# An Intersectional Perspective on Experiences Inspiring Transition to University Among First Nations Learners

by
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## Abstract

The literature on the university participation of First Nations (First Peoples of Canada) learners pointed to historic K-12 challenges and competing demands that hinder their transition to university. Although learners' attendance is rising steadily, more females than males attend university. The author sought an understanding of experiences that could inspire First Nations learners to attend university. The author examined the influence of race, gender, and socioeconomic background and identified differences or similarities in the experiences by comparing Bourdieu's (1977, 1985, 1986, 1990a) theory of practice and First Nations learners' experience of the transition within their academic fields, as well as their sources of inspiration throughout the processes. Using a biographical method, interviewing First Nations university students, and integrating a relational accountability of Indigenous research paradigm, the author demonstrated that they experienced different fields and possessed capital (i.e., *ore of capital*) and that certain life events as well as inspiration from family, community, and external sources that the author proposed are capital, triggered their action towards university enrollment. In addition, the learners' school fields appeared different from Bourdieu's with regard to competition in the field because of their collective-oriented ethos. However, their socioeconomic backgrounds inspired their transition, although child-raising responsibilities can hinder the transition for university aspirants, more for females than for males. Parallel with Bourdieu's notions, the families' habitus transformed through events of awakening and exposure to certain environments. This study, which offers a rare analysis of First Nations learners' transition to university in relation to Bourdieu's theory of practice and their inspiration, has resulted in a fuller understanding of the individual and structural factors that guide education practitioners, academia, and communities in advancing the university participation of First Nations learners.

# Dedication

To my father, Ferdinand A. Bannerman; my mother,
Mary Narteh Teyehingmeh; and my uncle, Godfred Narteh Teyehingmeh.
I have done for you what you wished you could have done for
yourselves and your ensuing generations.

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# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

## Into the Past

I was one of those who felt lost! It was after a few classes in elementary school at the age of 9 that I perceived a cognitive struggle in me. It felt like a 'dis-ease' that presented itself when I was in school, and went into remission when I was home caring for my younger siblings, doing house chores, in the market buying food items and feeding the chickens. I enjoyed 'seeing and observing,' touching, feeling, etc. So, not much made sense in class. The teacher wrote the notes on the blackboard and I copied. I took the notes home day after day. I had many chores to do at home. Studying at home was not as important as attending school; no one had to tell me. School became a familiar environment over time but not learning friendly. Teachers were quick to label students for their difficulties in various subject areas. Moreover, when labeled, you have no hope of redemption. You are stuck! I began searching for hope. I chased after it wherever I saw its shadow. I found hope in myself that came on the wings of inspiration, but it did not last. Then one day, hope searched for me. He said: I am your teacher, I am your parents, I am your family. I came to guide and inspire you on this journey. He took my hand. I found that he was wise and was enlarging my vision about myself. However, like many of my colleagues, I felt unnecessary anxiety when it was time to do our external junior high exams that qualified you for senior high school. I was not sure what to expect. I knew from past questions that the exam could either work in your favour or not. From a neighbourhood of scarce exposure to modern technology, I imagined that the exam setters would recognize that certain things were not within my frame of reference. I was in shock as I read the exam questions before me that fateful exam day. A considerable portion of the exam was about the telephone, how it was operated and names of its parts. I knew right away that the school system had no regard for under-privileged students like me. Sadly, this was how people like myself were excluded from succeeding with no hope. I did my best. I succeeded but I often thought of my colleagues whose overall grade on this English exam was stunted because of this 'telephone' portion of the exam. My success allowed me to attend a privileged high school that brought on its attendant challenges. All this while hope was with me. Hope walked with me until a point in the journey; then I let go. I let go of hope not because I did not need hope. There were giants in our way. I feared that I would not make it to my destination. Also, it felt as if I only could see the giants in the way because everyone else seeing from the outside thought all was well with me. I got lost because I let go of hope. Hope went searching for me again. Then hope found me. But this time, hope came from afar, beyond the skies. Hope reached out to me, yet I could not see his face. He told me that he came to give me hope, to tell me I can. Hope told me his story. I saw myself in his story. I believed in hope and hope believed in me. Hope showed me the way. Hope inspired me. It was a long journey. Now I am here! (Cynthia Arku, December 6, 2010)

## Overview of the Research

Postsecondary participation among Aboriginal Canadians[1] has risen steadily from 38% in 2001 to 44% in 2006 (including trades credentials, college diplomas, university degrees, etc.; Kroes, 2008), with fewer Aboriginal males than females participating (Government of Alberta [GOA], 2006) for reasons that remain unclear (Canadian Council on Learning [CCL], 2009). The proportion of First Nations postsecondary students who attend university is unclear. However, this disparity warrants research to understand how, for example, race, gender, and socioeconomic background intersect in inspiring university transition, which is this study's focus. In this study I refer to studies in the literature that focus on *Aboriginal* peoples, who consist of all three main groups (i.e., First Nations, Métis, and Inuit; Statistics Canada, 2010a), although I conducted my study with First Nations only because information on the subjects that I discuss might not be available on First Nations only.

