined “quality” as:

Quality: evidence-based, high-quality practices relating to programs for children, training and support for early childhood educators and child care providers, and provincial/territorial regulation and monitoring. (Cool, 2007, p. 6)

and

Quality: Early learning and child care should be of high quality to support optimal child development. Examples of initiatives that support high quality early learning and child care could include enhancements to training and support, child/caregiver ratios to group size, compensation, recruitment and retention, physical environment, health and safety, and learning environment. (Government of Canada, 2012a, para. 11)

In response to the government’s definition of QUAD (and of “quality” specifically), the Native Women’s Association of Canada (NWAC, 2005) articulated an Indigenous perspective that suggests quality in early childhood should be about developing “comprehensive strategies to improve early learning and provide better child care for every Aboriginal child” (p. 10). NWAC also raised some concerns about the principle of quality as it was broadly defined and the limitation within Indigenous communities in meeting or aligning with this definition. Namely, the NWAC noted

...every Aboriginal child should have access to quality – not second or neglected class – Early Learning and Child Care programs and services. What has to be faced, though, right now, is that we do not have quality services for all Aboriginal children and there need to be significantly increased investment to ensure that those who have less get more.

NWAC wishes to record a concern about who sets the standards for determining how “quality” programming is provided to Aboriginal children and families. Not all of our community-based workers have the same degrees and certificates as mainstream workers, and yet they are vital in providing direct services. (p. 10)

The Assembly of First Nations (2005, 2017) similarly took up the task of defining the notion of “quality” in respect of Indigenous ECE and the Multilateral Framework in their report *First Nations Early Learning and Child Care Action Plan* wherein they noted “First Nations must define what ‘quality’ child care is for them and for their children. First Nations values and beliefs must be the foundation for all policies, programs and principles which are developed for the care and education of First Nations children” (2005, p. 2). The AFN provided nine principles of quality within Indigenous ECD that encompassed funding to support wages and salaries of ECE staff, culturally appropriate programs and services, a bilateral funding arrangement to reduce bureaucracy, more direct funding to support implementation of ECD programs and services, supports for parents and caregivers, the inclusion of elders, supports and appropriate links to specialized services for children with special needs, licensing and appropriate regulatory regimes, and adequate and safe facilities (AFN, 2005, p. 3–4).

The Assembly of First Nation, in response to the Government of Canada’s desire to co-develop a transformative Indigenous early childcare framework that meets and reflects the unique cultures, aspirations and needs of First Nation, Metis, and Inuit children across Canada” (Government of Canada, 2018a, p. 2), developed an enhanced understanding of the notion of “quality” within Indigenous Early Learning and Care and has articulated this through a systems-view that supports wide structural changes to the provision of Indigenous early learning and care. As articulated in the AFN’s National First Nations Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) Policy Framework (2017), quality comprises structural and systemic actions that lend to high-quality programs and services for Indigenous children including:

- flexibility in the coordination of services (p. 8),
- funding formulas that maximize resources (p. 8),
- programs that reflect the languages and cultures of Indigenous children and their communities (p. 8),
- First Nations' specific standards and regulations (p. 8),
- local monitoring and regulation of programs and services (p. 8),
- accreditation and licensing processes for First Nations communities (p. 8),
- certified teachers who have the appropriate training and education (pp. 8–9),
- enhancements to physical environments (p. 9),
- processes for assessing children's well-being that are anchored in local community knowledge systems and include developmentally appropriate practices (p. 9)
- Local and parental control (p. 9)
- Enhance and develop evaluation processes and strategies (p. 9–10) and
- Ensure adequate and equitable funding for community-based programs and services with attention to equity (p. 9–10)

Greenwood and Shawana (2000), in their National study of First Nations Quality Child Care suggest that quality childcare “has special meaning” (p. 30) and that First Nations specific aspects of quality encompass

a safe place where children learn, have fun and feel loved...where everyone involved is satisfied...a safe and nurturing atmosphere...is holistic and includes culture, language, and education so children are provided with opportunities to gain independence, self-esteem, pride and dignity.... would involve the community and be accountable...where regulations [are in] place [and where there are] adequate resources in the centre” (pp. 84–85).

In relation to the intent of improving quality early childhood education and care for Indigenous children, the Senate (2009) notes broadly that improving access to affordable care, coupled with an improvement in the recruitment and training of in-service staff (p. 15) are central. However, Greenwood (2001) and Greenwood & Shawana (2000) contend that the overarching intent and purpose of quality in Indigenous ECE is to enhance community development and growth so that “the next generation is looked after” (Greenwood & Shawana, 2000, p. 85).

## ***Indigenous Early Childhood Programs in Canada: Quality***

There are two relatively well-documented ECD programs in Canada for Indigenous children that respond to the various calls to action in respect of “quality”. Most notably is the Aboriginal Head Start On Reserve (AHSOR), the Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities (AHSUNC), and the First Nations Partnership Program (FNPP). Each one will be examined briefly in relation to quality from an Indigenous perspective.

### ***The Aboriginal Head Start On Reserve (AHSOR)***

In 1995, the Government of Canada launched the Aboriginal Head Start program to “enhance child development and school readiness in First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children living in urban settings and large northern communities” (Health Canada, 2011). The program was expanded in 1998 to include children living on reserve and the AHSOR was established to meet this need. According to Health Canada (2011) the AHSOR aspires to provide funding to support activities that “support early intervention strategies to address the learning and developmental needs of young children living in First Nations communities” (para. 4). However, unlike other federally supported early childhood programs throughout Canada, the AHSOR was designed to support local intervention strategies that were developed and controlled by First Nations communities. In relation to quality, and in response to the various definitions of quality provided by the AFN and NWAC, the AHSOR is centered around six core components that include: (1) education, (2) health promotion, (3) culture and language, (4) nutrition, (5) social support, and (6) parental/family involvement (Health Canada, 2011, para. 6).

According to Stout and Harp (2009), there are 328 AHSOR programs across Canada (in 2006) and that a total of 9,173 children were receiving some form of Indigenous controlled and designed early childhood education<sup>4</sup>. A recent report by the Government of Canada suggests that for the 2015/16 reporting year, the number of children served has increased to 14,000, and the number of AHSOR sites has decreased to 300 across Canada (excluding B.C.) (Government of Canada, 2021; McCain et al., 2021). Moreover, and despite challenges in relation to the number of qualified staff and number of available spaces for children, Stout and Harp contend that the AHSOR, being grounded in community needs, “is a proven bridge to better education outcomes

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<sup>4</sup> Although the Aboriginal Head Start On Reserve program is more than 25 years old, very little information is available about the number of sites, and/or the number of children who attend the program. It is also widely under-reported in terms of meeting the stated program objectives and/or the needs of children on-reserve.

for First Nations children” (2009, p.17). Preston et al. (2011) also suggest that positive outcomes can be seen from the quality of care received by children attending the AHSOR within their communities and that there were “positive outcomes exhibited by Head Start children who advanced into kindergarten...as compared to children who had not” (p. 9). Preston et al. (2011) also suggest that children who participated in local Head Start programs in First Nations communities also had increased self-esteem and independence, were better practiced in their Indigenous language and were more knowledgeable about health and nutrition” (p. 9). The Senate (2009) similarly reports

To date, some additional observed benefits of the program include a positive change in children’s attitudes as they learn to socialize and utilize the basic skills they require in school; First Nation language development and use; the provision of nutritious foods for children and the education of their parents and staff about the relationship between nutrition and a child’s capacity to learn and develop. (p.

55)

Ball (2012) also suggests that the Aboriginal Head Start has, in some cases, reduced the high rates of removal of children from their families and communities and that, in many cases, the Aboriginal Head Start has become “community hubs where additional programs are integrated or co-located to streamline children’s access to specialists...and other services” (p. 353).

### ***The First Nations Partnership Program (FNPP)***

The FNPP was created in 1989 through an innovative partnership between the Meadow Lake Tribal Council (Ball & Pence, 2001a, 2001b) and the University of Victoria. The FNPP emanated out of a growing recognition among First Nations communities in Saskatchewan about the paucity of culturally responsive curriculum in Early Childhood Education (in post-secondary institutions (i.e. what community members were learning) and within early childhood settings). The starting point of the FNPP was to acknowledge that “culturally valued and useful knowledge about childhood and child care was embedded within the community and that this knowledge was needed to be afforded a central place in the development of training curricula” (Ball & Pence, 2001a, p. 5).

Through the FNPP, community members and Faculty members of the University of Victoria co-construct a living ECD curriculum (Ball & Pence, 2006) based on community goals

and strategies that would support Indigenous children's development in ways that would be congruent to their specific geographic, economic and social conditions (Ball & Pence, 2001a, 2001b). Ball and Pence (2001a) report that the FNPP had

Unprecedented rates of student retention and completion. Among 118 students across seven programs, 86.4% completed one year of full-time, university accredited study and 77.3% completed two years of full-time study and achieved a university diploma, compared to completion rates among Aboriginal students in two-year postsecondary programs nation-wide of less than 40%. (p. 20)

From a community-based perspective on the outcomes of this First Nations directed program, Ball and Pence (2001a) also found that the communities involved in the program were able to provide "(a) safe, developmentally appropriate care for children, (b) enable parents to pursue education and employment, (c) and to ensure that the reproduction of culture through programs for children and families" (p. 23) was achieved. Moreover, Ball and Pence (2001b) also found that quality First Nations directed programming allowed for the expansion of service delivery within and that the open-architecture of the program facilitated the infusion of co-constructed curricula that reflected their community specific needs and desires.

### ***School Readiness***

The most widely discussed element within government literature/reviews is the concept of school-readiness that has been linked to developmental outcomes such as "higher levels of primary school enrolment and educational performance, which in turn positively affects employment opportunities later in life" (UNICEF, 2012a). Furthermore, UNICEF also argues that children who are not prepared for school often lack the "necessary skills to be able to learn constructively and are more likely to fall behind or drop out completely – often perpetuating the cycle of poverty" (2012a, para. 2). Understood in this way, and although the definition of school-readiness has undergone significant shifts in understanding (UNICEF, 2012b), the broad assumptions within UNICEF's concept of school-readiness largely undergird much of the research and development within Indigenous ECE in Canada throughout the last two decades. Beginning with Hawthorn (1967) in his assessment of "Retardation and Failure" among Indigenous peoples in Canada, he contends, "Remedial measures must be taken to reduce the high failure rates" (p. 152) and that "it has already been suggested that lack of readiness for

school with its inevitable result of failure in grade one be eliminated at least partially through the establishment of preparatory programs such as nursery schools and kindergartens” (p. 152).

Hawthorn further contends that

A great many local, and a number of national, efforts have already proven that early child development (ECD) programs can be a wise investment...ECD programs enhance school readiness, increase the efficiency of primary school investment and human capital formation, foster valued social behaviours, reduce social welfare costs, stimulate community development, and help mothers become income earners. (p. 4)

In the decades to follow Hawthorn’s initial observations, government and nongovernment reports have also largely focused on the concept of ‘readiness’ given the overarching understanding that school readiness can have long-lasting positive effects on future educational outcomes (Ball & Lewis, 2005; Government of Canada, 2011b). Doherty (2007) outlines, school readiness is crucial for the individual and society given that

Children who lack school readiness at age five are much more likely to experience behavioural, social and academic difficulties and to drop out before graduation [and] ...failure to graduate from high school substantially reduces the individual’s employability and earning potential. [Therefore] the high levels of lack of school readiness in Canada have both current and future costs for society as a whole. In the short term, there are public costs incurred for remedial education and children repeating a grade. Lack of peer social skills at school entry is also one of the best predictors of delinquent behaviour in early adolescence...Competitiveness in the global economy requires both a sufficiently large pool of workers with the appropriate level of knowledge and skills. (p. 7)

The growing awareness of the potential for ECD to reduce low levels of educational achievement and completion among Indigenous students (Mendelson, 2006, 2008) coupled with the implications to Indigenous and non-Indigenous society in light of the education gap (AANDC, 1996, 2014b; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 1998; Richards, 2008), an increased level of focus and attention has been paid to increasing the level of readiness among Indigenous children as they prepare to enter the formal education system within the on and off reserve contexts (Calman & Crawford, 2013; Offord Centre, 2015).

The AHSOR as well as AHSUNC programs are both examples of early childhood readiness programs that are designed to equip children with the skills and tools they require not only at school entry but later in life. A limited amount of research as to the effectiveness of the AHSOR and AHSUNC have been completed in relation to readiness; however, the First Nations Information Governance Centre (2013) reports that children who attended an Aboriginal Head Start (AHS) program were more likely to speak or understand a First Nations language. dela Cruz and McCarthy (2010) similarly note in their longitudinal study of Head Start participants

Scored in the average range on the WIAT-II-A for three measures of academic skills, reading, numeracy, and word writing [and] study participants across all four grade samples were within the average range compared to norm-referenced group... indicating that the AHS children are performing well as their age-equivalent peers on academic tests. (p. 42)

The Indigenous perspective on school-readiness in relation to ECD in Canada departs dramatically from the views expressed by non-Indigenous peoples in that, for the most part, readiness is a concept and a notion that bears significant weight on the development of future generations who are well-versed in the needs, aspirations, values and beliefs of a child's particular community of origin. As it is being increasingly articulated, the concept of readiness "is based on mechanistic, exclusive, and reductionist thought that marginalized difference and diversity" (Butler-Kisber, 2013).

As first articulated by the National Indian Brotherhood in 1972 with the release of Indian Control of Indian Education,

We want education to provide the setting in which our children can develop the fundamental attitudes and values which have an honoured place in Indian tradition and culture.... We want the behaviour of our children to be shaped by those values which are most esteemed in our culture, when our children come to school they have already developed certain attitudes and behaviours which are based on experiences in the family. .... All of these have a special place in the Indian way of life. While these values can be understood and interpreted in different ways by different cultures, it is very important that Indian children have a chance to develop a value system which is compatible with Indian culture. (p. 2)

These sentiments were echoed nearly 15 years later in the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, where the notion of childhood development and readiness were not only recognized as important but also that Indigenous people want to prepare their children for stronger academic performance, but their concerns go beyond a singular focus on cognitive development. The RCAP also recognized the need of families for support and respite while they struggle with personal and economic problems and for the early identification of children with special needs and provision of appropriate care and parent education in the community. Last, the RCAP also recognized high quality childcare as a necessary service for parents undertaking training or gaining a foothold in the workforce. It was also recognized that early childhood education was a means of reinforcing Indigenous identity, instilling the values, attitudes and behaviours that give expression to Indigenous cultures (AANDC, 1996).

As Ball (2012), Ball and Pence (2001a, 2001b, 2006) articulate through their work in the First Nations Partnership Program, readiness has come to mean something quite distinct from the notion developed by mainstream ECD educators and policy-makers in that the FNPP typically involves preparing the school, children, and community to be responsive to the needs, desires, and aspirations of current and future generations of children.

As most aptly stated by Greenwood and Shawana (2000), the notion of readiness “is not for employment/educational support” (p. 23) but rather enhanced cultural retention and revitalization. Moreover, the concept of early childhood development within the Indigenous context would first and foremost consider the underlying values of Indigeneity as a “starting point for conceptualizing early childhood programming” (Greenwood, 2005, p. 552) and that the “ultimate goal of early childhood programs would be to foster the development of Aboriginal citizenship” (p. 553) and from readiness assumptions that are based in values and beliefs that are not embedded within values of Indigeneity. In the absence of such programming Greenwood (2005) argues, a “cognitive dissonance” (p. 555) is created within Indigenous children that “ultimately foster skills that lack meaning and connection to Aboriginal reality” (p. 555).

### ***Indigenous Parental Involvement / Engagement***

This brief section provides an overview of the various ways in which Indigenous parental engagement has been positioned within the literature with regards to improved educational outcomes among First Nations learners, as well as a brief overview of the history of First Nations

parental engagement, and an overview of the socio-cultural considerations that may impede parents from engaging in the school and home environments. The intent here is not to problematize First Nations parents, nor to victimize, but rather to articulate the complexity of their lived realities and the colonial legacy they carry as parents and as part of the community, and to contextualise the theme of parental involvement that emerged from the interviews with KTC and KTCEA participants.

### ***Hawthorn Report, 1967***

In 1964, the Minister of the Department of Citizenship and Immigration requested that the contemporary “situation of the Indians of Canada” be undertaken with the view of developing an “understanding of the difficulties they faced in overcoming some pressing problems and their many ramifications” (Hawthorn, 1967, p. 6). Non-Indigenous anthropologist, Harry. B. Hawthorn was commissioned to undertake this study and in 1967 produced a report entitled, *A Survey of the Contemporary Indians of Canada*, which concluded, among other things, that Indigenous peoples were the most disadvantaged group of people in Canada and referred to their status as “citizens minus” (p. 6). The Hawthorn report made numerous recommendations in an effort to elevate the status of Indigenous peoples through economic, social, and policy transformations, and as a means of redressing the impacts of settler colonization where “they [Indigenous Peoples] once occupied and used a country to which others came to gain enormous wealth in which the Indians have shared little” (p. 6).

Although the vast majority of the Hawthorn report focuses on improving the socio-economic and economic development of First Nations communities, there are a few recommendations pertaining to the necessary shifts in First Nations education. In attempting to explicate the vast discrepancy in school completion among First Nations people, the Hawthorn report explores what it believes to be the underlying factors associated with poor school readiness among First Nations children. Here Hawthorn identifies the role of early socialization of the Indian child, and that the “values that parents pass on their children reflect the values acceptable to the social group of which the family is one unit. [And] children learn to meet the expectations of the group and to act in terms of shared values” (p. 109). However, Hawthorn seems to suggest that the early socialization of school, and the values placed on the school environment among non-Indigenous families, is “an entirely new phenomenon” (p. 109) and that the “Indian child is faced with the problems of overcoming disparate patterns of learning and

acquiring a new role in an unfamiliar setting” (p. 109). Although Hawthorn does speak to the imposed states of deprivation experienced by Indigenous children in terms of safe housing, adequate and nutritious food, clothing, and other household items to which Indigenous children have limited to no access, he does also; however, negatively associate parental attitudes and perceived lack of parental engagement as an influence or mediator of child success.

Unfortunately, Hawthorn negatively implicates Indigenous parents for the “levelling effect on the individual’s achievement” (p. 114), as well as the latent effects on child development such as “perception, attention span, patterns of learning and relationships with adults who normally provide corrective feedback, set up expectations for task completion, rewards and punishment and who provide reinforcement in a variety of ways” (p. 114). In describing and comparing Indigenous to non-Indigenous parents, Hawthorn explores Indigenous parental attitudes toward the child, parental interest in learning, verbal practice and development, sanctions for learning, routines for learning, discipline, and general family patterns. In his summation, Hawthorn pivots and positions Indigenous parents across all these domains from a deficit perspective stating what he believes to be negative aspects of Indigenous parental attributes such as: “Parents have little background in formal education and are not oriented, nor do they have time to teach their children specific skills. Little time is spent teaching the child to talk or walk” (p. 112); or “English spoken by adults is often inaccurate and limited in vocabulary... No one reads to the child” (p. 113).

Based on his assessment of the home environment in which the Indigenous child is raised and socialized, and more specifically what he believes to be the negative attitudes, beliefs, and values imbued and passed down from Indigenous parents to their children, Hawthorn states, From the foregoing, it is obvious that the Indian child may have much difficulty in understanding and becoming re-oriented to the world of school as do the school personnel in understanding why this child is different and what his problems are. The Indian child from the first day of school experiences few successes and many frustrations and lacks the ability to articulate his confusion and misunderstandings and so reduces his opportunities for resolving them. Negative self-images begin to emerge, reinforced unwittingly by teachers and peers. The alienation process becomes firmly entrenched reaching its peak in negativism and despair about fifth or sixth grade. Parents may aspire

for success for their children, but they lack the knowledge of how to operationalize their aspirations. (Hawthorn, 1967, p. 115)

As was customary at the time and in the years preceding, very little consideration was given to the ways in which Indigenous worldviews, epistemology, ontology and pedagogy are considered strengths, as opposed to weaknesses, in child development. Furthermore, and in keeping with the practice of passing down Indigenous values and beliefs to children in this way, very little attention or consideration was given to the ways in which what appeared to be poor parental engagement and attitudes towards schooling, as simply Indigenous Peoples *living and parenting in tradition*. Hawthorn (1967) states “discipline is primarily protective and loose. Seldom is the child punished...the concept of autonomy allows him his own decisions”; and “routines are flexible and often non-existent”; or “child is permitted to do things which interest him when he is ready. Seldom is he rewarded or punished for specific learning attempts...Time is not a factor” and lastly, “children often involved in economic routines and pursuits of parents which sometimes mean frequent mobility ... older siblings care for the whole family...” (pp. 112–113).

From an Indigenous perspective, it is widely known now that what Hawthorn describes is what Indigenous Peoples and communities consider engaged traditional parenting styles that have been practiced and modeled for generations. For example, the concepts of non-interference, children as active agents in their learning process as opposed to empty vessels, as well as community-based versus individualistic modalities of learning have been misinterpreted as processes that would impair children’s development and readiness for learning at higher levels, as opposed to carrying forward traditional parenting styles and ways of being that promote family and community well-being over individualism.

### ***The Red Paper, or “Citizens Plus,” 1970***

In response to the report created by Hawthorn, in 1969 the federal government released the White Paper that intended to address, among other things, the major recommendations made by Hawthorn and his team of researchers. However, and as has been widely discussed elsewhere, then Prime Minister Trudeau and Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, Jean Chretien, interpreted Hawthorn’s report in such a way as to suggest that the distinct status of Indigenous Peoples was the primary barrier to the economic and social integration into the fabric

of Canadian society. The White Paper made sweeping changes to all facets of Indigenous ways of life, and without consultation, the federal government put forward proposals for the elimination of Indian Status and the Department of Indian Affairs, among others.

In response, in June 1970, the Indian Chiefs of Alberta (2011) issued a rebuke to the federal government's proposals with the Red Paper, wherein the Chiefs explore and articulate a counter proposal that includes counter policies on the issues of Indian Status, the Unique Indian Culture and Contribution, Channels for Services, Enriched Services, Lawful Obligations, and Indian Control of Indian Lands. Under Enriched Services, the Indian Chiefs of Alberta specifically identified education as an obligation of the Crown and that as part of the Treaty agreements, educational benefits such as "the provision of education of all types and levels to all Indian people at the expense of the federal government" (p. 195) be provided.

### ***Indian Control of Indian Education, 1972***

Two years after the Red Paper policy proposal was released, the National Indian Brotherhood (now Assembly of First Nations) issued the seminal and foundational document entitled *Indian Control of Indian Education (ICIE)* that carried forward the discussion on necessary changes to First Nations education.

In direct opposition to the deficit positioning of Indigenous parents in the Hawthorn Report, ICIE made clear the distinct, unique and important role of Indigenous parents in the lifelong education of Indigenous children. In addition to articulating an Indian Philosophy of Education, ICIE identified the Role of Parents in First Nations education. ICIE articulated that in order to avoid the "conflict of values which in the past has led to withdrawal and failure, Indian parents must have control of education with the responsibility of setting goals" (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972, p. 3). ICIE attempts to resituate Indigenous parents, who for generations had been dispossessed of control and self-determination in the education of their children, as the first rights holders in First Nations education who seek "participation and partnership with the Federal government" (p. 3). This local parental control is specified throughout much of ICIE and in places where Indigenous parents have generally been left out in the past such as with provincial governments and school boards, and as active agents in planning and implementation of education programs and services in local community schools.

### ***Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996***

In the years between 1972 and 1996, some progress has been made with regards to increasing local control over education by First Nations communities. In the largest survey of the well-being of Indigenous Peoples in Canada to date, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) was among the first to articulate the movement among a few First Nations communities to assume responsibility and administrative control over the delivery of education on-reserve such as the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement under the process of devolution.

The RCAP carries forward the two principles advocated for under ICIE, including local control and parental involvement and add that despite high levels of non-Indigenous parental involvement within provincial education systems, Indigenous parents remained excluded. The RCAP recommended that to support improved educational outcomes, and to address long standing problems, Indigenous parents be guaranteed representation on school boards and be included in decision-making processes to ensure meaningful resolution. In both the ICIE and the RCAP, Indigenous parents are ostensibly positioned as key stakeholders as opposed to deficits in the learning trajectory of their children.

### ***The Intergenerational Impact: The TRC Final Report, 2015***

Each of the reports outlined briefly for this section identifies Indigenous parents as key informants, mediators, and rights-holders in First Nations education. The positioning of Indigenous parents in this way works to resituate the parent as the first and most important teacher in the child's life, while also working to redress the legacy impacts of Indian Residential Schools in terms of dispossessing Indigenous parents from these important roles. However, while ICIE and the RCAP approach parental engagement from a strengths perspective, what remains largely out of view up to this point is the articulation of the legacy of Indian Residential Schools on external influences on the engagement-behaviours of Indigenous parents.

Shortly after concluding its mandate, in 2015 the Truth and Reconciliation Commission released its final reports and 94 Calls to Action that in careful detail articulated not only the lived-realities and lasting outcomes of the Indian residential school system but also the latent and related impacts across multiple systems, including education.

In speaking to the barriers that Indian residential school Survivors had to contend with after leaving school, the TRC states that these had “serious repercussions for their [Survivors’] children” (TRC, 2015, p. 69). Recent research that focused on the children of residential school Survivors, for instance, found that “First Nation youth aged twelve to seventeen are more likely to report having learning problems and having to repeat a grade if one or both of their parents attended residential school” (p. 69) and another study found that “Aboriginal children living off reserve whose parents attended residential school are less likely to be doing well at school compared to Aboriginal children whose parents did not attend these institutions” (p. 69). Lastly, the TRC reports another study that found that former “residential school students are less likely to have incomes in the highest 20%, and are more likely to report experiencing food insecurity” (p. 69). The challenges experienced by children of residential school Survivors are compounded by the depths of poverty arising from lower income levels and higher rates of unemployment, as well as the correlated lower levels of high school non-completion and post-secondary completion rates among residential school survivor parents. This in turn, and as explored previously, fosters the high levels of First Nations child poverty, which also correlates with lower levels of school non-completion and lower educational attainment overall.

As previously explored, First Nations children are at the greatest risk of experiencing prolonged exposure to high levels of stress due to economic, educational, and social marginalization. However, Indigenous parents also face the same levels of exposure to the same toxic stress which has meaningful effects on the extent of parental engagement within the school environment, among other things. The extent to which Indian residential school Survivors, and generations of children of Survivors, have suffered cannot be understated and it is important to note the significant inequality and social exclusion that Survivors and their children have faced. At the same time, it is also important to make known the tangible impacts of toxic stress that Indigenous parents endure and that act as barriers to parental engagement.

As Evans and Kim (2013) conclude, poverty and low-income status adversely impacts their parenting abilities in many ways and that “Poverty-related stress affects parents’ competencies as well as interpersonal relationships among family members” (p. 44). In addition to the physiological impacts of prolonged exposure to poverty in children such as altered genetic phenotypes, which places children in a state of “hypervigilance and high-reactivity to environmental events” (p. 44), it also impacts parenting skills. Evans and Kim (2013) suggest

that two additional pathways linking childhood poverty to adverse outcomes can be found in two areas: parental investment, and parental investment and warmth. (p. 46). Evans and Kim contend that exposure to poverty “increases distress among parents, which negatively impacts the quality of parent-child interactions....[which contributes to] deficits in self-regulation” (p. 44). In addition, parental investment may also be related to the development of self-regulatory skills in children and that “low income parents who talk less to their children tend to have children with poorer language skills, which limits children’s ability to regulate their emotions because of deficits in emotional expression and communication skills” (Hoff et al, in Evens & Kim, 2013, p. 44).

The intent of exploring Indigenous parental engagement in this way is to foreground the participant interview responses in such a way that Indigenous parents themselves are not positioned as problematic, but rather as individuals who are woven into a larger web of complex interactions between policy induced poverty through underfunding of basic programs and services on-reserve, few to no employment opportunities, as well as the lingering and multigenerational impacts of Indian residential schools. From an Indigenous perspective, Indigenous parents have long been recognized as the first and most important teacher in their children’s early development and throughout their lives; however, there are multiple factors arising from ongoing colonization that delimit parental engagement and that underpin their attitudes and beliefs about the education system and correlated behaviours such as disengagement with their children’s learning, and withhold children from participating in school activities and learning processes. With this understanding, Chapter 6 explores the research participants’ views regarding parental involvement and engagement with both young and school aged children.

### *Assessments in Early Childhood*

This brief section provides an overview of the various ways in which assessments within Indigenous early learning and care settings has been positioned within the literature to help properly situate research participant feedback to follow in Chapter 6, and to provide an overview of the socio-cultural considerations that have not yet been made visible. In that regard, this brief section attempts to develop a deeper understanding of the misapplication of assessments within Indigenous early learning and care settings in ways that are neither informed by the socio-

cultural contexts in which children live, nor informed by the policy frameworks that describe the web of complex interactions between policy induced poverty through underfunding and associated impacts. The intent here is to assist the reader to pivot away from problematizing and victimizing First Nations children, and instead to articulate the complexity of their lived realities and the colonial architecture that itself paves the path for the use of assessments and contextualise the theme of assessments that emerged from the interviews with KTC and KTCEA participants.

According to the National First Nations Head Start Program Standards (also known as the Aboriginal Head Start On Reserve Program), children attending a Head Start program should be receiving some form of assessment throughout time in the program. Health Canada (2003) states that assessments are defined as “the ongoing procedures used to identify a child’s strengths and developmental needs and to identify the appropriate services to address those strengths and needs” (p. 35). The Standards Guide does not explicitly state assessments as part of the Education Service Standards, or any other program element; however, under the heading of Human Resources and Staffing Qualifications, Health Canada (2005) makes “suggestions only” (p. 21) for the “consideration” (p. 21) about the hiring qualifications of First Nations Directors and Head Start Workers vis-a-vis assessments in Head Start Programs as follows:

***Directors***

- v) work with an interdisciplinary team of staff and parent(s)/legal guardian(s)/extended family to develop and implement an individual plan for each child with special needs,
- w) consult regularly with parent(s)/legal guardian(s)/extended family and staff on the progress of the children with special needs,
- x) the ability to link families with an ongoing system of health care, assist parent(s)/legal guardian(s)/extended family in the selection of health providers and promote parent(s)/legal guardian(s)/extended family involvement in all aspects of the health and social program,
- y) ability to make recommendations to others in authority regarding potential interventions for children and/or parent(s)/legal guardian(s)/extended family,
- z) work closely with community resources to ensure the coordination of services.

### *Head Start Workers*

- h) conduct advocacy work for families and parent(s)/legal guardian(s)/extended family, as directed by the supervisor, **coordinate the process of assessing children, including initial screenings, ongoing developmental, and specialized assessments, to determine if a disability exists,**
- i) work with an interdisciplinary team of staff and parent(s)/legal guardian(s)/extended family to **develop and implement an individual plan for each child with special needs,**
- j) consult regularly with parent(s)/legal guardian(s)/extended family and staff on the progress of disabilities services and of children with disabilities who are enrolled in the program,
- k) work closely with community resources to ensure the coordination of services, and
- l) as supported by the supervisor, advocate in the community for **appropriate services for children with disabilities and their families.** (p. 21–22, emphasis added)

Before moving into the participants' feedback and the themes gathered around assessments of KTC First Nations children in Chapter 6, a brief overview of assessments will be provided below, followed by an overview of the common issues and considerations/insights about assessments of Indigenous children in early childhood settings and educational environments.

### *Contextualizing Assessment in Early Childhood*

According to Gullo (2005), early childhood assessment began in 1904 shortly after the French Minister of Education recognized the need “for a classification system to assist educators in admitting, placing, and developing educational programs for children entering special schools” (p. 3). A special commission was established to study the situation that was led by Alfred Binet and as a result the Binet Scale was developed and used as an educational placement instrument in French schools (p. 4). Since then, assessment in early childhood has proliferated and in the 1990s,

Important trends, contemporary issues, research findings, and new understandings of and developments in practice have had positive effects on the field and on the infants, toddlers, preschoolers, kindergarten, and primary school children who are enrolled in early childhood education programs. (Saracho, 2015, p. 3)

Early childhood assessment, according to Ntuli et al., (2014) has become an “integral component of teaching and learning in early childhood education” (p. 221).

Assessment has been defined as “a procedure used to determine the degree to which an individual child possesses a certain attribute” (Gullo, 2005, p. 6) and can be used interchangeably with measurement. The BC Aboriginal Child Care Society (2013) provides additional clarity around assessments in that they “are generally explained as a more formal and often standardized process intended to determine specific developmental challenges experienced by a child” (p. 3). Assessments in early childhood are an important guide for educators for a number of reasons, including: guiding teacher planning, developing an understanding of the school/learning environment requirements to best meet the needs of young children and families, and to inform and evaluate the quality of programs and services and to guide current and future policy and curriculum. The purpose of assessments, therefore, is to “gain an understanding of a child’s overall development [that] would be helpful to the teacher in order to identify those areas where specific help or teaching is required” (p. 6). Even further, Gulla (2005) suggests that assessments

Would be helpful for the teacher in order to identify those areas where specific help or teaching is required. Identifying emerging areas of development and pinpointing those areas already possessed would provide information useful in determining a child’s readiness for instruction and would aid in identifying the appropriate forms and levels of classroom instruction. (p. 6)

### ***Challenges and Insights: Assessments in the Indigenous Early Learning and Care Context***

In their report to the BC Aboriginal Child Care Society in 2013, the Regional Innovation Chair for Aboriginal Early Childhood Development completed a synthesis of standard and non-standard approaches to assessment and Indigenous child development. The summary report identifies issues and insights from both approaches to address “the growing need to address the cultural and linguistic relevance of the tools and methods used and the increased call for parent,

family, and community involvement in all aspects of the assessment (including development, planning, analysis and feedback)” (p. 24). The BC Aboriginal Child Care Society determined that “because of the historical, cultural, and linguistic experience of Aboriginal children and their families, the cultural relevance of the tools and methods and the involvement of child, family and community in the assessment processes were viewed as even more essential to address the implications of cultural and community realities on child development” (2013, pp. 24–25). In speaking to the need for culturally relevant assessments, Preston et al. (2011) suggested that “typical assessment mechanisms employed within public education include formative test-taking measures, standardized tests, written evaluations, teacher-centered feedback and the provision of formal grades/percentages. This type of curricular approach to assessment is ill-matched with Aboriginal ways of knowing and learning” (p. 7). Preston et al. (2011) and Preston and Claypool (2021) also suggest that the normative assessment tools and methods used by western education systems differ significantly from Indigenous pedagogy and epistemological approaches to assessment/ Preston et al. (2011) and contend that

learning is not something that can be easily measured through formalized practices or written results (Tunison, 2007). Instead, Aboriginal forms of assessment are dependent upon dimensions of reflection and self-growth, which are extremely personal processes manifested within the spiritual, emotional, intellectual and physical realms of each student (Preston, 2008b). This type of self-assessment reduces performance anxiety, while increasing loyalty to teachers, promoting group cohesiveness and establishing a continued enthusiasm for learning (Gorman, 1999). Because a child’s learning is traditionally monitored through a student’s positive or negative experience, teachers do not need to invoke grades upon the learning journey of a student. (p. 9)

The BC Aboriginal Child Care Society affirms the complexity of assessments of Indigenous child development, as well as the incongruence of existing models to the lived-realities and contextual backgrounds of Indigenous children in First Nations communities. This is also affirmed by Preston and Claypool (2021) and Stoffer (2017) who argue, respectively, that “Mainstream assessment practices do not sufficiently account for the social, economic, and political factors that contribute to the learning challenges experienced by many Indigenous students” (Preston and Claypool, 2021, p. 4) and “Assessing a child in a way that does not seem meaningful or relevant to their life and culture is inauthentic and therefore meaningless, because

it does not respect the learning of the whole child” (Stoffer, 2017, p. 66). In terms of the standardized approaches to assessment and Indigenous children, the BC Aboriginal Child Care Society (2013) identifies issues related to standardized approaches, including: (1) increasingly complex models that require significant administrative support, (2) time consuming, (3) may result in lack of family, community input to design, development, implementation and analysis of assessments, (4) focused on the developmental domain alone, (5) may be vulnerable to cultural or linguistic issues, (6) may require more specific training, (7) comfort and safety of child may be compromised, (8) tends to be more deficit focused, (9) and can be disempowering for children, and families, thus limiting the involvement and emphasizing deficits (p. 27).

However, for non-standard assessment models, the BC Aboriginal Child Care Society emphasizes only a few challenges including: (1) requiring more thorough and ongoing training, (2) can be more complex and require more time to implement, (3) are less standardized because of the need to ensure the assessments reflect the child and families’ cultural and linguistic experiences, and (4) can be challenging for early childhood educators to “take to the next level” (p. 27) in terms of being able to clarify and interpret their findings regarding the child’s, or children’s, development. (p. 27). The issues identified for the non-standard assessments arises primarily from the ways in which the assessment tools are designed, developed, and implemented which, for the most part, are open to

Input from all involved (child, family, teacher)...and are child guided, strengths-focused, flexible, empowering for child and family, are culturally responsive and linguistically adapted, assess multiple domains of child development, and are “helpful methods to observe connections that children are making that may not be visible in standard assessments. (p. 27)

While challenges exist relative to assessment methods and models, emerging practice from across the country are illuminating the path forward in terms of how Indigenous children can be assessed in the early years in ways that do no more harm, that build and strengthen community and family connections, and that are strength-based so that both the child, family, teachers, and broader educational community can build upon to improve the depth and breadth of service delivery and provide responsive and meaningful supports. Riley and Johansen (2018) also speak to the importance of relevant and dynamic assessments for Indigenous children and that they reflect Indigenous ways of knowing and being such as group assessments versus

individual assessments that are based on context specific experiences of students and their respective communities (p. 400).

The intent of exploring assessments in this way is to foreground the participant interview responses that are explored later in Chapter 6. As noted above, there are multiple factors that arise from historic and ongoing colonization that inform the use of assessments and that underpin the over-categorization and identification of Indigenous children as having a disability. Moreover, it is also important to understand the incongruence of the normative assessment frameworks through which Indigenous children are assessed to uncover the pathways forward towards the development of community-based and community-designed responsive, respectful, and meaningful assessment tools. With this understanding, Chapter 6 explores the research participants' views regarding assessments with both young and school aged children.

### ***Understanding Child Readiness***

This brief section provides an overview of the various ways in which child readiness within Indigenous early learning and care settings has been positioned within the literature to help properly situate research participant feedback to follow in Chapter 6. In that regard, this brief section attempts to develop a deeper understanding of child readiness within Indigenous early learning and care settings and through the Aboriginal Head Start On Reserve Program. The intent here is to assist the reader to pivot away from problematizing and victimizing First Nations children, and instead to articulate the complexity of their lived realities and the colonial architecture that itself informs child readiness within the Indigenous context, and lastly to inform the theme of child readiness that emerged from the interviews with KTC and KTCEA participants.

Duncan et al. (2007) suggest that two views have emerged around the debate about “what constitutes school readiness and in particular about what skills predict school achievement” (p. 1429). The first view contends that “many early education programs, including Head Start, are designed to enhance children’s physical, intellectual, and social competencies on the grounds that each domain contributes to a child’s overall developmental competence and readiness for school” (p. 1429). The second view contends that “if the early acquisition of specific academic skills or learning enhancing behaviours forecasts later achievement, it may be beneficial to add

domain-specific early skills to the definition of school readiness and to encourage interventions aimed at promoting those skills prior to elementary school” (p. 1429). Duncan et al. (2007) argue that understanding which skills are linked to children’s academic achievement “has important implications for early childhood education programs” (p. 1249). Through that lens, Duncan et al. (2007) illuminate the need for a balance of skill and behavioural development vis-a-vis early childhood programs in that,

A child who enters kindergarten with rudimentary academic skills may be poised to learn from formal reading and mathematics instruction, receive positive reinforcement from the teacher, or be placed in a higher ability group that facilitates the acquisition of additional skills. Similarly, a child who can pay attention, inhibit impulsive behavior, and relate appropriately to adults and peers may be able to take advantage of the learning opportunities in the classroom, thus more easily mastering reading and math concepts taught in elementary school. For these reasons, the skills children possess when entering school might result in different achievement patterns later in life. If achievement at older ages is the product of a sequential process of skill acquisition, **then strengthening skills prior to school entry might lead children to master more advanced skills at an earlier age and perhaps even increase their overall level of achievement.** (p. 1429, emphasis added).

Duncan et al. (2007) identify that children’s school readiness is not simply determined by developmentally appropriate academic readiness, but rather by a comprehensive set of skills (academic and behavioral) that when combined, enable longer term success both at school entry and as they progress through the education system. The Aboriginal Head Start On Reserve Program makes aspirational claims to be one such program in that it “helps enhance child development and school readiness for children living in First Nations communities on reserve” by providing First Nations children with the “opportunity to develop their physical, emotional and social needs in a culturally relevant environment” (Health Canada, 2005). The program standards guide specifies that in addition to academic readiness skill development, First Nations children enrolled and attending Head Start programs on reserve will also receive programming that supports their holistic developmental needs through a comprehensive curriculum based on the six program components of: “nutrition, education, family involvement, social supports, health promotion and culture and language” (Health Canada, 2005).

What was evident throughout the interviews and Talking Circle that is further explored further in Chapter 6, is that KTC First Nations children who attended Head Start could be clearly distinguished from First Nations children who did not. As described previously, a number of respondents indicated that children who attended Head Start had improved school performance at school entry, as well as other improved outcomes in readiness for the school environment (routine, physical activity, etc.) and improved social skills such as sharing and communication. However, in terms of the level of awareness or understanding of a child's readiness outside of teacher-observation was limited by the awareness and understanding of the scope and types of assessments children received either at entry into the Head Start program, throughout their time in the program or at the point of exit from the program. These assessments, according to teachers within the K–12 system, would serve as important and necessary guideposts not only in terms of K–12 supports and services, but also for specialized supports that may be necessary for children who were assessed with learning or behavioural difficulties.

## **Chapter Summary**

This chapter provided a historical and contemporary review of the existing literature that have shaped the current understanding of ECD, and of ECD and the Indigenous population in Canada. This chapter also included a discussion of two topics identified among themes that emerged from participant feedback. The intent for including these aspects within this chapter is to foreground, contextualize and deepen an understanding of the history and complexity of both: parental engagement and assessments within early childhood. The next Chapter explores the theoretical perspective that guides and undergirds this research as well as an articulation of the research methodology employed for this research.

## Chapter Four: Theoretical Perspective and Research Methodology

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the theoretical perspective that guides and informs this research and to outline the methodology, design, and methods I used. This chapter is structured as follows: I begin by describing the theoretical perspective used in this research; namely, critical theory and the Foucault and Marx's related theories of governmentality and historical materialism. This is followed by an overview of the key traditions within qualitative research where I rely heavily on Creswell and his work within five main traditions. Each will be explored briefly, before moving onto an exploring and articulating Indigenous Research Methodology that serves (through its values, principles, and objectives) as the critical overarching methodology for this work. From here an examination of critical ethnographic case study research is examined in greater detail and is selected for its ability to support and advance the theoretical perspective of this research which focuses on power-relations and domination by clarifying the "conditions of oppression, opening avenues of resistance, and refashioning liberating ideals" (Bronner, 2017, p. 8).

The final section of this chapter describes the design and methods of my research study and will include an overview of the data sources, communities and participants invited to participate in this research, followed by Appendices regarding invitation to participate, participant consent, and study site locations.

### Theoretical Perspective

The theoretical perspective employed in my research consists of one overarching theory, critical theory, that is supported by two underlying theories, namely, (a) Foucault's notion of *governmentality*, and (b) Marx's notion of *historical materialism*. I have selected these concepts given their relationship to critical theory and their relation to this study's research questions. I first explore critical theory as the foundational theoretical perspective that underpins this research. I then explore and articulate both Foucault and Marx's subsequent theories of governmentality and historical materialism, respectively, as they relate to critical theory and the research question.

## *Critical Theory*

According to Morrow and Brown (1994), critical theory has its origins in the work of a group of German scholars, commonly referred to as the Frankfurt School, who used the term initially to designate a specific approach to interpreting Marxist theory. Since then, the term has undergone a number of transformations and is now neither exclusively identified with the Marxist tradition nor reserved exclusively to the Frankfurt School (p. 6). Morrow and Brown further specify that critical theory now “has a more specific focus on the substantive problematic of domination, a complex notion based on a concern with the ways social relations also mediate power relations to create various forms of alienation and inhibit the realization of human possibilities” (p. 10). Crotty (1998) also suggests that critical theory, and critical inquiry in particular, “illuminates the relationship between power and culture... that mirrors society’s contradictions and oppressions” (pp. 158–59) and that “keeps the spotlight on power relationships within society so as to expose the forces of hegemony and injustice” (p. 157). The distinctiveness of critical theory is made clear in its understanding of the complexity of domination and its ability to clarify the “conditions of oppression, opening avenues of resistance, and refashioning liberating ideals” (Bronner, 2017, p. 8).

Kinchelow and McLaren (2003) contend that research under the tradition of critical theory is principally focused on cultural critique and refers to a process of review and analysis of cultural phenomenon. This review and analysis, according to Kinchelow and McLaren (2003) reveals “underlying assumptions about accepted but problematic cultural practices ...along with their negative "aspects” (p. 361) and that research therefore becomes a “transformative endeavour unembarrassed by the label *political* and unafraid to consummate a relationship with emancipatory consciousness [in the] struggle for a better world” (Kinchelow & McLaren, 2003, p. 453, emphasis in original). To achieve these ends, Kinchelow and McLaren (2003) state that critical researchers accept seven basic assumptions; namely:

1. That all thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations that are social in nature and historically constituted;
2. That facts can never be isolated from the domain of values or removed from ideological inscription;

3. That the relationship between concept and object, between signifier and signified, is never stable and is often mediated by the social relations of capitalist production and consumption;
4. That language is central to the formation of subjectivity, that is, both conscious and unconscious awareness;
5. That certain groups in any society are privileged over others, constituting an oppression that is most forceful when subordinates accept their social status as natural, necessary or inevitable;
6. That oppression has many faces, and concern for only one form of oppression at the expense of others can be counterproductive because of the connections between them;
7. That mainstream research practices are generally implicated, albeit unwittingly, in the reproduction of class, race, and gender oppression (p. 453).

These assumptions enable researchers to understand issues of power and justice and the ways in which the “economy, matters of race, class, and gender, ideologies, discourses, education, religion, and other social instruments and cultural dynamics interact to construct a social system” (Kinchelow & McLaren, 2003, p. 436). Lastly, research under the tradition of critical theory, enables a reconceptualised view of the social world where critical enlightenment is achieved through the identification and analysis of the competing power interests between groups and individuals within society, with the view of identifying who gains and who loses in specific situations and the processes by which power operates within these arrangements (p. 437). Moreover, it also enables what Kinchelow and McLaren describe as emancipation, or a greater degree of autonomy and human agency that is achieved by exposing the forces that “prevent individuals and groups from shaping the decisions that affect their lives” (p. 437). Kinchelow and McLaren (2003) caution researchers regarding the use of the term emancipation, since “no one is ever completely emancipated from the sociopolitical context that has produced him or her” (p. 437) and the “arrogance that accompan[ies] efforts to emancipate “others” (p. 437). It also allows for economic determinism — or the economic factors that dictate the nature of all other aspects of human existence — so as to be understood not to be the base that determines the “superstructure” (p. 437). It is argued that critical theorists, and the reconceptualised view of critical theory,” understand[s] ...that there are multiple forms of power,

including racial, gender, and sexual axes of domination” (p. 438) that operate concurrently with economic forces of domination to shape everyday life.

Lastly, critical theory exposes oppressive power given its ability to reproduce inequality as it “is not always exercised by physical force but also through social psychological attempts to win people’s consent to domination through cultural institutions such as the media, the schools, the family, and the church” (p. 439). Critical researchers, therefore, develop an understanding that hegemonic consent is never completely established, as it is always “contested by various groups with different agendas ...[that] social relations are natural and inevitable” (p. 440).

The most salient aspects of Kinchelow and McLaren (2003) arguments for a reconceptualised view of critical theory in relation to my research is the understanding that ideology, “vis-a-vis hegemony, moves critical inquirers beyond simplistic explanations of domination...to describe the way media, political, educational, and other sociocultural productions coercively manipulate citizens to adopt oppressive meanings” (p. 440).

Furthermore, critical theory permits an understanding that “dominant ideological practices and discourses shape our vision of reality” (p. 440). As Marx and Engels articulate, not all ideologies have equal power and that, generally, dominant ideologies benefit the most powerful groups in society, where power is often invisible, and where ideologies are held implicitly (MacNaughton, 2005, p. 8). Further, critical theory also understands that language is not neutral and critical research enables researchers to “study the way language in the form of discourses serves as a form of regulation and domination” (Kinchelow & McLaren, 2003, p. 441). Within an educational context, it is further argued, discursive practices become a set of “tacit rules that regulate what can and cannot be said... what books may be read by students, what instructional methods must be utilized, and what belief systems and views of success may be taught” (p. 441) as a means of constructing consciousness.

Under the tradition of critical theory, and within the reconceptualised view of critical theory articulated by Kinchelow and McLaren (2003), my research identifies the ways in which competing power interests within the field of early childhood education theory and philosophy have shaped the decisions, human agency, and autonomy of Indigenous people and children. Further, my research is framed within the tradition of critical theory in order to identify the ways in which dominant discourses within early childhood education philosophy have regulated

beliefs, systems, and views of Indigenous Peoples in order to meet government interests in the maintenance of social order, and social reproduction of, Indigenous Peoples.

These research aims are most pronounced and articulated by the works of Michel Foucault and Karl Marx, in their theories of governmentality and historical materialism, respectively; each will be examined in the section to follow.

### **Foucault: Governmentality**

Michel Foucault introduced the term governmentality in the 1970s through a series of lectures, and in his investigations of political power (Rose et al., 2006). In his view, government was “an activity that undertakes to conduct individuals throughout their lives by placing them under the authority of a guide responsible for what they do, and for what happens to them” (Foucault, 1997, p. 68). Foucault later described governmentality in a “broad sense of techniques and procedures for directing human behaviour. Government of children, government of souls and consciences, government of a household, of a state, or of oneself” (1997, p. 87).

To understand the problem of government; however, “one needed to analyze the series: security, population, government” (Foucault, 1991b, p. 87), the latter of which (i.e. government) seems to define the sixteenth century and which is centred around a diverse set of questions. Namely, Foucault argues that the principal question is

of government of oneself, that ritualization of the problem of personal conduct.... the problem too of the government of souls and lives....the government of children and the great problematic of pedagogy....[and] How to govern oneself, how to be govern, how to govern others, by whom the people will accept being governed, how to become the best possible governor. (1991b, p. 87)

For Foucault, all of these problems are characteristic of the sixteenth century and is at the crossroads of two processes,

the one which, shattering structures of feudalism, leads to the establishment of the great territorial, administrative and colonial states; and that totally different movement which, with the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, raises the issue of how one must be spiritually ruled and left on this earth in order to achieve salvation. (1991b, p. 87)

Foucault considers the intersection of these two processes the point at which the question of how to be ruled, “how strictly, by whom, to what end, by what methods, etc.” (1991b, p. 88)

intensifies the problem of government in general. To fully analyze the problem of government, Foucault argues, would require one to compare all of the literature from the sixteenth century; however, Foucault suggests that the literature can be summarized in a single text “which from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century never ceased to function as the object of explicit or implicit opposition and rejection, and relative to which the whole literature of government established its standpoint: Machiavelli’s *The Prince*” (1991b, p. 88). *The Prince*, for Foucault, must be understood by what it was trying to define, namely the art of government where The Prince remained external to his own principality and which “stood in relation to singularity and externality, and thus of transcendence, to his principality [which is] acquired ...by inheritance of conquest” (p. 90). The precise form of government; however, remains with the question of defining the particular form of governing that can be applied to the state as a whole. In seeking to produce a typology of government, Foucault cites the work of La Mothe Le Vayer who further suggests three fundamental types of government that relate to a particular science or discipline such as: “the art of self-government, connected with morality; the art of properly governing a family, which belongs to the economy; and finally, the science of ruling the state, which concerns politics” (p. 91). There are distinct discontinuities between these three types of government and the task, according to Foucault, is to establish a continuity “in both an upwards and a downwards direction” (p. 91) between these types of government. An upwards continuity means that “a person who wishes to govern the state must first learn how to govern himself, his goods and his patrimony, after which he will be successful in governing the state” (p. 91). A downwards continuity is achieved when a state is well run and when “the head of the family will know how to look after his family, his goods and his patrimony, which means that individuals will, in turn, behave as they should” (p. 92). The downwards continuity ensures that individual behaviour and the management and oversight of the family observe the same principles as those ascribed to the good government of the state — or the policing of families, individuals, and their behaviour. Whereas the prince’s authority ensures an upward continuity, the police — and the policing of families and their behaviour — ensures a downward one. According to Foucault (1991b), the central term in the downwards continuity is the government of the family, “termed economy” (p. 92).

## *Introducing Economy*

Economy — or the “correct manner of managing individuals, goods and wealth within the family...and of making the family fortunes prosper — how to introduce this meticulous attention of the father towards his family into the management of the state” (Foucault, 1991b, p. 92) is central to the establishment of the art of government.

In his lecture *Security, Territory, and Population*, Foucault (2007a) explains that an analysis of the genesis of a political knowledge is required to trace the shifts in the new objectives and appearances of a population and the mechanisms capable of ensuring its regulation. Government, Foucault argues, is the leading agent in this genesis and for which he proposed a “particular approach to the successive formulations of these arts of governing” (Rose et al., 2006, p. 83). The first stage of the genesis of government, involves an “in-depth inquiry concerning the history not merely of the notion but even of the procedures and means employed to ensure, in a given society, the ‘government of men’ (Foucault, 2007a, p. 67) as well as an understanding of the shift from political to pastoral power. Foucault (2007a) uses a shepherd’s power over his flock as exemplary of the notion of pastoral power, where the:

shepherd's power is exercised not so much over a fixed territory as over a multitude in movement toward a goal; it has the role of providing the flock with its sustenance, watching over it on a daily basis, and ensuring its salvation; lastly, it is a matter of a power that individualizes by granting, through an essential paradox, as much value to a single one of the sheep as to the entire flock. (p. 68)

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, pastoral power became more complex and a search for other modes of governing the flock were sought as a means of determining the “right way to “govern” children, a family, a domain, a principality” (Foucault, 1997, p. 68). This shift gave rise to new forms of economic and social relations and “new political structurations” (1997, p. 68). To govern then, according to Foucault, means to govern things, or as La Perrier states, “government is the right disposition of things, arranged so as to lead to a convenient end” (Foucault, 1997, p. 94) where a new finality emerges. Government, in this view of finality, is understood as the

right manner of disposing things so as to lead not to the form of the common good...but to an end which is 'convenient' for each of the things that are to be governed. This implies a plurality of specific aims: for instance, government will have to ensure that the greatest

possible quantity of wealth is produced, that the people are provided with sufficient means of subsistence, that the population is enabled to multiply, etc. There is a whole series of specific finalities, then, which become the objective of government as such. In order to achieve these various finalities, **things must be disposed** — and this term, dispose, is important because with sovereignty the instrument that allowed it to achieve its aim — that is to say, obedience to the laws — was the law itself; law and sovereignty were absolutely inseparable. On the contrary, with government it is a question not of imposing law on men, but of disposing things: that is to say, of employing tactics rather than laws, and even of using laws themselves as tactics — to arrange things in such a way that, through a certain number of means, such and such **ends may be achieved**.

(Foucault, 1997, p. 94, emphasis added)

### ***Discussion: Governmentality and the Disposition of ‘Things’***

Disposition in the art of government is an especially salient point in describing the theoretical framework for this research. The disposition of ‘things’ so that specific ends can be achieved is central to understanding the use of Indian Residential Schools by the Canadian government at the end of the 19th century, and the formation of a new rationality regarding the Indigenous Peoples of Canada, and the education of Indigenous children. As Foucault suggests,

The things with which in this sense government is to be concerned are in fact men, but men in their relations, their links, their imbrications with those other things which are wealth, resources, means of subsistence, the territory with its specific qualities, kinds of things, customs, habits, ways of acting and thinking, etc.; lastly, men in their relation to that other kind of things, accidents and misfortunes such as famine, epidemics, death etc. (Foucault, 1991b, p. 93)

As the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) specified, Indian Residential Schools were “part of a process that brought European states and Christian churches together in a complex and powerful manner” (p. 43). Starting in the sixteenth century, European states gained control of Indigenous Peoples’ lands through mass migration of settlers throughout the world. The spread of the European empire throughout this time was driven by the desire to locate new sources of wealth and marked the creation of a new European dominated global economy. However, as the TRC (2015) further remarks, the “mere presence of Indigenous Peoples in the newly colonized lands blocked settler access to land” (p. 45), and the wealth

contained therein. To gain access, control, and to dispossess Indigenous Peoples of the land, settlers negotiated treaties, “waged wars of extinction, eliminated traditional landholding practices, disrupted families, and imposed a political and spiritual order that came with new values and cultural practices” (p. 45). The disposition of Indigenous Peoples from the land was further legitimized by the Catholic church and the issuance of four orders, or papal bulls, by then Pope Alexander VI that helped shape the foundation for the *Doctrine of Discovery*, or the assertion that discovered lands could be possessed by the discoverer. This was further legitimated by european s by the doctrine of *terra nullius*, where the government could claim ownership of a territory since Indigenous Peoples merely occupied, rather than owned, the land upon which they had occupied since time immemorial. Through these doctrines and ideologies, european settlers dispossessed Indigenous Peoples of their land to achieve civilization and a new economic order.

Yet, the dispossession of Indigenous Peoples from the land was only successful insofar as it removed the obstacle for full economic exploitation of the land for economic means. It was further understood that Indigenous Peoples must be assimilated into the broader body politic and as such, Indigenous peoples were expected to also relinquish their distinct government, cultures, and identities in order for the Canadian government to more fully control the state. To achieve these ends, the Canadian government established Indian Residential Schools to instruct Indian and ‘half-breed’ populations in ways that would support industrialization and self-sufficiency. According to the TRC (2015), the federal government entered into the establishment of Indian Residential Schools with the understanding that it (the Canadian government) had entered into Treaties with Indigenous Peoples to provide relief in periods of economic distress and that as traditional Indigenous economic pursuits were eliminated, the government would be called upon to provide increased relief. Increased investment by federal government into Indian Residential Schools was undertaken for three principal reasons:

[First, to] provide Aboriginal peoples with the skills they would need to participate in the coming market-based economy. Second, it would further their political assimilation...by giving up their status and not returning to their reserve communities and families. Third, the schools were seen as engines of cultural and spiritual change [where] savages were to emerge as Christian white men. There was also a national security element to the schools. Indian Affairs...observed that “it is unlikely that any Tribe or Tribes would give trouble

of a serious nature to the Government whose members had children completely under Government control.” (TRC, 2015, p. 58)

These are especially important observations in relation to what Foucault observed in the art of governing; namely: (1) the art of governing one’s self which is connected to morality, (2) the art of properly governing the family, which is inextricably tied to the economy, and (3) the science of ruling the state, which concerns, principally, politics (Foucault, 1997, p. 91). These are central to understanding the trajectory of government control to achieve a desired end for Indigenous populations. The principal agent in achieving these desired ends was the establishment of Indian Residential Schools shortly following Confederation and the passing of the *Indian Act* in 1867. Through these apparatuses, the federal government took calculated steps to: (1) regulate Indigenous morality by replacing traditional Indigenous spirituality with christian belief-systems; (2) transform Indigenous kinship and familial structures with patriarchal heads of family who regulated economy — or the activities that contributed to the means of subsistence of the family; and (3) the delegitimization of traditional forms of Indigenous government and the replacement with a patriarchal head of state, the Prime Minister, who was principally in charge of managing the politics of a nation.

As the TRC (2015) makes clear, the “history of residential schools presented in this report commenced by placing schools in the broader history of the global european colonization of Indigenous Peoples and their land” (p. 133). What remains, however, is the understanding that Indian Residential Schools was only part of the larger process of colonization of Indigenous Peoples and that the legacy of the assimilationist project remains in the “suppressed Aboriginal culture and languages, disrupted Aboriginal government, destroyed Aboriginal economies, and confine[ment] of Aboriginal peoples to marginal and often unproductive land” (p. 133). Indeed, the legacy of Indian Residential Schools is only one part of Canada’s colonial history — but must not be resigned to history — as the original intent of the assimilationist project remains embedded in the policies and programs implemented by government that are manifest in the disproportionate and debilitating inequalities in health, education, child welfare apprehensions, and overall low levels of well-being experienced almost singularly by Indigenous Peoples in Canada. To remediate these effects and to alter the trajectory of the legacy of Indigenous suffering, the TRC made 94 important Calls to Action as a means of reconciling with Indigenous Peoples, writ-large.

These calls to facilitate reconciliation, the TRC suggests, involve both personal, group and community action that focus centrally on changes to the way we, as Canadians, (1) govern ourselves, (2) the laws, policies and programs, as well as the way we educate our children, (3) the way we do business and, (4) the way we think, and talk to each other (TRC, 2015, pp. 316–317). While the project of reconciliation is an important one, the Calls to Action represent very little in terms of changing the “way we think”, or the philosophy that underpins relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples in Canada. The Calls to Action represent neo-liberal adaptations of emancipation for the oppressed while the art of government remains deeply enmeshed with governing things to achieve a desired end state.

Foucault’s view regarding the government of things that this research is principally founded on. This research is underpinned by the understanding that the broader art of government and of governing, remains fixated on governing the customs, habits, and ways of thinking and acting of Indigenous Peoples.

### **Karl Marx: Historical Materialism**

Kelle and Kovolson (1973) contend that “historical materialism is an organic part of the whole conception of Marxism and is bound up with its general philosophical outlook” (p. 26) which recognizes that the changes in society are “law-governed and that is in the process of progressive development” (p. 32). According to Mitchell (2008), Karl Marx sought to develop a materialist conception of history (later termed by Hegel) called “historical materialism” (p. 52). which insists that humans’ self-production of reality also includes humans’ self-production of consciousness that is “always deeply and inescapably *social* (rather than individual) ...and that all social practice was itself historically and socially conditioned, determined by the dead weight of preceding practice and the institutions to which that practice gave rise” (p. 52). As Marx’s describes in the Preface to the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859),

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the

general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but **their social existence that determines their consciousness (p. 43).**

Kelle and Kovalson (1973) suggest that Marx's philosophical outlook is underpinned by basic principles concerning social theory; the most important principle of which is Marx's theory of society. According to Kelle and Kovalson (1973) the principle of materialism recognizes that the "material life of society, the social processes of material production in the first place, is not just another necessary factor of social life, but the material foundation for the interaction of all the social phenomena which ultimately determine the spiritual sphere and all other expressions of social life" (p. 27). Historical materialism is also said to contain its own specific concepts, or categories, that specify its essential aspects of its subject and that result from an "analysis, a division of the object, and mark the stages in its cognition" (Kelle & Kovalson, 1973, p. 28). Kelle and Kovalson (1973) further state that the need "to formulate categories in the historical development of knowledge is determined by the fact that it is impossible to obtain a coherent concept of an object without a breakdown of it and the establishment of its separate aspects as categories" (p. 28) and that these categories reflect "individual aspects of social life which are proper to only some formations but which are of central importance for an understanding of their development (like class, state, politics, war etc.) Lastly, Kelle and Kovalson (1973) argue

The need to develop categories emanates from their "role in the cognition of the *laws* of the objective world. The task of cognition is not a mere reproduction of the object in thought but the discovery of its inherent laws and essential connections and relations. But the essence of an object and its laws do not lie on the surface of phenomena; **they are hidden** from and inaccessible to sensation. That is why there is a need to go on from appearance to essence, to affect a theoretical penetration into the essence of the object and to establish the stage of cognition achieved in the corresponding categories. (p. 28, emphasis added)

### ***Discussion: Marx, Consciousness, and hidden phenomena***

Indigenous peoples, more so than any other group in Canadian society, are bound up in the state's pursuit of progressive development towards an ideal end state (i.e. total assimilation into the body politic) since we are the only group that has specific legislation that determines nearly every aspect of our existence (i.e. the Indian Act). Further, it is precisely because of this

intersection and bounded reality, that much of our consciousness has been, and is, determined by our social existence as the populous of people deemed “problematic” in the advancement and progression of the state to achieve its goals.

Indeed, as previously explored, Indigenous Peoples stood in the way of the state’s pursuit of progressive development and as such, were displaced, dispossessed of their land, culture, ways of life, and legislated to control not only the governance of our populations and territories, but also our identities, our cultivation and production of land and resources, and most significantly in relation to this research — education. From this standpoint, Indigenous education as a social practice is, as Mitchell (2008) suggests, “deeply and inescapably *social* (rather than individual) ... historically and socially conditioned... [and] determined by the dead weight of preceding practice and the institutions to which that practice gave rise” (p. 52). Within K–12 education, this is perhaps best described by Battiste (2013) in her seminal work entitled *Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the Learning Spirit*, who contends that “education and literacy have not been benign processes” (p. 26) and that eurocentric dominance within Indigenous education in Canada represents “cognitive imperialism” (p. 26) that advances the discontinuity and trauma that many Indigenous Peoples continue to experience. Battiste (2013) rightly argues that the “current structure helps preserve class structure and a ruling elite rather than sorting everyone out according to their inherent capabilities” (p. 29). It is precisely this larger “superstructure” within Canadian society that places Indigenous Peoples’ existence at the bottom of the structure, that has determined and defined our existence, and ultimately, our consciousness as the First Peoples of this country.

Although Battiste’s (2013) work speaks to this within the realm of K–12 education, an examination of the same has not yet been undertaken within ECD for Indigenous children in Canada; largely because of the ways in which ECD is positioned as a benign space along the trajectory of learning, but also because of the prevailing narrative about the ways in which ECD is viewed as essential to changing the trajectory of the lives, and lived experiences, of marginalized populations who are rendered “problematic” as a result of the superstructure designed to preserve class structure. It is precisely this view that Marx’s notion of historical materialism informs and guides this work. More specifically, it is the ongoing determination by the state to control the “mode of production of material life conditions, the general process of social, political and intellectual life” of Indigenous Peoples within the realm of ECD programs

and policy that remains hidden. As such, this research is underpinned by the understanding of the need to examine Indigenous ECD to go beneath the surface — or from appearance to essence — to examine the ways in which it contributes to the maintenance of social order, and social positioning of Indigenous Peoples as the alienated underclass.

## **Qualitative Research**

The section to immediately follow explores the basic tenets of qualitative research, and also provides an overview of the five main traditions of qualitative research. I then move on to describe the role of Indigenous Research Methodology and its principles, before describing the ways in which Critical Ethnography, and critical ethnographic case study research, was best suited for the purposes of this research. It is important for me to describe these for several reasons, the primary reason being that I wanted to demonstrate the ways in which main traditions in qualitative research did not permit me, as the researcher, to critically examine the specific ways in which colonialism operates within the realm of early childhood in Indigenous communities. Although I attempted to try and fit this research into the confines of more traditional approaches, in order to honour the voices and stories of research participants themselves and uncover colonialism throughout, these traditions were ill suited in that regard. Secondly, it was also important that I make clear that I had carefully examined each of the main traditions yet was unable to ‘see myself’ or honour Indigenous ways of knowing and being in any single tradition. In that respect, while this approach may be uncommon, it was important that I include this exploration and process to deepen my own understanding and those of the reader.

While Newby (2014) suggests that qualitative research “lacks clear definition” (p. 103), Van Mannen (1983) contends that qualitative research is understood as a broad term used to describe an “array of interpretive techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate, and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomenon in the social world” (p. 9). Qualitative and quantitative methodologies are often compared as they are not considered mutually exclusive (Van Mannen, 1983, p. 10); however, differences between the two methodologies can be located in the overall “form, focus, and emphasis of the study” (p. 10). Denzin and Lincoln (1994, in Creswell, 1998) outline additional key differences among the two approaches and suggest that “quantitative researchers work with a few variables and many cases whereas qualitative researchers rely on a few cases

and many variables” (pp. 15–16). Generally, qualitative research is a way that social science researchers to describe “the unfolding of social processes” (Van Mannen, 1983, p. 10) by using a “wide and deep angle lens” (Johnson & Christensen, 2012, p. 35) to study things “in their natural setting, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of their meaning people bring to them” (Creswell, 1998, p. 18).

In order for researchers to undertake qualitative research, Creswell (1998) states that the researcher must have a “strong commitment to study a problem” (p. 16) and

*commit to extensive time in the field...engage(ing) in the complex, time-consuming process of data analysis...write long passages, because the evidence must substantiate the claims...[and] participate in a form of social and human science research that does not have firm guidelines or specific procedures and is evolving and changing constantly.* (pp. 16–17, emphasis in original)

In addition, they must also demonstrate a strong rationale for choosing a qualitative approach. Creswell (1998) contends that there are eight compelling arguments that substantiate a qualitative study; they are:

1. The nature of the research question; Does the research question begin with a “how” or “what”?
2. The topic needs to be explored; Are the variables not easily identified? Are theories not available to explain behaviour?
3. There is a need to present a detailed view of the topic;
4. The topic cannot be explored from a distant setting; To better understand phenomena and the meaning people bring to them, it is best to study individuals in a natural setting.
5. There is a desire of the researcher to “bring himself or herself into the study” (p. 18); The personal pronoun “I” is used or the researcher employs storytelling or narration.
6. There is sufficient time and resources to expend in the field on extensive data collection;
7. The audience of the research study is receptive to qualitative research; and
8. The emphasis in the research is for the researcher to be an “active learner” (p. 18) who is able to tell the story from the participant view as opposed to a distant observer who passes judgement on the participants (adapted from Creswell, 1998, pp. 17–18)

## *Articulating the Five Traditions of Qualitative Inquiry*

Although this research uses critical ethnography as the principal methodology, a brief overview of the other five traditions of qualitative inquiry, as explored by Creswell (1998), will be explored in the section below in order to provide rationale, and to distinguish and make evident, that critical ethnography is the most appropriate methodology given the aims, purpose, and objectives of this research. The traditions explored below include: (1) biography, (2) phenomenological study, (3) grounded theory, (4) ethnography, and (5) case study. Although not explored by Creswell's, Indigenous Research Methodology, and Critical Ethnographic Case Study will also be explored given (1) the nature of the research, the intended audience, and the participants involved in the study, and (2) my own identification as a nehiyaw iskwew.

### ***Tradition 1: Biography***

Creswell (1998) states that a biographical study is the "study of an individual and her or his experience as told to the researcher or found in documents and archival material" (p. 47) and is the "studied use and collection of life documents that describe turning point moments in an individual's life" (Denzin, 1989a, in Creswell, 1998, p. 47) and support the broad genre of biographical writing such as individual biographies, autobiographies, life histories and oral histories.

A biographical study tells the life story of an individual and is written by someone other than the individual being studied and provides a life history of a person's life and how "it reflects cultural themes of the society, personal themes, institutional themes, and social histories" (Creswell, 1998, p. 49). An oral history is where the researcher gathers "personal recollections of events, their causes, and their effects from an individual or several individuals... [and is] collected through tape recordings or through written works of individuals who have died or who are still living" (p. 49)

Creswell (1998) states that the researcher should determine whether the biography will be classical or interpretive wherein the researcher either "uses statements about theory, concerns with validity and criticism of documents and materials, and the formulation of distinct hypotheses, all drawn from the perspective of the researcher" (p. 50) or "operates on an entirely

different set of assumptions...and asks that biographers be cognizant of how studies are both read and written” (p. 50).

### ***Tradition 2: Phenomenological Study***

Newby (2014) argues that phenomenology is “very simply, concerned with how we experience the world rather than ideas and concepts about how the world really is” (p. 39) and is concerned, principally, with the meanings we give to the things we experience by studying individual and collective experiences — or, the lifeworld (Newby, 2014, p. 39). Creswell (1998) suggests further that phenomenology, and the phenomenological study, describes the “meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon” (p. 51).

Phenomenology as a research method finds its roots with German mathematician, Edmund Husserl, who states that researchers under this tradition search for “the **essential, invariant structure**...or the central underlying meaning of the experience and emphasize the **intentionality of consciousness** where experiences contain both the outward appearance and inward consciousness based on memory, image and meaning” (p. 52). Data analysis under this tradition proceeds through “the methodology of reduction, the analysis of specific statements and themes, and a search for all possible meanings. The researcher sets aside all prejudgements, **bracketing** his or her own experience and relying on intuition, imagination, and universal structures to obtain a picture of the experience” (Creswell, 1998, p. 52).

### ***Tradition 3: Grounded theory***

Newby (2014) contends that grounded theory is “an approach to social science research that makes use of coding as a means of extracting the information from data...[with the principle objective] of generating theory from the data” (p. 491). Grounded theory is the process of generating, or discovering, a theory that relates to a particular situation and that this situation is “one in which individuals interact, take actions, or engage in a process in response to a phenomenon” (p. 56). This tradition was first articulated by two sociologists, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, in 1967 who held that theories should be “grounded in data from the field, especially in the actions, interactions, and social processes of people” (Creswell, 1989, p. 56).

The research process in a grounded theory study is a “zig-zag” process where the researchers goes in and out of the field to gather information, analyze the data, and then back to

the field to gather more information — until the categories of information are saturated and the “theory has been elaborated in all its complexity” (Creswell, 1998, p. 57).

According to Newby (2014) grounded theory is “arguably the most popular...qualitative research method” (p. 491) as it embraces “the richness of the qualitative world with a rigour and within a framework that owes much to quantitative research” (p. 491). Classic grounded theory is an inductive approach to research in that it “starts with the data and seeks to find patterns in the data, not impose frameworks upon it...[and is] rooted in what the data is telling us whereas template analysis has the potential to distort what messages lie in the data” (p. 492). A grounded theory research study must recognize that it is a never-ending process where the person “who applies the theory becomes, in effect, a generator of theory” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 242).

#### ***Tradition 4: Ethnography***

Ethnography is traditionally or classically defined as a form of “qualitative research focused on discovering and describing the culture of a group” (Johnson & Christensen, 2012, p. 389), or as a “description or interpretation of a cultural social group or system” (Creswell, 1998, p. 58); and/or “the extended study of human societies, institutions, and social relationships” (Wellington, 2000, p. 44, in Creswell, 1998). As such, a researcher generally examines a group’s behaviours and/or learned patterns of behaviour, customs, and ways of life and studies the meanings of a group’s “behaviours, language, and interactions of the culture-sharing group” (Creswell, 1998, p. 58). Central to ethnography is the concept of culture, which, as Creswell contends, is an “amorphous term” and something that the researcher

Attributes to a group as he or she looks for patterns of daily living... It consists of looking for what people do (**behaviour**), what they say (**language**), and some tension between what they really do and what they ought to do as well as what they make use of (**artifacts**). (Spradley, in Creswell, 1998, p. 59)

Johnson and Christensen (2012) further articulate that culture is comprised of both material and nonmaterial components such as “a system of shared beliefs, values, practices, perspectives, folk knowledge, language, norms, rituals, and material objects and artifacts that members of a group use in understanding their world and in relating to one another” (p. 389). From this standpoint, individuals become members of a specific culture “through a socialization process by which they learn and are trained about the features of the culture” (p. 389) and where they “internalize the culture...[and] take the values and beliefs to be their own” (p. 389). As a result of this

socialization process, and through the internalization of culture, specific cultures are maintained over time as individuals becoming “fully functioning and accepted members of the group” (p. 389).

In order to describe the culture of a group, the researcher is tasked with gathering artifacts, stories, and uncovering cultural themes to establish patterns of behaviour among cultural groups that describe and establish “‘cultural rules’ of a culture-sharing group” (Creswell, 1998, p. 60). According to Mitchell (2007),

The job of the ethnographer, then, becomes the description and interpretation of the meanings of particular groups of people (cultures) made from their interaction with the world around them; how they understand the world. If culture is a system of meanings, and ethnography is writing culture, then ethnography consists of finding out what the system of meaning is, and writing it down...[through] thick description. (p. 61)

The final product, according to Creswell (1998) is that a “holistic cultural portrait of the social group that incorporates both the views of the actors in the group (**emic**) and the researcher’s interpretation of views of about human social life in a social science perspective (**etic**)” (p. 60).

### ***Tradition 5: Case Study***

Johnson and Christensen (2012) describe case study research simply as “research that provides a detailed account and analysis of one or more cases” (p. 395). Newby (2014) further contends that case study research is the analysis of “an individual circumstance or event that is chosen either because it is typical or because it is unusual or because there was a problem or because something worked well” (p. 53). Central to case study research is the understanding that a case is defined as a ‘bounded system’, or that researchers are “going to try and figure out what complex things go on within that system...the case study tells a story about a bounded system” (Johnson & Christensen, 2012, p. 395). Creswell (1998) states that “many students choose the case study as their preferred approach to qualitative research ...[because] a case study is familiar” (p. 62) and gives researchers a “rich understanding of a situation” (Newby, 2014, p. 56).

Creswell (1998) suggests that researchers consider, first, what type of case study research will be the most promising and useful (p. 52) and the researcher should decide whether a single, collective, multi-site or within-site, or focused case study will serve their intended purpose and

research objectives. From here, the researcher then moves on to determine the research design and whether an intrinsic, instrumental, or collective case study is most appropriate. Johnson and Christensen (2012), state that an intrinsic case study is one where the researcher “describes, in depth, the particulars of the case in order to shed light on it...[with the goal being] to understand the case as a holistic entity, as well as to understand its inner working” (p. 396). The benefit of a single case, or intrinsic, case study is that the researcher can “put all their time and resources into the study...and can therefore develop an in-depth understanding of it” (p. 397). An instrumental case study involves the researcher attempting to understand something other than the particular case; that is, the goal of the researcher is to understand something more general that makes conclusions about something beyond a particular case. With an instrumental case study, the goal is to explain a particular phenomenon to generalize and conclusions that apply beyond the particular case. Lastly, a collective case study, Johnson and Christensen (2012) explain, is one where the “researcher believes he or she can gain greater insight into a research topic by concurrently studying multiple cases in one overall research study” (p. 397). With this approach, cases are studied instrumentally, or based on the impact as a collective rather than on an individual basis. In sum, case studies present a rich and holistic description of the case (or cases) in its context in order to build an explanation about the case (or cases) (Creswell, 1998, p. 156).

### **Indigenous Research Methodology**

As explored previously, as a nehiyaw iskwew I am reminded of the most fundamental principle of Indigenous research methodology which is the “necessity for the researcher to locate himself or herself” (Absolon & Willett, 2005, p. 97). Locating oneself, and self-locating at the outset of a research process, reflects an Indigenous way of ensuring that I, and other Indigenous researchers, am accountable for my own positionality. Absolon and Willett (2005) contend that research emanating from this approach resists the entrenched positivist contention that research must be objective, value-free, and neutral, as research with, for, and by Indigenous Peoples is principally understood through a human epistemological lens and that when we “talk about ourselves first and then relating pieces of our stories and ideas to the research topic” (p. 98) we are resisting colonial models of writing. As Absolon and Willett (2005) state further, location is more “than simply saying that you are of Cree or Anishinaabe or British ancestry; from Toronto

or Alberta or Canada; location is about relationships to the land, language, spiritual, cosmological, political, economical, environmental, and social elements in one's life" (p. 98).

### ***Honouring Indigenous Research Methodological Principles and Practices***

To the question, "What is an Indigenous methodology?", Wilson (2001) suggests

...Indigenous research methodology means "talking about your relational accountability...[that] as a researcher you are answering to *all your relations* when you are doing your research. You are not answering to questions of validity or reliability or making judgements of better or worse. Instead you should be fulfilling your relationships with the world around you. So your methodology has to ask different questions...you are asking how am I fulfilling my role in this relationship? ...and being accountable to *all my relations*. (p. 177)

In answering and being accountable to all my relations, Weber-Pillwax (2001) further contends "whatever I do as an Indigenous researcher must be hooked to the 'community' or the 'Indigenous research has to benefit the community'" (p. 168). Further, Weber-Pillwax (2001) argues that 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). The purpose of 'hooking' research to the needs and benefits of the community is rooted, according to Weber-Pillwax (2001), in the understanding that "if my work as an Indigenous scholar cannot or does not lead to action, it is useless to me or anyone else" (p. 169).

Kinchelow and Steinberg (2014) acknowledge the significance inherent to Indigenous research and in the generation of Indigenous knowledge that lends to action and social change, such as that generated through Indigenous research. Kinchelow and Steinberg (2014) contend that the generation of Indigenous knowledge through, among other things, research supports larger efforts to counteract the dismissal of Indigenous knowledge by researchers from dominant cultural backgrounds and that it adds value to the educational and epistemological viewpoints of Indigenous Peoples. Kinchelow and Steinberg (2014) contend that these efforts

seeks an intercultural/interracial effort to question the hegemonic and oppressive aspects of Western education and to work for justice and self-direction for Indigenous Peoples around the world. In this critical multilogical context, the purpose of Indigenous education and the production of Indigenous knowledge does not involve "saving"

Indigenous people but helping construct conditions that allow for Indigenous self-sufficiency while learning from the vast storehouse of Indigenous knowledges that provide compelling insights into all domains of human endeavor. (p. 135)

Through this lens, Indigenous research and Indigenous knowledge is recognized as a “rich social resource for any justice-related attempt to bring about social change” (Kinchelow & Steinberg, 2014, p. 135); however, the generation of Indigenous knowledge through Indigenous research must be grounded in both values and principles so that any product or outcomes from Indigenous research not contribute to the hegemonic and oppressive aspects of Western education and society (p. 135). Grande (2008) further states that Indigenous scholars claiming space within educational research is the necessary “first step in reclaiming and decolonizing an intellectual space — an inquiry room — of our own” (p. 234)

### ***Values and Principles of Indigenous Research Methodology***

#### Values.

In order for research with Indigenous peoples to be beneficial (as described by Weber-Pillwax, 2001; Wilson, 2011; and Kinchelow & Steinberg, 2014), Pidgeon and Hardy Cox (2002) contend that the research must be flexible rather than fixed; incorporate the integral components of Indigenous knowledge such as cultural protocols, values, and behaviours; and that it uses the four Rs — respect, responsibilities, relevance, and reciprocity (p. 100). Pidgeon (2001) advances this understanding in her own work with Indigenous students in Canadian universities and articulates that the four Rs establish the guiding values for research with Indigenous students, and Indigenous peoples.