Why do people undertake further education? Global competition and an oversupply of qualified labour (Brown, 2001) have meant that completion of high school is inadequate to support a reasonable life (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2010; United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, 2007). "Well-educated knowledge workers are the new 'natural resource' of the new global economy" (Lynch, 2006,

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[1] Aboriginal Canadians are the original people who lived in Canada before the coming of the Europeans (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples [RCAP], 1996). Aboriginal peoples in Canada consist of three groups; namely, First Nations (also known as North American Indians), Métis, and Inuit Aboriginal peoples of Canada, as defined in the *Constitution Act, 1982*, section 35 (2); Statistics Canada, 2016). Censuses show that those who self-identify as Aboriginal comprised a population of 1,400,685 in 2011, which represented 4.3% of the total Canadian population. The population of Aboriginal peoples has increased significantly. Aboriginal peoples made up 3.8% (1.1 million) of the Canadian population in 2006, 3.3% in 2001, and 2.8% in 1996. First Nations have comprised the majority. As of 2011, the Aboriginal population has been comprised of 60.8% First Nations, 32.3% Métis, and 4 2% Inuit (Statistics Canada, 2010a, 2016). Aboriginal peoples in Alberta are predominantly First Nations and Métis (Statistics Canada, 2010b).

p. 13). These realities influence the decision of many to attend university. However, some pursue postsecondary education (PSE) for reasons that are not job related (Zhang & Palameta, 2006).

Statistics Canada (2010c) reported that the K-12 school graduation rate is almost three times lower among Canadian Aboriginal peoples than other Canadians for reasons that include an oppressive residential school history, culturally insensitive schools, and inadequate parental involvement and career planning (CCL, 2007; Indian and Northern Affairs Canada [INAC], 2005a; Steinhauer, 2008; Wotherspoon & Satzewich, 2000). Because the statistics tend to depict Aboriginal communities as damaged, researchers have taken a pathological approach or adopted a deficit model that is flawed with damage-centred frameworks and attitudes usually aimed at political or material gains. Tuck (2009), in *Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities*, pointed out the danger of damage-centred research:

> It is a pathologizing approach in which the oppression singularly defines a community. [It is] research that operates, even benevolently, from a theory of change that establishes harm or injury in order to achieve reparation. . . . Pain and loss are documented in order to obtain particular political or material gains. (p. 413)

Although depathological research is necessary, it important to understand the reasons for the inequalities in educational transition and the ways that learners navigate systems of education.

The low graduation rate of Aboriginal learners suggests that the majority of their university transition are likely to occur later in life, although adult postsecondary students might navigate challenges with their participation in paid and/or unpaid work, childbearing, marriage, parenting, care for a sick relative, and geographical location (CCL, 2009; Frenette, 2002; Looker & Dwyer, 1998). Often, studies with Aboriginal peoples invite them "to speak but to only speak from that space in the margin that is a sign of deprivation, a wound, an unfulfilled longing. Only speak your pain" (hooks, 1990; as cited in Tuck, 2009, p. 413). I wondered, Are researchers taking an interest in highlighting how Aboriginal peoples are navigating the systems to achieve success and finding out what is inspiring them to do so? The research that I had been reading frequently demonstrated deficit, and I wondered how this approach had become the norm. After seeing too much pathologising research that, from discussions with Elders, Tuck (2009) underscored that Elders "agree that a time for a shift has come, that damage-centred narratives are no longer sufficient. We are in a new historical moment" (pp. 415-416). Smith (2012) noted that "events and accounts which focus on the active resistance [for example] are important not just because they speak to our survival, but they celebrate our being at an ordinary human level and affirm our identities as indigenous[2] women and men" (p. 146). I found Bourdieu's (1977, 1986) theory of practise a suitable lens for this study because it could not only help me to explain the struggles of some First Nations learners, but also unveil the processes by which they navigated, survived, and countered those struggles and eventually triumphed into university. In this way, Bourdieu's theory helped me to identify the events, activities, moments of inspiration, and decision points, along with the influences of race, gender, and socioeconomic status (SES), which culminated in stories that celebrate First Nations men's and women's lives for being able to attend university in spite of their struggles.

Conceptions of educational decisions grounded in human-capital and rational-choice theories do not capture the full range of individual motivations (Gorard & Rees, 2002). Human-capital theory suggests a narrow conceptualisation that links learning to the development of an individual's and society's economic wealth (Livingstone, 2009; Robeyns, 2006). This notion has shifted explanations of inequality from structural to individualistic accounts that hold individuals responsible for their life chances (Coffield, 1999). Rational-choice theory suggests that individuals with knowledge of market conditions make decisions about resources with their best interests in mind (Redmond, 2006). Both human-capital and rational theories recognise the power of individual agency but neglect the impact of the larger structural forces and subjective dimensions (e.g., a person's social location, spirituality, materiality, and relationships with others), which all shape individual choices (Livingstone, 2009; Scott, 2006). Research that examines the variety of factors that shape transition are therefore necessary.