Regarding *respect*, Pidgeon and Hardy Cox (2002), suggest researchers begin by engaging with and involving “Aboriginal groups, communities, and individuals in the research process, discussing each other’s ideas helping to ensure the project will be of benefit to all parties” (p. 102). Regarding *relevance*, Pidgeon and Hardy Cox (2002) state that this element takes into consideration the “importance and relevance of the study to the research and Aboriginal group(s) involved. What is relevant to the researcher may not be relevant to the Aboriginal peoples involved in the research” (p. 103). In doing so, the research will reflect the needs of the community, clarify expectations, and help build relationships among the researcher and the community, and solidify a shared understanding of the core question “how will the

research contribute to Aboriginal peoples?” (p. 103). Next, Pidgeon and Hardy Cox (2002) suggest that *reciprocity* entails “honouring each other’s roles [by] Clearly defining each group’s roles and expectations” (p. 103) which helped with developing a shared understanding of the benefits of the project and identifying the ways in which the research will “assist them with a political or legal or community development issue” (p. 104). Lastly, Pidgeon and Hardy Cox (2002) suggest that *responsibility* entails researchers be cognizant of “their responsibilities to the research, to the people, and to themselves” (p. 104) through adherence to the ways in which the community is involved in the design and implementation of the specific research project. The underlying principle embedded within the four R’s, as outlined by Pidgeon and Hardy Cox (2002), is reinforced by Weber-Pillwax (2001) who suggests that “trust is critical to this method, and the researcher must have a deep sense of responsibility to uphold that trust in every way” (p. 170).

#### Principles.

Wilson (2007) suggests that Indigenist research is a paradigm — or a model — that advances Indigenous knowledge creation that cannot be advanced through a mainstream, European paradigm. It also upholds the philosophies of Indigenous Peoples behind our search for knowledge (p. 194) and embeds this new knowledge “as part of us, part of what and who we are” (p. 194). To undertake work within an Indigenist paradigm requires researchers place themselves “and their work firmly in a relational context” (p. 194) — that is, researchers must never be separated from their work or from themselves (i.e. writing in the 1st person as opposed to the 3rd) (p. 194) and that the researcher’s relationships with the world around them must be recognized as these also shape how and in what ways we will conduct our research.

Wilson (2007) articulates that the following principles must guide research from an Indigenist paradigm:

- Respect for all forms of life as being related and interconnected.
- Conduct all actions and interactions in a spirit of kindness; honesty, compassion.
- The reason for doing the research must bring benefits to the Indigenous community.
- The foundation of the research question must lie within the reality of the Indigenous experience.

- Any theories developed or proposed must be grounded in an Indigenous epistemology and supported by the Elders and the community that live out this particular epistemology.
- The methods used will be process-oriented, and the researcher will be recognized and cognizant of his or her role as one part of the group in process.
- It will be recognized that the researcher must assume a certain responsibility for the transformations and outcomes of the research project(s) which he or she brings into a community.
- It is advisable that a researcher work as part of a team of Indigenous scholars/thinkers with the guidance of Elder(s) or knowledge keepers.
- It is recognized that the integrity of any Indigenous people or community could never be undermined by Indigenous research because such research is grounded in that integrity.
- It is recognized that the languages and cultures of Indigenous Peoples are living processes and that research and the discovery of knowledge is an ongoing function for the thinkers and scholars of every Indigenous group. (p. 195)

### **Exploring and Articulating the Rationale for Critical Ethnography as the Principal Research Methodology**

Having briefly explored each of the five research traditions as well as Indigenous Research Methodology, the next section will articulate and explore the rationale for the use of critical ethnography as the principal research methodology used in this research.

At a foundational level, I am cognizant of what Grande (2008) contends is “demon to be purged” within Indigenous education which is “...the spectre of colonialism” (p. 234). As Grande states, “we live within, against, and outside of its constant company witnessing its various manifestations as it [colonialism] shape-shifts its way into from research and public policy to textbooks and classrooms” (p. 234). Within the realm of Indigenous education in Canada on a broad-level, I am powerfully aware of the constant flow of colonialism and eurocentric dominance that permeates not only into research but also into our classrooms, textbooks, policies, and practices. As Battiste (2013) states in her book *Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the Learning Spirit*, the persistent ideological underpinnings that position Indigenous

Peoples as inferior within education, and education policy in particular, is central to the forced assimilation plan by settlers for Indigenous Peoples throughout Canada. Battiste (2013) also recognizes that “education and literacy **have not been benign processes**, for cognitive imperialism, licensed by dominant English languages and eurocentric discourse, has tragically diminished Indigenous languages and knowledges and contributed to the discontinuity and trauma for Aboriginal peoples continue to experience” (p. 26, emphasis added). Battiste (2013) further states

Cognitive imperialism is a form of manipulation used in Eurocentric educational systems. Built on damaging assumptions and imperialist knowledge, educational curricula and pedagogy are built on a monocultural foundation of knowledge and privileges it through public education...[and] relies on colonial dominance as a foundation of thought, language, values and frames of reference as reflected in the language of instruction, curricula, discourses, texts and methods. (p. 161)

This work is grounded in the understanding that dominance and power asserted by non-Indigenous Peoples over Indigenous Peoples in an effort to assimilate us into dominant society has been the principal aim since before and after Confederation. However, power within this particular context is a “relationship of struggle” (Belsey, 2002, in MacNaughton, 2005, p. 27) to dominate the meanings we give to our lives. It is, as MacNaughton (2005) suggests, a “battle to authorise the truth, because truths don’t just happen, they are produced in our struggle to decide the meanings of our actions, thoughts and feelings” (p. 27). Power, MacNaughton (2005) further argues, is operationalized in the ways we use “truths [to] build discourses of normality to produce and regulate ourselves...our relationships and our institutions, especially our production of normality” (p. 27).

Within educational policy frameworks that dominate K–12 education for all children in Canada, the struggle for control over the ‘truth’ about Indigenous Peoples’ distinct ways of knowing and being, coupled with the struggle for control over (and ultimately power) the content of curricula, processes, pedagogy, and methods used to teach Indigenous students, has been a long and arduous path. As articulated by the National Indian Brotherhood in 1972 in their policy paper entitled *Indian Control of Indian Education*, First Nations people made known for the first time not only the distinct ways in which Indian students should learn, but also the values and

beliefs deemed important, if not necessary, for the ongoing survival of Indian peoples throughout Canada. The National Indian Brotherhood (1972) specifies,

We want education to provide the setting in which our children can develop the fundamental attitudes and values which have an honored place in Indian tradition and culture. The values which we want to pass on to our children, values which make our people a great race, are not written in any book. They are found in our history, in our legends and in our culture. We believe that if an Indian child is fully aware of the important Indian values he will have reason to be proud of our race and of himself as an Indian. We want the behavior of our children to be shaped by those values which are most esteemed in our culture. When our children come to school they have already developed certain attitudes and habits which are based on experiences in the family. School programs which are influenced by these values respect cultural priority and are an extension of the education which parents give children from their first years. These early lessons emphasize attitudes of:

- self-reliance,
- respect for personal freedom (sic),
- generosity,
- respect for nature,
- wisdom.

All of these have a special place in the Indian way of life. While these values can be understood and interpreted in different ways by different cultures, it is very important that Indian children have a chance to develop a value system which is compatible with Indian culture. (p. 2)

It was precisely this framework and corresponding value statements made by the National Indian Brotherhood that have formed the foundation for *Indian Control of Indian Education*, and now First Nations control of First Nations Education in Canada (Assembly of First Nations, 2010), that present an ongoing challenge to the unquestioned and unregulated control over Indian education by non-Indian peoples.

While efforts to dismantle and disrupt the flow of colonialism that operates within and throughout Indigenous K–12 education are an ongoing process, the realm of Indigenous Early Childhood Development remains largely unexamined. However, given the significance of the

early years on later development and educational and social performance outcomes (i.e. high school graduation, employment, incomes etc.), it could be argued that this space is inherently political given the relationship and ongoing struggle for power and control of Indigenous Peoples. And it is precisely the ways in which, if at all, power by non-Indigenous Peoples is operationalized within ECD that this work is principally concerned.

Understood in this way, the five traditions of qualitative research explored above do not provide the means to explore and examine the “power-laden social and cultural processes within particular social sites” (Cook, in O’Reilly, 2012, p. 149) to “reveal the hidden depths of exploitation, power, and disadvantage” (O’Reilly, 2012, p. 54).

The first two traditions, case study and phenomenological study, for example are principally concerned with: (1) studying an individual and her or his experience, and (2) describing the “meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon” (Creswell, 1998, p. 54). These two traditions provide a mechanism for understanding individual experiences and the meaning of those lived experiences. They do not; however, specifically aim to develop an understanding of power, structures of power, and/or the ways in which power operates within specific sites (i.e. communities).

The third tradition, grounded theory, is similarly misaligned with the purpose and intent of this particular study in that grounded theory is the process of generating, or discovering, a theory that relates to a particular situation and that this situation is “one in which individuals interact, take actions, or engage in a process in response to a phenomenon” (Creswell, 1998, p. 56). As Pinar (2004) explores in his study of curriculum, and curriculum theory in particular, grounded theory is the study of a particular experience that is revealed through the process of gathering data from the field, coding it, determining themes based on the coded data, and developing a theory around a particular phenomenon. Within the context of this research, and while upholding the principles of self-determination by Indigenous Peoples outlined in the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, the purpose is not to observe and describe a particular experience and develop a theory based on the data gathering and coding process. Rather, this research, and the use of critical ethnography (explored below) is to explore and examine social processes to reveal the depths of exploitation, power, and disadvantage.

The fourth tradition, ethnography, is a form of qualitative research focused on “discovering and describing the culture of a group” (Johnson & Christensen, 2012, p. 389), or as

a “description or interpretation of a cultural social group or system” (Creswell, 1998, p. 58). As Tuhiwai-Smith (1999) articulates, ethnography, as operationalized through anthropology, is “closely associated with the study of the Other and with the defining of primitivism” and Indigenous Peoples as their “special subject” (p. 66). It was precisely the “ethnographic gaze of anthropology [that] has collected, classified, and represented other cultures to the extent that anthropologists are often [viewed] as the ‘takers and users’ who ‘exploit the hospitality and generosity of native people’” (Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999, p. 67). Returning to Wilson (2007) and Weber-Pillwax (2001), respectively, research with and by Indigenous Peoples must bring no harm and must ultimately benefit Indigenous Peoples and communities. Within the context of this research, the intent is to provide the means to support and drive change for and by Indigenous communities within the realm of early childhood development. It is not, however, the intent to study a group of Indigenous children, or Indigenous communities in interaction with their children, to describe and make known the culture and cultural processes for others to possess, consume, or classify. In doing so, I reject the “construction of totalizing discourses which control the Other...[and that] denied other views of what happened and what the significance of historical ‘facts’ may be to the colonized” (Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999, p. 67).

The final tradition, case study is understood as the analysis of “an individual circumstance or event that is chosen either because it is typical or because it is unusual or because there was a problem or because something worked well” (Newby, 2014). While case study suits this research because it involves multiple sites (i.e. multiple communities), multiple individuals, and will not be “restricted to one observation” (Blatter, 2012, p. 69), case study alone is insufficient to reveal power relations or to assist researchers in exploring and examining social processes so as to reveal the depths of exploitation, power, and disadvantage. Finally, although not the principal methodology used in this study, my work is informed and guided by the principles, values, and outcomes of Indigenous Research Methodology, as it supports and enables the use of case study that allows for the examination of power and domination within social structures or processes within specific communities or societies as well as context-specific and community-specific responses to policy changes over time. The use of interviews enabled research participants the opportunity to give voice to their unique experiences and responses that may not be present, or identifiable within policy instruments such as government reports, and/or texts.

The following section articulates the use of a critical ethnographic case study method for this research, the research process, and will conclude with the phases in the design of this study.

### ***Critical Ethnography***

The search for an appropriate and responsive research methodology, as explored above, has taken me down some interesting paths. However, what remained clear throughout this journey was the need for a methodology that adequately, and critically, reflected the intended objectives of the research itself, and that enabled me as the researcher to fulfill my “ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular *lived* domain” (Madison, 2005, p. 5, emphasis in original). As Madison (2005) describes, Critical Ethnography allows for the articulation and identification of

the conditions for existence within a particular context are not as they *could* be for specific subjects; as a result, the researcher feels a moral obligation to make a contribution toward changing those conditions toward greater freedom and equity. The critical ethnographer also takes us beneath surface appearances, disrupts the *status quo*, and unsettles both neutrality and taken-for-granted assumptions by bringing to light underlying and obscure operations of power and control. (p. 5)

Because of the ways in which this research critically examines and historicizes Indigenous early childhood, critical ethnography allowed me to, as Foley (2002) states, “critically analyze the disciplinary and discursive historical context” (p. 477) to “expose exploitation and inequality” (p. 470) and to “better understand societal forces of power, dominance, and change” (p. 471). Further, critical ethnography enabled me to unapologetically apply personal reflexive and introspective narratives (p. 474) to help deepen my understanding of the research findings themselves which includes an understanding of the various ways the KTC First Nations have micro-resisted domination and colonization within education. Gordon (2017), in their research on Samoan resistance, similarly states that, “Critical ethnography, then, enables for a deeper understanding of the ways in which Samoans mediate and resist the social and structural incursions and legacies of colonialism” (p. 53). Lastly, critical ethnography enabled me to resist the tide of domination within research to remain detached from the research itself. Instead, critical ethnography implores that the researcher acknowledges their distinct positionalities, and in some ways forces the researcher to acknowledge his/her/their own power,

privilege, and biases as part of the research process while at the same time “denouncing the power structures that surround our subjects” (Madison, 2005, p. 7). As I’ve heard throughout my tenure as an Indigenous person within academia, there is often concern about Indigenous Peoples being too close to the research participants (i.e. people [relatives] and communities [relations]) for the research to be unbiased. However, as I’ve long expressed both within and outside of academia, it is impossible for me to detach myself given my relational obligations to the research process and outcomes. Madison (2005) suggests that there is a concern for positionality in that it “is sometimes understood as “reflexive ethnography”: it is a “turning back” on ourselves” (p. 7). Critical ethnography enabled me to, through reflexive analytic writing, acknowledge that I am not detached or dispossessed from the research participants or processes, but rather that this work is intricately bound up “in a class marked by class, racial, and sexual conflict, [where] no producers of knowledge are innocent or politically neutral” (Foley & Valenzuela, 2005, p. 220). This ‘reflexive turn’ as Foley states, allows the ethnographer to ‘turn back’ so that we,

are accountable for our own research paradigms, our own positions of authority, and our own moral responsibility relative to representation and interpretation. We begin to ask ourselves, What are we going to do with the research and who ultimately will benefit? Who gives us the authority to make claims about where we have been? How will our work make a difference in people's lives? But we might also begin to ask another kind of question: What difference *does* it make when the ethnographer himself comes from a history of colonization and disenfranchisement? (Madison, 2005, p. 7)

### **The Research Process and Phases in the Design of a Study**

In order for researchers to avoid the “bewilderment at the array of methodologies and methods” (Crotty, 1998, p. 1) in qualitative research, “one reasonably clear-cut way [of] grasping what is involved in the process of social research” (p. 1) is through what Crotty describes as “scaffolding” (p. 2). This four-part technique is used to provide “stability and direction” (p. 2) to researchers as they build and develop a more robust understanding of their own research process. To begin, Crotty suggests that the researcher answer two fundamental questions: (1) “what methodologies and methods will we be employing in the research we propose to do?” (p. 2) and (2) “how do we justify this choice and use of methodologies and methods?” (p. 2). In answering

these foundational questions, the researcher is then positioned to answer four additional questions that are the basic elements of the research process; they are:

1. What *methods* do we propose to use?
2. What *methodology* governs our choice and use of methods?
3. What *theoretical perspective* lies behind the methodology in question? and
4. What *epistemology* informs this theoretical perspective? (Crotty, 1998, p. 2)

The section to follow explores the need for a critical ethnographic case study and addresses these four foundational questions about the research process which will include an outline of the methodology and the methods that informed and inform and direct my research study.

### **Methodology: Critical Ethnographic Case Study**

Gagnon (2010) states that the case study method is appropriate for “describing, explaining, predicting, or controlling processes associated with a variety of phenomena at the individual, group, or organizational levels” (p. 2). Case studies are also useful for answering the questions “who, what, when, and how” (Gagnon, p. 2) and for “predicting short-term and long-term forecasts of... future behaviours or events” (p. 2). Newby (2014) adds that case study research has two goals: to pick out patterns “because they suggest that there are processes at work that create these patterns” (p. 53), and secondly to understand the “variations from the expected” (p. 54).

#### ***Intrinsic versus Instrumental Case Studies***

Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier (2013) suggest that case studies can be divided into two main forms, intrinsic or instrumental, where the former attempts to capture the “case in its entirety” (p. 11) ...”to more fully understand the person, department or institution, that makes up the case” (p. 12); and where the latter “focuses on an aspect, concern, or issue of the case” (p. 12) by analyzing resources such as policies and resources, observations, interviews and questionnaires” (p. 12). Instrumental case studies are generally used within educational settings as the researcher is typically concerned with an aspect of the case such as “teaching and learning, implementation of policy, curriculum development or issues of personal and professional relevance” (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013, p. 12).

Baxter and Jack (2008) add that instrumental case studies are “used to accomplish something other than understanding a particular situation” (p. 549). Instrumental case studies, in

this regard, provide insight into an issue or help to refine a theory but are generally a secondary interest and play only a supportive role in facilitating an understanding of something else. Instrumental case studies are also used to look at an issue of phenomenon in depth and where the contexts are scrutinized in order to develop the researcher's understanding of something else (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Intrinsic case studies, on the other hand, are used by researchers where the "intent is to better understand the case" (p. 548) not because it is representative of other cases or because it illustrates a particular problem, but rather because the case itself is of interest.

Within the context of the two main forms of case studies, Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier (2013) further suggest that there are five main models of case studies: (1) reflective, (2) longitudinal, (3) cumulative, (4) collective, and (5) collaborative. These five models will be explored briefly below.

### ***Case Study Models***

A reflective case study is defined as "one where the researcher is emphasizing a personal evaluative component in the form of reflective commentaries or expanded field notes or journals which engage with the topic and the researcher's feelings, issues and reflections on experiences and interactions" (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013, p. 15). Key aspects of a reflective case study is that "the researcher becomes the central point around which the research is built" (p. 16) and where the research is built on reflective journals/commentaries and other forms of data" (p. 16) that are collected over a contained period of time. Key challenges associated with this model is that it can be negatively influenced by personal biases; it can be unbalanced based on the limited number of data sources; and can be ethically challenging should the research draw on data collected from colleagues or other persons close to the researcher.

Longitudinal case studies are those that are carried out over a long period of time in order to understand a process. This model allows the researcher sufficient time to develop a deeper understanding of changes that occur over time. Key aspects of longitudinal case studies are that they collect "dynamic rather than static data" (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013, p. 18); they allow for both fluid and core questions; they link "past, present, and future: information by using cohorts to explore "groups and processes in social context and in relation to key events/policies" (p. 18). Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier (2013) state that although longitudinal case studies allow the researcher to gain a deep understanding of an issue within a specific context, they do; however, require sustained and continued effort on the part of the researcher; tend to lose focus

and interest by research participants and, as such, have a tendency to take considerable time to bring to a conclusion and to share research findings with participants (p. 18–19).

Cumulative, collaborative and collective case studies are generally viewed as “overlapping” (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013, p. 19) as “all three models rely upon the generation of case studies built around the same theme or focus of some kind, for example a new curriculum innovation” (p. 19). However, the three models can be differentiated based on the strengths and key aspects inherent within each model; they are:

1. Cumulative: Builds case studies that replicate and/or build on existing case studies in order to develop a cumulative body of evidence to draw upon regarding a particular phenomenon or development.
2. Collective: Works on a number of cases separately (and possibly asynchronously) that have a similar general purpose. Although the evidence may vary in approach and quality, each case still provides insights concerning a particular innovation/problem.
3. Collaborative: Researcher works collaboratively with colleagues within/across institutions who have a shared purpose. Approaches to data collection with the view to generate evidence that is more substantial and grounded in different contexts. (p. 19)

### ***Study Design: Single or Multiple Cases***

In addition to determining the model of case study, Baxter and Jack (2008) state that “researchers must also consider if it is prudent to conduct a single case study or if a better understanding of the phenomenon will be gained through conducting a multiple case study” (p. 549).

Yin (2014) states that a single case study is one where a single text is used to describe and analyse the case. Often, single case studies collect data about an “embedded unit of analysis...” Multiple case studies, conversely, contain more than a single case where the “context is different for each case” (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 550). In multiple case studies, we are examining multiple cases to understand the similarities and differences. Yin (2003, in Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 550) states that multiple case studies can be used to either, “(a) predicts similar results (a literal replication) or (b) predicts contrasting results but for predictable reasons (a

theoretical replication)” (p. 47). Although the evidence created from a multiple case study is considered robust and reliable, it can, however, be time consuming and expensive to conduct.

### *Selecting Cases*

Gagnon (2010) suggests that there are multiple factors a researcher must consider when selecting cases for a particular case study and that the researcher carefully considers not only the extent to which the case aligns with the purpose and objectives of the research, but also the geographic distance between the research sites. Further, Gagnon suggests that multiple sites should be identified in the event one or more sites decides to withdraw or abandon their participation in the research (p. 51).

### *Collecting Data*

Yin (2014) states that three rules must be observed when collecting case study data. Namely, multiple sources should be used so that the researcher can analyze a variety of information, trace lines of convergence and strengthen construct validity” (Gagnon, 2010, p. 57). Secondly, Yin (2003, in Gagnon, 2010) states that a formal database should be created so that other researchers can review the evidence and verify the study’s analyses and conclusions. Lastly, it is further suggested that a chain of evidence be maintained to ensure consistency and to demonstrate the reliability of the data. This chain should also cover the circumstances under which the data was collected.

To gather data; however, requires that the researcher gain access to the research setting. To do so, the researcher must first spend time developing relationships and establishing trust. Within the context of this research study, the significance of establishing relationships and trust is crucial given the significance of relationships within Indigenous communities and among Indigenous Peoples, but also given the history of harmful research and the related impacts on Indigenous Peoples.

Gagnon (2010) and Bassey (1999) further suggest that case study research gathers data from multiple sources — including data from texts, observations, and interviews (depending on the specific plan of inquiry). Data collected from texts can either be published or unpublished, where the former involves undertaking an in-depth literature review on the topic of the case study. The latter involves gathering information from unpublished records, reports, and archival data from institutions. Observation, according to Gillam (2000), has three main elements:

“watching what people do; listening to what they say; and asking clarifying questions” (p. 45). Although observation can seem like “simple business” (p. 46), observation is challenging for multiple reasons including lack of objectivity by the researcher, the impact of “observer effect” (p. 47) where those being observed change how they would normally interact within their natural setting, and lastly, the amount of time involved in the observational process, and data collected from interviews, are “among the most important sources of information” (Gagnon, 2010, p. 61) and can be classified into three types, based on two criteria; namely, the amount of leeway “granted to the respondent and the degree of depth or detail” (p. 61). In an open-ended interview, for instance, a central theme is introduced as the topic of discussion and sub-themes are introduced as the interview progresses. A semi-structured interview, however, the interviewer “asks precise questions...reducing...the freedom of the respondent” (p. 61) but still allowing the respondent considerable leeway in answering open-ended questions. Lastly, a structured interview is one where a series of structured questions are posed to the respondent and can often take the form of a questionnaire.

### **Specific Method and Plan of Inquiry**

Having explored the aspects of case study research, my research employed an instrumental, collective case study model due to its emphasis on understanding a particular situation. My research used multiple cases, each of whom who each have a similar general purpose where each case and each respondent will enhance and provide context-specific understandings by participating in semi-structured interviews that answer the research questions:

1. In what ways have shifts in government policy positively or negatively impacted Indigenous ECD within the context of Indigenous self-determination and autonomy and the maintenance of social order?
2. In what ways have Indigenous communities actively or passively resisted these shifts?
3. How can Indigenous resistance within the context of Indigenous ECD inform program and policy development in the future?

### ***Data sources***

Thomas (1993) states “where and from whom we obtain data ultimately provides the meanings that shape the analysis” (p. 37). Therefore, the task for the researcher is to identify the

sources that have the potential to reveal information the most relevant to the topic. In this regard, it is “crucial to identify the types of informants who are most likely to possess an “insider’s knowledge” of the research domain” (p. 37).

### ***Data sources for this research***

Creswell (1998) suggests that when designing the research plan, it is important that the researcher include a statement about past experiences as the researcher in relation to the group or community being studied (p. 147). As I’ve explored elsewhere (Kemble, 2013), I have worked within the field of First Nations education for over 5 years and have worked extensively with First Nations communities through my work with both the federal and provincial governments for the last 12 years. Throughout this time, and more recently in my roles as educational research consultant in 2014–2015, then as an Education Manager with the Ministry of Education in the First Nations Métis, and Inuit Education Division (2014–2017), Director of Indigenous Health in the Faculty of Medicine & Dentistry (2017–2019), and Sr. Manager of Indigenous Relations & Supports (2019–present) I have been given the privilege of working alongside most, if not all, First Nations in Alberta and have developed trust, rapport, and relationships. Within the recent past, my rapport and relationship with First Nations and Tribal Councils within the traditional territory of Treaty 6, 7, and 8 has grown significantly. The site I worked with for this research was the Kee Tas Kee Now Tribal Council First Nations, or KTC. The member First Nations of the KTC are: Loon River First Nation, Lubicon Lake Band, Peerless Trout First Nation, Whitefish Lake First Nation, and Woodland Cree First Nation (explored in greater detail below).

### ***Interviews: Semi-Structured***

Semi-structured interviews generally have a degree of flexibility to them that makes “productive” (Gillam, 2000, p. 65); however, Gillam warns that interviewing should not be carried out until the researcher is clear about two things: (1) the key issues in the research investigation, and (2) what will best be answered in face-to-face interviews (p. 65).

Gillam (2000) further recommends controlling the number of interviews since a single interview often results in 10 hours of transcription and an equal number of hours of analysis. While Gillam (2000) recommends that the interview last no longer than 30 minutes, for the purposes of this research, interviews lasted as naturally long as they needed to be. In preparation for this research, I was advised that in some cases, the formal interview component may not even

take place until after an informal meeting has occurred between the researcher and research participant (as is often the case within Indigenous communities). As previously explored, this was the case for this research in that I not only had to present an overview of the research to the KTC Education Authority Board of Directors, I also had to seek their approval to proceed and engage in the research process. It was also necessary to engage in this process so that KTC First Nations leadership could inform the community about the research and then to connect me with those in the community who they believed would be beneficial to the overall purpose of the study. The interviews used open-ended questions to allow for probing of a particular element of a response from a participant and will be tape-recorded to avoid any inhibitions or interruption of the flow of response.

### ***Types of Participants***

For this study, I conducted interviews with key personnel within the KTC First Nations, and the newly established KTC Education Authority, as well as Health Directors, and other personnel within the field of early learning and care on-reserve, as well as those who were identified by KTCEA leadership as holding key perspectives that would benefit this research.

Examining childcare and early childhood education for First Nation children within the province of Alberta was of particular interest given the role of the federal government and the provision of funding under the Administrative Reform Agreement between Alberta and Canada signed in 1992 for the provision of social services comparable to those provided by the province of Alberta to non-Indigenous peoples. It is especially important also since the Agreement is specific to the First Nations in Treaty 7 and Treaty 8, the Lesser Slave Lake Indian Regional Council and the Bigstone Cree Nation. With regard to childcare under this agreement, the federal Department of Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) provided \$4.1 million in funding to eligible childcare centres on-reserve in Alberta in 2005/06 (Child Care Canada, 2006, p. xxvi). According to the Government of Canada (2018c), childcare programs fall under the jurisdiction of the federal government and parents are “eligible for federal government funding equivalent to parent child care subsidies when programs request an inspection and receive documentation showing that provincial licensing standards are met” (p. 63). Further, Alberta (through the Ministry of Children's Services),

Alberta has implemented a process to recognize Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) education programs in approved private vocational training institutions based on a theoretical understanding of all aspects of child development from both an academic and First Nations/Aboriginal knowledge base. Based on content and number of course hours, programs may be eligible for certification as a Child Development Worker or a Child Development Supervisor. Alberta also contracts with early childhood educators to deliver the entry-level Child-Care Orientation Course in First Nation communities leading to certification as a Child Development Assistant. (p. 63)

## **Gaining Access, Data Collection, and Analysis**

### ***Gaining Access***

This research involves interviews with key personnel within the Kee Tas Kee Now Tribal Council. Within the Indigenous context, gaining access to key personnel and the site requires permission by Chiefs and Councils. A letter was sent to the leadership of the KTC Chiefs and Councils that:

- introduced myself;
- explained the purpose and intent of the research;
- identified the benefits to their community;
- outlined the active (versus passive) role played by research participants in the research;
- requested to meet with them in person to explore the research purpose further and to answer any questions.

The process of gaining entry to the research sites was a crucial part of the process and ensured that leadership was aware of the research being undertaken within their communities, and that they had control over granting access to their respective communities. Following the letters, I received an invitation from the administration of the KTC to attend a KTCEA Board of Directors meeting and present my proposal and seek permission to work with their respective communities.

Once permission was granted by the KTC First Nations leadership, I followed up with an email to the Executive Leadership of the Education Authority asking for guidance as to how to connect with the key personnel for this study. Contact information was provided by Executive

Leadership and, over the course of several months, I communicated and arranged interviews to take place in the spring and summer of 2018, and arranged a research schedule.

### ***Data Collection***

This part of the research process began with compiling the preliminary record by making observations at each of the sites, followed by a detailed description (or thick description) of the sites as recorded in my field notes. This was followed by semi-structured interviews with key personnel and was done to give voice to participants in the research process and provide an opportunity for them to explore the ways in which changes in federal policy have impacted ECD programs and services within their communities. Responses were recorded and transcribed and then re-read to begin determining themes.

### ***Identifying Themes and Coding Responses***

Harding (2015) suggests the researcher adhere to four stages when analysing the research interview responses. Namely, that the researcher starts the process by identifying initial categories based on reading the transcripts; followed by writing codes along the sides of the transcripts; reviewing the list of codes, revising the list of categories and deciding which codes should appear in which category. The final stage is to look for themes and findings in each category.

By reading the initial transcripts, the researcher is able to identify categories that codes can be placed into and is a major part of separating and sorting the data. The categories for my research were: (1) positive impacts of response to policy change; (2) negative impacts of response policy change; (3) internal or external influence, (4) passive resistance to policy shifts, (5) active resistance to policy shifts, and (6) past experiences of changes. These main categories will assist me in identifying substantive statements (Gillam, 2000, p. 59) — or those statements that generally make a point. From these substantive statements, Harding (2015) states that organizing data this way will enable the researcher to make better sense of the data by:

- Identifying codes which should be placed in pre-set categories;
- Create subcategories within the initial categories;
- Identify new categories which can bring together a number of codes;
- Identify codes that apply to sufficient numbers of respondents to be part of the findings even though they stand outside any category; and

- Identify codes that stand outside any category and should be discarded because they do not apply to sufficient numbers of respondents (p. 8).

The final stage was to undertake a thematic analysis based on data collected through interviews and field notes to understand and inform the research questions, as well as to understand the social and cultural processes that are influenced/mediated by power and the ways in which communities have responded to shifts in policy over time. To achieve this, I identified commonalities, examined differences in responses to questions.

## **Chapter 5: Journey, Process, Methods**

As will be explored in the sections to follow, while I entered the research process with what I believed was a clear understanding of the questions, objectives, and methodology of my research, what took place in the months in which the research took place was far different than I had anticipated or imagined. This is not to say that the way the process unfolded was unwanted or undesirable; on the contrary. In fact, as I reflected back on the time spent with the communities, I am grateful for the important ways this research departed from the normative, and perhaps expected, research process and journey. This section explains the methods undertaken to select research participants, provides an overview of the participants themselves, personal reflections and observations, and a reflexive analysis of the ways in which the communities helped to guide and steer this research and the process and methods into spaces that were responsive to their own needs, epistemologies, worldviews, and practices/protocols.

### **Initiating the Research Journey**

On December 13, 2018, the Board of Directors of the Kee Tas Kee Now Tribal Council (KTC) composed of the Chiefs and Councillors of the KTC First Nations, passed a motion granting me permission to undertake the research outlined in my proposal. Although I previously explored the ways in which my research is informed and guided by Indigenous Research Methodology and the 4 Rs of Indigenous research, here I explore the process, protocols, and practices I engaged in prior to commencing the research journey as a means of articulating for approaching and seeking out permission to conduct research in this way. Although the structure and format of this chapter follows the same of other chapters, Chapter 5 includes personal reflections interspersed throughout (in italics) to help deepen an understanding of the complexities of the research process, the reflexive practice I used to foreground both the research journey, and the process of community engagement and respecting and upholding the distinct approaches, protocols, and processes used by the Kee Tas Kee Now Tribal Council.

## *The Complexity of Research with Indigenous Peoples and Indigenist Researchers*

### *Confronting a Painful Legacy*

I am not sure how or when this precisely came to be, but I feel as though I have long been aware of, and cognizant not to participate in or be complicit with, extractive and harmful research practices when working with, alongside, and for Indigenous Peoples and communities. I was first introduced to the seminal work of Tuhiwai-Smith (1999, 2012, 2021) in the first year of my PhD in the required graduate course EDPS 601: Indigenous Research Methods. It was here where I was confronted with the painful legacy of unethical and harmful research practices by non-Indigenous researchers in the past, and the ways in which Imperialism, as a “discursive field of knowledge” (Tuhiwai-Smith, 2012, p, 60) and the correlated and intermingling of the “exploitation and subjugation of Indigenous Peoples” (p. 61), that has impacted not only Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing, but also the “reach of imperialism into ‘our heads’” (p. 63). Tuhiwai-Smith (2012) identified then, and the facts of which linger even today, that

research within late-modern and late-colonial conditions continues relentlessly and brings with it a new wave of exploration, discovery, exploitation and appropriation. Researchers enter communities armed with goodwill in their front pockets and patents in their back pockets, they bring medicine into villages and extract blood for genetic analysis. No matter how appalling their behaviours, how insensitive and offensive their personal actions may be, their acts and intentions are always justified as being for the ‘good of mankind’” (pp. 65–66).

Indeed, as Kovach (2009) points out, incidences of extractive and disrespectful research practices with Indigenous Peoples and communities are “not hard to find” (p. 141) and cannot be situated purely as a “historical phenomenon” (p. 142) as they extend even today. And while there are various standpoints that try to explain why, Kovach suggests that, through a decolonizing lens, unethical practices continue in the present context because research is “an extension of the Indigenous-settler colonial project” (p. 142) with much of it having to do with “divergent beliefs around ownership of knowledge stemming from collectivist and individualistic orientations that hold deep philosophical assumptions about how a society should work” (p. 142).

It's important to note that while Tuhiwai-Smith and Kovach (among others) articulate the protracted history of unethical research on Indigenous Peoples, there is also a concurrent history of Indigenous resistance within the sphere of Indigenous research as well as a resurgence in "Indigenous Peoples' participation in knowledge production and the development of research guidelines" (Goodman et al., 2018, p. 2).

### ***Indigenous Resurgence and Survivance Through Indigenous Research Protocols***

An early example of this work can be seen with the release of the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP). As Kovach (2009) explains, the RCAP is the "most substantive study to date of conditions in Aboriginal communities" and in order to gather the information necessary to fulfill the commission's mandate, the RCAP invited "researchers from across Canada to submit proposals to the commission" (Kovach, 2009, p. 144). However, and in light of the history of past unethical research conducted on Indigenous Peoples, the RCAP developed a set of guidelines to ensure

that, in all research sponsored by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, appropriate respect is given to the cultures, languages, knowledge and values of Aboriginal peoples, and to the standards used by Aboriginal peoples to legitimate knowledge. These guidelines represent the standard of "best practice" adopted by the Commission. (Kovach, 2009, p. 294)

Since then, a number of other guidelines have been developed such as they Noojmowin Teg Health Centre's *Guidelines for Ethical Research* (2003), Assembly of First Nations *Ethics in First Nations Research* (2009), the Canadian Institutes of Health Research's *Guidelines for Health Research Involving Aboriginal peoples* (2013), the Panel on Research Ethics *Chapter 9, Tri-Council Policy Statement on Research Involving First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples of Canada* (2018), and the First Nations Information Governance Centre's *Principles of Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession* (2021). Each of these, in their own way, articulates the protocols and principles Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers are to follow when conducting research within and alongside Indigenous Peoples and communities, and that "work to strengthen the overall ethical foundation of a research project" (Kovach, 2010, p. 143). These guidelines articulate the vision for a present and future status of Indigenous research that heals the "widespread distrust of research and outside researchers in many First Nations communities"

(Assembly of First Nations, 2009, p. 4), improves the “bad reputation” (Kovach, 2010, p. 147) of western research, while increasing relevance of research to meet the community’s needs (Goodman et al., 2018, p. 5) and reducing the number of inappropriate and impractical research projects that lead to a feeling of “being researched to death” (Goodman et al., 2018, p. 5).

### ***Mapping and Navigating the Indigenist Research Terrain***

While these guidelines apply to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers, Indigenous researchers hold additional responsibilities that include respecting and upholding protocols, but also to ensuring that the “process — that is, methodology and method — [that are] far more important than the outcome” are well defined and articulated (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012, p. 218). As Tuhiwai Smith argues, “processes are expected to be respectful, to enable people, to heal and to educate. They are expected to lead one small step further towards self-determination” (p. 218–219). For Indigenous researchers, Wilson et al. (2019) describes additional responsibilities regarding an Indigenist research approach which is a “philosophical approach to research that centres Indigenous ontology, epistemology, and axiology ...[or] Ways of Knowing, Ways of Being, and Ways of Doing” (Martin & Miraboopa, 2003, in Wilson, 2019, p. 7). Wilson adds that Indigenist research is “about who we are, how we know and engage with Knowledge, what we do as researchers, and the ways we enact relational accountability” (p. 7), all of which requires a “particular way of behaving in the world” (p. 7). Key to Indigenist research is the understanding that Indigenous knowledge is relational in that “it can’t be “discovered” or “owned, but instead reveals itself, is experienced, is shared” (Adams et al., 2015, in Wilson, 2019, p. 9) and that an Indigenist researcher brings “one’s whole being into the process of engaging and communicating with the human and more-than-human entities that make us who we are” (p. 9). Steinhauer (2002) elaborates by stating that “one fact seems most certain, and that is that Indigenous researchers must engage in their work with both passion and compassion, for their obligations are horrendous” (p. 79).

### ***Reflecting on Research as an Indigenous Person***

Having spent my entire professional career working with, for, and among Indigenous Peoples and communities, I have come to understand the importance of relationality, of being in ‘good relation’, respect, humility, and of centering and elevating Indigenous perspectives and

ways of knowing and being, as well as how my role — as both insider and outsider — is to hold space for work that does no more harm.

I have been invited into the community numerous times over the course of my professional and academic career and have participated respectfully in ceremonies to initiate important conversations and advance shared, and often community-driven, priorities in the areas of First Nations education and Indigenous health. I engage this way out of respect, knowing fully that ceremony to some, perhaps many, is the most important or central tenet to being in good relation with one another and that the requests we make while in ceremony are sacred commitments. As I've explored elsewhere in this research, I don't long for ceremony and don't actively seek it out as part of my own wellness and healing journey. That is not to say that I don't respect ceremony; rather, I simply recognize that I don't try to force myself into it as a means of trying to prove my authenticity as an Indigenous person. I also recognize that I may not be ready to approach ceremony as part of my healing journey yet. Having come to this place of deep personal acceptance and understanding, I recognize that in doing so, I am exercising my own sovereignty and rights to self-determination and autonomy as an Indigenous person.

Having worked alongside in a supportive capacity with the KTC First Nations as they established their Education Authority, I'd spent years listening to, being in circle and in prayer with, KTC First Nations members and leaders, all the while being attentive and responsive to their needs, ideas, and aspirations as it relates to education for, and by, KTC First Nations people. It was through this relationship with the community, its leadership, and others that questions about me personally, as well as my PhD journey emerged. Spending considerable time with the KTC First Nations between 2015-2017, supporting their needs in as many ways as possible, and conducting myself "in a way that reflects miyo" (Kovach, 2010, p. 147) that helped to establish trust that, even as an Indigenous person, was not automatically afforded to me. As Kovach (2010) explains, trust "needs to be earned internally" (p. 147). And so, when KTC community members, administrators, and leadership would ask me about my studies, I would share openly about what I was studying and why. In doing so, I was creating an ethical and relational space for them to enter into this part of my life.

And so, as I approached this chapter, I was reflecting on the research process itself; about the ways in which the Kee Tas Kee Now Tribal Council Education Authority welcomed me into their circle; about the ways in which they granted me permission to work and do research with

the Kee Tas Kee Now Tribal Council member Nations. At first, I believed that in writing this section I needed to demonstrate how I initiated the process by entering into ceremony with the KTC First Nations and about how I went about offering protocol and engaging with Elders. All of these are important and for some First Nations communities these aspects are central, if not the very first step, in starting the research process. But that was not the case for me, and it was not the process that KTC initiated. And in some respects, I believed that for my research to be viewed and considered authentically by others, I had to make this process fit into a normative framework. However, having reflected on this further, I understand now that trying to make my experiences and KTC processes and protocols “fit”, I was being disingenuous and disrespectful first and foremost to the KTC First Nations, but also potentially harmful to other communities who chose to initiate processes in ways that are defined by their own criteria as to what is acceptable, respectful, and meaningful. I recognize now that the KTCEAs processes and protocols are their own — and set in accordance with their local customs and practices, and in that respect are valid in their own way. As Archibald et al. (2019) state”

decolonizing research is not merely ethical research in terms of the requirements of the academy or institutions; more importantly it meets the criteria set by our own communities, who will often sanction the integrity and credibility of the story using their own measures. (p. 7)

### ***Respecting Local Indigenous Process and Protocols for Initiating Research***

And so, in 2017, I asked KTC if they would be interested in participating in my PhD research journey. I was subsequently invited to present to the KTCEA Board of Directors in December 2018, as this was the process they had established for considering requests, such as those made by external researchers, including myself. The meeting began in prayer, as is customary for the KTC First Nations, and then I was invited to listen and be present to the discussions around the table about the newly formed Education Authority. I was then asked to present to the Board and then I asked for permission to work with, and engage in research with, the KTCEA staff and administration in Early Childhood Development. The CEO then asked the Board of Directors for mutual consent and further explored that the research would be at no cost to the Nations involved, and that I would need access to staff at their respective schools. A motion was made as follows:

Motion #03-12-13-2018

Moved by Chief Thunder to formalize that KTCEA approves and welcomes the work of Tibetha Kemble in research of Early Childhood Development needs of the KTC Nations. Seconded by Chief Sharpe. All In Favor. CARRIED.

Ivan thanked Tibetha for her presentation and that you have access to our communities for your research. (KTCEA, 2019f)

I left the Board of Directors meeting shortly after with a commitment to follow up with the Superintendent of Education at a later date.

In late winter and early spring of 2019, I reached out to the Senior Administration for the KTCEA for guidance as to whom to contact at each of the KTCEA schools as a starting point for my research. They requested a copy of my research objectives and questions, which they reviewed and then emailed the KTC School Principals and included both the approved motion, as well as a request that they instruct their Kindergarten teachers to connect with me directly to support the research on ECD within KTC First Nations. The Senior Administrator's email was also sent on to the KTC Director of Health who then asked each of the Health Directors of the KTC First Nations to follow up by email with me so that I would be able to speak with them directly about my research and to support the needs of KTC First Nations children.

I then used this introductory email to circle back to both the KTCEA School principals and each of the Health Directors of the KTC First Nations. I worked with interested First Nations school principals, health directors, and was also connected with education specialists with the KTCEA itself. I used these channels to set up meetings with those who expressed interest and initiated the research journey on April 15, 2019.

### **The Research Journey Begins**

Almost immediately after the email was sent to Principals and Health Directors, I sent follow up emails to the KTCEA and KTC staff who were identified in the email distribution list. I indicated that I was following up on the email introduction and would be pleased to connect with them directly and to schedule an appointment to meet with them personally and to potentially conduct an interview.

I received responses immediately from a number of KTC and KTCEA staff and arranged the two interviews in April 2019 and four interviews throughout the month of May 2019.

However, the rest of the interviews that took place throughout the rest of June 2019 and emerged as a result of information sharing about the scope of my research by interviewees with other KTC and KTCEA staff who either (1) may be interested in participating, or (2) may have insights and information that would be useful to the study based on their role with the KTC or KTCEA. Over the course of April, May, June, and July 2019, I would go on to meet with a number of KTCEA and KTC professionals and spent a significant amount of time travelling to and from Red Earth Creek, Alberta, and visiting KTC First Nations and KTCEA personnel.

Having only a few connections to KTC and KTCEA prior to commencing my research, I recognized some impending challenges that could arise, as an outsider researcher, with respect to establishing connections with community personnel across such a vast territory, as well as the ways in which trust underscored my ability to connect with community members to conduct not only the initial interviews, but subsequent ones. I was cognizant of the fact that I, as an individual and outside interviewer/academic, would likely be unable to reach as far into the community as necessary given my lack of insider connections. In that respect, my ability to reach and connect with as many KTC and KTCEA personnel depended on the trust the community placed in me, and on the goodwill of KTC and KTCEA staff to connect me to the right people who may be able to inform my study.

I am humbled by the willingness and extent to which KTC and KTCEA staff and leadership went in order to support my study through either their participation in research interviews, talking circles, or by helping connect me to others within the community who may be able to support this research. In reflecting back on my time with and in the community, as well as my time working alongside them at the Government of Alberta, I am overwhelmed by their sense of collective responsibility towards their communities as a whole, but most significantly to the children of the KTC First Nation communities.

Having just undertaken the intense and extensive process of becoming a First Nation Education Authority, there was a heightened sense of possibility, responsibility, as well as uncertainty about the success of the Education Authority over both the short and long term. Given their experiences with colonial governments, the imposition of colonial education for more than a century, as well as a protracted history of broken promises and unfulfilled treaty obligations, it is understandable that uncertainty would cast a shadow. However, this was overpowered by their sense of hope and possibility and their intensity of focus towards a larger

goal — all of which was carried forward by an immensely talented team of professionals within each community and the KTCEA Administration. The intensity of focus and expertise coupled with their profound respect for each other and an overarching commitment to the success of the Education Authority for the greater good was the foundation upon which they moved forward together in a singular vision for a better future.

And it is this understanding that I carried with me as I approached the research journey then, and as I work towards completing the journey now. At the centre of their work together was not only their vision for the future of community-controlled First Nations education, but also the promise of future generations.

### **Research Expectations, Process, and Outcomes**

I entered into the research journey with a relatively static and naive understanding about how the journey, process, and outcomes would unfold. As my work with communities deepened, I noticed a number of changes happening simultaneously. In the first instance, I had to let go of the normative assumptions and expectations about the process and the researchers themselves. As Indigenous Research Methodology makes clear, and as Martin and Mirraboopa (2002) articulate,

Methods for data collection are demonstrations of Ways of Knowing, Being, and Doing. This entails following codes for communication and protocols for interacting that expects different behaviour in different settings with different participants. This will vary in each setting and must be respected as part of the research activity, not just as a means to acquire research outcomes. (p. 10)

In the second instance, I became aware of the expectations placed upon Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers about maintaining the ‘integrity’ of the research by not deviating too far from the original design. What took place throughout my research journey, as I understand it now, was precisely as it needed to be, and as a result, has strengthened the outcomes of the overall research project. In fact, and as will be explored below, in lessening my grip on the process, design, and implementation of the research journey, I was creating and holding space for the KTCEA and for community participants in ways that reflected their needs, aspirations, protocols, and interests.

### ***Research Objectives and Questions***

As explained in Chapter 1, my research examines how early childhood development theory and policy have responded over time to the needs of the Canadian government. My research further analyzes how these shifts capitalized on social inequalities that were state-created through centuries of forced assimilation, coercion, poor policy, and deliberate underfunding. Following from this, I examine the extent to which these theoretical and policy shifts contribute to the maintenance of social order between Indigenous Peoples and the state, and in turn negatively impact Indigenous ECD and the ability of Indigenous Peoples to be self-determining and autonomous.

My research questions are:

1. In what ways have shifts in government policy positively or negatively impacted Indigenous ECD within the context of Indigenous self-determination and autonomy and the maintenance of social order?
2. In what ways have Indigenous communities actively or passively resisted these shifts?
3. How can Indigenous resistance within the context of Indigenous ECD inform program and policy development in the future?

In order to answer these questions, and to reach the objectives of this research, I set about identifying possible research participants for this study. In the section to immediately follow, an overview of the research participant identification process will be explored, an overview of each participant will be provided, and an identification of the research sites for this study is provided.

### ***Research Participant Identification***

In designing this research study, I assumed that the type of participants for this study would be limited to key personnel within early childhood education, as well as those who had past experiences with early childhood in each of the research sites (such as Elders, parents, etc.). However, once the KTCEA and the KTC First Nations had been established as the research participants, I was less prescriptive about who the research participants should be. I inquired with the Education Authority about who *they believed* would be valuable sources of information for this study and in reflecting back on this process now, it became clear that the KTCEA and KTC First Nations were not only keen to support my work but that they too wanted to develop a deeper understanding of early childhood within their respective communities so that they could

also bring about positive change as part of their broader work in establishing the KTC Education Authority. The research participants we identified were those who would be able to speak to the impacts and outcomes of early childhood education across the spectrum of child development and through the lens of education as part of the continuum of lifelong education. In that respect, and although I assumed I would only be working with key personnel within early childhood, the research participants in my study spanned both health and education sectors and I interviewed key personnel including Health Directors, principals, K-6 teachers, Head Start staff, and education specialists.

And so, while I initially went about planning for this research as part of my own educational journey that would answer the research questions in ways that *I believed* would benefit the communities who participated, I realize now that KTC was guiding me into spaces and conversations that would not only help my research study, but that would help them understand the aspects of early childhood that *they believed* were important to them. In a few instances, and against the backdrop of the recent establishment of the KTCEA, a few research participants expressed their excitement about the outcomes of my research and in one instance, a research participant expressed that they believed this work would serve as the “silver bullet” to a number of pressing issues within early childhood, and the latent impacts of ECD programming on the educational outcomes of KTCEA students. It also became clear that although the scope, purpose, and intended outcomes of my research were clear (and fairly narrow); they perhaps intuitively sensed that my research would assist them in learning more about the complexities of early childhood education design, scope, and implementation across KTC First Nations, as well as the impacts of the system-level fragmentation of early childhood between the departments of Health and Education.

### ***Research Participants and Locations***

There were no set number of participants for this research and as I’d indicated to the KTC First Nations and the KTCEA, I was interested in meeting and interviewing as many individuals as possible who would be able to provide meaningful insights into early childhood development within their respective communities. Over the course of 6 months, from April to September 2019, I interviewed 11 people for this study. All of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, at an agreed upon location within their respective communities, and at times that were

convenient for interview participants. The interviews themselves took place during the school or workday in three school settings, one Health Centre, and the remainder took place at the KTCEA Head Office in Red Earth Creek. Most of the interviews were one hour in length, and some cases lasted for 1.5 to 2 hours depending on availability.

For the interviews that took place in the early spring months of 2019, I planned for multiple interviews on multiple and consecutive days given that my home location was Edmonton, Alberta, and the interview sites were located in KTC First Nation communities in Northern Alberta or at the KTCEA Head Office located in Red Earth Creek, Alberta. In a few instances, there were times when I was unable to schedule interviews consecutively and I would travel to and from Red Earth Creek in the same day; however, for the most part, interviews took place either on the same day at different locations and different times, or on multiple consecutive days.

In one instance, I worked alongside a specialist employed by the KTCEA on planning a Talking Circle Gathering of Early Childhood Educators in mid-June 2019; however, and although there was significant and expressed interest in this event, only four early childhood educators were able to participate. This was due, in large part, to the wildfires in Alberta throughout this period and that were most acute within the High Level region of Alberta as well as the recurrence of evacuation orders for residents in Northern Alberta. Despite the number of active wildfires in Northern Alberta at the time, the Talking Circle proceeded with the four research participants on June 18, 2019, and the session lasted for 2 hours. The purpose of hosting a Talking Circle as opposed to one-on-one interviews with early childhood educators was two-fold. In the first instance, there was some expressed concern that these research participants may feel most comfortable being interviewed as a group and in a setting where they could have the opportunity to build off each other in their responses. In the second instance, it was also noted that Early Childhood educators may not have the time on any given day to meet with me on a one-to-one basis. The Talking Circle session was scheduled on a day when these research participants were already participating in professional development and were scheduled to be away from their respective early childhood environments.

Having led and participated in Talking Circles in the past (Kemble, 2019), I was familiar with the sense of safety and security that they brought to informants who may not have experienced being interviewed in the past, as well as the ways in which Talking Circles evoke

deeper and more reflexive responses from participants. I was comfortable leading participants through a series of questions about their roles and experiences in early childhood within their respective communities. For the Talking Circle sessions, I came prepared with small baskets containing food and fidget-toys that would be placed in the centre of table for participants as a gesture of my gratitude for their participation, and with the understanding that hosting in this way created and fostered a casual and friendly environment.

### ***Research Participant Profiles***

As indicated in the Research Participant Consent forms, all participant's identities will be anonymized, and pseudonyms will be created using the first letter of their first names to maintain confidentiality. This section provides an overview and a profile of the participants who participated in the research process either through one-to-one interviews or via a Talking Circle.

#### ***Participant Profile 1: "E" — KTCEA Specialist***

"E" was the first research participant for this study. We arranged to meet in the morning in mid-April 2019 at the KTCEA Home Office located in Red Earth Creek, Alberta. As a specialist, "E" has spent the bulk of their career working with young Indigenous children in Canada, either on-reserve in the province of Alberta, or in remote Northern Inuit communities. "E" has also spent time learning about and from the Maori people of New Zealand and brings forward a rich and complex understanding of the role and power of the immersion of young children into broad, intentional, and intensive community, language, and cultural programming. The focus of "E's" work is with young children in K5 through to Grade 3; however, on occasion they have been invited to work with children who attend Head Start on-reserve. "E" has been employed with the KTCEA since its inception.

#### ***Participant Profile 2: "L" — Health Director***

I arranged to meet with "L" in the afternoon in mid-April at the Health Centre located on-reserve. At the time of our meeting and interview, "L" had just recently assumed the role of Director. "L" is a member of the local community and had been working for their respective First Nation for a number of years prior to assuming the new role. Given their role, "L" had a broad understanding of early childhood programming within the community, as well as an understanding of the national requirements of the Aboriginal Head Start On Reserve program

which is under the purview of the health portfolio. However, given the short period of time in which they had been Director of Health at the time of our interview, the depth of understanding about early childhood programming in the community was somewhat limited. However, they were able to provide meaningful insights into the role of funding and policy limitations on the outcomes of children who participated in the programs.

***Participant Profile 3: “E2” — Principal***

The third participant, “E2” and I met the first week of May 2019 at the community-based school located on-reserve where they were the Principal. “E2” is an experienced First Nations educator with more than 30 years of experience working as a teacher and administrator in both provincial education systems and in band-operated schools. “E2” has worked with First Nations students as a teacher in Grades 2 through 11 and “E2” has spent the majority of their career as an educator in schools in the western Canadian provinces. “E2” also has experience working with a large and well-established Cree First Nation school board in eastern Canada and brings this experience with them to the newly established KTC Education Authority. “E2” joined the KTCEA shortly after it was formed in 2019 and expressed a great deal of interest and enthusiasm as a newly hired principal under the new Education Authority.

***Participant Profile 4: “M” — K-12 Teacher***

The fourth research participant and I met shortly after my meeting with “E2” on the same day in May 2019 and in the same school; however, this interview took place spontaneously and as a result of the planning and information sharing on the part of “E2” not only about my visit, but also about the research itself. I was introduced to “M” by “E2” and we met in a quiet resource room located within the school itself. “M” has been with the KTCEA since it formed and was employed by another KTC First Nation school before moving to another school in 2019. “M” is also a highly experienced educator with more than 30 years of teaching experience in Grades 1 and 2. “M” has spent most of their career working with First Nations children either in the provincial education system, or in band-operated schools.

***Participant Profile 5: “M2” — K-12 Teacher***

The fifth research participant and I met shortly after my meeting with “M” on the same day and in the same school and similar to the interview with “M”, this interview took place spontaneously and as a result of the planning and information sharing on the part of “E2” not

only about my visit, but also about the research itself. I was introduced to “M2” by “E2” and “M” and we met in the school library room located within the school itself. “M2” has been with the KTCEA since it formed and is an experienced First Nations educator and has taught First Nations children in Grades 3, 5, and 6 in both provincial and band operated schools in Alberta and other prairie provinces. “M2” has been with the current school for less than 10 years and with the KTCEA since its inception.

***Participant Profile 6: “L2” — K–12 Teacher***

The 6th participant and I met in May 2019 and arranged to meet in the morning at the school and in their office located in the community. At the request of “L2”, the interview itself was not recorded; however, they did provide consent for me to take notes of the conversation. “L2” is a First Nations educator and originally from another western prairie province. “L2” has primarily worked for First Nations schools on-reserve as a teacher to students in grades 3, 5 and 8, as well as with young children in Kindergarten. “L2” has been with the community school for a short period of time; however, “L2” brings with them a range of experiences from both the provincial and band-operated school systems.

***Participant Profile 7: “D” — Principal***

The seventh participant and I also met in May 2019 and arranged to meet in the morning at the school at which they were employed as the Principal. “D” also requested that the interview not be recorded, but did consent and permit me to take notes of the conversation. “D” is an experienced First Nations educator and a new Principal who has worked with First Nation band-operated schools for the majority of their careers. “D” is from a First Nation in central Alberta and was new to the KTCEA and the school when we met.

***Group Interview — Talking Circle — Participants***

There were 4 participants in the Talking Circle which took place in mid June 2019. The Talking Circle itself took place in the KTCEA Home Office and participants travelled to the meeting from their respective communities to attend. As noted previously, although a larger number of attendees were planned, the wildfires in Northern Alberta significantly impacted the ability of attendees to travel. On the day we met, we were all aware of the participants’ likelihood that they may have to leave the session at any given time due to evacuation orders.

Each of the participants are differentiated as follows: (1) each have been assigned “A” as a pseudonym and have been assigned a number from 1 to 4 to delineate between attendees.

***Participant 8: “A1” — Early Childhood Services Staff***

Participant “A1” joined the KTCEA shortly after it was established and had been in their current role for approximately 6 months prior to the Talking Circle session. Prior to joining the Education Authority, “A1” had completed some work as a researcher with the University of Alberta and conducting community-based research with Indigenous communities surrounding the City of Edmonton. In their role with the Education Authority, “A1” brings experience in working collaboratively with and alongside First Nations communities and working with First Nations children and their families. “A1” supported and assisted in organizing the Talking Circle and in bringing participants together and sharing background information about the research project and the intent/objectives of the Talking Circles themselves.

***Participant 9: “A2” — Health Department Staff***

Similar to “A1”, “A2” is new to the Education Authority and to their role in the area of Jordan’s Principle. However, “A2” is an experienced First Nations educator with significant experience working with young children. “A2” has spent the majority of their career working with very young children in band-operated daycares, Kindergarten classrooms, and has also worked with children with special needs, and children with developmental needs within the K–12 environment.

***Participant 10: “A3” — Health Department Staff***

Participant 10 is an experienced health care worker within their local community and has been employed by the Health Department for approximately 10 years as a Maternal Child Health Worker. Additionally, “A3” has worked alongside children in early childhood settings in band-operated childcare centres, as well as with the elderly. Since Health is outside the purview of the newly established Education Authority, “A3” was aware of the work underway to strengthen the system of education for KTC First Nations communities. As a parent who lives in the community and who has raised children who attended band-operated daycare and early childhood programming, “A3” also brought forward personal experiences and reflections on early childhood within First Nations communities.

### ***Participant 11: “A4” — Health Department Staff***

Participant 11 identified themselves as the Head Start Coordinator for one of the KTC First Nations. “A4” has been in their current position for three years and works directly with 3–4 year old children from the local KTC First Nations community. Prior to this, “A4” worked with a neighbouring provincial school division for the majority of their professional career as well as a variety of service-sector roles that supported children in the K–12 education system in the provincial and band-operated contexts.

### ***Other Community Meetings, Opportunities, and Observations***

In addition to the formal interviews and Talking Circles, I was also invited to attend one PD Session for Early Literacy and one meeting with Health Directors in May 2019. These will be explored briefly to help deepen an understanding of the role of the community in guiding and supporting this research and the hospitality of the KTC First Nation communities.

### ***Professional Development Session***

Shortly after concluding my interview with “E2”, they indicated that I might be able to connect with more early childhood educators at the PD Session being held the next day at the Clarence Jaycox school, located within the Loon River First Nation community. “E2” invited me to attend the all-day session, and after concluding my interview with “D”, I drove to the school and attended the session where again “E2” graciously introduced me to early childhood educators and literacy/numeracy teachers/specialists from other KTC First Nation communities. Although I was apprehensive about attending a session out of fear that I would be intruding, I recognized the importance of honouring “E2’s” invitation and the gift that was being extended to me. At the session, I introduced myself to a number of attendees, connected with a few early childhood educators and inquired if they would be interested in participating in a Talking Circle or a one-on-one interview. Three early childhood educators indicated some level of interest, and I collected their contact information and sent follow up emails to connect at a later date. However, I was unsuccessful in connecting with any of them for the purpose of this research.

Personal reflection.

*Over the course of my professional career working with Indigenous Peoples and communities, and my personal life as an Indigenous person, I learned that when an*

*Indigenous person or community extends an invitation, or offers you a gift, you accept it. If the offer is to attend a ceremony, my understanding is that you agree to attend, inquire about offerings and gifts prior to attending, and then show up at the location well in advance so that one can sit in conversation and in relationship with either the host or other attendees. If the invitation is to attend a community event, the same process holds true: inquire, honour, attend, and act in good relation, as a good relative, when you arrive. In that sense, when “E2” extended the offer and invitation to attend a PD Session being hosted for the community, I was apprehensive at first because I feared being considered an intrusive researcher; however, I understand now that “E2” was offering me a gift and opportunity to help deepen my research, connection to community, and trust amongst current and future participants. As I now know, “E2” was supporting not only me as a researcher, but the trust I could potentially build by being present in the community. The humility and hospitality that “E2” and so many others showed me while I was with them cannot be understated and is again a testament to their capacity to work collectively and collaboratively to support each other and the community as a whole.*

### ***Meeting with Health Directors***

At about the midpoint of my 6 months with the KTC First Nation communities, the number of research participants and connections were slowing down. I sent an email to a Coordinator at the KTC Education Authority and explained what was happening, whom I was still hoping to connect with for the purpose of the research and they indicated that they would connect with the Health Directors about a possible path forward. In mid-May 2019, I was invited to attend a meeting with the KTC First Nations Health Directors at the KTCEA Home Office in Red Earth Creek, Alberta. Our conversation focused on my research topic and questions, and I indicated the possibility of connecting with either Head Start Directors, Head Start workers, or others in the field of early childhood education within their respective portfolios. The Health Directors indicated that they would communicate with key personnel about my research and the notion of bringing Early Childhood Educators, such as Head Start and other ECD staff, together into a Talking Circle may be the best approach.

The Directors worked with the Coordinator, then went about communicating with possible attendees, gathering attendee information, organizing local community catering to

support the Talking Circle event (as is customary when coming into a circle this way), and communicating with me about the specifics of the day.

#### Personal Reflection.

*Without the hospitality and generosity of KTCEA and KTC First Nations staff, connecting with early childhood educators in the Talking Circle would not have been possible. Further, their generosity in hosting the session at the KTCEA Home Office, catering food for myself and participants to enjoy must be honoured and appreciated here. Without their kind and careful attention to my requests to locate additional research participants, I doubt I would have been able to meet with additional participants from KTC First Nation communities to gather rich and meaningful insights about their respective histories working with young First Nations children, nor about their journeys as early childhood educators. I remain immensely grateful to the Coordinator, the Health Directors, and to the Talking Circle participants for their overwhelming generosity, humility, and willingness to support me and this research.*

#### ***Lunchtime Conversations***

As noted previously, I initially planned to meet with “E2” at the local community school; however, what I understand now is that “E2” generously shared information about my research with their staff and inquired with them, prior to our meeting, about their interest and willingness to participate and speak with me as a research participant. Without prompting, “E2” had organized a partial day of activities and meetings with their staff to support this research project. Given the fact that they anticipated these interviews would take place throughout the entire day, “E2” also arranged for me to stay for lunch. After my meeting with “M2”, I was invited into the school kitchen where I would spend the lunch hour with kitchen staff and eat the meal being prepared for students at the school.

#### Personal Reflection.

*I spent that hour listening to kitchen staff and the cook talk about their experiences as staff at the local school, about the enjoyment they took in planning and preparing meals for students, and about the respect they held for school staff. I choose to talk about this experience as part of the research journey because no single event, meeting, interview, or*

*encounter with members of the community is too great or too small to not mention. Being with the community in this way reminded me of the 4 R's of Indigenous research and about the need for Responsibility, Respect, and Reciprocity. The generosity that the entire school staff extended to me was a guide and a reminder of the importance of responsibility for the work going forward, respect for all persons involved in any aspect of the research process and journey, and the importance of carrying forward their goodwill in all my relations.*

### ***Research Participants: Observations and Reflections***

On a few occasions, research participants were somewhat cautious about speaking with me about the nature and scope of their work, and in some cases, were fearful about not only how their voice would be heard and represented in my work, but also about perceived repercussions that might result from open and candid sharing of information with me. Participant's apprehension is both noted and respected and I did what I could, as an outsider, to assure them that their identities would remain confidential — including any/all details that would single them out and or possibly create the conditions where someone would read this work and be able to readily identify them. That being said, I am left with a lingering sense that those who were more cautious in their participation were telling me, without actually telling me, about the multiple social and community forces and pressures at play with regards to their respective roles within the community, and as members of the community itself.

It is also worth noting that I entered into this research at a critical and substantive time of change within and across the KTC First Nations communities themselves. Establishing a large First Nations Education Authority is no small undertaking as it requires the bringing together of once disparate single school-houses, into a single, massive, and cohesive unit that can deliver first, second, and third level educational services to thousands of First Nations students. The complexities that arise from this are multifaceted and, in some cases, can arouse reactions in others to the changing of the social order of things. Indeed, what had been in place within the community for 40, 50, or even 60 years, was now manifesting itself as a real and completely new and different possibility. However, the KTC First Nations understand, and are responsive to, the ways in which their communities respond to change and are intentional about bringing every community forward with them in the journey to becoming an Education Authority. In doing so,

they were proactively working to alleviate anxiety, doubt, and to actively resist the dominant colonial approaches to change initiatives that subdue, placate, and suppress Indigenous voice and vision. However, an undertone of apprehension about the Education Authority, its intentions and related impacts, was present in a few of the participants for this study.

Another observation is about the tension that surrounded and stood between education and health within each community. As noted elsewhere, early childhood education within First Nations communities falls under the federal umbrella of health as ECD has been defined as a social determinant of health for the broader Canadian public, and for First Nations peoples. However, early childhood is also considered one aspect on the continuum of lifelong education for Indigenous Peoples and engaging in educational research about an aspect of the communities' health-related portfolio aroused some curiosity about what the KTCEA was planning to do, and what financial impacts may arise for the communities themselves in the event the KTCEA assumed control over early childhood education.

### ***Researcher and Community Expectations***

I remain humbled by the faith and belief the community and research participants placed in me in this regard; however, I was also intimidated by the expectations placed on this research in terms of its capacity to help “solve” and address a number of issues within early childhood education programming within their communities. Nonetheless I am cognizant of the fact that these are not bad expectations for the community to have of me, and of researchers to follow. Indeed, and as explored previously, this history of extractive research processes on Indigenous Peoples that serve outside non-Indigenous research interests has been well-chronicled, and the resurgence of Indigenous research methodologies, as well as guiding frameworks and research principles that have emerged in response to this help to guide and shape Indigenous research going forward into spaces where research projects are not determined in isolation from the groups or individuals being studied, but are co-designed in such a way as to serve the needs of the communities themselves.

I worried that in speaking about the ways in which this research shape-shifted over time would arouse uncertainty and doubt about the strength of my research design; however, I believe that the outcomes, processes, and methods that emerged organically, and in relation to the communities themselves, is one of the greatest strengths and most positive outcomes that could

have been achieved. Here I speak to two important considerations: the first of which is that although in Chapter 4 I explored and articulated the importance of honouring the values and principles of Indigenous Research Methodologies (IRM), in reality the research itself had moved beyond the symbolism that I described, to a more meaningful implementation of IRM throughout the course of this research. In many ways, while I espoused the need to honour IRM, the process the KTC First Nations and I engaged in carried forward the responsibility that I, as an Indigenous researcher, carried with me as I entered into this work that could not be separated from either IRM or the method. In the second instance, I recognize the ways in which the organic unfolding that took place over time upheld and respected their rights to self-determination and autonomy as KTC First Nations, as I did not interfere in the process of identifying the research participants they believed would best inform my work, and then subsequently some of their questions about early childhood education. And in many ways, after analyzing the transcripts and notes, I understand how the research participants not only provided rich insights into the research questions for this study, but to a large extent they provided deeply meaningful insights into the much broader impacts of underfunding for programs and services on-reserve, the complex and multifaceted ways in which the communities adapted in order to meet the needs of children, and lastly held space for research participants to speak openly about the lasting impacts of colonial deprivation, control and oppression not only on the communities as a whole, but on parents and children, and on the education system and educational outcomes of First Nations children on-reserve.

### ***Research Process/Method***

Initially approaching the design for this study, I believed that this research would be best suited to an instrumental collective case study, using semi-structured interviews, due to the emphasis on understanding a particular situation and where each case and each respondent would enhance and provide context-specific understandings vis-a-vis the research questions. And while I had prepared an interview guide with interview questions, I entered into the interviews with the understanding that they would be more conversational and relational than prescriptive and distanced. This adapted approach grew from an awareness, or a sense, that a rigid prescriptive set of questions and answers would not allow, or create the safe space, for participants to freely

explore their experiences or perspectives, nor would it align with their respective areas of expertise.

As Kovach (2009) explains, a conversational approach does not place “external parameters on the research participant’s narrative” (p. 124) and allows participants “greater control over what they wish to share” (p. 124). The original set of questions was intended to serve my research interests; however, after having worked collaboratively to identify and interview key informants within each community, it was clear that a conversational approach would better serve their needs and would inform a broader understanding of the complexities within early childhood in KTC First Nations communities and the KTCEA.

It is important to note that in addition to the variation in methods explored above (i.e. change in research participants, change in data collection techniques), I also used multiple forms of knowledge-gathering techniques. In addition to semi-structured and open-ended interviews, towards the end of my research journey, and following the advice of one Director of Health, I worked alongside KTCEA personnel to bring together key research participants who worked in early childhood education into a Talking Circle. As Kovach (2009) further states, “research-sharing circles have recently surfaced as a method of gathering group knowledge ...[are] based on cultural traditions and have been adapted to contemporary settings in research” (p. 124). The role of the Talking Circle as a knowledge-gathering method within this research was deemed the most appropriate way to first build trust and a sense of safety amongst participants, and secondarily to help evoke deeper and more personal reflections from ECD personnel within the community.

Through an Indigenist paradigm, these methods flow “an Indigenous belief system that has at its core a relational understanding and accountability to the world” (Steinhauer, 2001; Wilson, 2001, in Kovach, 2010, p. 42). And in situating it this way, I am cognizant of the “interplay (relationship) between the method and paradigm and the extent to which method, itself, is congruent with Indigenous worldviews” (Kovach, 2010, p. 40). Kovach (2010) explains that a paradigm “includes a philosophical belief system or worldview and how that belief system or worldview influences a particular set of methods” (p. 41). Through that lens, I entered into the data collection phase of this research with the view and understanding of the centrality of Indigenous ways of knowing and being as guides for this work, as did including a conversational approach to be ‘in relation’ to each other and the use of storytelling as a means of answering

questions. In doing so, these methods are more “elastic, [which] gives research participants an opportunity to share their story on a specific topic without the periodic disruptions involved in adhering to a structured approach” (Kovach, 2009, p. 124).

### **Conversation Method in Indigenous Research**

The next section of this chapter explores, examines, and analyzes the research participants' responses to the broad research questions, as well as the narratives and stories they shared with me as part of this process. This section also contextualizes the use of Storywork and Conversation Method, as described by Kovach (2009, 2010) and Archibald et al. (2019), as they guided not only the method, but also the ways in which their knowledge was shared and interpreted.

### ***Storytelling and Storywork Method***

Kovach (2009) begins by situating Story as Methodology as a familiar and “primary means of passing knowledge within tribal traditions, for it suits the fluidity and interpretive nature of ancestral ways of knowing” (p. 94). Even further, stories are key to the transmission of traditional knowledge and are considered “vessels for passing along teachings, medicines, and practices that can assist members of the collective” (p. 95). As such, stories and storywork and the “oral rendition of the personal narrative ...is a portal for holistic epistemology. It is the most effective method for capturing this form of knowing in research” (p. 96). Alongside the cultural and traditional significance of storytelling and storywork comes the personal responsibility of the researcher as they “assume a responsibility that the story shared will be treated with the respect it deserves and acknowledgment of the relationship from which it emerges” (p. 97).

This method requires a relationship-based approach to the research itself which concurrently carries forward the “centrality of relationships” (p. 98), as well as the responsibilities of the researcher that are evoked “through research in the form of protocols and ethical considerations” (p. 98). And in order for the story to surface, there must be a foundation of trust between the researcher and the research participant and one way to (1) strengthen the foundation of trust already established, or (2) establish trust in the event there is no pre-existing relationship, is to share one’s own story, starting with one’s self-location (p. 98) which provides an “opportunity for the research participants to situate and assess the researcher’s motivations for

the research, thus beginning the relationship that is elemental to story-based methodology” (p. 98). This necessary and elemental process allows researchers to create space for the research participant to “feel that the researcher is willing to listen to the story” (p. 98).

### *The Conversation Method*

Similar to storytelling and storywork as supportive of and in alignment with an Indigenous paradigm and worldview, for Kovach (2010) the conversation method also “honours orality as a means of transmitting knowledge and uphold the relational which is necessary to maintain the collectivist tradition” (p. 42). Through the conversation method, stories are a “culturally organic means to gather knowledge within research” (p. 42), and although the conversational method can now also be found in western qualitative research, there are several distinct features:

1. It is linked to a particular tribal epistemology (or knowledge) and is situated within an Indigenous paradigm;
2. It is relational;
3. It is purposeful (most often involving a decolonizing aim);
4. It involves particular protocol as determined by the epistemology and/or place;
5. It involves an informality and flexibility;
6. It is collaborative and dialogic; and
7. It is reflexive. (Kovach, 2010, p. 43)

Although Kovach does not define the methodology for the conversation method, Kovach does provide two research studies as examples to help inform and guide Indigenous researchers with methodological considerations. In Project One, Kovach identifies the methodology for this study as,

A mixed qualitative approach that utilized an Indigenous methodology based upon Plains Cree epistemology for gathering knowledge and interpretation, and a non-Indigenous approach of thematic analysis for organizing data. It incorporated a decolonizing theoretical lens.... The conversational method employed is best described as a dialogic approach to gathering knowledge that is built upon an Indigenous relational tradition. It utilized open-ended, semi-structured interview questions to prompt conversation where participant and researchers co-create knowledge. It was the symbiotic relationship

between the Indigenous epistemology, method, and interpretation that qualifies it as an Indigenous methodology. (Kovach, 2009, in Kovach, 2010, p. 44)

For Project Two, the methodology is,

based on a mixed qualitative method approach including Indigenous methodology, born of place, based on Plains Cree Worldview for gathering and interpreting data, and grounded theory for data organization.... The project incorporated a bi-cultural theoretical perspective for interpreting and making meaning of the participants' stories. This included a decolonizing theoretical lens to analyze the power dynamic inherent in the research curiosity. In conjunction, an Indigenous relational theoretical approach was used to offer a relational analysis given that the research curiosity has a focus on western culture's relational intersection with Indigeneity. (Kovach, 2010, p. 45)

The similarities identified between the two projects are that both projects used the conversational method as it “served the belief about knowledge as a “self-in-relation” (Graveline, 2000, p. 361, in Kovach, 2009, p. 45) and that the dialogue between researcher and participant enabled the co-creation of knowledge, as opposed to the singular interpretation of an interaction, and deepened the responsibility of both participant and researcher. By engaging in relational dialogue this way, research participants are able to gain deeper insights into the researcher themselves which helps to build trust and reciprocity, and the flexibility of the approach allows participants to “tell their story on their own terms” (Thomas, 2005, in Kovach, 2009, p. 45).

For each of the interviews and for the Talking Circle, I shifted the focus of our engagement on ensuring that participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences and perspectives in a less formal and structured way. After reviewing the transcripts and primary and follow up questions for the interviews, it became clear that our interactions were far more conversational, with many participants sharing their stories as educators, leaders, parents, and grandparents, than they were the ‘classic’ semi-structured interviews. Given this shift, the next chapter examines and explores the findings from the interviews and the Talking Circle in two ways. In the first instance, and since a few of the sub-questions attempted to glean insights from participants to the overarching research question and objectives, I have provided an overview of the insights that were gathered through analyzing the interview transcripts. In the second instance, I have completed a sub-thematic analysis of the other parts of the interview transcripts

as, upon further reflection, it became clear that participants were speaking to the impacts not of early childhood education policy itself, but to the absence of it. There were a number of key insights and findings from the sub-thematic analysis that, while on the surface do not appear to answer or respond to the primary research question, did in fact speak to the ways in which government policy positively or negatively impacted Indigenous ECD within the context of Indigenous self-determination and autonomy and the maintenance of social order, as well as the ways in which they have actively or passively resisted these shifts.

## Chapter 6: Findings, Discussion, and Analysis

### Interview and Talking Circle Findings

This chapter explores the findings from the research interviews and the Talking Circle through a thematic analysis of the transcripts, and in one instance an analysis based on reports and not interviews themselves. The purpose of this exploration, discussion, and analysis is to give voice to the themes identified in the transcripts that are pertinent to both early childhood education and the KTC Education Authority. It was also important that the stories, experiences, and perspectives of research participants that they shared with me be elevated and prioritized. As opposed to semi-structured interviews, research participants and I engaged in a less formal, conversational interview, and the depth and breadth of their responses tended to be rich with contextual and historical information, as well as deep personal insights and reflections that, in a formal and normative analytic framework, would have been excluded.

### Themes

Six themes emerged from participants' responses and through the analysis of transcripts that warrant discussion and further exploration given the impacts and importance to the future of early childhood education within the KTC First Nations communities.

1. the role of and positive impacts of early childhood education programs such as the Aboriginal Head Start On Reserve program
2. the desire to implement and make better use child-readiness assessments
3. the prevalence of First Nations children identified as having special needs or disabilities
4. the role of parental engagement
5. the ongoing impacts of underfunding, maladaptive policy frameworks, and general inequities
6. resistance to the colonial project.

In what follows, I briefly explore the themes that emerged from the interviews and Talking Circles and provide a commentary about their connection to the overarching research purpose, objectives, and questions.

## *The Role and Impact of Early Childhood Education and the Aboriginal Head Start Program*

The vast majority of KTC First Nations have some form of early childhood education services, the most prominent being the Aboriginal Head Start On Reserve Program. Since most of the respondents were part of the larger K–12 education system through the KTCEA, and formerly as band-operated schools, they were asked to think about and consider the impacts of early childhood programming on student outcomes at later grades. “Head Start”, as it is referred to by many of the respondents, was understood as being a part of the suite of health-related programs offered to children within the KTC First Nations communities; however, and again referring back to the delineation of health and education programs, many indicated that they “did not know what happened in Head Start.” However, all but one respondent had observations about the positive impacts of early childhood on readiness in later grades, self-regulation, and social skills.

**M2:** We do have a Head Start program and, uhm, I don’t think it’s mandatory for parents to put children in preschool. But it does make a big difference because when I came back here three or four years ago, I was doing a kindergarten/Grade 1 split. So the Grade 1s had finished K5 before, but there were lower ones that could have benefitted from an extra year in K5 and the ones that came right up through K5 — those ones (children), the biggest difference I found with those ones was the social skills. ... It was hard for them (children without K5 or ECD) to adjust and the fact that the kids did not go to Head Start or preschool and they went directly into K5, everything was new. I had to go right down because they didn’t have the basics. They didn’t know how to write their names, basic numbers, basic colours, whereas the child who is in Head Start, they do have some understanding. For example, they will know how to write their names and then you just build on that. But the ones who didn’t go to Head Start, you have to start right at the beginning. ..So, it did make a big difference in the ones that did go to Head Start versus the ones that didn’t go.

“E” noted that, as a principal, they were working to break down the silos between health and education so that they could work on translating Head Start assessments and outcomes and transitioning children into the classroom as children moved into Kindergarten and Grade 1. However, since this work is still underway:

**E:** One of them [positive aspects of child development] you can see right away. The first is social skills and learning to get along with each other, sharing, you know, social skills. And being taught in K4 or Head Start. If they haven’t had that year it can be hard and the kids are also not used to a routine or sitting for a while, but I guess it would be for the Kindergarten teacher to begin taking a look at what they are doing in Head Start and vice versa. Even taking a look at how they evaluate that four-year-old.

We also have speech language issues as well but even more now it's worse where they speak English and they're not speaking in Cree. So, it's reverse now. So, it's different when I went through school. I could understand it, but I mean, and you'd hear people speaking English, but ah, yeah, there is a gap between Head Start and K5. Learning gaps and whether that is the curriculum [in Head Start] or...

“M” and “E” both also observed positive and negative outcomes of early childhood programming, or lack thereof, in later grades, such as,

**M:** What I am seeing in this school is that kids can be in grades well high up and not know the alphabet.

**E:** My main focus is increasing literacy consumption and unfortunately the data for reading levels. So through that, it became obvious that many kids are coming into school not ready, and K5 usually ends up being what Head Start should be. And so because Alberta doesn't mandate Kindergarten — or that it's not necessary — I'm not sure how they word that in their documents, but it's only an option. We also have a lot of parents who don't utilize K5 because you don't have to go to school legislated until Grade 1. So, our kids come in unprepared for school — or the structured environment of the school that is.

As an experienced educator, “L2” speaks to the ways in which their role as a teacher in the later years can help bridge the gap between the skills that children enter school with, and what they need to learn to adapt and thrive in their current environment and grade:

**L2:** In January when the kids came, they were all low in terms of readiness and many of the children didn't know their ABCs, numbers, or how to grip a pencil; really lacking in the basic things that would make them ready for kindergarten. Another thing is some of them don't know how to zipper up a coat, put on shoes, or even basic reading. Some children, because of lack of access and exposure to early childhood education, don't have a daily routine and in that sense they want to play all the time. They are good now [in terms of developmental progress for current grade level]. One key piece also is the socialization skills that they should come with when they enter Kindergarten. Not many of them have been socialized into a preschool environment and not in the home either. So they come here and it's hard for them to learn and share and be in a group setting. And again, with the absences and lack of readiness, it really impacts how I teach and plan to teach everyone... So, it's been a process of teaching them to sit down for a few minutes at a time in order to increase their stamina. Now they know how to do ABCs and their numbers from 1–13...but literacy is low and their ability to recognize letters is low. So, in K4, it would be important to start to socialise children so that they build a foundation that they can take into Kindergarten, then into Grade 1. Without the foundation, they are behind and it gets harder and harder to catch them up. In some cases, there are children who are in grades 4 and 5 who don't have this and this and it comes through.

Talking Circle participants, many of whom worked directly with young children from the KTC First Nations, also indicated several positive impacts of Head Start programming.

**A3:** And I get feedback from parents. They tell me that their kids learned a lot and I also have feedback from the kindergarten teacher who says “you can really tell which kids were in Head Start and which ones aren’t. And I’m like, “Yay! At least I am doing something right!”

**A2,** whose community has a half-day Head Start program: I know in our community the Head Start has done a lot. Like, the kids who come from Head Start — it’s like, “you kids just came from Head Start.” Um, the teacher right now she does take care of the Kindergarten too. So, what she tries to do is to look at the schedule and try to prepare them. Like, what to expect so that those kids in K4 will be ready for K5. And letting them know that they won’t be playing all day. Like, they will be playing, but learning will be a little longer. That also helps too. Routine. And then transition.

A consistent theme throughout the one-to-one interviews and the larger Talking Circle related to the positive impacts of early childhood education, and of Head Start in particular. Respondents were both consistent and clear in their observations as early childhood educators, and K–12 teachers and administrators, that there were observable differences between First Nations children who had, and had not, attended some form of early childhood education programming in the community. Participants noted that children who had attended early childhood programs came prepared for school entry (i.e. K5 or Kindergarten) and had numeracy and literacy foundational skills, adaptive social skills, and had become accustomed to a structured learning environment. However, a few respondents also indicated that for those who did not attend some form of early childhood education, including Head Start or K4, and even further those who did not attend Kindergarten, were at a deficit in the Grade 1 environment and teachers generally would have to spend considerable time working to bring non-ECD children up to the levels of ECD children within the same learning environment at the same time. Teachers indicated that they were adaptive to the various school-readiness levels of all children in their classrooms; however, in some cases, the readiness-gap was too great, and some children would carry this forward into future grades. This gap was compounded in some cases where children attended schools that had a “no fail policy.”

For instance, “L2” noted that, as a K–12 educator, she is required to “pass them on, even if they are not at grade level. Even when the skills are not there” and unless the parents want their children held back to address literacy/numeracy and social skill development. “M”, who teaches children in later grades, noted that in some cases where the readiness-gap was not addressed in K5 or Grade 1, the effects were cumulative over time and children would be experiencing delays in numeracy and literacy into Grade 6 and beyond.

## Considerations

### *Accessibility*

There are three important factors to consider that help to contextualize the variances in school-readiness of KTC First Nations students. The first of which is accessibility. As Brittain and Blackstock (2015) articulate,

Starting with early childhood education, First Nations children are at a disadvantage, with 257 First Nations communities reported as having no access to childcare in 2006 (National Council of Welfare, 2007). The Aboriginal Head Start program, considered one of the best early childhood programs, serves only 12% of children on reserve who are eligible.

Overall accessibility to the Aboriginal Head Start On Reserve program is limited due to inequitable funding provided to First Nations for early childhood programs and services (Barrera, 2017, 2018; Assembly of First Nations, 2012a). Despite these known inequities and the fact that the ongoing inequitable funding provided to First Nations children and communities is a violation of their human rights (Blackstock, 2016; First Nations Caring Society, 2019, p. 39), many First Nations still only receive funding for part-time programming, three to four days per week (Doherty et al, 2003, p. 28), for Head Start programs that support between 12–18% of the on-reserve child population (Brittain & Blackstock, 2015). Data from the 2016 Census suggests that the KTC First Nations child and youth population (under the age of 14 years of age) on-reserve represents between 31 to 35 percent of the total population on-reserve (Statistics Canada, 2020).

Compared to the rest of the Canadian child and youth population that was estimated to be 16.5% in 2010, Indigenous children represent a greater proportion of the total population than non-Indigenous children. Coupled with the fact that the Indigenous population continues to grow at nearly “four times the rate” of the non-Indigenous population (Statistics Canada, 2017b), the proportion of Indigenous children requiring some form of early childhood education and programs remains significantly higher than the rest of Canada<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Data concerning access and participation by First Nations children to the Aboriginal Head Start On Reserve program is not available on a consistent basis and is quite often outdated. The Standards Guide, for example, was developed in 2001 and remains unchanged 20 years later. Similarly, data about First Nations children on-reserve is made available only through the Census which is released every 4–5 years. For the purposes of this research, the

## *Legislation*

First Nations education in Canada is legislated under s. 114 of the Indian Act. As such, First Nations children and youth between the ages of 6 and 16 are mandated to attend either in off-reserve provincial schools, or on-reserve in band-operated or federal schools.

Pre-school is generally understood to be education for young children between the ages of 3–5 and pre-Kindergarten (or K5) is for children between the ages of 5–6, and school entry into Grade 1 is for children who are 7 years of age. First Nations children between the ages of 0–6 are not required to attend any form of schooling, and with the limited access to early childhood services on-reserve, many First Nations children simply do not have access to education prior to entering Grade 1. Recent changes announced by the Government of Canada in 2019 state that a new approach to K–12 First Nations education will bring about First Nations control of First Nations education, through predictable and sufficient funding as well as access to “new resources which will support full-time kindergarten in every First Nations school for children aged four and five” (Government of Canada, 2019b, n.p). It is not known to what extent First Nations, and the KTC First Nations in particular, have received this new funding to support every First Nation school and every child between the ages of four and five who want access to it. However, this historic and ongoing gap is made more acute by the fact that in the province of Alberta, as “E” points out”, Kindergarten is not mandatory under provincial education legislation — of which, First Nations generally must adhere to under s. 88 of the Indian Act’s law of general application (Government of Canada, 1985).

A number of research participants noted the role of parents, parental engagement, and parental experiences with education as key drivers of school-readiness among KTC First Nations children. However, a number of participants noted that parental experiences with their own education in the past was negatively associated with their children’s early education outcomes, and that based on their experiences, as well as the lingering effects of the Indian Residential School system, many parents did not value education in such a way as to prompt and promote learning and developmental opportunities among their children. Moreover, due to a lack of opportunity (i.e. advanced education and employment), many respondents indicated that parental

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most recent data from the 2016 Census was used as it was the most recent and available data. It should be further noted that several requests for information were made to the Health Canada about the AHSOR, but my inquiries went unanswered.

involvement and engagement in their own child's development was impacted significantly due to the perceived lack of benefit later on. This will be explored separately and in greater detail in the major themes section below.

One respondent indicated that a number of children in the community are in foster care and as a result, they have lost not only the maternal connection, but also the safety and sense of security that comes from being within the family home. The respondent noted that as a result of the break in family connection, coupled with the stress of poverty, children experienced related educational impacts to cognition, retention, and learning abilities of young children (Patel et al., 2012, Aghamohammadi-Sereshki, et al., 2020).

### ***Impacts of Health and Education Silos vis-a-vis Early Childhood Development***

Since Canada “does not have a federal department or national system of education” (Government of Canada, 2020a) and delegates authority over education to the provinces under Section 93 of the Constitution Act, Early childhood education in Alberta is within the purview of the Government of Alberta's Ministry of Education. Early Childhood Services (ECS) are referred to as

Educational programming for children before they enter Grade 1. ECS includes both Pre-Kindergarten programming dedicated to children who require additional supports and Kindergarten. Alberta is the only province in Canada that funds education supports for children as young as 2 years 8 months. (Government of Alberta, 2021b)

Ministry funding is provided to young children who require additional support prior to school entry and eligibility for funding is limited to children learning English as a second language, children requiring Francophone programming, children who are gifted and talented, or children diagnosed with mild, moderate or severe disabilities or language delays. For children in the latter category, they are eligible to begin Pre-Kindergarten at age 2 years 8 months whereas all other eligible children can begin at age 3 years 8 months. The Government of Alberta also oversees both licensed and unlicensed childcare programming and provides some funding support to eligible families and children through subsidies and through the Inclusive Child Care Program for children with disabilities. It is important to note that although early childhood education programs are viewed nationally (Canadian Public Health Association, 2016) and globally (World Health Organization, 2021) as a social determinant of health, and therefore

likely under the purview of Departments of Health, across Canadian provinces ECS is considered one aspect of a child's education journey. To that end, provinces include ECS as part of their suite of funded (partially or fully funded (i.e. Kindergarten) programs available to children and families.

Since First Nations are under federal jurisdiction (i.e. Sec 91(21) of the Constitution Act, 1867), early childhood education is provided to First Nations children by the Department of Indigenous Services Canada through Indigenous Health and by way of the First Nations and Inuit family health programs (which includes the Aboriginal Head Start On Reserve). Despite the Government of Canada overseeing and legislating First Nations education on-reserve, it only specifies education for children ages 6–16 (or Grade 1 to Grade 11) under the *Indian Act*, and not for children between the ages of 0–5. Early Childhood Education on-reserve is under the purview of the Health portfolio as opposed to First Nations education.

The bifurcation of lifelong education in this way has created two branches of education on-reserve: K–12 under First Nations education and ECS under First Nations health. Education for First Nations children is overseen by two different First Nations departments at two different stages of a child's life.

A number of respondents indicated that the ways in which Health and Education departments were isolated, or siloed, impacted their ability to best support children as they approached school entry. "E2" and I explored the impacts, tensions, and possibility:

**Interviewer:** So, there is a K4 here?

**E2:** Not here.

**Interviewer:** Not here.

**E2:** It's in another building.

**Interviewer:** So, there is a Head Start here?

**E2:** Yeah, so, I think we need to meet with them, for them to meet with us. We're just totally isolated from each other.

**Interviewer:** So you don't interact with Head Start at all?

**E2:** Very little and there is something wrong with that, you know?

**Interviewer:** Is there tension, or...

**E2:** It's just never been pursued by anybody. One thing I did when I came in was I invited them to come and use the gym when it was available and you know, have your kids come here to play when it's available, or have a day or two where you bring them so that they know this is the building where the Kinders will come next year.

**Interviewer:** Socialize it.

**E2:** Right, right. Some prep.

**Interviewer:** And that didn't happen?

**E2:** No, it never happened. So we need to change that...

**Interviewer:** So, like I said, the purpose of this work is to find out a bit more about the impacts of federal ECD policy and the impacts on children and their families in the communities in which they live. So, you are on the receiving end of children who may or may not have received Head Start programming and what we know about Head Start is that it meets the needs of about 8 percent of kids on reserve. So, considering the large number of children there is a huge population [of children] who don't receive anything at all before entering into K5?

**E2:** That's right.

**Interviewer:** So, I guess from your perspective what are some of the impacts that children bring with them. And I guess you wouldn't know which kids come from Head Start?

**E2:** Actually, no we don't... But the Kindergarten teacher - I told her, find out, get a list and get that information so that we can at least put together a class list of numbers. But it's working in isolation.

For another respondent, the split between Education and Health created a lack of clarity around permissions required by two departments vis-a-vis the pursuit of targeted early childhood services funding opportunities that provided benefits to children throughout all KTC First Nations communities.

**E:** And then the policy came in and it wasn't easy. All of a sudden I have to get permission from Health now. And that's not a problem, but now all the Directors — it's like, you know, it's common sense you know, because I can't just do something because I want to. But all of a sudden this is taking all my time because I have to coordinate efforts [across health and education]. So now I have permission from Health to come in, and I have permission from Education to come in, and I work two days in September and June with Head Start and do two days of PD and then have the parents come in and play the games in the backpacks and learn from the centres and then they go home. And then the other side - this is the first resource that Head Start will get through the KTCEA because we're not Health.

When prompted with whether this created a tension and what "E" had learned through the process, "E" responded

**E:** It was great, like, you can, we'll get a few things from me and we'll sign off and these are the steps you need to take... So there were things that I've done that like I shouldn't have done, but the whole checkboxes about who to check in with prior is actually good... You know, it was a happy mistake, but it was a lot more in depth because it was not our jurisdiction and because it was not our jurisdiction — although we have access to Head Start and have been invited. And it's hard because when you are in someone's face versus developing a relationship. So it would be nice, even if education didn't get under their financial jurisdiction, Head Start, that there would be a wrap-around where 'this' is the health aspect that health needs to look at, whereas we are the educational.

Conversely, one respondent who worked in Health for the KTC First Nations also spoke to the division between Health and Education:

**Interviewer:** I mean, is it meeting the needs of kids? Helping them get ready for school?

**L:** I hope so.

**Interviewer:** Ok, yeah. So, you don't really know once they are in Head Start and then they go into...

**L:** ECS, Kindergarten. We don't....

**Interviewer:** Because then it becomes education.

**L:** Right, it becomes education. And we don't know anything about education.

**Interviewer:** Ok, so you don't really talk to each other?

**L:** Right, we don't talk to each other.

Although none of the respondents were critical of the division between health and education vis-a-vis early learning and care, their responses indicated that there are latent impacts to both the scope and depth of service delivery once children enter the K–12 system, as well as a limited understanding of child development and well-being across KTC First Nations. Respondents indicated that they respected the jurisdiction of Health over ECS; however, better coordination, communication, sharing of information, including early learning assessments, would benefit children who received ECS and those who did not.

### ***The Desire to Implement and Make Better use of Child-readiness Assessments***

The second theme that emerged from participants centred around the desire to implement child-readiness assessments either in the early learning environment or as they entered into school in K4, K5, or Kindergarten. In some instances, K–12 teachers also indicated a desire to more deeply understand the readiness of children within their classrooms, as well as any historical assessment information that they can use to inform program planning. Individualized Program Plan for students requiring additional or special support.

**E:** So, I sit on the fence about assessment, but I would really like to know where our kids are at when they come into K5 or even Head Start. With not so much educational domains, but like fine motor, gross motor, communication and socialization skills. Um, because our kids do knock it out of the water socially and I think it's because First Nations kids are raised socially in a village... But I would like to know where kids are at in a non-abrasive, non-judgemental space and I would like parents to want to know. Or just be interested in where students are. How their kids are doing, because I think that is the biggest hill.

**Interviewer:** So, what is in place for assessment? Or you only see them in K4, K5? Coming in...so when they come in K4/K5. No other form of assessment?

**E:** So, K4 and K5, there is a literacy assessment up to Grade 2, all the way up to Grade 12. Formally, we have the PATs and informally we do benchmark assessments with Fountas and Pinnell that we do with teachers in January and May, and we have the alphabet assessments. Sight word assessments so teachers can cater knowledge to what

the students need. So when we get kids who come in who are supposed to be at a certain level, provincially, um all these are standardized to the common law.

**Interviewer:** And so what was the assessment you mentioned on the phone?

**E:** So, the ASQ and the AFQ [Ages and Stages Questionnaires], so social and emotional and the other one is focused on the child's growth. And then there is the score guide and resources to help. And at that point, parents are asking questions: why are they below? How does this affect my child's growth and development? And that's where the conversation starts to shift towards you know "this affects this" and "here is the crossover to what it will look like in Grade 12" and I know that's a ways away but it kind of gives a whole child [perspective].

Although "M2" did not originally speak to the impacts of assessments in early childhood, they did indicate that upon entry into their classroom, as their teacher they needed to develop an understanding of each child's readiness, as well as the child's personal history, and learn by directly with each child so that they could plan to teach various levels of readiness among children within one grade and in one classroom:

**M2:** I had to go a lot of one on one reading, side by side. And him, I think he had health problems and hearing problems in Grade 1 and, sad to say, but the teacher's didn't pick up on it. He would misbehave and he wouldn't do what they asked him to, they just figured "this boy has behavioral issues." Little did they know that this boy couldn't hear a word they were saying or it was you when you talked and it was muffled, that's literally how the teachers voices sounded to him. And when you can't understand, especially when you're a kid, you become defiant. So this boy was labelled as "behaviour" when really it was because he couldn't hear and he still has tubes in his ears. One side he is deaf. And I forget. But yeah, you know, that boy his hearing was not the greatest. So it affected his learning. Now (they) are in (a higher grade) and I'm trying to do what I can to help.

In building off "M2's" response, I prompted a follow up question based on what I had heard in past conversations and posed a hypothetical situation of holistic assessment in early childhood that would then be shared with the K-12 school. "M2" was also curious about what sorts of assessments were being completed within early learning environments such as Head Starts and explored this as part of her initial response:

**Interviewer:** So, I don't know if the hearing problem started really, really, early, but one of the other things I am picking up on is the screening aspect of early childhood environments. Head Start is very good for literacy, numeracy, but what about screening for immunization, or Speech Language? ...So that they (Head Start) have an idea of what [level of readiness] they are at and when there is a transfer to a school, you have it [the information] and you know that you need to provide supports to [them] when [they] get to school.

**M2:** I don't think they do that in Head Start. It only starts with us [school]. Um, they start doing IPPs. Up until three years ago K5 wasn't here. K5s weren't screened. The teacher

could make recommendations about what she saw. So Grade 1 is when we start doing IPPs and screening them. But now, it's right across the board and that's how it should be. Every grade, you notice a kid is not responding or has no clue, yeah, you should be concerned.

## **Considerations**

### ***Evaluation of the Aboriginal Head Start On Reserve and Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities Programs (AHSOR & AHSUNC).***

In addition to the issues and opportunities with early childhood assessments explored above, there are several factors that should be taken into consideration concerning the use and implementation of child and school readiness assessment tools for First Nations children who reside on reserve.

The majority of respondents who participated in this study identified Head Start as the primary early childhood education program within their respective communities. Given the depth and persistence of poor educational outcomes among First Nations students on-reserve generally, early childhood education plays an important role not only in terms of affecting outcomes both at school entry but also at later stages of the students' educational journey. In that respect, both longitudinal and immediate understandings of the impacts of the AHSOR via data and other analytics are an important and vital source of information for First Nations communities as they plan, develop and implement responsive educational programs and services. However, the AHSOR and the Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities (AHSUNC) have only been reported on, not evaluated in terms of the outcomes of early childhood programming, once each in 2000–2001 and for the years between 2012–2015 and 2015–2016 respectively.

For the AHSUNC, the Public Health Agency of Canada's (2017) evaluation, under 4.4 Performance: Issue #4 – Achievement of Expected Outcomes (Effectiveness), inquired "To what extent has the longer-term outcome been achieved?" (p. 35). PHAC was interested in understanding "to what extent have First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children experienced improved health and well-being in order to develop successfully as Indigenous Peoples?" (p. 34). In response to this, the PHAC states

**Though it is difficult to empirically demonstrate the extent to which the AHSUNC program impacts the health and well-being of its students, evidence suggests that the**

**program is linked to successful long term outcomes for many graduates, their families and communities.** (p. 35, emphasis added)

PHAC then describes some of the community-based responses to the question about the effectiveness of the AHSUNC and in two examples, communities provided anecdotal data from past participants about the role of AHSUNC on their present lives, as well as other data from participants who are now serving as leaders within their respective communities (p. 35). PHAC goes on to state that in some communities where AHSUNC is offered,

staff keep track of former students and note some have gone on to become police officers, nurses, social workers and great parents, and/or have returned to AHSUNC for long and short term employment, student practicums, and volunteering (including those with special needs). (p. 35)

With regard to the AHSOR, one annual report was published by Health Canada in 2003, states that the program aspires to “provide opportunities for Aboriginal pre-school children to develop positive self-esteem...a desire for learning and ...to enhance all aspects of their development” (Health Canada, 2003, p. 3) through the delivery of comprehensive holistic, community-based school-readiness and early intervention programming. Despite the Annual Report identifying “National Evaluation Activities” (p. 5) that intend to establish formative and measurable elements upon which future comparisons can be made; the report itself did not provide additional details about the state of current program evaluations in terms of meeting its stated objectives and purpose. Indeed, each region was examined purely in terms of the number of children served, demographic characteristics of the child population, and the number of children identified as having special needs. A search for subsequent annual AHSOR reports did not produce any results and it is unclear whether Health Canada has completed either a formative or summative assessment of the program’s effectiveness in ensuring First Nations children are school-ready and/or if early interventions were effective mechanisms for children with differing abilities.

With that understanding, a clearer picture of the state of assessments in early childhood becomes clearer. Namely, that comprehensive child readiness assessments have not been developed at a national level to assist the AHSOR or the AHSUNC in (a) determining whether the program is meeting its stated objectives and needs of First Nations children, or (b) enabling a deeper understanding of effective, meaningful, and culturally-responsive and community-based

assessments that help guide early childhood program and policy development, and that inform and guide teachers within the K–12 system. The effects of a vague federal policy framework around assessments within early childhood environment (and perhaps the overall lack of understanding at the federal level about how best to assess First Nations child development and school-readiness has a trickle-down effect at the community level), leaves both early childhood educators and K–12 educators and administrators in the dark about how their children are doing. That is not to say that communities themselves have not worked to determine for themselves the most appropriate and effective assessment tools to support child development and school readiness. However, in the absence of clear communication, baseline metrics, assessment models and methodologies by the federal government about developmentally appropriate outcomes that arise from AHSOR and AHSUNC objectives makes the evaluation of these programs in terms of their effectiveness to indeed enable children to be ready for school somewhat undefined. It bears noting that while the AHSOR and AHSUNC’s frameworks are vague with regard to the design of local and community-based programs that meet the needs of children, First Nations communities are not constrained in terms of how they choose to manifest program design. As such, First Nations communities are able to build in both structure and accountability in responsive and localized ways without constraint. However, vague program frameworks at the federal level, especially as it relates to the vital role early childhood plays in terms of longer-term outcomes in First Nations children on-reserve, this lack of clarity and inaction at the federal level may be defined as neglect by omission.

#### Neglect by Omission.

At a National Aboriginal Day ceremony in 2016, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau reaffirmed the commitment to

renewed nation-to-nation relationship between Canada and Indigenous Peoples, one based on the recognition of rights, respect, trust, co-operation, and partnership...[and that] there is no relationship is more important to our government and to Canada than the one with Indigenous Peoples. (Government of Canada, 2016b, para. 3)

Prime Minister Trudeau further noted that,

Events over the past few months – including the loss of life to suicide and the feelings of despair felt in some communities – remind us that we must work in genuine partnership with Indigenous Peoples, the provinces, and the territories to **better support the well-**

**being of children and families, improve the quality of education for Indigenous students, and ensure health services meet the needs of Indigenous communities.** (2016b, para 3, emphasis added).

As discussed earlier in Chapter 4, there have been moderate improvements in the provision of equitable and meaningful funding for K–12 education, increased control over the design and delivery of education on-reserve, as well as a new National Framework for Indigenous Early Learning and Care in Canada (Government of Canada, 2018a). It could be said that the federal government, and Prime Minister Trudeau, are staying true to their commitments. With regards to the Indigenous Early Learning and Care Framework, for instance, the federal government is taking action on a long-stated desire by First Nation, Inuit, and Métis peoples and communities of the need for “High-quality, culturally-specific and well-supported early learning and child care (ELCC) programs, services and supports that are specifically designed for and with Indigenous families and communities will make a genuine difference in the early experiences of children” (Government of Canada, 2018a). With respect to early childhood assessments, the Framework includes and articulates the understanding that “Many organizations providing ELCC services to Indigenous children and families reported an inability to undertake community-based evaluation, and also reported difficulty in accessing expert advice and knowledge of promising practices” (p. 24). In that sense, the new Framework aspires to improve documentation of “children’s experiences and learning, alongside community-based review or evaluation...to address data gaps, provide evidence for planning and create greater accountability to children, families and other partners” (p. 24). Importantly, the new Framework identifies that new evaluation processes aspire to “determine whether Indigenous ELCC programs are meeting the needs of Indigenous children and the expectations of their parents and communities” that may lead to “improved documentation, program planning, data collection, performance measurement and multiple levels of evaluation (particularly Indigenous-developed)” (p. 24).

The new Framework is an important departure from the complex patchwork of assessment and evaluation tools that have largely been underpinned Indigenous Early Learning and Care programs across the country. However, this departure rests against the backdrop that both the AHSOR and the AHSUNC have been in operation for more than 25 years and in that sense, multiple generations of Indigenous children, by which the Government of Canada by its own admission states are “at higher risk of living in poverty and encountering obstacles to

optimal development” (PHAC, 2017, p. 9), have not been meaningfully assessed in terms of their academic and other developmental domains in the early years. This, in turn, then fails to inform and guide responsive supports and services at later grades and in later years which inform part of the complex reasons for the high levels of high school non-completion in many First Nations communities. The passivity of the federal government to develop a guiding national framework prior to 2018 can be, against the backdrop of the federal government fiduciary obligations to Indian people under the *Indian Act*, considered to be passive neglect of Indigenous children by the state through policy omission.

### ***The Prevalence of First Nations Children Identified as Having Special Needs or Disabilities***

The third theme throughout both AHSOR and AHSUNC reports was the prevalence of First Nations children who were identified as having special needs or disabilities. Although children with special needs or disabilities did not dramatically emerge from the interviews or Talking Circle, several respondents noted their interactions with students who had both assessed and unassessed disabilities within their respective learning environments. These respondents spoke to the related impacts of unassessed special needs and disabilities among children within their learning environments, and the ways in which they struggled to teach them at their current grade level and to concurrently determining the types of supports and services required to support their learning outcomes, all while managing the learning needs of all other students in their classroom.

While these are important considerations vis-a-vis the need for a broad Early Childhood Development assessment framework, what has been absent from the discussion and in the literature is the role of chronic underfunding of all basic programs and services on-reserve, including disability and special needs supports and services, on child development overall. For example, the PHAC noted in 2017 that they are aware of the

importance of early childhood development as a key contributor to children’s future educational success and reducing poor socio-economic effects...[and that] targeting the crucial developmental years have been shown to impact brain development, which in turn is linked to better educational attainment, physical health, and gainful employment. (p. 9)

The PHAC goes further to state that “Indigenous children in Canada are already at a higher risk of ...encountering other obstacles to optimal development, [therefore] providing

programs that focus on finding ways to overcome these challenges or compensate for the disadvantages faced is crucial” (p. 9). PHAC provides a few high-level explanations as to why Indigenous children would be at greater risk and disadvantage in terms of their readiness for school including broad claims about the residual effects of Indian residential schools and colonization. However, they were less likely to implicate themselves as the arbiters of the effects of ongoing colonization including their observations about Indigenous Peoples’ low-socioeconomic status, levels of abuse or neglect, status of individual and community loss in terms of Indigenous knowledge, culture and language, the proportion of Indigenous Peoples and communities in food-insecure households, the proportion of Indigenous children living in foster care or with adoptive parents, or the number of Indigenous children who are living with parents with emotional, mental health and/or substance abuse issues. Furthermore, there remains very little discussion, aside from the monumental Aboriginal Child Survey (2006), regarding the requisite supports and services that have been identified by Indigenous peoples that remain out of reach to support child development and special needs and/or disabilities among First Nations children. As Brittain and Blackstock (2015) argue, one of the most significant impacts vis-a-vis children with disabilities is the role that lack of access and equitable funding have on increased child intervention and disruption of the family unit. Brittain and Blackstock (2015) observe,

Like Aboriginal adults, Aboriginal children also experience disability at twice the rate of the general population, and First Nations children living on reserves often go without services altogether, since their communities often lack the necessary services and programs, and they face complex and lengthy jurisdictional barriers and disputes when they attempt to access them (Woodgate, 2013). According to the most recent evaluation of Jordan’s Principle, inequitable access to programs and services actually drives up the number of First Nations children in foster care and out of home care (JPWG, 2015). The “unique challenges” First Nations children face in accessing services, including denial, delay or disruption of services because of jurisdictional barriers and disputes, sometimes leads “parents whose children require [assisted living] services with no option but to give “Child and Family Services custody” to secure disability services for their child (JPWG, 2015, p. 8, 77). (Brittain & Blackstock, 2015, p. 92)

Finally, there is also no meaningful discussion about the very real developmental implications of the high levels of stress First Nations children experience acutely and that they

endure over prolonged periods of time that arise from the manufactured conditions of poverty and crises across all social systems. In that sense, First Nations children, and First Nations early childhood development programs, are viewed as the ‘silver bullet’ to the effects of constant deprivation endured by First Nations children and their families, without attending to or addressing the underlying material state of deprivation and underfunding.

The most acute effect rests in the proportion of First Nations children who are deemed to have special needs. In the 2017 Evaluation of the Aboriginal Head Start in Urban and Northern Communities, the PHAC states that “data show that a significant number of children in AHSUNC program have special needs such as autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and mental health issues” (PHAC, 2017, p. 10). Based on a 2013 report, PHAC found that close to 15% of all children enrolled in AHSUNC “had been diagnosed as having special needs, most commonly speech language difficulties, [and] another 10% had suspected special needs” (p. 10). Health Canada (2017) similarly reports that approximately 10% of children enrolled in the AHSOR had identified special needs.

## **Considerations**

### ***The Cumulative and Lasting Effects of Poverty and Stress in Early Childhood***

According to Canada Without Poverty (2021), approximately 1 in 7 Canadians (or 4.9 million people) live in poverty and of that population, more than 1.3 million children live in poverty. Among the Indigenous child population, approximately 40% live in poverty, and among Status First Nations children the rate of poverty is disproportionate and current approximations suggest 60% of First Nations children (Campaign 2000, 2016, p. 4) live in poverty.

According to Evans and Kim (2013), poverty experienced in childhood can be particularly stressful primarily because of the environments in which they live. Evans and Kim (2013) argue that there are “numerous social and physical stressors [that] are correlated with income, including family conflict and turmoil, family dissolution, maternal depression, exposure to violence, as well as elevated parental hardness and diminished parental responsiveness” (p. 44). In addition to the parental and environmental factors, children who experience poverty are also likely to live in communities with “less social capital; are exposed to more toxins and pollutants, crime and street traffic, and have fewer places to engage in physical activity and less

access to healthy foods” (p. 44). Although Evans and Kim are referring to non-Indigenous children in the United States, a correlation and connection can be made to the living conditions on-reserve, as well as the inequities First Nations children and families endure as it relates to unstable and overcrowded housing, poor or no access to nutritious foods, increased exposure to toxins within the home and community environment, as well as a general lack of access to social capital available to all other non-Indigenous Peoples in Canada. Evans and Kim identify that these multiple stressors are made more acute with the experience of child poverty “may be a signature feature of childhood poverty with far-reaching consequences...This is important because **exposure to multiple risk factors outweighs the adverse developmental sequelae of being exposed to a single risk**” (p. 44, emphasis added). But the impacts of chronic stress as a result of poverty in early childhood are not limited to the developmental domain alone and Evans et al., suggest that chronic stress, as an underlying mechanism linking poverty to child development, also has physiological outcomes. Evans et al., conclude that “for most chronic diseases, early childhood deprivation predicts morbidity in adulthood, regardless of whether there is later upward mobility” (Evans & Kim, 2013, p. 44).

Perhaps the most striking conclusion made by Evans and Kim (2013) is that material deprivation in early childhood leaves lasting damage and they suggest that “these outcomes [developmental and physiological] might reflect the idea that deprivation is embedded in early life, permanently scarring individuals or learning to a history of multiple insults that accumulate to do damage” (p. 44). This assertion aligns with more recent research by Aghamohammadi-Sereshki et al., (2021) who indicate that “previous studies in MDD participants and healthy controls [suggest that] ...childhood adversity affects the anterior hippocampus” (p. E193), as well as all hippocampal fields (including subfield and subregions). This finding is important to early child brain development, as well as outcomes in later life, since these areas of the brain are “critical for learning, memory and cognition” (Yang & McGuire, 2013, p. 21) and that in the later years, plays a role in increased stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms in adulthood, as well as to decision-making capacity both in early childhood and later adulthood (Yang & McGuire, 2013, p. 21)

The role of assessment in early childhood cannot be understated as it plays an important role in the design and delivery of specialized supports and services for children with special needs as it informs K4/K5 and Kindergarten planning as well as supports program design and

implementation for early childhood programs and environments. There are clear and important considerations about the incompatibility of normative non-Indigenous assessment models and tools for young Indigenous children and some meaningful developments in terms of community-based and designed assessment methods and models that are being used to support First Nations child development in First Nations communities across Canada. Moreover, at the national level, there have been some modest improvements to the status and patchwork of early learning and care programs with the new Indigenous Early Learning and Care Framework.

However, it is also important to make clear that in the absence of any meaningful assessment framework for early childhood programs within First Nations communities over the last 25 years, as well as limited capacity and funding supports provided by the federal government to ensure entire First Nations child populations have access to these programs, means that multiple generations of First Nations children have had to contend with predetermined educational outcomes even before they enter school. The design of early childhood programs in this way has contributed to the persistent gap in poorer educational outcomes that we observe in First Nations learners today, as well as in generations past, and has manifested in the inter-group bifurcation of children who either “have” and those who “have not.”

Secondarily, it is also important to specify that the lack of transformative change to the chronic underfunding of basic programs and services on-reserve generally, coupled with any meaningful discussion about the impacts of chronic and toxic stress that First Nations children have and continue to endure as a result, means that First Nations early childhood assessment and early childhood programs are being positioned in such a way as to carry the load of generations of policy and funding neglect by the federal government. The subsequent categorization of disproportionate numbers of First Nations children as being special needs obscures the very real state of ongoing deprivation within communities and does little to concurrently address the material conditions of disadvantage that create the foundations of poverty that First Nations children are expected to “overcome” through early childhood programs.

While these are important considerations, it is also important to note that there are promising practices within Indigenous early childhood assessment that can be drawn from to support the KTC First Nations, the KTCEA and KTC First Nations children, as well as

Indigenous early learning and care across the country. These will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 7.

### *Parental Engagement & the Culture of Education On Reserve*

This section will discuss the fourth theme identified by research participants throughout the interview process; namely the role of parental engagement on First Nations learners' attendance and school outcomes.

#### *Parental Engagement and Attendance*

Although research participants were not asked directly about parental engagement, a number of respondents spoke about the role of parental involvement or engagement, or lack thereof, and the ways in which this impacted child readiness, as well as success of Indigenous children in current and later grades. Parental engagement was identified as a key factor in promoting student attendance, which is directly linked to improved educational outcomes such as high school completion.

**E:** We start with (#) on our nominal roll. And that's one of the challenges is attendance. So many have dropped out of high school and it's always a challenge to try and keep them in school, so we try to do as much as we can. And it's always a topic at the principals meeting. You know, we need to think outside the box.

**Interviewer:** Where do you think the attendance piece comes in? The lack of attendance, I mean?

**E:** It's so easy to blame parents and you have factors there. And you have some dysfunction in the home where kids don't have stability. That is the experience here. In knowing the community that kids are staying with relatives, with grandparents, aunts, uncles, and some are on the verge of child and family [services] placing them in a different home. Other things that are contributing factors — even in Grade 6, at that level, at that age, alcohol and drugs and lately crystal meth. So those are some of the things that come to mind.... So that affects attendance and we've talked about a few things we can do to keep kids coming. Making classes interesting, creative, offering a variety of classes like CTS with cosmetology. That's been one. Shop, and physical education. And kids like phys ed...

“E” moved on to explore some of the ways in which they have adapted the normative eurocentric learning environment so that it is more conducive to learning for Indigenous children who have vastly different learning needs and styles, including changing the start time, scheduling core and elective classes in ways that encourage greater engagement and attendance, and tapping into their natural talents in the arts and sports. “E” spoke to their experience working with

generations of First Nations learners over time and their observations about natural talent and ability in these areas:

**E:** You know what I find interesting, Tibetha? Even in isolated communities, these kids have natural talents [even] without training. We have some distance runners, hockey [players], volleyball [players]...so I guess my point is that not only do we have kids who are talented in sports, but also in other areas — art, singing, all of that. And it all helps to keep them in school and the potential for other things... but you need to develop that culture early and kids dream big, they do, they dream big.

“M” also explored the role of attendance, and parental expectations about attendance, on student engagement and achievement.

**M:** And the same thing in my class. And it’s attendance. Attendance, attendance, attendance. Problems at home, problems at home. All the issues at home. Education isn’t valued. It’s not valued, but I can’t blame the parents for not valuing the education. I don’t blame them and so some kids just don’t come enough. And it’s not that the kids don’t have the ability, it’s that they’re not coming [to school]. And there’s a few...the ones that come everyday, they know the alphabet, they know the sounds, they know some sight words, they are reading. They’re not as high up as I’d like them to be, but they are reading. They are writing every day. One little girl said to me, “I told my mom and dad, ‘no, I don’t want to go to town, I want to go to school, I want to learn’

#### Parental Experiences, Expectations, and Values of Education.

“M2” also spoke to the role of parental attitudes as well as what they believed were the impacts of the home environment and parent’s past experiences with education as influences on the value placed on education by parents as well as on student in-class engagement,

**M2:** Even the ones who are with their family. When the families are unhealthy, they have an unhealthy homelife and at the same time they are trying to function in a normal system and they have these things that have already damaged them inside, so that does play a big part....and I don’t know how to explain it, but it’s just like parents don’t value education so the kids take that mindset up. So they come to school and misbehave or whatever, and I think a lot of it is, they think nobody cares.

At the same time, “M2” reflected back on their own parents, as residential school Survivors, and the impact that had on their educational journey, and as it relates to the ways in which parents of children in their current classroom,

**M2:** How do you break the cycle and how do you make your people more proud of who they are — to excel better? You know, I always tell my kids, “you know, I grew up the same way you guys did. Both my parents were...raised in residential schools.”... So, there is a disconnection and it trickles. You know the way I grew up, I couldn’t wait to finish school and I pushed myself...and today I tell my kids, education is so important — you need it.

“E2” also spoke about the complex intersection of the role of parental values affecting student engagement and attendance in young children, as well as the culture of education embedded within the community itself.

**E2:** Like, I’ll go down there [to a K5] and the intent for K5 is that it provides a stable foundation and then you go to other classrooms and you’ll be lucky if there are 5 kids in the classroom. So, for me they don’t have value yet in education and in early childhood. For instance, Head Start is viewed more as babysitting...or sometimes the kid will come home and say “I’m not having a good time, or the teacher yelled” and so the parents are like, “ok, you don’t have to go.” And so, there is not a lot of communication. On a given day, K5 and Grade 1, some of the classes I go into will have half the enrolled number of kids. So, already you have kids not attending or getting any sort of formal education and then all of a sudden they start a new school in Grade 2 or Grade 3, and I don’t really know why, but it seems to start in Grade 2 or Grade 3 where it starts to taper off and then we only have 3 or 4 more years and then they hit Grade 9 and then they’re like, “I’m out.”

As our conversation moved forward, “E2” and I discussed the lingering effects of residential schools on current generations of First Nations parents and their children.

**Interviewer:** So you said something important about ‘not stealing your kids’, and so I mean you talked about the lingering effects of residential schools and the intergenerational mistrust and then I think the understanding is based in valid experiences that [reinforce the understanding] that any interaction with any system will result in child apprehension or a child being screened and placed in some sort of remedial stream so there is like a silent protectionism of withholding [children], it seems, to keep their kids away from systems that just don’t know how to do it [teach and engage safely and respectfully].

**E2:** On a personal level, I think and I sense, that when you don’t know something is wrong but you kind of think you do and then to go out in public and then have your child identified — or to sense that you are failure — there is that...and also that we don’t have reconciliation. I don’t know if my history was the same as a First Nations person if I would necessarily care to have my kid go into a system that took who I was away and now I don’t know where I am. And like you are trying to find yourself and validity in a system that broke you. So, I struggle with that because I think it’s valid to not have a bunch of faith in a system because of the past and it’s going to take a while...

“E2” and I then moved into discussing the multiple challenges for communities and parents. As the Education Authority worked to become more established within the community, there were shifting mindsets, from competing for limited resources to a shared resource base, and moving from individual Nations’ culture of education to the KTCEA as the driving force behind a renewed and shared culture of education.

## The Culture of Education.

On multiple occasions, respondents spoke about the “culture of education” within the communities themselves as a driving force behind student achievement. “M2”, for instance, noted,

**M2:** There are a handful of parents in the community who are ‘Yeah, education is important. Yes, we need to have our kids in school.’ And then there are others who ...don’t value education because they themselves don’t have a very high level [of education] ...and so school isn’t important to them.

In terms of rebuilding or strengthening the culture of education within communities, “M2” explored the cumulative impact of colonialism on the current culture of education,

**Interviewer:** So, it’s [the underlying force for lack of attendance] a culture?

**M2:** It is. That’s the problem we have today. How do you put back something that was taken? You know, it can’t just be with one person, it has to be everybody. Pushing each other, lifting each other up. And you see some parents [who say] “Ah, you don’t have to go. They don’t teach you nothing there.” That’s the stigma that surrounds the school.

Within the Talking Circle, “A1” spoke to the power of relationships in helping to strengthen parental relationships with the school and early learning programs, as well as building trust and value in education. “A1” notes,

**A1:** One of the strengths that we talked about earlier was about that relationship with family that is developed and that once that’s in place it helps, um, bring more families in. The word of mouth when we have one family who talks to you and understands the program, it kind of trickles out into the community. And I think that model that I see here as well as in other communities is a really big strength.

**Interviewer:** Would you say that, not lack of knowledge, per se, but apprehensiveness about what the programs are all about, or information, or anxiety that stops families from [engaging] with these programs?

**A1:** For me, the families that I work with, if one has a bad experience with the daycare or Head Start they tend to tell other parents and tell them not to take their children there. Especially if they know the worker... So when they talk like that, they don’t give their kids a chance to experience day care. Word of mouth is hard. So, I just try and reassure them...

## Considerations

### *Parental Engagement: Discussion, and Analysis*

The research participants’ focus on parental engagement in KTC schools to support and enhance children’s educational outcomes aligns with the growing body of research that suggests parental involvement has a positive effect on students, teachers, and schools (Bandaet al., 2007)

and is a key factor in children's academic outcomes (Lara & Saracostti, 2019). While this is an important and necessary insight for educators and administrators in planning and developing academic programs and success strategies, much of the literature does not attend to the lasting impact of colonization that is a distinct and unique experience for First Nations parents in particular.

This generation of First Nations learners, for instance, will have parents and grandparents who have either experienced the Indian residential school system, or whose educational experience is also foregrounded by deep and prolonged underfunding of their own educational experiences, or both. Parental engagement in First Nations communities is underpinned by the multi-generational impacts of colonialism through the imposed education system, as well as the lack of funding that, by virtue of what it signalled, has created a culture among some parents that education is not a worthwhile venture and as such, disengage from the school and the educational process. As "M2" stated succinctly, "we don't have a lot of parents — well, there are a handful of parents in the community who are 'Yeah! Education is important. Yes, we need to have our kids in school.' And there are others who say, 'Oh, this school is dumb'...who don't have a very high level — Grade 8 or Grade 9.... [but] How do you put back something that was taken?"

Indeed, and while parental engagement is a key feature of short- and long-term student success, the process of healing from the effects of colonization and rebuilding the community and parental culture regarding the value of education, as opposed to problematizing parents, will be key to any major shift in the control over education that First Nations people and communities have long asserted.

#### Deprivation Tolerance.

Chapter 2 explored the context and history of First Nations education for the KTC First Nations prior to the establishment of the Education Authority in 2019, which included an overview of the history and legacy of underfunding of K–12 education for First Nations learners and the cumulative impacts to educational outcomes and the pervasive "crisis" in on-reserve education. In addition to the challenges and limitations of the 'school-house' model that has personified on-reserve education for more than 60 years (especially as it relates to the limitations for band-operated schools to provide 2nd and 3rd level services). Chapter 2 also identified the new KTCEA per-student funding allocation through the Regional Education Agreement with the federal government that is not only equal to provincial per-student allocations but also exceeds it.

This aligns with the principle of Substantive Equality where, in order to achieve true equality of outcomes, “extra help” is provided to address the impacts of historical disadvantage through “the provision of services and benefits in a manner and according to standards that meet any unique needs and circumstances, such as cultural, social, economic and historical disadvantage” (Government of Canada, 2019a, para. 3). Achieving equal outcomes, the Government of Canada states, requires the “implementation of measures that consider and are tailored to respond to the unique causes of their historical disadvantage as well as their historical, geographical and cultural needs and circumstances” (2019a, para. 3)). The KTCEA’s new funding arrangement considers their geographical, cultural history, as well as the historical disadvantage arising from the underfunding of education in KTC First Nations, and as such provides more than \$20,000 per student in federal funding — or funding that is comparable, and even in excess of, provincial standards (Siple, 2019).

Interviews with staff and administrators within the KTCEA schools did not specifically focus on funding, although there were a number of comments about the positive impacts the new funding model on student supports and classroom/school resources. Additionally, a number of participants spoke to improvements in the extent and availability of land based learning and Indigenous language initiatives, and the importance of sports and recreation on student learning and engagement. Overall, the establishment of the KTCEA and the new per student funding allocation created a sense of renewal and optimism about what the Education Authority would be able to offer students and related outcomes to improved student achievement.

On the Health side of discussions, however, participants frequently spoke to the impact of low, or inadequate levels of funding on the programs and services provided to young children through the Head Start program. What was apparent throughout the discussion with Health staff and administration was that they were doing what they could, with what they had and, in some cases, they were adapting to various states of deprivation, either tangible or intangible. Prior to exploring this in greater detail, I would like to explore how I have come to understand deprivation tolerance that is experienced acutely by Indigenous Peoples.

#### Personal Reflection.

*In late 2019, I was listening to a podcast entitled *The Future Of Leadership* (Hirsch, 2020) by Todd Hirsh, Vice President and Chief Economist for ATB Financial. In one episode, Todd interviews Curtis Stange, President & CEO of ATB Financial and Joan*

*Hertz, Chair of the Board of Directors for ATB Financial. One of the questions posed to Curtis and Joan was about the qualities of good leadership, especially during Covid. Curtis Stange responded that he tends to look at the three quotients of IQ (intelligence), EQ (Emotional Intelligence) and AI (or Adaptability Intelligence) as they tend to represent the necessary qualities of leaders in such uncertain times. While I'd not heard of AQ before, I was keen to learn more about AQ, or the growth mindset "needed to challenge your current thinking, change your current paradigms and consider what is possible especially in this complex, ambiguous and uncertain world." Curtis later describes an additional quality required of future leaders, namely, "deprivation tolerance", or a leader's capacity to make do with what they have in order to keep moving forward especially during these fiscally challenging times. Although the podcast was meant to spark thought on leadership and executive leadership generally, I couldn't help but translate the concept of deprivation tolerance over into my own experience and to the intersection of my identity as an Indigenous woman in leadership, and the complexities of leadership and leading others with fairly limited resources that is commonplace among marginalized groups such as Black, Indigenous, and Persons of Colour.*

*I thought the idea of deprivation tolerance as particularly interesting, especially as an Indigenous leader within post-secondary education, and the mindset that I had acquired over time that I simply make do, and be as nimble with limited resources as much as possible. I had not worked in an organization up to this point where resources, both financial and human, were sufficient to meet both demand and purpose, and I had come to a place of acceptance that the kind of work that I do, and the teams that I lead, simply adapt and adopt the conditions of deprivation as the natural order of things. In a conversation with one of the Indigenous leaders on my team at NorQuest College in early 2021, we were discussing the need for a student engagement session to try and rebuild the sense of community among Indigenous students at the college that had been interrupted as a result of Covid, and to try and fold them more closely into the fabric of our work. At the end of our discussion, we had agreed to host a large event and I immediately went into planning mode and started delegating tasks to already overburdened team mates. However, the other Indigenous leader in this conversation*

*pointed out that we had sufficient resources to hire an external contractor to carry out the planning and implementation of the event and I was taken aback by the net and cumulative effects of underfunding on Indigenous student services, and perhaps of the needs of Indigenous Peoples broadly, on both my thoughts and actions.*

*It occurred to me that I had existed as a leader in these spaces of deprivation for such an extended period of time that there would be, in my own mind, no other option than to carry the burden of planning and implementing a large student engagement event. It had not occurred to me that we might have sufficient resources to alleviate the burden of this event, nor did I actively seek out resources to reduce our individual and collective burden. In carrying forward the notion of deprivation tolerance that Curtis described, it occurred to me that my whole modality was simply to try and tolerate and plan around deprivation in both material and immaterial forms. Curtis's comments, and my subsequent personal revelation, has stuck with me as an Indigenous person and leader, and I wondered about the extent to which other Indigenous Peoples and communities have simply adapted and shifted both thinking and action around deprivation.*

*And in re-reading, thinking about, and analyzing the transcripts from staff and administrators within the Health programs at the KTC First Nations, I was once again struck by the extent to which deprivation, and the tolerance of deprivation, was embedded in their words and actions. This is not to suggest that either myself or the interview participants are passive, or that tolerance of conditions of deprivation means acceptance. And it's important for me to be clear here; that there is a difference between acceptance and tolerance, both of which have distinct pathways and that for Indigenous Peoples in particular, and that our perceived tolerance of deprivation must be interpreted through the lens of the protracted history of colonization in Canada.*

*Deprivation tolerance has a limited theoretical foundation, and a search for literature on "deprivation tolerance" produced a single result on the tolerance of personal deprivation, as well as a large body of literature pertaining to the physiological impacts of sleep and oxygen deprivation, as well as the impacts of perceptual deprivation. In the section to immediately follow, I will briefly explore Olson and Hafer's theory of Tolerance of Personal Deprivation (2001), as well as some of the limitations and correlations of their theory, before exploring the limitations of their assertions*

*before moving on to explore the ongoing and multifaceted impacts of colonization on Indigenous Peoples that serve as the foundations for the perceived tolerance of deprivation and some of the ways in which Indigenous Peoples and communities participate in acts of micro-resistance in order to maintain and sustain our ways of life.*

#### Tolerance of Personal Deprivation.

Olson and Hafer (2001) were particularly interested in answering the question: “why so many apparently deprived individuals do not protest their status...and instead tolerate their deprivation” (p. 157). In their study of the factors that underpin disadvantaged group’s tolerance of personal deprivation, Olson and Hafer (2001) assert that “When a group or system distributes resources unequally among its members, those members (most of them) must view the inequalities as justified if the system is to survive” (p. 157). Olson and Hafer describe the conditions necessary for the maintenance of the status quo between advantaged and disadvantaged groups and suggest that there are several factors that explicate why disadvantaged groups “accept the status quo” including: (1) motivation to believe the world is a just and fair place; (2) the tendency for disadvantaged groups to report the relatively little personal experience of discrimination; and (3) that it is socially undesirable to report being resentful about deprivation (p. 158).

With regards to the first factor, or motivation to believe the world is a just and fair place, Olson and Hafer rely on Lerner’s Just World Theory (1970, 1977) which suggests that “people want to believe that the world is fair” (Olson & Hafer, 2001, p. 159) and that we are “motivated to believe that the world is an orderly and predictable place, where we will be rewarded for our efforts and investments...and to believe that our own social system is fair and legitimate” (p. 159). Lerner’s Theory of a Just World is best known, according to Olson and Hafer for its application to “how perceivers are more likely to derogate the victim’s character, either blaming them for their suffering or concluding that they are bad people who deserve to suffer” (p 159). Reuben and Peplau’s (1975) related Just World Scale has been shown to predict

the extent to which perceivers will derogate innocent victims, with strong believers in a just world exhibiting more derogation of victims than weak believers in a just world... Thus, strong believers in a just world seem more likely than weak believers in a just world to infer from poor outcomes that someone possesses a bad character. (Olsen & Hafer, p. 159)

Just World Theory, and the related Just World Scale, exemplifies the immutable settler colonial relationship with Indigenous Peoples in Canada and illuminates the power of the pervasive and uninterrupted meta-narrative that Canada is a peacemaker (Regan, 2010) that has underpinned much of the ongoing and unquestioned violence against Indigenous Peoples, and that has served to legitimize settler hostility and blame towards Indigenous Peoples and communities for the pervasive inequalities observed across all social systems. As Regan (2010) describes

Most Canadians, if asked about the history of our relationship with Indigenous Peoples, would not describe it as violent. Rather, we take pride in a cherished national myth that distinguishes between the horrific “Indian” wars of frontier settlement in the United States and the more benign settlement process that we tell ourselves occurred in the Canadian West. In this narrative, we cast ourselves in the role of the benevolent peacemakers — neutral arbiters of British law and justice, Christian messengers of the peaceable kingdom — who collaborated together in various ways to negotiate treaties and implement Indian policy intended to bestow upon Indigenous people the generous benefits of gifts of peace, order, good government and Western education that were the hallmarks of the colonial project of civilizing “savages.” (p. 83)

Although too lengthy to explore here in great detail, the depth and breadth of settler hostility and blame towards Indigenous Peoples is advanced through purposeful and carefully crafted rhetoric and policy language about the deservedness, or lack thereof, of Indigenous Peoples that has transcended generations. Indeed, early settler narratives about the threat posed to the nation’s progress by Indigenous Peoples, coupled with the belief about our inferiority and idleness that was embedded in early rhetoric and Indian policy, has firmly been planted into the national consciousness and has remained there since before confederation. A cursory review of any current news article about ongoing “crises” in First Nations Education, Child Welfare, Justice, Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, or housing and drinking water, painfully illustrates that very little has changed in the hearts and minds of Canada as a whole, despite striking evidence to the contrary that suggests Canada is anything close to generous or peaceful. Comments from the general public will often reiterate the oft-stated tropes about the idleness of Indigenous Peoples as the manifestations of our current self-imposed conditions, and often reinforces the Canadian ideal and metanarrative as “peacemaker” who has offered and

provided so much to Indigenous Peoples, only to have it squandered because of the bad character or nature of Indigenous Peoples themselves.

Although I see some correlation between Olson and Hafer Just World Theory with the maintenance of the status quo here in Canada, their assertion that the same theory helps to justify or support the understanding that it is also an “important determinant of the acceptance or legitimation of the status quo by deprived individuals” (Olson & Hafer, 2001, p. 160) fails to consider critical insights about the role of colonization and/or the vast and long history of various forms of resistance by Indigenous Peoples in Canada.

### ***The Ongoing Impacts of Underfunding, Maladaptive Policy Frameworks, and General Inequities***

Returning to research participant feedback, the fifth theme that emerged from interviews with Health staff and administration concerned the ongoing impacts of underfunding, maladaptive policy frameworks, and general inequities experienced by KTC health programs that delimited Indigenous child development.

#### ***Underfunding***

In my interview with a Health Director of a KTC First Nation, I recognized the limited scope of knowledge about the Head Start program in particular, given the relatively short period of time they had been in their current role. However, I inquired about any generalized ideas about aspects of the program that they would like to change, improve, or build on. “L” was candid with me that the biggest challenge with the Head Start program was “the funding” and that the amount of funding the program received positioned it within the community to serve only a limited number of children and that it was “bare bones.”

**Interviewer:** Do you want to talk a bit more about that? Like is it the amount, how it flows through?

**L:** The amount?

**Interviewer:** Like, it doesn’t cover programming, food, transportation... that sort of thing?

**L:** No.

**Interviewer:** So, funding is an issue. So is space?

**L:** ...It’s hard to fit things in there. Their displays and things...

**Interviewer:** Doesn’t really work?

**L:** Kind of.

When I inquired about what they, as a Health Director, would like to see in the Head Start Program, the conversation explored some of the pressures First Nations were under to adhere to the AHSOR program guidelines despite limited funding, as well as the limited capacity of the program to support sufficient numbers of children relative to demand within the community.

**Interviewer:** Ok, so this is an open-ended question then. If there was a “perfect state” in respect of early childhood -- what would that look like? What do you want to see as the Director?

**L:** As long as they meet all the program requirements.

**Interviewer:** OK. Maybe more kids are involved in it [AHSOR]?

**L:** Well, as many as they can. It varies and it depends on the number of kids in the community. Sometimes it’s small and sometimes it’s way too many.

Expanding on this further, I inquired about what they envisioned the future of the AHSOR might be like and contextualised my question with feedback from other research participants who indicated greater inclusion of language immersion, learning from Elders and from the land, to which “L” responded, “that’s the way it *should* be.”

When engaged in the Talking Circle, participants were less direct in their responses to the role of funding, however, they did talk about the contours of limited funding on both the physical spaces in which Head Start was located, and on the extent of programming that could be reasonably provided to young children in the programs.

**A3:** I get about 13, so like 13 will be registered but then sometimes almost half of them won’t come. The biggest class I had would be 8 in the first year [the program ran]. Now I have my regulars — seven. So some come initially and then they drop off, but right now I have seven.

**Interviewer:** You have space for 13?

**A3:** Ah, if I had 13 coming, I would not have space for all of them in the trailer. Because we’re in a trailer. It would just be too many.

Speaking also to the role of limited space, “A1”, “A2”, and “A4” also explored the impacts of limited space in Head Start generally before turning to the issue of staffing, and the limited capacity of the program to recruit and retain staff because of the funding regime.

**A4:** I never had a nap time [in my program]. It’s hard, pragmatically. Because my program goes from 9 to 1.

**A2:** So the kids coming from K4, at one o’clock they will be going to the next class, so it doesn’t make sense for them to nap. And so, then those kids are going into class at one, should go into another room.

**Interviewer:** Oh, so they are all together? (\*Because of space limitations, the children who are awake and waiting for their next class must nap because there is no other room for them to stay in once they are finished lunch and have to wait to start their next class.)

**A2:** Right, so if there was another room, they could sit in there, but because of lack of staff.

**Interviewer:** and lack of space...

**A2:** Well, lack of space, yes, but really, in my role at the daycare, it's hard to find staff and so forth. There is no getting around it.

**A3:** It's pretty bad for me, but we manage.

**Interviewer:** Would you say that staffing is an issue across the board?

**A2:** For them, yeah. We don't have a daycare.

When asked about the impacts of lack of funding on the delivery and design of AHSOR and childcare programs in particular, a number of respondents indicated that they were often excluded from any engagement about the budget for the programs themselves and would make do with the funding they received and would, in some cases, supplement and/or be creative with the funding itself.

**Interviewer:** In terms of daycare, the funding you receive from the federal government doesn't cover the entire cost...or it doesn't enable the program to be offered to all children?

**A2:** The programs run and the people who work there don't know anything about the funding. As for the policy part, that's up to the band and the Chief. They don't really get anything. The supplies are so bad that I had to help them utilize what they had to be creative. Lack of toys, they don't have a playground. Being creative is really all that you can do with them. Yeah. They don't really talk much about funding for daycare. I'm not sure about anywhere else, but lack of funding in many areas for sure.

**A3:** Mine, for Head Start, I don't even know. I have access to the money through my Health Director. So I ask for supplies and stuff which I usually do. But, for a playground. I asked for some playground equipment and she said, let's wait until we have a new building. I'm close enough to the school so that when the kids [elementary school] aren't there, I just take my kids there. I just made sure....and I was telling her [Director], that if I ever do get the space, I won't know what to do with all the space.

When asked about some of the influences on staffing, the conversation shifted towards the role of incongruent wage levels with provincial counterparts in childcare, motivation, and the complex interplay between employment funding supports some childcare workers receive that are reduced or removed once an income threshold is achieved. However, respondents indicated that even though childcare workers were receiving some form of employment income, because of the limited hours (based on program guidelines and lack of funding), the income received was still relatively low and did not cover all household expenses, yet their funding from other sources was cut or reduced and they were still unable to afford their costs of living.

**A1:** They don't even have a standard or ladder [wages] for them to look up to. Say for instance, staff are making a low wage. There is another motivation for people not to stay. Which is why they need to go and get their education. But there is no sense of hope, right?

**A2:** And that's the trouble we have. I am only there for a half day. The assistant I work with only gets paid for 3.5 hours and that's it. And who is going to come to work for that many hours?

**Interviewer:** So, like less than \$60 per day?

**A2:** Yeah, like \$500 dollars every two weeks and if someone has like 4 kids, 5 kids to support, that's nothing at all. And if they come to work for us, then they get cut off from Social Assistance and their bills they have to pay....now they have to pay for power and fuel.

**A3:** Yeah, so you have people who want to do something about it [get off SA], but they can't.

**A4:** And if they do something, they get cut off.

**A2:**...they give you the ability to make \$150, but if you go over \$150, you get cut off. So, they'd rather stay home.

**A3:** So, yeah, they will just stay home and wait for the kids to come home instead of...

**A4:** But they can't do anything about it.

Unlike provincial childcare centres, on-reserve centres are not required to meet provincial licensing requirements, and in that respect are ineligible to receive provincial child care subsidies or to apply for provincial wage top-ups that are available to all other child care centres in Alberta (Child Care Canada, n.d.). These wage top ups are provided to "certified early childhood educators over and above the base wage paid by the employer" (Government of Alberta, 2021a) and is essential to attracting and retaining certified childcare workers. Further, wage top ups have been recognized as an important part of addressing the under compensation of childcare professionals in the province of Alberta specifically, and to ensuring there are enough child care professionals to "meet the growing demand for child care spaces in Alberta" (Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta, n.d.).

First Nations who are interested in becoming a provincially licensed childcare provider can apply to the provincial ministry of Children's Services. In 2017, the Kapawe'no First Nation was the first childcare provider on-reserve to become provincially licensed and under this new status became eligible for both provincial wage top ups and provincial subsidies (Morin, 2017). While this is an important and notable achievement for the Kapawe'no First Nations, a number of First Nations in Alberta, and across the country, are hesitant and cautious about adopting provincial laws or regulatory requirements to on-reserve programs and services due to the

jurisdiction on-reserve of the Nations themselves, the obligations of the federal government, and a history of attempts to offload First Nations programs and services to the provinces.

For the Aboriginal Head Start On Reserve, there are no program requirements or policy guidelines governing worker wages and benefits; however, Alberta specific regulations pertaining to the AHSOR specifies both staff to child ratios and staffing qualifications for AHSOR staff and as such, would presumably match childcare wages of non-Indigenous childcare workers.

What was apparent in the conversation with childcare workers; however, was that the federal funding regime and program guidelines that govern the AHSOR means that the duration of the program (part time/half-days, 3 days a week) coupled with the pay structure, disincentivizes those who would generally be interested in working with children and families and the AHSOR program on-reserve. And as the respondents made clear, in some instances, the employment income was insufficient to meet the real costs of living and the actual needs of First Nations families. As such, childcare programs had difficulty in hiring, attracting and retaining First Nations childcare workers in addition to the downward policy pressure on childcare workers themselves to stay out of the workforce despite being able and willing to work.

Moreover, from an educational perspective, even when childcare workers completed higher levels of education within early childhood (such as Level 1, 2 or 3 certification), there was little change in the remuneration they received unlike in the provincial context where childcare worker wages are commensurate with the levels of education and certification they possess.

**A2:** For me, when I went and got my diploma and I was asking my Health Director, me getting my diploma and accomplishing that — will I get a raise? A good raise? And she said, ‘I don’t know.’ And I said, why? And that’s all she said.

“A2” later described the pressure they had to apply on the Director for increased wages and hours and noted that they lobbied for themselves yet wondered about the impacts for those who didn’t ask for both additional pay and hours.

**A2:** Even the online course I did myself. The band paid for my books and tuition, but I didn’t get anything out of it. I was asking the band, can you guys help me out? Because when I first started, I wasn’t making a lot. I was only down to part time when I first started, and I was asking and complaining...and all we were getting was part time. So I said I will have to go look for something good and if something comes up, I will take it because you guys aren’t paying me. So yeah, they put me on full time only last year. Finally. And then I kept nagging them to give me higher pay and then for... and I finally got it. So I am after them. Well, so far the only person I’ve asked for is me.

## **Considerations**

### ***Discussion, and Analysis***

Chapter 3 outlined the history of Indigenous early childhood education in Canada, a review of the existing literature and an articulation of the multiple facets of the colonial project which, around the time of settlement had as its primary objective to assimilate Indigenous Peoples into the body politic primarily through education, also included the education of young Indigenous children in residential schools, infant schools, and Kindergarten. As noted previously, the intent of early education by the colonial government was to lift them “out of their old ways of indolence” (Prochner, 2009, p. 139), to prepare them with a religious and moral foundation so that their labour would not be lost and so that the government would achieve social order among Indigenous Peoples that would detract from criminal or deviant behaviour later in life. As described by Prochner (2009), Indigenous early childhood education therefore, was viewed as a critical and cost-effective measure since “[early] formation is cheaper than reformation” (Prochner, 2009, p. 169). Chapter 3 also identifies the ways in which the Hawthorn report worked to undermine early childhood *by* Indigenous Peoples, *for* Indigenous Peoples, in two ways: (1) through the maladaptive interpretation of Indigenous ways of knowing and being, and (2) the misdirected understanding of the causes of deprivation that young Indigenous children endured.

With regard to the former, Hawthorn (1967), like other non-Indigenous researchers at the time, examined and interpreted Indigenous childhood experiences and environments through a non-Indigenous lens which pivoted around a eurocentric and normative understanding of what constitutes appropriate childhood development and then compared Indigenous child-rearing practices to those of the dominant colonial society.

The imposition of dominant eurocentric ideology, especially as it relates to Indigenous early childhood, has been explored in depth by the RCAP and the TRC, among others; however, and as Patrick Johnson (1983) in his book *Native Children and the Child Welfare System*

articulates, there are vast shortcomings with this approach that have meaningful and detrimental implications for Indigenous Peoples and communities,

There is also the potential for misunderstanding and discrimination on the part of social workers and child care workers who actually provide child welfare services and who have direct contact with families. If those workers are not Native or have little knowledge of Native values and customs, they may not recognize approaches to child rearing that are acceptable in Native society. One such example can be found in the attitude of Native Peoples to material goods, which an American sociologist has suggested is,

The key to understanding child rearing. It is person oriented. The nature of this upbringing is such as to place great value on relationships with other people in the local community and to place negligible value on objects. The child learns to define himself in relationship with other people and not in relationship to such abstractions as "career" or "occupation", or money. While reformers stress objects, Indians stress personal relationships. (p. 73)

Similarly, and with regard to the latter, the Hawthorn report misapplies a euro normative understanding of child development onto traditional child rearing practices and then positions and misdirects Indigenous ways of knowing and being as detrimental to Indigenous child development. Hawthorn (1967) further suggests that early environmental deprivation (such as Indigenous children being raised with high levels of autonomy in flexible and adaptive learning environments, as well as very little coercion, punishment and reward) should be understood as the primary factors for what Hawthorn determined to be reasons for their "retardation at school-entry" (p. 133). Understood in this way, the Hawthorn report was key to undermining early childhood education that had long been practiced by Indigenous Peoples and provided the early foundations for the imposition of non-Indigenous early childhood programs that, on the surface, worked to prepare children for school entry and to take up their role in society, while simultaneously misdirecting attention away from key policy and funding failures by the federal government.

Since the imposition of Indian residential school system, as well as other early reformation and assimilation efforts within the sphere of early childhood throughout the 1800s and into the 1960s, First Nations early childhood education may have taken on various formations within federal policy and programming, however, its intent remains the same:

assimilation and reformation. At the time of settlement, the federal government was clear in its intent and action to assimilate and reform Indigenous populations; however, over time, it has obscured, and made less visible, the path of assimilation. Today, the goal of assimilation is less intentional and obvious, yet can be seen in the multiple policy and funding failures, incongruent and inequitable program and policy frameworks, as well as the ongoing chronic underfunding of every basic program and service on-reserve. At its core, and although less obvious, the colonial project has shape shifted over time in order to meet government priorities and objectives which can be seen in the present circumstances described by research participants such as:

1. the lack of funding resources to fully and meaningfully implement Indigenous early childhood programs,
2. lack of funding to support sufficient childcare spaces that matches population growth and demand, and
3. inadequate childcare program resources to support appropriate physical space allocation, and the lack of funding to support comparable staffing levels.

When combined, these downward pressures place Indigenous Peoples and communities on the losing edge of the potential for Indigenous early childhood development to make meaningful contributions that strengthen and build Indigenous communities as a whole.

That is not to say that Indigenous communities have not done what they can with what they have. Indeed, the capacity for Indigenous communities to thrive and survive despite centuries of deprivation and colonization is a testament to our strength as a people, as well as our enduring hearts that continue to advance the needs of our people in spite of centuries of failed assimilation.

### ***Micro-Resistance to the Colonial Project***

Before turning to the sixth and final theme identified in the research, an analysis of the major themes up to this point is warranted vis-a-vis Foucault's theory and methodology of governmentality for studying the historical particularities of liberal societies.

As explored in Chapter 3, while I initially described how my research would seek to uncover the ways in which ECD policies and programs remain deeply enmeshed with philosophies that seek to conform or reform Indigenous children into productive citizens equipped to support the project of a new economic order and to meet current and future fiscal

demands, my understanding of the techniques of government to achieve a desired end state has shifted considerably.

I entered into this research with the view that the technique of government to advance the process of colonization that was employed within Indigenous early childhood education was through the precise embedding of Western liberal philosophies of early childhood that seek to either *conform or reform* Indigenous children. What I now understand; however, is that while the government still shapes the conduct of Indigenous Peoples, it does so through vastly different means. As Dean (2009) explores,

The government of the prison, of the economy and of the unemployed, as much as the government of our own bodies, personalities and inclinations, entails an attempt to affect and shape in some way who and what individuals and collectives are and should be. The criminal might be regarded as a victim of circumstance and environment who requires reformation; the unemployed person as someone at risk of welfare dependency who requires group counselling to provide self-help and increase self-esteem; and the national population as lacking the capacities of enterprise and entrepreneurship required to be internationally competitive. All these examples illustrate how government is crucially concerned to modify a certain space marked out by entities such as the individual, its selfhood or personage, or the personality, character, capacities, levels of self-esteem and motivation the individual possesses. Government concerns not only practices of government but also **practices of the self**. To analyse government is to analyse those **practices that try to shape, sculpt, mobilize and work through the choices, desires, aspirations, needs, wants and lifestyles of individuals and groups**. (p. 20, emphasis added)

Against this background, the technique of government to either reform or conform Indigenous Peoples' behaviour and action was not necessarily evident in early childhood program policies or frameworks, per se, but rather in the absence of it. Indeed, vague policy and program frameworks, coupled with vastly inequitable funding regimes across all social systems on-reserve that would support whole communities, as well as the ways in which the historical and ongoing trauma endured by parents remains unaddressed and instead downloaded and translated as 'disengagement' are examples of the absence of government conduct. The absence of government conduct in this sense has, as its outcome, the shaping and mobilizing of 'the self'

and community efforts within early childhood education around the manifestations of colonialism that emerge in the forms of children being unprepared for school, and with regards to the vast numbers of Indigenous children who were deemed to have special needs. That is not to say that the needs of children ought to be ignored here. Rather, the behaviours of the community are focused on, and are mobilized around, attending to the manifestations of the failures of government, or the conduct of government. In essence, government, through their neglect and omission, have shaped the conduct of Indigenous Peoples and communities through distraction, yet the overarching intent remains the same: assimilation.

It could be argued that the lack of access to current early childhood education programs on-reserve by vast and rising numbers of Indigenous children will lead to the continuation of disproportionate number of Indigenous Peoples who, later in life, will not complete high school, not enter post-secondary, have poorer health and social outcomes, and who may also become incarcerated — all of which are known to be countered by the development and implementation of rich, robust, high-intensity early childhood programs. In the absence of this, the maintenance of the social order and the status of settler-colonial dominance of the state is maintained. Assimilation, therefore, is reinforced by way of mass incarceration and low levels of education, high levels of unemployment and poverty later in life, that produces and reproduces Indigenous Peoples as the underclass.

The historicization of Indigenous early childhood education in this chapter and in others is an important aspect of understanding the application of Foucault's governmentality as the theoretical framework for this research as it enables an examination of genealogies of particular places and social problems. The genealogy of Indigenous early childhood education helps to uncover the ways in "the past is not so different from today" (Dean, 2009, p. 57) and illuminates the ways in which the federal government has positioned early childhood education on-reserve as being self-determined and self-defined by Indigenous communities underscores and perhaps excavates the "hidden histories of conflicts over their meanings" (Nadesan, 2019, p. 2). While Indigenous early childhood education is viewed, and is discursively positioned, as being a site of self-determination (i.e. program and policy language that 'recommends' as opposed to 'directs'), neo-liberal governmentality, where "Government ... involves a form of power over others that is made operable through the liberties of those over whom it is exercised" (Dean, 2009, p. 58), uncovers that the 'liberties' passed on to Indigenous communities through the language and

illusion of self-determination within the realm of early childhood, serve as sites of control and domination that are demarcated by policy omissions and neglect and through vast under resourcing of communities as a whole.

Foucault & Gordon (1980) cautions the over-generalizations of social conduct and specifies that the analyst must also identify points of social tension and resistance emerging from conflicts. This section explores the counter-conduct, or resistance, which is a key aspect of Foucault's governmentality.

### *Counter-conduct*

According to Odysseos and Helle (2016), "resistance, and its study, are on the rise" (p. 151); however, much of the recent academic and public attention, they argue,

Has tended to focus nearly exclusively on the visible and politically discernible practices of dissent against the excesses of sovereignty, worsening economic exploitation, and increasingly diverse instances of dispossession and other forms of oppression. Less visible practices of resistance or those who do not participate in an expressly political register against the state and/or the market. (p. 151)

Indeed, and with regards to Indigenous-specific resistance in Canada, much of the public attention over the last 30 years has focused on massive protests by Indigenous Peoples such as the Oka Crisis in 1990, the Ipperwash Standoff in 1993, Caledonia protests in 2006, Idle No More in 2013, anti-pipeline demonstrations (i.e. Wet'suwet'en, among others) and various blockades to counter logging, clear-cutting, and violations of treaty-rights. Less visible; however, are those ongoing resistances that take place within communities, and by community members, as a countermeasure to ongoing colonialism, and the imposition of settler-colonialism.

Counter-conduct, according to Foucault, can be understood as a key aspect of governmentality and that allows for an understanding of a "much more diffuse and subdued forms of resistance" (Foucault, 2007b, p. 200), that, according to Lorenzi (2016)

always implies, on the one side, a governmental mechanism of power trying to impose on a group of individuals a specific form of conduct (which is the target of resistance, of struggles) and, on the other side, a refusal expressed by the individuals who can no longer accept being conducted like that and want to conduct themselves differently. (p. 11)

Further, according to Rosol (2014), counter-conduct (as understood in the sphere of studies in urban politics) suggests that this approach "adequately captures certain forms of

contestation in urban politics that *go beyond open protest or direct confrontation*. It can thus help us to reveal forms of resistance **often overlooked but still highly important** for shaping and changing urban politics (2014, p. 7, emphasis added). Although counter-conduct might therefore be assumed or associated with passive resistance, it is important to centre Foucault's insights which asserts that counter-conduct is active resistance between government and the governed. In that sense, "power is relational, rather than being possessed or located" (Foucault, 2000) and, as such, "there is no power without potential refusal or revolt" (p. 328). As Death (2010) further declares,

rather than social revolution or wars of movement, resistance is identified at the micro-level, 'in the transgression and contestation of societal norms; in the disruption of metanarratives of humanism; ... in the "re-appearance" of "local popular", "disqualified", and "subjugated knowledges"; and in the aesthetic of self-creation. (Kulynych, 1997, p. 328, in Death, 2010, p. 238)

The sixth and final theme that emerged in this research aligns well with Foucault's perspective on counter-conduct and provides a useful framework for interpretation of the various subtle forms of resistance by KTC First Nation research participants to the settler-colonial relationship and within the sphere of education. Within this research, counter-conduct is a useful analytic tool in that allows for an analysis that focuses on

practices and mentalities of resistance, rather than movements, and also seeks to show how power and resistance, government and dissent, are mutually constitutive. The form protests take are closely linked to the regimes of power against which they are opposed – and simultaneously practices of government themselves are shaped by the manner in which they are resisted. (Death, 2010, p. 240)

#### Parental Refusal.

The role of parents in student success was a key theme observed in nearly every interview. In many respects, parental behaviours and attitudes about school, and education, in general, were viewed negatively and as a delimiting force on current and future success. M2, for example, stated

**M2:** And that's what's lacking in a lot of our communities. And you see these parents that couldn't care less about school. Their parents didn't care about school, 'Ahhh, you don't have to go. They don't teach you nothing there'. That's the stigma that surrounds

the school. Always with the negatives about the school and like, this idea that we don't teach them.

However, in thinking about the specific history of colonization, displacement and dispossession experienced by First Nations people, followed by the settler-colonial imposition of the Indian residential school system and the manufactured crisis in First Nations education that has persisted for more than a century, parental refusal, either active or passive (e.g. withholding children from school until it is mandated, not reading to children or taking on the presumed functions of parenting within education) can also be positioned positively as a form of micro-resistance to the ongoing colonial project, or as stated previously as an example of counter-conduct in direct opposition to the prevailing regime of power embedded within settler-colonial/Indigenous relationship. Much like Indigenous parents in the past refusing to send their children to Indian residential schools despite the threat of imprisonment, and/or First Nations parents fleeing to the trapline, or into the bush to hide children from the RCMP, parental refusal in various forms has always been part of a less visible form of resistance to settler imposition.

Indeed, in reflecting on the comments by a number of respondents, several indicated that parents did not allow their children to participate in formal education until it was mandated, and even still, were overly cautious of formal education. As "A1" stated,

**A1:** For me, for the families that I work with, if one has a bad experience with the daycare or Head Start, they tell other parents and tell them not to take their children there... I just try to reassure them (parents) that it's ok.

"E" also reflected back the fear that parents had in leaving their children with the education system, largely borne out of their own experiences. In speaking to parental fear and lack of engagement in early childhood, "E" noted their role in building trust with parents through sustained relationships and the ways in which this helped to alleviate apprehension that has been embedded within the collective consciousness about the role of the school.

**E:** That's the ideal and we'll get there in a couple of years but it's important for them to see my face and for them to know that I am going to be here for as long as I need to be here, you know?

**Interviewer:** Yes I do. It's important for them to know who you are.

**E:** It's (having a community event and inviting parents in) not like it's going to be like, "we're going to be stealing your kids", but like giving them early literacy games they can go home with.

As such, and again referring back to Foucault's counter-conduct, parental refusal, parental withholding, and disengagement with education is one specific site of resistance where

parents can be seen as pushing back what they know to be true about the relationship of power between the government (and the school as an arm of government) and the governed (themselves). Moreover, parental refusal is an active resistance to the known tide of eurocentrism within education that has been their experience, their parents' experience, and their grandparents' experiences. As has been the case with other forms of protest over the years (ie. White Paper, Red Paper, Indian Control of Indian Education) resistance within education by parents carries forward the less visible protests of the past and reifies what Death contends in that the "form protests take are closely linked to the regimes of power against which they are opposed – and simultaneously practices of government themselves are shaped by the manner in which they are resisted." In that sense, parental refusal today, is very much the same as parental resistance in the past and has shape-shifted over time to take on the forms of governmentality that also have also shifted from overt assimilation to more covert policy neglect and omission that also seeks assimilation, reformation, and conformity to the goals and objectives of government.

#### Collaboration vs. Divide and Conquer.

According to Posner et al. (2010), divide and conquer has generally been understood as "a specific class of theoretical models whose main feature, roughly speaking, is that a single actor exploits coordination problems among a group by making discriminatory offers or discriminatory threats" (p. 418). With the imposition of the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs shortly after enactment of the Indian Act in 1867, and with the disruption of traditional forms of governance with the replacement of paternalistic eurocentric models of government, all facets of daily life were suddenly replaced by various departments of education, health, children's services, and land management. In doing so, the federal government undertook a process of bureaucratization of First Nations communities so that the management and oversight of their imposed fiduciary responsibilities over wards of the state (Indian peoples) could be better managed. In carrying forward Posner et al., (2010) assertion, the intent of the federal government was not to ensure that this form of bureaucracy would be effective and, in many ways, and as articulated throughout history, there was supposed to be an end date to the obligations of the Crown to Indigenous Peoples and an end to the Indian problem.

One such method was through the systematic breakdown of communities themselves through bureaucratic means and the division of what was once a whole community into smaller pieces all governed and managed independently. As explored above, several respondents

indicated that the coordination of supports and services to young children was made almost impossible through the division of health and education departments, where each one had a specific function in child development, but not a coordinated or effective one. Indeed, a number of respondents indicated that the bifurcation of health and education departments posed harm not only to effective service delivery, but more specifically to being able to support the whole child as they transitioned from early childhood into the formal K–12 education system.

On a few occasions, respondents indicated that, for the betterment of educational outcomes, they pushed past the artificial barriers to collaboration that had been established a century ago and where schools invited Health Department staff to engage with school staff to share resources and information, and in some cases, to coordinate on the extension of services that the child received in early learning settings, into the classroom. For Health staff, several indicated that despite not being directly linked to the Education Department, they would take children to the school playground to use their resources, and in other cases they would collaborate with each other in funding proposal submissions to better meet the needs of young children.

Interestingly, and perhaps a unique example of a technique of governmentality, was the ways in which jurisdictions were placed at odds with each other over funding. There was a residual level of fear about moving too quickly on the education side as there was a perception that Health would react by withdrawing their engagement/collaboration over fear that their funding would be reduced or eliminated altogether. Although the two departments were from the same community, the perceived threat (or discriminatory threat) of being discriminated against through reduced funding was used to keep the two departments in opposition to each other, as opposed to being supportive of each other. The acts of resistance that were evident in the transcripts arose from the understanding that communities were aware of the superficiality of the bifurcation of departments, and they chose instead to collaborate to maintain the strength of the community, and to hold at the centre of their work the needs of the child.

#### From Schoolhouse to Education Authority.

Although not directly identified by participants, the formation of the KTC Education Authority was in and of itself a form of resistance to the colonial project that has, for more than a century, sought to displace traditional forms of knowing and being with the settler-colonial model of education. Whereas provincial governments were given authority over the delivery of

education for provincial residents, s. 91(24) of the Constitution Act specified that the federal government had sole authority over Indians and land reserved for Indians, which includes education among other things. And as settlement progressed throughout the 1800s, so too did the evolution of education and provinces quickly established models of education that provided comprehensive supports and services to schools through school boards. However, for more than a century, First Nations education has operated as a school-house model of education and lacked the coordinated service delivery that, in many respects, serves as the foundation for holistic student success.

In coming together as a group of Nations that has been materialistically divided through imposed settler-colonial governance models, the KTC First Nations enacted a specific form of resistance to the continuation of the colonial project within education. Through the formation of the Education Authority, the outdated non-system of education was being replaced by a comprehensive, coordinated, and agreed-to system of education that provided 1st, 2nd, and 3rd level services to a student population that had, up to this point, received little or a patchwork of loosely coordinated services to meet individual student versus whole-community needs.

Although the establishment of an Education Authority on-reserve might be construed as a modified version of European education applied to First Nations contexts, it is important to make clear that the KTC Education Authority is self-governing by the leadership of the member Nations, it has developed its own set of policies and procedures for all facets of the education system, and receives funding not by way of the Department of Indigenous Services as a third party mechanism, but directly from the federal government itself. The KTCEA has, in effect, changed the nature and structure of the relationship between the government and those being governed. The relationship between KTCEA and the federal government, therefore, has shifted from “practices that try to shape, sculpt, mobilize and work through the choices, desires, aspirations, needs, wants and lifestyles of individuals and groups” (Dean, 2009, p 20) through government inaction, towards the active enactment of their own choices, desires, aspirations, needs, etc. of the KTC First Nations themselves.

## **Chapter Summary**

This chapter examined the research participant responses and provided an analysis of the six themes that emerged around the research questions. While I entered into this process with

what I know now was a limited view of decolonization of early childhood education, what emerged as a result was a new understanding of the ways in which decolonization, or the act of undoing colonialism, is not necessarily within policies, guidelines, or actions by community/program staff and administration themselves, but rather through the ways in which the community has persisted, resisted, and thrived over time despite the relentless tide of colonialism. In coming away from this process, I've also had to reconsider and re-examine what I thought I knew to be true about decolonization.

Chapter 7 discusses the relation between the work completed for this study and the ways in which it addresses the original research questions, implications for policy and practice, as well as areas for future research. However, given the extent of the shift in my own understanding, Chapter 7 will begin with an Epilogue that articulates the shift in articulating and positioning this work as part of the process of decolonization.

## **Chapter 7: Naming, Becoming, and Undoing**

### **Epilogue: Understanding and Articulating Decolonization**

In approaching the conclusion for this research, it seemed important that I spend time exploring the shifts in both my thinking and practice throughout the 7 years in which this research took place. Although somewhat atypical for academic work, an epilogue seemed appropriate as it allows me to explore and discuss these shifts over the course of my journey both as a doctoral student, an Indigenous person in academia and leadership, and as an Indigenous researcher. The epilogue to follow builds a deeper understanding of the assumptions I held before this research started, the ways in which they changed over time, and how, in doing so, this research was transformed not only in terms of the approach I took to analyzing the research participant's feedback, but also in analyzing it and the world around me through a wholly different lens. Perhaps no bigger shift occurred for me than the one associated with my understanding of "decolonization" — a word that has come to be used within academia and elsewhere colloquially, without much deep understanding or examination. It was precisely here where a growing sense of dis-ease started to form within me about the casual and uncritical ways I was using the term "decolonizing" and how, in the absence of any meaningful discussion about it, I would be harming Indigenous Peoples and communities as a result. This specific harm, silence and non-substantive discussion, created an uncomfortable tension that prompted me to pause and think more critically about this work, and the contributions emanating from it.

At the beginning of my research, it seemed harmless enough to use a word or a term that had come to be synonymous with Indigenous Peoples and Indigenous research, much in the same way the word "reconcile" has within the last 6 post-TRC years. However, as time passed, and the more I engaged with the communities involved in this work, the more I understood what it meant to do decolonizing work. Namely, that it was less about attending to the ways in which the oppressor operationalizes eurocentrism, and more specifically about mapping the contours of settler colonial violence in such a way as to render the invisible, visible, within the realm of early childhood. In what follows, I attempt to map out the journey in my shifts in understanding so that this work contributes to a growing body of knowledge within Indigenous critical studies where Indigenous Peoples "operationalize Indigenous knowledges to develop theories, build academic

infrastructure, and inform our own cultural and ethical practices” (Moreton-Robinson, 2016, p. 5). Further, I map out this terrain so as to make visible the overarching assertion of this work which is that deprivation, and material deprivation in particular, undergirds Indigenous existence and remains the primary tool of oppression operationalized through settler colonialism.

When I initially developed the title for this dissertation, using the word “decolonizing” seemed like a natural, if not obvious, choice. Indeed, much of what has been done, and continues to be done, within the field of Indigenous research centres around the “undoing” of colonialism that has become so deeply entrenched and naturalized within institutions of higher learning and across disciplines. Using the word “decolonizing” seemed like the most appropriate word to describe not only the research process, but also the intended outcomes for the focus of this work that speaks to the ways in which early childhood education is a contested site, and an area of knowledge that, I believe, remains deeply implicated with the colonial project.

I was first introduced to the concept back in 2008 while I was completing my Master’s degree. As I have previously explored (Kemble, 2013), as a result of the research and writing process, I came to a place of understanding of the importance of Indigenous research methods, processes, and methodologies as a means of dislocating and decentring eurocentric understandings of what constitutes research, the production of knowledge, and a intentional resistance to the unrelenting assertion within academia of a singular truth. Getting to this place of understanding was a journey as I had unknowingly, or perhaps passively accepted, a eurocentric and western understanding of my role as a researcher — that I must be detached from my research, objective, and abjectly neutral in both my research methods and methodologies but also with articulating my findings. I recognize that the passive acceptance of a eurocentric understanding of, and approach to, my research back then, and even now, are the “scars I bear” (Kemble, 2021) from internalized colonialism. What I know now, as I came to understand back then, is that as an Indigenous person, it is impossible to remain disconnected from my research and that maintaining or positioning myself as neutral and objective, I was actively advancing the western tradition, and its colonial underpinnings, of eurocentric research. Tuhiwai-Smith (2012) explores the concept of “distance”, “neutrality”, and “objectivity” that I was seeking to uphold:

One of the concepts through which Western ideas about the individual and community, about time and space, knowledge and research, imperialism and colonialism can be drawn together is the concept of distance. The individual can be distanced, or separated,

from the physical environment, the community...In research, the concept of distance is most important as it implies neutrality and objectivity on behalf of the researcher.

Distance is measurable. What has come to stand for is objectivity, which is not measurable to quite the same extent. (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999, 2012, p. 58)

It is also here where I came to understand the importance of self-locating as a *nehiyaw iskwew* as a means of identifying to those around me of my connection to community, of how I have come to be accepted, of the work I have done to unravel the impacts of colonialism in my own life, and to situate the work against the backdrop of the central tenet of decolonization — *to do no more harm*.

In the time in between then and now, and even more so as I work to complete this dissertation, my understanding of decolonization has grown and shifted significantly. What I now understand about not only the meaning but also the process of decolonization arises from the release of the Truth & Reconciliation Commission's final report and 94 Calls to Action in 2015, only one year after I started my doctoral program, and the massive (and albeit uncoordinated) national, provincial, and regional responses by all levels of government, public and private institutions, and Canadians at large to take up meaningful responses to the legacy, and ongoing nature of, colonialism and the Indian residential school system that continues to reverberate through every social system in Canada.

At the time the Calls to Action were released, I was a 1st year doctoral student at the University of Alberta and was on my way home to Edmonton from a labour mobility conference I was attending in Ottawa. The release of the TRC's final report on my last day in Ottawa was all that conference attendees could talk about. And so curiously, I downloaded the final reports and read them all on the 5-hour flight home.

Prior to 2015, I knew passively about the Indian Residential School system. I had read a few books on the subject but for a host of reasons I still am trying to understand, did not know, feel, or understand the true depth of brutality and violence in all its manifestations (e.g. physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual) that hundreds of thousands of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit children experienced for more than a century throughout the Indian residential school era. As I read through the reports, I was confronted with an understanding that most, if not all, of the deep and pervasive inequities that are disproportionately experienced by Indigenous Peoples across all systems (i.e. health, education, child welfare, justice, and language and culture), and First

Nations peoples in particular, found their roots in the Indian residential school system, but also in the related “settlement” process of what is now known as Canada. It was also clear to me that the 94 Calls to Action within 5 Legacy Areas of Health, Education, Justice, Language & Culture, and Child Welfare were purposeful in their design.

It would take a few more years to further deepen my understanding, and in 2017 when I assumed the role of Director of Indigenous Health at the University of Alberta’s Faculty of Medicine, I came to understand the full depth and breadth of the multifaceted, complex, and interlocking ways in which the impacts of residential schools continued to linger on across and between generation upon generation of Indigenous Peoples.

### **Understanding Systematic and Systemic Oppression**

One of the primary ways in which I came to this understanding arose from the opportunity to work collaboratively with curriculum leads, and faculty leadership, on the development of a course on Indigenous health in response to TRC Call to Action #24 which states:

We call upon medical and nursing schools in Canada to require all students to take a course dealing with Aboriginal health issues, including the history and legacy of residential schools, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Treaties and Aboriginal rights, and Indigenous teachings and practices. This will require skills-based training in intercultural competency, conflict resolution, human rights, and anti-racism. (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, p. 3)

In the process of developing this course, and then subsequently having to deliver most of the content to all Doctor of Medicine, Doctor of Dental Surgery, Medical Laboratory Science, Radiation Therapy, and Dental Hygiene students, I came to understand not only the psycho-social impacts, but also the deep and lasting physiological implications of the residential school system in particular. It was here where I realized that the process of colonization and its impacts extended beyond the imposition of christian, eurocentric, western ideals, morals, beliefs, and the eradication of Indigenous cultures and languages, towards a more systemic conclusion.

In the process of developing content for the Indigenous Health course modules, the Indigenous Health course curriculum team and I carefully researched and curated readings for each lecture in order to meet the stated learning outcomes which were:

1. Students are able to articulate a coherent and deep understanding of Indigenous Peoples' histories within the context of the Canadian healthcare system.
2. Students are able to articulate a coherent and deep understanding of their own individual and group locations in relation to Indigenous Peoples in the social history and educational contexts of Canada.
3. Students can express a deep understanding and appreciation of their individual responses to the issues described and to the experiences shared by Indigenous Peoples; they demonstrate personal and professional capacity for working effectively and positively towards improved health outcomes and relationships generally.
4. Students recognize and can demonstrate ways in which their knowledge about Indigenous histories, and their experiences and reflections on Indigenous ways of knowing and being can have a lasting influence on the development of their personal and professional approaches to working with, and providing care for, Indigenous peoples.
5. Students understand how professional preparation in Indigenous health can positively impact Indigenous patient experiences and outcomes.

Among the resources gathered for these modules were those based on the painstaking research undertaken by Mosby (2013) and Mosby and Galloway (2017) as well as the TRC Survivor testimonies, about the “abiding” conditions of hunger experienced by Indigenous children who attended residential schools, and details about cruel medical experimentation in a number of unauthorized and deeply unethical studies authorized by the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs (Mosby, 2013). As the TRC report “The Survivors Speak” (TRC, 2015) made clear, the food provided to students, or lack thereof, can be described simply as “You didn’t get enough” (TRC, 2015, p. 71). As the testimonies of survivors provided in the same report also made clear,

Again and again, former students spoke of how hungry they were at residential schools. Students who spoke of hunger also spoke of their efforts to improve their diet secretly...

Dorothy Nolie said she was hungry all the time in the Alert Bay school...

Of the food at the Fort Alexander school, Faron Fontaine said that all he could recall was kids starving. Kids going in the kitchen to steal food...

Andrew Paul said that every night at the Roman Catholic school in Aklavik, we cried to have something good to eat before we sleep.

A lot of the times the food we had was rancid, full of maggots, stink. Sometimes we would sneak away from school to go visit our aunts or uncles just to have a piece of bannock. They stayed in tents not far from the school. (p. 72)

While the TRC Final Reports provided survivor accounts of the starvation and daily hunger they endured, Mosby (2013) and Mosby and Galloway's (2017) research describes the contours of the extent of hunger and deprivation experienced by thousands of Indigenous children who attended residential schools across Canada. Importantly, Mosby and Galloway (2017, p. E1044) illuminate the federal government's relentless drive to fulfill the colonial project — assimilation and erasure — with specific attention paid to the deliberate underfunding, or material deprivation within residential school administration, including providing insufficient funding for food, that left “thousands of children vulnerable to disease” (p. E1044). Mosby and Galloway situate their research against the backdrop of a recent study of high poverty environments “where chronic undernutrition is endemic, and in so-called “natural experiments” arising from 20th century famine events, reveals a range of biological effects of sustained caloric restriction” (p. E1044). The central fact that Mosby and Galloway assert is that the hunger and material deprivation children in residential schools endured has had lasting physiological impacts. Mosby and Galloway state that the unprecedented levels of obesity, diabetes, and other non-communicable diseases that are disproportionately experienced by Indigenous Peoples today, can be linked to the periods of prolonged hunger and malnutrition that were endured over the last century.

Hunger has always been central to survivors' accounts of their residential school experiences and we strongly believe that this testimony must be taken more seriously by researchers and medical practitioners. In light of recent evidence showing the connections between childhood hunger and chronic disease risk both in adulthood and in succeeding generations, **we can now be fairly certain that the elevated risk of obesity, early-onset insulin resistance and diabetes observed among Indigenous Peoples in Canada arises, in part at least, from the prolonged malnutrition experienced by many residential school survivors.** (pp. E1044-45, emphasis added)

Another illuminating aspect of our work in developing content for the Faculty of Medicine & Dentistry's Indigenous Health course was examining the manifestations, or roots, of

the disparity in health outcomes between Indigenous Peoples and all others. As Daschuk (2013) articulates in *Clearing the Plains: disease, politics of starvation, and the loss of Aboriginal life*, “the chasm between the health conditions of First Nations people and mainstream Canadians has existed for as long as anyone can remember; it too has become part of who we are as a nation” (p. ix). However, “Health as a measure of human experience cannot be considered in isolation from the social and economic forces that shape it. In Canada, the marginalization of First Nations people has been the primary factor impeding improved health outcomes for all its citizens” (p. x). Daschuk notes that while a significant amount of attention has been paid, and continues to be paid to, the role of anti-Indigenous racism in health care as a leading cause of the health disparities that are disproportionately experienced by First Nations people (Logan McCallum & Perry, 2018; Allen & Smylie, 2015; Kelm, 1998), the focus of his work chronicles the “*material* conditions, the result of long-term economic and environmental sources, that ultimately led to such divergent histories of population health in Western Canada” (Daschuk, 2013, p. x, emphasis added). Daschuk (2013) describes in careful detail the ways in which the “settlement” of Canada was underpinned by significant health events such as the rise of infectious disease brought to the country by settlers, the onset of epidemics such as smallpox and tuberculosis, in conjunction with other events such as widespread famine during the early 1800s, that “exploded and cut down the Indigenous population...[as] it swept through the entire newly imposed reserve system...” and that was defined by “human rather than simply biological parameters” (p. xix). Here Daschuk (2013) refers to the

...most significant factor under human control was the failure of the Canadian government to meet its treaty obligations and its decision to use food as a means to control the Indian population to meet its development agenda rather than as a response to a humanitarian crisis. (p. xix)

And so it was here, in the process of designing curriculum for undergraduate medical and dental health professionals, where the material foundations that have manufactured the persistently poor health outcomes among Indigenous Peoples became real. In coming to know and understand these facts, as well as others related to the erasure of Indigenous Peoples’ treaty and other rights, and ongoing colonialism within our current healthcare system, it was impossible for me to not see how the colonial project, at its foundation, sought to eradicate Indigenous Peoples then, and even now through the deliberate ongoing underfunding and policy neglect of

all social services on-reserve today. In addition to the imposition of eurocentric thought/belief via Indian residential schools, there was (and is) a clear and overriding objective related to the material deprivation (Shewell, 2004) of Indigenous Peoples into submission with the ongoing colonial project.

In addition to the material deprivation, ideological suppression and oppression, as well as the structural forces at play in the ongoing process of colonization, one of the most disturbing aspects of the curriculum development process was making a clear connection to the overarching intent of the colonial project, and actions of the settler state, vis-a-vis genocide.

In the process of researching the complex history of Indigenous women's health for example, I would also come to know about the painful legacy of eugenics inflicted upon Indigenous women throughout history, starting as early as the settlement era where, as explored previously in Daschuk (2013) vis-a-vis starvation tactics to settle the plains, the levels of malnutrition and low nutrition levels among Indigenous women in particular

...[made it so] Aboriginal women often could not conceive children due to poor health, [and where] pregnancy and lactation placed major demands on mothers and excessive hunger gave rise to low birth weight babies and high infant mortality rates. (Lux, 2001, p. 45, in Stote, 2015, p. 39)

As Stote (2015) further explores, "This effect was in keeping with the purpose of the Indian Act — to reduce the numbers of those to whom the federal government has obligations either through bureaucratic means, or in this case, through manipulation and outright starvation" (p. 39). Stote (2012, 2015) chronicles another dark and devastating period of the process of colonization through population control among the Indigenous population in Canada through forced and coerced sterilization of Indigenous women starting as early as the 1900, into the 1930s in Alberta (Government of Alberta, 1928) and British Columbia specifically through enforced sterilization, that progressed well into the 1970s and even to today. According to Stote (2012), "within the larger context of capitalist expansion, eugenics ideology was also employed by government officials as one means of justifying colonialist policies being imposed on Aboriginal peoples in Canada. The poor health, poverty and other conditions experienced by Aboriginal peoples as a direct result of colonial policy then became indicative of their lower social evolution" (Stote, 2012, p. 119). As Fabre and Schreiber (in Stote, 2012) articulate,

The *Indian Act*, for example, gave the Canadian government more authority over natives lives to carry out its goals of containment, civilization, and assimilation. Aboriginal women were often portrayed as unfit mothers and their children were removed from their care — to later be sold, put up for adoption, or sent off to residential schools — in hopes of disabling the transmission of culture and language through the separation of the child and mother. (p. 31)

Fabre and Schreiber (in Stote, 2012), situate the coerced and enforced sterilization of Indigenous women against the backdrop of the role Indigenous women played in maintaining a community's wellbeing, juxtaposed against the threat they posed to the well-being of Canadian society (Stote, 2012, p. 30). In order to effectively “distort and undermine” (Stote, 2012, p. 30) Indigenous women, they were first and foremost sexualized as deviant, and/or in violation of behavioural norms assigned to women of that era, in order to justify their dehumanization, and then later dispossessed of their humanity through legislative amendments to the *Indian Act* (i.e. s. 88 Laws of Provincial Application) that gave rise to near absolute power to the provincial government to deem Indigenous women “mentally disabled” or “incompetent.” In doing so, this effectively gave “Alberta license to coercively sterilize those with mental disabilities, under the Sexual Sterilization Act” (Fabre & Schreiber p. 30, 2017, in Stote, 2012). But the effects of amended and enabling legislation extended beyond mere population control, but rather towards a more appalling conclusion: to reduce the number of Indians that the government was obliged to.

Although the eugenics movement in Alberta lost public favour in the late 1940s and early 1950s, other variations of Indigenous population control, and an ever-present settler tension with the “Indian problem” would continue to occupy local, provincial and national attention. According to Dyck and Lux (2020), “In the spring of 1972, delegates to the first national conference on family planning, convened by the Department of National Health and Welfare, identified “isolated communities and groups,” including Indigenous Peoples, as a high priority for family planning programs” (p. 76). Although a series of consultations, conferences, and public policy proposals were put forward in the early 1970s, Indigenous populations were disproportionately targeted in an effort to align with broader mandates to control and limit the Indigenous population growth.

In addition to the more obvious role of sterilization in the process of colonization was also the understanding of the ways in which the same amendments to the Indian Act “stipulated

that an Aboriginal individual would have their land repossessed by either the provincial or federal government once they had been declared mentally disabled” that further denied and “belittled their claims to their ancestral lands” (Fabre & Schreiber, 2017, in Stote, 2012, p. 32). Circling back to the overarching intent of the colonial project, it became clear that Indigenous women and the calculated undermining of Indigenous women’s reproductive rights was also central to the colonial agenda to “undermine and exterminate Aboriginal populations” (Fabre & Schreiber, in Stote, 2012, p. 33).

### **Indigenization to Decolonization: Moving from the Symbolic to the Substantive**

I would go on to teach undergraduate Medicine and Dentistry students about the complex history of Indigenous Peoples’ health for more than a year between 2018–2019 and with each lecture, and with each new class of students, I would explore the psycho-social and physiological impacts of colonialism and material deprivation, as well as the painful truth about Canada’s genocide of Indigenous Peoples. By the end of my tenure with the faculty, my knowledge and understanding of these facts had solidified and reinforced my understanding of the ways in which colonialism and systemic discrimination operates. Yet, I was still struggling to understand the process of decolonization, or the undoing of colonialism in particular.

By 2019, I had transitioned roles and moved into a senior leadership position with NorQuest College. Unlike the Faculty of Medicine & Dentistry’s Indigenous small yet mighty student population (which, on any given year would hover around 30–40 Indigenous students across all five faculty programs), NorQuest college was home to a vast population of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit learners who, like many who had come before them, were seeking out the foundational knowledge and education they needed in order to pursue advanced education within a college or university setting, or to gain the supports and services they needed to become workforce ready. I would leverage the experiences gained throughout my tenure with the faculty, with specific consideration to the knowledge gained in undertaking the process of “undoing” colonialism within the MD and MLS admissions process (Kitteringham & Vega, 2018). It was here where I would come to learn about the ways in which legislation (such as the Enfranchisement Act, 1880 (Hinge, 1985), underpinned the current under-representation of Indigenous Peoples not only within health professions, but within and across academia altogether. A closer look at the impacts of the discrimination that took place between 1880 and

1951 would help me gain clarity about the structural foundations of colonialism in particular. For example, as stated in the Enfranchisement Act,

*Indians admitted to degrees in Universities etc., may become enfranchised and receive allotments of land of their band.*

(1.) Any Indian who may be admitted to the degree of **Doctor of Medicine, or to any other degree by any University of Learning**, or who may be admitted in any Province of the Dominion to practice law either as an Advocate or as a Barrister or Counsellor, or Solicitor or Attorney or to be a Notary Public, or who may enter Holy Orders, or who may be licensed by any denomination of Christians as a Minister of the Gospel, may, upon petition to the Superintendent-General, *ipso facto* **become and be enfranchised** under this Act, and he shall then be **entitled to all the rights and privileges** to which any other member of the band to which he belongs would be entitled were he enfranchised under the provisions of this Act ; and the Superintendent-General may give him a suitable allotment of land from the lands belonging to the band of which he is a member.

(Hinge, 1985, p. 83, emphasis added)

Throughout this period of significant change, I came to an acute awareness of the structural conditions of colonialism. This knowledge, coupled with my experience working in First Nations education with the federal government's Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, solidified my understanding of how, and in what ways, colonization had not only ideological, but also material and structural foundations. Being equipped with this knowledge, I entered into my role at NorQuest College with the understanding that while I had addressed specific limitations within a specific institution (ie. higher education, within provincial and federal governments), I was entering into an institution of higher learning whose Indigenous learner population is predominantly confined to foundational programming as a result of the material deprivation within First Nations education (Drummond & Rosenbluth, 2013; Assembly of First Nations, n.d.; White-Eye, 2019) that has been both well-chronicled and determined as the primary reason for the nearly 30 year gap (The Senate, 2011, p. 2) in educational outcomes between First Nations learners and all others (Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2018). It was here, also, where the processes and techniques used to decolonize post-secondary education took on a new shape.

Since 2019, the Indigenous Relations & Support team and I have advanced meaningful initiatives designed to redress the impacts of colonialism, and that advance the process of reconciliation (Reeves, 2020). However, in late 2020 and early 2021, it had become abundantly clear that while our work was important and necessary, I, along with other Indigenous leaders at NorQuest, began asking questions about the relentless push and pull between greater autonomy and self-determination we were seeking, relative to institutions goals that, on paper and in principle, strived towards “decolonization” yet were still very much underpinned by neo-colonial goals of greater efficiency, profitability, and performativity that delimited both Indigenous self-determination and autonomy.

In 2017, NorQuest College, like other post-secondary institutions across Canada in response to the TRC Calls to Action, developed and released its first-ever Indigenization Strategy, *Wahkohtowin* (NorQuest College, 2017). The development and release of *Wahkohtowin* arose following two years of deep Indigenous community and college-wide engagement that articulated a recognition that “Canada is at a turning point in its history of healing our relationship with Indigenous Peoples” (NorQuest, 2017, p. 2) as well as the college’s broad intentions to “take concrete and meaningful action that transforms the way post-secondary institutions understand, respect, serve, and include Indigenous Peoples, knowledge, and perspectives within the framework of our institutions” (p. 2). *Wahkohtowin* articulates a path towards the “restoration of balance, mutual understanding, and respect between us all” (p. 3) through the pursuit of seven strategic pathways, while also focusing efforts on decolonization. As a living document, *Wahkohtowin* allowed me as the most senior Indigenous leader to examine, review, and reflect upon how far NorQuest had come in terms of meeting its Strategic Pathways two years after it’s release, while also articulating and re-envisioning a future. After a comprehensive review, it was apparent that NorQuest has invested considerable time and resources to implementing a number of the strategic pathways, including the establishment of an Indigenous Student Centre, Indigenizing curriculum, hiring Indigenous staff for important functions such as Indigenous community engagement, increased supports and services for Indigenous learners, and relevant and meaningful community partnerships. By the time I joined the college in 2019, the desire to advance *Wahkohtowin* even further was present undercurrent and/or expectation of my role; however, it was clear that there were divergent views of what the next steps should be and what shape they should take.

Over the course of the next 12 months, my team and I would undertake the process of developing and implementing the Indigenous Imperative Roadmap; a document that strategically advanced initiatives that address systemic barriers and redress the impacts of colonization that are both distinct and disproportionately experienced by Indigenous Peoples within post-secondary education. Since then, the college has also embarked on a renewed strategic planning process that includes, among other things, a reimagining of Indigenization and decolonization. As part of this process, my team and I were invited to participate in reimagining the Indigenous Relations & Supports portfolio, as well as future Indigenization and decolonization work. A series of listening events took place where the entire team was invited to share what they believed would move the portfolio forward over the next decade. Although we did share and articulate the need for ongoing work to address systemic barriers in access and affordability within post-secondary education, for the most part, the ever-present theme of our discussions was that we wanted the *relationship* to be different and we wanted to be treated differently.

Taking these important insights into consideration, the Indigenous Leadership Team would come to know and understand that the past had moved us forward in important and necessary ways, and in some respects, and that Indigenization efforts such as Indigenizing curricula, creating spaces that reflected back our unique and distinct identities, as well as building a team of highly qualified and experienced Indigenous professionals was the ***first step, not the last*** in establishing a strong foundation as we moved forward together on our journey under the Indigenous Imperative Roadmap. It also became clear that the foundations we created together have, like other institutions (for example, the Nîsôhkamâtotân Centre at NAIT (Northern Alberta Institute of Technology, 2021), First Peoples House at the University of Alberta (University of Alberta, 2021), Grant MacEwan’s kihêw waciston Indigenous Student Services Centre (Grant MacEwan University, 2021)), become an expected norm, standard, or baseline expectation of post-secondary institutions by Indigenous Peoples and communities. Lastly, our efforts to help NorQuest move beyond the symbolic and aspirational nature of our work into more substantive structural changes were, at best, met with tepid acceptance. For the most part, the institution (like many others), were following the lead of public attention and settler interpretations of how best to implement the TRC Calls to Action, seemed to be fixated on developing awareness of our “shared history” (KAIROS Canada, 2020) of Indian residential

schools and settler colonialism through mechanisms including the KAIROS Blanket Exercise<sup>6</sup>, Indigenous Awareness Training (NorQuest College, 2021; University of Alberta, 2021), and large one-time events that recognized and celebrated Indigenous Peoples cultures, histories, and contributions. As an Indigenous leader within post-secondary education who had led the implementation of a series of these three events in the past, it had become clear that while they opened up space for settlers to begin processing complex and related emotions related to the devastating impacts of Indian residential schools and the ongoing process of colonization, they did little to move settlers into a place of critical understanding of their roles, responsibilities and obligations in carrying forward the process of reconciliation and making structural and systemic changes within their respective spheres of influence.

As I reflect on my time within post-secondary, I consider that perhaps the most challenging aspect of advancing the process of reconciliation rests in it being both defined and understood to different degrees by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples. According to the TRC (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, p. 3), reconciliation “means different things to different people” (p. 11) and is defined in two separate sections of Volume 6: Reconciliation, as

establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in this country. For that to happen, there has to be awareness of the past, acknowledgement of the harm that has been inflicted, atonement for the causes, and action to change behaviour. (p. 3)

an ongoing process of establishing and maintaining respectful relationships. A critical part of this process involves repairing damaged trust by making apologies, providing individual and collective reparations, and following through with concrete actions that demonstrate real societal change. (p. 11)

The TRC further states that “reconciliation must inspire Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples to transform Canadian society so that our children and grandchildren can live together in dignity, peace, and prosperity on these lands we now share” (p. 4) through dialogue, repaired

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<sup>6</sup> Based on the collaboration between the Aboriginal Rights Coalition with Indigenous elders and teachers, the Blanket Exercise is “an interactive way of learning the history most Canadians are never taught.... build understanding about our shared history as Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada by walking through pre-contact, treaty-making, colonization and resistance. Everyone is actively involved as they step onto blankets that represent the land, and into the role of First Nations, Inuit and later Métis peoples” (KAIROS Canada, 2021)

relations between Indigenous Peoples and settlers, public education about Indian residential schools and the roots and painful legacy of settler colonial conflict that informs and shapes a new public policy direction, and truth-telling. However, the TRC is careful to note that “knowing the truth about what happened in residential schools in and of itself does not necessarily lead to reconciliation” (p. 11) and that “Together, Canadians must do more than just talk about reconciliation; we must learn how to practise reconciliation in our everyday lives — within ourselves and our families, and in our communities, governments, places of worship, schools, and workplaces. To do so constructively, Canadians must remain committed to the ongoing work of establishing and maintaining respectful relationships” (p. 17).

Yet, what remains to be seen across most, if not all, public institutions, is substantive and meaningful progress on all 94 Calls to Action that moves beyond dialogue or tokenistic gestures of goodwill. As the Yellowhead Institute (Jewell & Mosby, 2020) articulated in 2020, “Canada has fallen far short of these commitments and has, by any reasonable metric, received a failing grade when it comes to the 94 Calls to Action” (p. 4). Jewell and Mosby have identified no new completed Calls to Action and they estimate that at the current rate of progress (i.e. 2.25 calls completed each year), “we could only hope to see substantial change over nearly four decades (we projected the completion of Calls to Action to be in 2057)” (p. 20). And it was this understanding that was reached by the Indigenous Leadership team at NorQuest: that not only was our relationship with non-Indigenous administration fixated on pursuing the symbolic, feel-good, nature of Indigenization, but most importantly *our relationship* had not shifted into a place where our sovereignty was recognized. We were, in large part, simply re-creating the same settler-colonial to Indigenous Peoples’ dynamic that has shaped our past and present reality. And as I reflected on my own professional career over the last 20 years, it occurred to me that I had, and was, participating in the normative order of things — that is, a centuries-old settler-colonial relational dynamic. Moreover, I came to the realization that my role, in the simplest terms, had become fixated on managing and/or blunting the trickle-down impacts of colonialism and oppression that are deeply embedded within post-secondary education.

Taking all these considerations into account, the Indigenous Leadership team recognized this important turning point and the opportunity to deepen our understanding of how to move away from the looming threat of NorQuest College becoming a site of “de-Indigenization” (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018, p. 221) towards a more meaningful, respectful, and sustainable space

that reimagined and reconfigured the relationship between Indigenous Peoples and settlers. Critical to this, and a key foundational document for our discussions in this area, was the article by Gaudry and Lorenz (2018) entitled *Indigenization as inclusion, reconciliation, and decolonization: navigating the different visions for indigenizing the Canadian Academy*.

In the section to immediately follow, I provide a brief exploration of the spectrum of Indigenization, as articulated by Gaudry and Lorenz (2018), followed by an examination of the ways in which this helped to shift both my own personal and professional understanding of decolonization that became foundational for the rest of this research.

### ***Indigenization on a Spectrum***

Indigenous Peoples' resistance to western and eurocentric education has a long, protracted, and painful history (Battiste, 2013). Over the last four centuries, Indigenous Peoples have resisted colonization, assimilation, and the destruction of traditional knowledge, knowledge systems, languages, cultures, ways of knowing and being, and family and governance systems. Indigenous Peoples have held constant the understanding that our knowledge, and knowledge systems, are the key to upholding and maintaining our distinct and unique identities, and rights, as the First Peoples of what is now known as Canada. Further, resistance to mainstream western education plays an important role in transmitting traditions, values and beliefs, as well as epistemological approaches to knowing and being that will strengthen our communities-of-origin, and ensure this generation, and seven generations to follow, will have the knowledge they need to be successful at home, in school, in community, and society as a whole. Important in the process of resisting and “undoing” colonialism is elevating the powerful role that post-secondary education, or higher learning, plays in the life-long education of, by, and for Indigenous Peoples.

According to Gaudry and Lorenz (2018) up to this point, universities have operated as sites of “de-Indigenization” (Gaudry & Lorenz, p. 221) where the academic canon has asserted the existence of only one truth and one knowledge based on european understandings of knowledge itself. As a result, universities and other sites of higher learning, perpetuate the oppression and suppression of other forms of knowledge and knowledge systems as equally important or valid, especially those that are not scientific or evidence-based. In the process, other ways of knowing, and other constructs of knowledge, have been delegitimized and marginalized as invalid, and therefore, untrustworthy as a knowledge source. However, Indigenous

knowledge, and knowledge systems, have long been asserted as holding equal status by Indigenous Peoples and communities, and have played a significant role in the development of a rich knowledge base within Canadian western society, and other societies around the world. As the movement to deconstruct and decolonize western post-secondary education, Indigenous Peoples and communities work alongside academic administrators to Indigenize curriculum, where Indigenous knowledge, beliefs, values, and ways of knowing are woven into existing curriculum, and to create safe spaces for all forms of Indigeneity to be expressed.

As explored above, following the TRC Calls to Action in 2015, a number of institutions have made some progress and invested short term sources of revenue to support the work Indigenizing the academy in a number of performative ways; however, and as Gaudry and Lorenz (2018) assert, most post-secondary education institutions appear to have lost “enthusiasm” (p. 222) for more advanced structural changes beyond mere Indigenization. Gaudry and Lorenz (2018) explore the various strategies and approaches to Indigenization that “exist on a spectrum” (p. 218). They identify three vastly different approaches to Indigenization as follows:

1. Indigenization Inclusion (p. 219): this approach is characterized by a “need for change” that seeks only to “add Indigenous Peoples into existing structures, inserting them into departments where they are likely to be the only Indigenous scholars in their respective units” (p. 219) as a performative measure designed to “reflect the diversity of the broader public...with little need to rethink the university’s underlying structure” (p. 219). Gaudry et al. further explain that Indigenization inclusion focuses mostly on inclusion policies that hold “a vision that ultimately expects Indigenous Peoples to bear the burden of change...[and] naturalize the status quo” (p. 220)
2. Reconciliation Indigenization (p. 221): This approach is characterized by a shift “in rhetoric and lack the substance needed to produce real and meaningful change” (p. 222). Moreover, while the administrative “dynamics of Indigenization have certainly shifted, how effectively reconciliation-driven Indigenization will be implemented by Canadian universities remains to be seen” (p. 222). This assertion rests on the understanding that although reconciliation Indigenization is marked by a shift in relational power — that is, Indigenous Peoples are more likely to be responsible for implementing institutional change initiatives, this is delimited by an overall loss of enthusiasm that undermines any

meaningful progress towards “transformative policy proposals” (p. 222). This approach recognizes that the approach to reconciliation most favoured by institutions “has been more discursive than substantive and [have] few policies that have aimed to uproot the established epistemological privilege of the Western tradition” (p. 222).

3. Decolonial Indigenization (p. 223): This approach elevates and advances the “transformative Indigenization program rooted in decolonial approaches to teaching, research, and administration” (p. 223) that has been envisioned by Indigenous faculty. Through this approach, the academic is wholly transformed by “fundamentally reorient[ing] knowledge production to a system based on different power relations between Indigenous Peoples and Canadians -- and for several respondents this includes a “dual university” structure” (p. 223). Although this approach is characterized as “radical” and “off the radar of my university administrators” (p. 223), Gaudry and Lorenz, contend this approach is viewed by Indigenous scholars as a necessity to “meet long term Indigenous needs, so much so, that it is often written about as an inevitability.”

Within the framework of Decolonial Indigenization, Gaudry and Lorenz (2018) illuminate notable aspects of this approach that demarcate its departure from the normative aspects identified in both Indigenization Inclusion and Reconciliation Indigenization. Gaudry and Lorenz, state

Decolonial Indigenization, then, envisions dismantling the university and building it back up again with a very different role and purpose. Respondents saw a decolonial approach to Indigenization as something that would “radically transform” higher education, remaking it in two ways. First, this decolonial Indigenization would use a treaty based model of university governance and practice. Second, decolonial Indigenization supports a resurgence in Indigenous culture, politics, knowledge, and on-the-land skills. (p. 223)

The key aspect of Gaudry’s assertion about the function of decolonial Indigenization was the “remaking” of the university through a treaty-based model of governance. Our (NorQuest Indigenous leadership) renewed and shared path forward therefore was best positioned within the framework of Decolonial Indigenization, as it not only aligned with where the most opportunity exists to blend the long-asserted desire to make education accessible, inclusive, responsive, and relevant to the lived-realities, visions, and needs of Indigenous communities themselves, while also re-imagining sites of higher education where Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples could

co-exist without interference or subordination of one another in the process of educating future generations of Canadian and Indigenous citizens.

### ***Treaty-Based Model of Governance***

As Gaudry and Lorenz (2018) explore, Decolonial Indigenization centres treaties as the path forward, placing an emphasis on the transformation of institutional relationships that are governed by treaty principles. In doing so, decolonial Indigenization recognizes treaties, and treaty-based governance models, as “living agreements which evolve over time” where each party possesses “co-existing sovereignty...[as] equal peoples on the same [territory] [who can] can mutually recognize the autonomy and sovereignty of each other in certain spheres and share jurisdictions in others without incorporation or subordination” (p. 224).

Having previously worked with the federal government’s Department of Indian and Northern Affairs for close to a decade (coupled with the understanding that as a Sixties Scoop Survivor my knowledge about and connection to the history and significance of the treaties themselves was limited prior to becoming an adult), I have developed a working knowledge about the divergent viewpoints not only about the spirit and intent of the numbered treaties, but also about how the treaties intended to describe the ways in which we were to co-exist peacefully as partners forever. While the federal government will assert it has a limited mandate to “work collaboratively with partners to improve access to high quality services for First Nations, Inuit and Métis...[and] support and empower Indigenous Peoples to independently deliver services and address the socio-economic conditions in their communities” (Indigenous Services Canada, 2021), First Nations peoples and communities understand and continue to articulate a different vision that is underscored by the department’s “fiduciary responsibility” (Justice Canada, 2021; Hurley, 2002) and which arises from s. 35 of the Constitution Act, 1982, as well as the spirit and intent of the treaties themselves.

### ***Treaties as Living Agreements***

Having spent my professional career working with and alongside Indigenous Peoples and communities, Treaties, and the nature and significance of Treaties, has been ever-present. Over time, and with greater exposure to various First Nations peoples and communities in Alberta, my knowledge about the sacred role of Treaties has grown and I have come to know about the

importance of Treaties as a everlasting guides for our conduct with each other, with our Treaty partners, and the knowledge that Treaties are agreements that are to last for “As Long as the Sun Shines, the Rivers Flow and the Grass Grows” (Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations, 2008). However, as Cardinal and Hildebrand (2000) state, much like the training and education professionals receive in areas such as law and medicine, knowledge about the spiritual and philosophies of Treaties “requires years of preparatory training accompanied by rigorous discipline of studies” (p. 28). This kind of preparation can only be held by those such as Elders, who have been chosen to receive this lifelong training and education. Furthermore, what knowledge Elders share about the Treaties with others is limited since others do not have the proper “preparation and study” (p. 28) to understand the conceptual levels with which Elders operate. What I know about Treaties is based on and reflected in what I have learned by being in relation to other Indigenous Peoples, and what I carry forward and the ways I uphold the principles of the Treaty in my life and work. What I do know with certainty is that Treaties have no end date, they are living agreements, and they “cannot be changed or altered” (Cardinal & Hildebrand, 2000, p. 25).

As I reflect back on my experiences to date, the spirit and intent of Treaties, as well as Treaty principles, have always been at the forefront of every conversation with and among First Nations communities. I recognize now that in many ways, Indigenous Peoples and communities have long carried forward the importance of equally upholding and implementing the treaties so that Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples can live and co-exist in the ways in which our ancestors described. In the current context, we can see the contours of this in the growing interest in and conversation about “We Are All Treaty People”, as well as the resurgence of Treaty-based dialogue across institutions. And so, while discussion about Treaties was once confined to dialogue between First Nations and the state, they are now being used as a framework for reconciliation and improved relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples across what is now known as Canada.

### **Decolonization is not a metaphor**

One of the most compelling aspects of Decolonial Indigenization is the ways in which, in its simplest form, it describes a process that “aims to unsettle and dismantle settler colonialism” (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018, p.223) and through “dismantling the university and building it back up

again with a very different role and purpose” (p. 223). In coming to understand these concepts at a deeper level, I was particularly drawn to the insights of Tuck and Yang (2012) in their article “Decolonization is not a Metaphor.” Like myself, Tuck and Yang were “thinking about what decolonization means, what it wants and requires” (p. 2) and the growing tide of dis-ease with regards to the “ease with which the language of decolonization has been superficially adopted into education and other social sciences, supplanting prior ways of talking about social justice, critical methodologies, or approaches which decentre settler perspectives” (p. 2)

Although Tuck and Yang (2012) explore in detail the numerous ways in which non-Indigenous Peoples “make moves to alleviate the impacts of colonization [through] the too-easy adoption of decolonizing discourse ...[that] tap into pre-existing tropes that get in the way of more meaningful potential alliances” (p. 3) and “attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity” (p. 3); I was most intrigued by the assertion that “settler colonialism and its decolonization implicates and unsettles everyone” (p. 7) and the various tactics, or “moves to innocence”, employed by settlers in the process of “decolonization” which, in reality, are simply the ways in which settlers try and re-establish their normalcy and dominance in these spaces.

#### Personal Reflection.

*In 2017, I was approached and asked to join a sub-committee on Early Learning and Care to inform policy and systems change vis-a-vis quality child care for parents and children living in poverty in the city of Edmonton. I was sought out because of my work in the areas of Indigenous Peoples health and Indigenous early childhood education. The Chair of the subcommittee was plain in their goals for my participation: I was to illuminate for the subcommittee the needs and perspectives of Indigenous children and their families regarding the development of a “system” of early learning and care in the city of Edmonton. I was the token Indigenous person at the table who was responsible for representing and articulating the needs of an entire, and vastly different, community of First Nation, Inuit, and Métis peoples.*

*Between 2017 and 2018, I attended subcommittee meetings and listened to settlers (e.g. high level academics and early childhood administrators) describe the problems, as they understood them, of access and affordability in early childhood by Black,*

*Indigenous, and persons of colour, or those who were most acutely affected by poverty. I listened to them talk about the poor in abstract terms and in disaffected tones. I watched as they circled the drain on developing a “solution” for those they knew nothing about, and whose experiences they’d never had to endure. I listened to them talk about problems from a distance and listened to them theorize a solution based on abstract and disconnected understandings of the excluded.*

*I soon became resentful of the committee and my participation; however, I recognize that my resentment was merely an outcome/manifestation of the expectations I had of the subcommittee whom I assumed would know better. And it occurred to me in late 2018 that I could do one of two things: (1) I could leave the subcommittee and move on with my life, casting aside my relational obligations and the need to advance the process of decolonization in every area of my personal and professional life, or (2) I could stay on the subcommittee and advance what I know to be a wise practice: working directly with and among those most excluded. I recommended that the subcommittee organize and host Talking Circles with Indigenous parents and caregivers in the city of Edmonton to understand not only their experiences with the current “non-system” of early learning and care, but also their experiences as Indigenous Peoples navigating yet another system designed to exclude them.*

*In early 2019, and over the next 6 months, I would host 6 Talking Circles with Indigenous parents and caregivers, as well as early childhood staff and administrators. What arose from these conversations was a clear articulation of the ways in which early childhood and child care was implicated in the ongoing process of colonization of Indigenous Peoples. Indigenous parents spoke openly and plainly about how child welfare intervention was an ever-present threat in child care centres, about their experiences with material deprivation, and about how the impacts of colonization coupled with their levels of abject poverty made child apprehension even more of a threat. Indigenous parents also spoke about the ways in which culturally responsive child care, and Indigenous child care workers themselves, served as protective factors against child intervention, as well as to the understanding that Indigenous parents in poverty could be “seen” as people as opposed to the tired and racist tropes that surrounded their existence.*

*Coming away from this experience, I then made both upstream and downstream recommendations to the subcommittee. I spoke to the need to train early childhood educators in the history and enduring legacy of colonialism, as well as how to engage in culturally safe practices with Indigenous Peoples, and meaningful training in the ways in which their profession was entangled in the ongoing process of colonization. I spoke about the need to amend legislation so that poverty could not be weaponized as a reason for child apprehension and so that child care centres would not be sites of oppression and violence. I spoke very little about the need to Indigenize spaces and places. And I did so intentionally because I understood the specific “settler move to innocence” here: namely, the ongoing assertion that decolonization has been misinterpreted, and perhaps co-opted with the process of merely adding beads and feathers to a European white-centric curriculum, and about putting up mini-tipis in child care centres and other symbols on the walls to avoid the eventual and necessary confrontation with the truth.*

*The report that I produced was sent to the subcommittee where it was recognized and adopted; however, for more than 2 years the subcommittee struggled with meaningful implementation of the system-level changes it demanded. Indeed, and reflecting back on this now, I believe the subcommittee anticipated a report and related recommendations about how child care centres could participate in ending poverty with accessible and quality early childhood education that told them how to use cradle swings, or how to teach about the Medicine Wheel, or how to make displays about the Seven Sacred Teachings. I don't believe that the subcommittee anticipated that they would be asked to dismantle the system that had privileged them for so long and that had obscured their vision from being able to see their complicity in the ongoing colonial project.*

*In early 2021, I ended my participation on the subcommittee given its inability to move the recommendations forward in any meaningful way. I was confronted by the Chair who asked that I find another Indigenous person to replace me, and demanded that I teach the committee about substantive equality, anti-racism, and anti-oppression on my way out. I refused. I was accused of being incapable of creating systems-change and ironically also unable to tell and teach others how to undertake systemic change.*

*As I consider and reconsider my journey with the subcommittee, I am responsive to what Tuck and Yang (2012) describe as incommensurability which “recognizes what is*

*distinct, what is sovereign for project(s) of decolonization in relation to human and civil rights based social justice projects.” (p. 35). In many respects, my journey with the subcommittee was punctuated, in my own mind, with the goal of decolonization, or the undoing of colonialism, embedded within early learning and care. However, the subcommittee was centred on and pivoted around reconciliation which, according to Tuck and Yang (2012), is “about rescuing settler normalcy, about rescuing a settler future. Reconciliation is concerned with questions of what will decolonization look like? ... What will be the consequences for the settler?” (p. 35). In that sense, the subcommittee and I were working in opposition to each other; with me searching for ways to end the tireless “entangled triad structure of settler-native-slave” (p. 1) dynamic, and the subcommittee working to maintain it.*

## **On Becoming and Undoing**

The intent of the Epilogue was to explore the process through which I have come to understand decolonization. In naming this dissertation in 2017, I had a limited view and understanding of decolonization and had superficially adopted the discourse of decolonization without attending to what it requires. Furthermore, in the beginning of this process, I had centered settler-colonialism and pivoted Indigenous perspectives around it. Decolonization, as I now understand, demands something entirely different.

The last 4 years have been a period of significant growth both personally and professionally and the experiences I’ve described above are an attempt to chronicle the ways in which I have moved out of, and into, a different place of understanding. Through my roles in developing curricula, leading teams of Indigenous Peoples, and advancing various processes of Indigenization, I know now that decolonization is a ***purposeful unsettling of settler colonialism*** within education, and a rendering of the invisible, visible. Decolonization is not a description of the various ways in which Indigenous Peoples and communities manage the trickle-down effects of oppression and colonization, nor is it the centering of settler-colonialism and the various ways Indigenous Peoples have had to adapt. Rather, as Tuck and Yang (2012) state, decolonization is purposefully ensuring that the “real and symbolic violence of settler colonialism” (p. 3) not to be overlooked. It is also distinct from other forms of social justice in that it places an emphasis on Indigenous Peoples struggles for recognition of “their/our sovereignty” (p. 3) and makes visible

the “contributions of Indigenous intellectuals and activists to theories and frameworks of decolonization” (p. 3).

With that in mind, when I completed my Master’s degree in 2013, I left the process with more questions than answers, which is perhaps the intended outcome of graduate level study. And so, when I applied to the doctoral program in 2013, I entered into it in 2014 with the goal of answering the lingering questions I had about the policy and funding deficit that Indigenous early childhood falls into. I also entered into it with the knowledge that few had come before me in this area and that there was an opportunity to, at the very least, make some kind of contribution to the immensely powerful body of work and legacy they left before me.

However, when I would describe the area of focus for my doctoral to some non-Indigenous academics, their thirst for answers, and for knowledge held by communities about this sacred time in our development, was palpable. Some of them would talk about wanting to know more about traditional parenting styles and they would fetishize and fantasize learning about traditional child rearing practices. Sometimes they would talk about their thirst for alternate theories to those already well-established in the academic community, or about the knowledge they heard about, but had never seen in writing. They lunged at the idea of suddenly being able to consume knowledge, perhaps even sacred knowledge, that they had long been denied knowing about. They lunged at the idea of finally being able to describe the needs of a particular group so that they could build more inclusive early learning environments. And it was this drive for inclusion and camouflaged settler-dominance that perhaps drove me to look for answers about the tension I held in my mind and body about who and what I was doing this for. I found the fetishization of Indigenous ways of knowing and being, and settler appetite to consume and include deeply unsettling. This tension drove me not in the direction of wanting to satisfy settler-appetites and quell settler-longing, but rather to make known the real and symbolic violence within First Nations early childhood that arises from settler-colonialism itself, while also elevating the ways in which First Nations peoples and communities have, and continue to, assert their sovereignty.

This research does not aim to satisfy settler-appetites, nor does it try to equate the nation-building and sovereignty that KTC First Nations assert over education with larger efforts towards reconciliation, which is, as Tuck and Yang (2012) state, about “rescuing settler normalcy, about rescuing a settler future” (p. 35). It is; however, a clear articulation of the strength and

survival of the KTC First Nations people. It is also about the very real manifestations of material deprivation enacted by settler colonialism and it is about making visible the ways in which KTC First Nations have held themselves accountable to the Treaty and to each other, to their sacred laws, and to enacting a model of governance and a system of education that ensures the “collective advancement and preservation of cultures, languages, and traditions” (KTCEA, 2019a). And although I entered into this research with the view that I would uncover the ways in which Indigenous early childhood education was implicated in the colonial project through government policies; I found, instead, something different. Indeed, having come to know the ways in which the federal government has weaponized policy to achieve their desired end, I believed I would find the same thing within the context of early childhood. However, I come away from this research with the understanding that it was the *absence of policy coupled with the ongoing material deprivation* that surrounded early childhood that underpinned the advancement of the colonial project here.

Sometimes the contours of colonization are visible. The Indian residential school system is one such example. Here, the sharp edges of colonization are discernable on the generations of Survivors who carry the burden and legacy of these so-called schools. We can also see the obvious contours of colonization on the generations of Indigenous Peoples who must now contend with disproportionate rates of non-communicable diseases such as diabetes and heart disease which, as we know now, arise from the centuries of starvation and material deprivation inflicted upon us to try and make us comply. We can also discern the contours of colonization in the ongoing oppression of Indigenous women. We see the sharp edges in the shadows of those who have gone missing, who are murdered, and who have been failed by the so-called justice system.

And then sometimes the contours of colonization are less visible to the eye. Here I speak to the skilled sleight-of-hand used by the federal government in its passive omission of meaningful policy, funding, and legislative frameworks that hold it accountable for its obligations to First Nations people. This omission, while seemingly benign, and sometimes cast in the illusory light of “self-determination,” is what I speak of in this research.

If one considers and remembers the overarching objective of the federal government to “get rid of the Indian problem,” our shared history, and the conditions endured by Indigenous

Peoples over centuries, it is possible to render visible the multiple ways in which colonization carries forward even today.

We were never intended to survive. We were never intended to thrive. But we remain.

And it is this site of tension between what was intended to happen and what was happening within the community where I understand decolonization fully.

Decolonizing the philosophy of early childhood, therefore, is not about uncovering the complex ways in which eurocentric philosophies have penetrated Indigenous ways of life and knowing and being within early childhood, but rather about ensuring the “real and symbolic violence of settler colonialism” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 3) not be overlooked. Having explored the complexities of early learning environments within the KTC First Nations, I come away with an understanding that decolonization and the undoing of colonialism in the ways in which Fanon (1963) described:

Decolonization, as we know, is a historical process: that is to say it cannot be understood, it cannot become intelligible nor clear to itself except in the **exact measure that we can discern the movements which give it historical form and content.** (p. 36, emphasis added)

### **Opportunities for Decolonization within Indigenous Early Childhood**

As explored in Chapter 3, in entering into this research I’d hoped to find and understand the ways in which government policy had influenced the contours of early childhood programs and services in First Nations communities in Alberta through the research questions that guided this work; they are:

1. In what ways have shifts in government policy and philosophy positively or negatively impacted Indigenous ECD within the context of Indigenous self-determination and autonomy and the maintenance of social order?
2. In what ways have Indigenous communities actively or passively resisted these shifts?
3. How can Indigenous resistance within the context of Indigenous ECD inform program and policy development in the future?

I approached this through a theoretical framework that utilized Foucault’s notion of governmentality and Marx’s materialist conception of history called historical materialism. The identification and combination of these ideological foundations helped to structure my thinking

as I entered into this research journey and were key to guiding my initial theorizing and framing of the problem, perhaps rightly so given the protracted history of government intervention and control over the lives of Indigenous Peoples from the “cradle to the grave” (Goikas, 1995, p. 5) under the *Indian Act*. I had assumed and expected that through the lens of governmentality, that the downward continuity in the art of governing would be visible within early childhood.

Moreover, I assumed through this lens that Indigenous parents, caregivers, and childcare workers and administrators would be, through government policy implementation, ensuring that “the head of the family will know how to look after his family, his goods and his patrimony, which means that individuals will, in turn, behave as they should” (p. 92). Indeed, and against the well-known backdrop of the settler-colonial project to assimilate Indigenous Peoples into the body politic and to get “rid of the Indian in the child,” it is fair to assume and expected that I might be uncovering the complex ways in which government, under the guise of the best interests of the child, would still be working to achieve these ends through policy. I assumed that I would be able to discern the slow ‘disposition of things’ that Foucault describes as:

The things with which in this sense government is to be concerned are in fact men, but **men in their relations, their links, their imbrications with those other things which are wealth, resources, means of subsistence, the territory with its specific qualities, kinds of things, customs, habits, ways of acting and thinking,** etc; lastly, men in their relation to that other kind of things, accidents and misfortunes such as famine, epidemics, death etc. (Burchell et al., 1991, p. 93, emphasis added)

Lastly, I also entered into this research with the assumption and expectation that Indigenous Peoples would be intricately bound up in the process of the state’s relentless pursuit of progressive development and that through the careful and deliberate design of early childhood education policy and program development, the federal government would be able to achieve its stated, and unabated goals, of assimilation.

The thing about expectations is that they often end up being predetermined resentments and disappointments. The same holds true with assumptions, with the exception that assumptions leave little room for interpretation or curiosity. What I know now, in the absence of assumptions or expectations, is that something entirely different was happening.

It is indeed true to say that the federal government has long imposed, and made clear, its desires and intentions for us as Indigenous Peoples. In some cases, it has been hard to pinpoint

exactly what, or when, these shape shifts have occurred as a means to meet government expectations and needs. I do know, however, that the machinery of government is set up in such a way as to obscure from sight precisely how it achieves those ends. Having worked for the federal Department of Indigenous Affairs for a decade, I know, and have been in close proximity to, the multifaceted and slippery ways in which the colonial project moves forward. However, one thing remains clear: poverty and material deprivation have been, in addition to the imposition of settler-colonial ideology, the most active tools of oppression and subjugation of Indigenous Peoples and communities as a whole.

Poverty is constricting and restructuring. And poverty endured over extended periods of time makes people compliant. It also ensures the maintenance of unequal power relations that, in the context of the settler-colonial relationship, has undermined the spirit and intent of the treaty since contact. We were supposed to be partners. We were supposed to co-exist peacefully, respecting each other's ways of knowing and being, including governance structures. But poverty and the manufactured conditions of crisis that have been imposed on Indigenous communities for centuries have placed Indigenous Peoples on the losing edge. However, the strength, courage, and survivance that continues to flow through our veins ensures that we continue to fight, thrive, and persist.

I come away from this research with the understanding that the KTC First Nations people and communities have held their customs, languages, and ways of life close. Although there are scars from colonialism that render some, perhaps many aspects of our Indigeneity not completely intact, and with a long road ahead in terms of building and rebuilding what has been taken, the KTC First Nations have long resisted and persevered despite centuries of colonization. What was clear to me was that early childhood remained a sacred place of development and learning for their children; sites of language, learning from observing, and non-interference were direct resistances to colonialism. Indeed, the KTC First Nations have a rich, robust and deeply held understanding of the shape, scope, and content that early childhood must take in order for the communities to go on thriving and so that their children would grow and move into being the next generation of leaders and visionaries.

### *Community-based, culturally responsive, early childhood assessments*

In 2015, the TRC made 94 Calls to Action including 42 directed to addressing the legacy of colonization and the impacts of the residential school system. Call to Action #12 states,

Aboriginal families continue to suffer from a general lack of early childhood education programs. The Assembly of First Nations reported that, according to 2011 data, 78% of children up to the age of 5 have no access to licenced day care let alone to intensive early childhood programs. Such programs are vital to support the development of young children and, by extension, address some of the deficit in parenting skills that is the legacy of residential schools.

Call to Action #12: We call upon the federal, provincial, territorial and Aboriginal governments to develop culturally appropriate early childhood education programs for Aboriginal families. (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015)

Much like the RCAP that preceded it, the TRC is careful to pay attention to the known inequities in terms of access and affordability in early childhood for Indigenous children. The inclusion of a Call to Action, and the subsequent federal Indigenous Early Learning & Care Framework and accompanying funding, is a direct response to this gap. However, much like the persistent gap in K-12 education funding, the same holds true for early childhood and, as such, the substantive equality principle needs to be applied to address the cumulative shortfall of funding on early learning and care environments on reserve so that they are comparable, or exceed, those of children in provincial programs.

Furthermore, and given the focus of assessments in early childhood by research participants, it bears noting again that the observed development of KTC First Nations children has been undermined by the social conditions and the material deprivation that they have experienced and endured for centuries. That is not to say that all assessments should be discarded. In fact, to the contrary, since there are children within the community who must be supported with adequate and holistic supports and services in early childhood to enable and engender lifelong learning and success as they move through the K–12 education system. However, an opportunity exists to bring the community together to develop community-based and culturally responsive assessment tools and methods to assess Indigenous children's development within the community.

### *Relational Practice*

Concerns about the incongruence of normative, and euro-normed, assessment tools in early childhood within Indigenous communities has been well-documented. As Ball (2008) states, “Much of the research done to create and demonstrate the usefulness of different observation and diagnostic tools and intervention programs has involved middle class children from urban centres” (p. 7). As such, the unique and distinct aspects of Indigenous child development may be overlooked, and perhaps perceived as deficits, in the process of implementing assessment tools with Indigenous children that can be important sites that support their “optimal development” (Ball, 2008, p. 7). Moreover, this incongruence, coupled with lack of services, “frequently results in serious negative consequences for Aboriginal children” (Assembly of First Nations, 1998; BC Aboriginal Network for Disabilities Society, 1996; Canadian Centre for Justice, 2001; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Stairs & Bernhard, 2002, in Ball 2008, p. 7).

One approach to adapting assessment tools/methods to ensure alignment with, and the strengthening of, Indigenous ways of knowing and being is through the inclusion and recognition of all aspects of the child’s development and well-being “including their social, emotional, intellectual, physical and spiritual nature” (Ball, 2008, p. 7).

In discussing the key themes in preparing practitioners for culturally appropriate use of the ASQ (Ages and Stages Questionnaire), Ball (2008) suggests a relational approach (p. 24) “recognizing the foundational and defining role of cultural context is a first step for meaningful developmental monitoring, screening, assessment and program delivery” (p. 24). Ball states that practitioners “need to be trained to use the ASQ in a process-oriented way within the broader context of building positive relationships in which parents experience cultural safety and positive intent” (p. 24). Ball also suggests that, based on the findings of the research with BC Head Start Programs, there is a need for training beyond the procedural towards a “deeper knowledge of the intent of the tool, the meaning of the domains, and the developmental concept assessed by each item.”(p. 24). This process helps to ensure that the ASQ can be adapted to fit the child’s environment and that it captures the “ecology of services and supports” so that children are assessed positively and constructively (p. 24).

Similarly, research conducted by McDonnell et al. from the University of Victoria (2016) examined culturally appropriate approaches to developing assessment tools in early childhood

programs. Here too, McDonnell et al. underscore the role of relationships between parents and families, Elders, and other early childhood staff to enhance the cultural safety and relevance of early childhood assessments. McDonnell et al. (2016) state that building “comfortable relationships with parents/families” (p. 20) was key to strengthening the development and use of assessment tools to support children’s overall development.

The deeper the relationship between parents and childhood educators, as well as a deeper connection to the community by the school and early learning environment, appears to be connected to the observed positive developmental outcomes of children being assessed. Assessment tools whose domains encompass a holistic assessment of the child, “including their social, emotional, intellectual, physical and spiritual nature” (Ball, 2008, p. 7), that also considers the social and structural conditions that surround the child, present a more holistic and culturally safe assessment of how, and in what domains, the child is developing. As opposed to euro-normed tools that measure child development in the absence of what parents and communities deem important to be measured, community and parent-informed assessment tools get to the heart of measuring what matters most, and as such strengthens community and parent connection to early learning environments and early developmental outcomes of Indigenous children.

### ***Breaking Down Silos: Health and Education***

It is not my place to interfere with Indigenous communities’ autonomy, self-determination, or governance. The ways in which communities structure themselves and govern administration of all aspects of their respective communities is, as I’ve explored throughout, a site of historic struggle. The strength and persistence of Indigenous communities to continue to govern themselves in the ways they believe will benefit their people the most is a testament to their strength and survivance. I do not intend to contribute to the conflict, nor do I intend to be critical of the KTC First Nations communities' governance over their local affairs.

I offer, instead, observations about the silos between the Departments of Health and Education, and a possible way in which to strengthen outcomes within early childhood.

In the present context, the KTC Department of Health oversees all aspects of First Nations health within the KTC First Nations communities, including, among other things, early childhood development. Unlike provincial contexts where early childhood education is included under the larger umbrella of the Ministry of Education, the federal government classifies early

childhood education for First Nations peoples within the domain of the social determinants of health and as such, programming extended to First Nations is under health policies and frameworks. However, and while this may provide administrative ease for the federal government, this approach is misaligned to the philosophy of First Nations peoples that education is a lifelong process — from early childhood to adulthood. Moreover, and with the establishment of the KTC Education Authority, this may also delimit the Education Authority's capacity to provide greater access to early childhood education programs through their funding model and to access 2nd and 3rd level services that are a key component of holistic child development programs.

### ***Shared / Relational Governance***

There may be an opportunity to explore shared governance and administration of early childhood education programs and services between Health and the Education Authority through the shared inclusion of early childhood education under the spheres of lifelong learning within the KTC Education Authority and the determinants of health within the Department of Health. This approach may support greater access to programming, assessments, and supports within the Education Authority by KTC First Nations communities and may contribute to improved educational outcomes over time through increased collaboration and coordination of services. That is not to say that the Department of Health has not, or cannot, achieve these; however, the effectiveness that a system of education can provide may prove to be beneficial for the Health department and for early childhood programs in particular. It may also prove to be beneficial in terms of attracting, retaining and recruiting Indigenous childcare workers since the Education Authority funding model, and per student funding allocation, may provide for greater levels of income parity between on and off-reserve early childhood workers, and may, in some cases, provide for full-time programming that would otherwise be unavailable under the federal early childhood programs. As such, with greater access to intense (duration) childhood education programs, this increases the need for workers on a full-time basis which would in turn, increase labour force participation and reduce low income amongst First Nations women on reserve.

## *Parental Engagement*

On May 27, 2021, news about the discovery of 215 Indigenous children buried at the Kamloops Indian Residential schools made headlines across Canada. For many settlers, this gruesome discovery caused them significant distress and there was an immediate public outpouring of sympathy and disbelief at the atrocities of these so-called schools. For Indigenous Peoples, however, knowledge of the missing and buried children was not news. Indeed, stories of the missing and buried were whispered across generations and the TRC was careful to include an entire volume to this brutal arm of the colonial project enacted within residential schools across Canada over the span of 160 years.

For Indigenous Peoples, the spirits of those who never returned home remain close; their memories live on in the enduring hearts of mothers, fathers, sisters, aunts, uncles, moshums and kohkums. Our collective memory of those who never returned are a stark reminder to ourselves and to the broader Canadian public, of our enduring and immutable presence.

And while the nation grapples with how to cope, Indigenous Peoples carry forward and continue to process the legacy of Indian residential schools and to grieve for all that was taken. But it must also be recognized that while some of the legacy impacts of residential schools are visible, there are also less visible legacies that can be seen in the levels of distrust among Indigenous Peoples regarding education and other enculturation processes. Furthermore, with the known and imposed deprivation of on-reserve education by the federal government that has manufactured a sense of collective demoralization in education cannot be overlooked. Indeed, the ways in which education on-reserve has been both organized and funded can and must be seen as nothing short of a system designed to fail us. It is not surprising then, that on a national basis, First Nations non-completion rates remain upwards of 75 percent (Government of Canada, 2018a).

On an intergenerational level, it should be unsurprising that low levels of parental engagement are observed within early childhood and perhaps across the K–12 journey. The cumulative effect of the demoralization that occurs within the K–12 system, coupled with the legacy of mistrust from the Indian residential schools era, has created ripe conditions for the opposite — or parental *disengagement*. Indeed, as Piotr et al. (2019) concluded in their research on parental involvement in Indigenous youth sports, there is a direct and negative association between Indigenous female attendance at residential schools, and parental involvement in

schools. However, parental involvement has been shown to have a significant and positive relationship to academic achievement (Kimaro & Machumu, 2015) and has come to be understood as a key factor in changing a child's educational trajectory over a lifetime (Wilder, 2014). Jeynes (2003) further suggests that parental involvement, especially among minoritized students, yields greater, and even statistically significant, results among African American students in particular. Parental involvement among Indigenous populations, however, faces challenges unlike other student populations. Among First Nations populations, for instance, Frieze (2014) suggests that there are a "variety of reasons" (p. 14) for the lack of participation among First Nations parents including the belief that they are being called in for disciplinary reasons and past negative encounters with school staff that affect their perceptions about school engagement which leads to low levels of trust and respect between school staff and First Nations parents (p. 14). Lastly, Frieze suggests that First Nations parents lack the cultural knowledge about "how to act appropriately or positively" (Friedel, 1999, p. 20, in Frieze, 2014, p. 14) which can lead to disengagement by parents that is then perceived by school staff as lack of care or concern.

### ***Being in Good Relation***

A key aspect of the Indian residential school system was to break the bond between parent and child by removing the child from as much parental influence as possible. The intent of residential schools, and of colonization, was to undermine Indigenous ways of knowing and being and living in accordance with our spiritual laws such as *wahkohtowin* and *miyo michitowin* (or, "having or possessing good relations" (Cardinal & Hilderbrand, 2000, p. 15) in order to facilitate assimilation into western christian modes of living and behaving. In many ways, the bonds that were broken throughout this era are slowly starting to heal through decades of intergenerational healing that have followed. However, trust within First Nations communities, and among First Nations parents, vis-a-vis schooling remains quite low (Frieze, 2014, p. 15).

Recent research by Barrera-Osorio et al. (2020) contends that perceptions of trustworthiness can be significantly improved through parental involvement interventions that allow parents to "have a seat at the table" (p. 21) in terms of decision-making processes about their children's education. Frieze (2014) further suggests that including parents in decision-

making through targeted partnership programs can also have significant and positive improvements in parental involvement in schools, which may also lead to improved outcomes among Indigenous children. Over time, and with sustained engagement of parents in decision-making processes, Indigenous parental involvement/engagement may lead to improved perceptions of education, trustworthiness of schools and school staff, and parental participation in school processes. There may be an opportunity to explore parental school partnership strategies that engage parents in community with other parents, where parents are key informants and decision makers, and that seek to actively build trust.

## **Conclusion**

When I entered into my doctoral program seven years ago, I could not have foreseen what the journey would entail. Over the years, I have grown a deep and profound respect for the generations of Indigenous Peoples who have continued to thrive as opposed to survive in the face of the ongoing processes of colonization. Education, as Indigenous Peoples and other excluded and oppressed peoples understand and know painfully all-too-well, is a powerful tool. It has the power to liberate or oppress; it has the power to strengthen a peoples, or it can dehumanize. As Paulo Freire (1970) reminds me, liberation and humanization is a praxis; it is “the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it.” And it is through that lens that I reflect back on these seven years’ worth of experiences, and through the research that the KTC First Nations permitted me to engage in, where I realize that I have been fundamentally transformed.

I have been transformed in my understanding of what constitutes community-based and community-engaged research. I, like many others before me, believed that these processes simply meant I work to establish trust, act in good relation, and do no more harm. The basic tenets of Indigenous Research Methodology also guided my understanding here; namely, that my research was supposed to benefit the people I was researching and that it was their agenda and visions for the research that would take precedence over my own plain curiosities. I was reminded also about the need for reciprocal accountability in that what I do matches what I said I would do, and that my research would do no more harm.

But as I approached the completion of my research and began the process of writing these final chapters, I had forgotten that this, in fact, is not *my* research. It belongs to the community.

In failing to remember and understand this, I was not centering the needs of the community but rather my own.

I needed to finish.

I wanted to finish.

I was tired.

I wanted to end the nagging sensation that accompanies research at this level.

I wanted to move forward.

Community-based and community-engaged research, I know now, is not about me. It is not about the researcher. It is, however, about the obligations I, we, have to the community. I finished these chapters, and this dissertation then, with the view that I had an unmet accountability to the communities I said I would serve. I was also confronted with what I believed to be an overwhelming responsibility to produce some sort of magic bullet designed to solve a problem. The self-imposed delays were centered in my own self-doubt and unwillingness to accept responsibility, as opposed to remembering the ways in which this research might enable the KTC First Nations a window through which they may wish to further reflect and consider new or other approaches.

I was secondarily transformed in my understanding of the complexity of the colonial project. Having worked for the federal government for so long, my view was that policies were the primary agents being used to carry forward the colonial project. I believed and knew that policies were weaponized in order to subjugate Indigenous populations; however, I know now that sometimes it is the *absence of policy* that also keeps the colonial project moving forward. But perhaps more than any other one thing, I have been transformed by the knowledge that material deprivation over centuries has been the primary tool of oppression. We have seen the legacy of destruction that imposed poverty has made on our communities; we bear witness to it in the vast over-representation of Indigenous children in the child welfare system, the egregiously high numbers of Indigenous men and women in the carceral system, and the disproportionate numbers of Indigenous men, women, and families who live in abject poverty despite Canada being described as the “best country in the world” (U.S. News & World Report, 2021). We also bear witness to it in the vast numbers of Indigenous Peoples who never complete school, which, if similar rates were to be observed among *any other* population in Canada, would spark a national crisis.

Yet in spite of this, for more than 20 years, the KTC First Nations have carried forward the voices and visions of past generations of leaders and parents and have long-fought for the equal rights of Indigenous children within First Nations education. Coming together as a unified whole to form a single Education Authority, despite all that they have endured and experienced, is a testament to their strength, but also to their commitment to ensuring the next generation of leaders have what they need to be successful both in their communities and in society as a whole. The KTC First Nations, like many other Nations, hold the futures of children close and remind us all that children are a gift to us from the Creator. Even more, despite widespread and prolonged underfunding within early childhood, the communities came together to do what they could, with what they had, to ensure children had rich, meaningful, and caring environments.

I came into this research at the beginning of their journey as an Education Authority, and I will complete my research journey as they continue theirs. There is no doubt that the KTC Education Authority has, and will continue to, transform First Nations education for the benefit of KTC First Nations communities. I am forever grateful for the opportunity to bear witness to the greatness that they are undertaking.

### ***Final Reflection: On Naming and Claiming Genocide***

Given the nature and pace of my personal and professional life, the time I've dedicated to completing this dissertation has been sporadic, interspersed with intense periods of focus and considerable progress, followed by brief periods of delay. From time to time I would express that I was losing grip on the plot, or that my stamina was waning, or that I simply could not see the finish line anymore. My doctoral supervisor, Dr. Makere Stewart-Harawira, was always there to point out that the finish line, while like a mirage some days, was just beyond the horizon and to not lose sight of how far I've come and how little is left to be done. She has always been quick to point this out because she knows this from experience and has guided many others through this process. She knows this work is hard. She knows the painstaking efforts that are needed because of the importance of the work we do as Indigenous Peoples. She knows what needs to be said, where it needs to be said, and why it needs to be said. I trust her completely and so I just kept pushing, one day at a time.

The thing about doctoral supervisors, especially those who have been with you on your education journey for more than a decade, is that they come to know you really well. Dr.

Stewart-Harawira knows me this way. She has watched me grow and she has watched my nitanis grow from an infant into a teenager. She has watched me progress as an Indigenous woman in leadership outside of academia. She has watched me stumble, get back up, and keep going. But she also knows my behaviour patterns and she knows when I am trying to diffuse difficult topics; she knows when I want to say more yet I hold myself back. She knows.

A few weeks ago, she asked me if I was prepared to answer questions from my examination committee about whether I think the conclusions made in this research can be considered genocide. In typical fashion, I tried to diffuse the severity but answered ‘yes’, I am prepared. She pushed me further. I responded. I always respond. I have been trained my entire professional life to respond.

The next day we met for our weekly check-in, and I shared with her some of the thinking I had done about her question on genocide.

I told her that I have been trained, as an Indigenous person navigating complex colonial systems, to make really complex things, and really horrible things, less severe. I have been trained to diffuse the severity of the colonial project through carefully crafted language. I have been trained to say things without actually saying them. I do this because I know what happens when I don’t. I’ve come to know that those with power slam the doors to progress and justice closed when confronted too abruptly or too overtly with the truth. I know what happens to Indigenous, Black, and Persons of Colour when we step outside of our expected roles. We are demoted; we are shunned; we are humiliated and isolated when we push for the truth too hard. As a result, I have developed a talent and reputation not for being direct, but rather for my ability to influence others by ‘inspiring’ them to see the hope and opportunity in the challenges we face together, and not by directly confronting the brutality of the settler-colonial project. I make people feel comfortable, not uncomfortable, with the truth.

And so, when I was asked about whether I thought the material deprivation described in this research was genocide, I panicked. My inner dialogue, though, kept yelling at me to say it out loud.

Genocide.

Genocide.

I get it. It’s a hard word to say. Many Canadians are quick to say that the settler-colonial project and associated assimilation, not genocide, within our own borders is nothing like the

genocide we have come to equate with Nazi Germany or Rwanda. Canada is, after all, one of the most peaceful and accepting countries in the world.

Except that it's not.

Having spent decades thinking about and studying colonialism in what is now known as Canada, it's an easy yet exceptionally painful statement to make: Canada has and continues to commit genocide against Indigenous Peoples. And I say *continues* because we tend to think about genocide as a static one-time event. We don't talk about genocide as also being something that is possible over centuries. Indeed, there is no time stamp on how long the intentional killing of a group has to take place in order for it to be considered 'genocidal.' The careful mapping of the settler colonial project in this research, and in other's research, through forced sterilizations, 'relocations' of hundreds of Indigenous communities, massive child apprehensions through the Sixties and Millennial Scoops, the massive over-incarceration of Indigenous Peoples, the starvation and experimentation on Indigenous Peoples both inside and outside of residential schools, and the endured and prolonged material and social deprivation in every sphere of our existence point in one conclusive direction: Genocide.

As the United Nations (U.N., 1951) makes clear under Article II of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide,

*Genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:*

- 1. Killing members of the group;*
- 2. Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;*
- 3. Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;*
- 4. Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;*
- 5. Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.*

The U.N. goes on to state the elements of the crime of genocide:

may take place in the context of an armed conflict, international or non-international, but **also in the context of a peaceful situation.** The latter is less common but still possible.

The same article establishes the obligation of the contracting parties to prevent and to punish the crime of genocide.

The popular understanding of what constitutes genocide tends to be broader than the content of the norm under international law. Article II of the Genocide Convention contains a narrow definition of the crime of genocide, which includes two main elements:

1. *A mental element*: the "intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such"; and
2. *A physical element*, which includes the following five acts, enumerated exhaustively:
  - Killing members of the group
  - Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group
  - ***Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part***
  - Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group
  - Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group  
(United Nations, 1951, para. 6–7, emphasis added)

I have highlighted the second sentence of the first paragraph and the third bullet under the United Nations definition of the physical element of genocide as this became clearer to me as I pieced together the constellation of efforts to destroy, *in whole or in part*, us as a People through a complex web of omission, neglect, calculated efforts, and deliberate underfunding. In essence, the constellation spells out with precise clarity the conditions of life that are intended to bring us to an end. But getting to this understanding was not easy. I've spent close to 20 years working with, for, and among Indigenous Peoples and it has only been through prolonged exposure to the manifestations of the genocidal colonial project where I am able to see through the clouds that obscure this precise constellation. And perhaps that is the intent after all: to obscure.

When the TRC released its final reports and Calls to Action, I was quick to note that they had framed it as 'cultural genocide' (TRC, 2015, p. 1). I had several subsequent conversations with Indigenous colleagues to try and understand the implications of this phrase. As a 1st year doctoral student, I was still naive in terms in my understanding of this nuance and the ways in

which it allowed Canada, and Canadians, to side-step ownership of the genocide that had been committed and pulled forward into the 21st century. And I am not alone. As the U.N. (1951, para. 8) also states,

The **intent is the most difficult element to determine**. To constitute genocide, there must be a proven intent on the part of perpetrators to physically destroy a national, ethnical, racial or religious group. **Cultural destruction does not suffice**, nor does an intention to simply disperse a group. It is this special intent, or *dolus specialis*, that makes the crime of genocide so unique. In addition, case law has associated intent with the existence of a State or organizational plan or policy, even if the definition of genocide in international law does not include that element. (1951, para. 8, emphasis added)

Although the TRC completed its mandate and recorded the truthful testimony of thousands of Survivors by naming and speaking to the horrors of the Indian Residential School system as well as the lingering impacts, “cultural genocide” as they labelled it, enabled the state to side-step being held accountable for committing genocide on a national and international scale. Dr. Tamara Starblanket (2018) was instrumental in guiding me to this place of understanding and her painstaking analysis of the ways in which “cultural genocide” enables the state to obscure the intent that the definition of the UN Convention on Genocide demands. Although it slowly became clear to me that the sum totality of the settler colonial project was indeed genocide, I was still unable to name it.

Earlier this year, I picked up a book by James Baldwin entitled *The Fire Next Time* (1963), written almost 60 years ago. Despite the length of time since it was first written, I was struck by the ways in which Baldwin’s description of the life of the Black man had barely moved in the time he wrote it, which was one hundred years since emancipation, and in the 60 years that followed. Baldwin writes in descriptive detail all the ways in which his nephew’s life, much like his own, was set from the start. His nephew, he declares, was born into a “ghetto in which, in fact, it [the United States] intended you should perish” (p. 18). He goes further to describe that the precision of his life’s outcomes are “because you are black, *and for no other reason*” (p. 19).

Although Baldwin’s words are compelling throughout the chapter entitled *Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation*, I was struck by one passage in particular, so much so that I bought the audio book and listened to it over and over and over again. The words, while painful and honest, ruptured something in me:

The limits of your ambition were, thus, expected to be set forever. You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being. You were not expected to aspire to excellence: you were expected to make peace with mediocrity. Where you have turned, James, in your short time on this earth, you have been told where you could go and what you could do (*and how you could do it*) and where you could live and whom you could marry. I know your countrymen do not agree with me about this, and I hear them saying, "You exaggerate." They do not know Harlem, and I do. So do you. Take no one's word for anything, including mine — but trust your experience. Know whence you came, there is really no limit to where you can go. The details and symbols of your life have been deliberately constructed to make you believe what people say about you. Please try to remember that what they believe, as well as what they do and cause you to endure, does not testify to your inferiority, but to their inhumanity and fear. (Baldwin, 1963, p. 19)

Baldwin goes on to explain that the precision of the white man's efforts to dehumanize the black man are a deliberate attempt to keep Black people as a fixed and reliable star in the constellation, or the mind, of the white man. And the moment Black people strive for freedom or "move[s] out of place" (p. 20), heaven and earth "are shaken to their foundation" (p. 20).

I see now, through Baldwin's words and my own interpretation and application of them to the Indigenous experience, the ways in which the conditions of life for Indigenous Peoples have been carefully laid down for more than four centuries. We were never intended to move out of the fixed constellation and place within the settler imagination as inhuman, worthless, and as a 'burden.' But here we are.

I see through the state-constructed clouds that have obscured the precise location of each star in the constellation of genocide that has taken place in this country. This research, my life, and the lives of millions of other Indigenous Peoples, are a testament to the truth that despite the conditions of our existence being spelled out from the start and in the permanence of the constellation, these state-constructed clouds (i.e. 'cultural genocide') can no longer cover the stars that grow brighter, shine brighter, the more we speak them into existence.

And I conclude by stating that while I was pensive about writing these words, and to call what has happened genocide, I recognize the power these words hold in transforming the path ahead. Although I struggled to say the word and to write it, I see now the ways in which

Baldwin, and so many others before and after him, have called on us to not feel fear, or to feel lost. Baldwin's call has resonated in my mind since I read it:

You come from a long line of great poets, some of the greatest poets since Homer. One of them said, *The very time I thought I was lost, My dungeon shook and my chains fell off.*

(1963, p. 21)

My chains have fallen off. Let the dungeon shake.

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