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[2] I use *Indigenous* in this dissertation to refer to people who self-identify as having an ancestry with original inhabitants of places such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand, United States of America, and other countries (Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008). Because of the diversity of Indigenous peoples, I specifically refer to Aboriginal, Aboriginal peoples, Natives, and First Nations such as those of Canada. Although the three main groups of Aboriginal peoples in Canada are First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (Statistics Canada, 2010a), I use *First Nations* and *Natives* interchangeably.

From my review of the literature, I found little about the transition to university for First Nations students in Canada. Generally, it is well documented that the determinants of postsecondary learning include access to knowledge and finance (Frennete, 2010; Taylor & Steinhauer, 2010), unexpected encounters (e.g., a traumatic illness, job loss, change in job location, and change in job; Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997), and social capital from formal and informal institutions, peers, teachers, and churches (Coleman, 1990; Fuller & Hannum, 2002; Gofen, 2009; Putman, 2000; Voigt, 2007). Other determinants of PSE participation include parents' educational level and income (Bourdieu, 1977; Lehmann, 2007; Walpole, 2003). Students with parents who attended university are also more likely to attend (CCL, 2009). Furthermore, Sewell and Hauser (1980) noted the influence of mental ability, personal ambition, and luck. An individual's conditions do not work in isolation to determine university transition, which suggests that an intersectional perspective on identity locations and experiences can foster a fuller understanding of the factors that inspire university transition.

However, researchers who have examined how the intersections of locations and identities determine First Nations students' decision to attend university are sparse. The few studies on First Nations peoples' PSE transition have explored career pathways of youth (18-34 years). Taylor and Steinhauer (2010), for example, looked at the challenges of First Nations youth who transition into health programs in Alberta. Researchers have rarely looked at university transition from a gender perspective within the First Nations group in Canada. Neither have they taken an intersectional perspective in which they analysed a combination of categories of identities of learners and their effects on transition (see DeFrancisco & Palczewski, 2007). As well, desire-based frameworks for "understanding complexity, contradiction and self-determination of lived lives" (Tuck, 2009, p. 416) for depathologising research that account for the hope, visions, and wisdom of lived lives within Aboriginal communities are rare.

Therefore, in this study I explored the intersectional experiences of gender, race, and socioeconomic backgrounds and how they influence First Nations learners' attendance at university, with an emphasis on what inspired them. First Nations learners were the target population whom I researched. I chose them because they formed the majority in the Transition Year Program (TYP), which permitted a deeper exploration that was evidence specific and relevant to this group. I framed this study from the perspective of Bourdieu's (1986) theory of practice. Also, I was open to exploring areas of the theory that my hunch told me would be somewhat less compatible in the First Nations learner's context, such as competition in the school field. Bourdieu's theory of practice explains the link between the structural and individual dimensions of the social processes of social inequality and, to an extent, social change. The theory recognises that identity categories (e.g., race, gender, and socioeconomic background; Adkins, 2003; Bourdieu, 1984, 1985, 1986) and how the combinations of categories define one's location (i.e., intersectionality; DeFrancisco & Palczewski, 2007). The theory's emphasis on both individual and structural influences as well the role of identity(ies) in shaping educational experiences (Bourdieu & Champagne, 1999; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) promotes a fuller understanding of the processes that First Nations learners negotiate to get to university.

Three key concepts are foundational to Bourdieu's (1986) theory of practice; namely, *capital, field*, and *habitus*. *Capital* comprises the concepts of economic (finances), social (relations among persons), and cultural (acquired dispositions and credentials from family; Bourdieu, 1986; Caspi, 1998) that people use to advance their position in the field. In terms of First Nations' educational goals, advancing their position might be synonymous culturally grounded education that promotes school achievement and skills to enable access to employment (MNWGE, 2002). The *field* as "a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 97) is where power struggles occur among the players as they use their individual strategies. Bourdieu (1977) indicated that there are various fields. Institutions can be considered fields. There are different institutional fields (e.g., family, school, and workplace), and the capitals in one field might not be valued in another. *Habitus* is a view of the world, place, attitudes, beliefs, and experiences that influence subsequent behaviour with regard to possible accomplishments, aspirations, and subsequent actions (Bourdieu, 1985, 1986; Dumais, 2002). The field and habitus are interdependent. In the field, individuals "exist as agents" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 107) and are the primary focus of research. Thus, university transition for First Nations peoples can occur when their horizons for action or habitus include the possibility of higher education and when they have sufficient support (e.g., resources from government, private and nongovernmental sources) for their transition.

Their transition occurs through the hope, visions, and self-determination that they live, which is why I sought an understanding of the factors that lead to successful transition and what the choice to attend university means for First Nations students. I further argue that it is possible to understand gender oppression better by analysing both genders and other differences, including racialised and classed identities (i.e., feminist intersectionality; Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2008; Weiler, 2009), because gender as a constructed identity can create a different meaning of schooling for males and females, even if they share similar class or racial identities (Dentith & Peterlin, 2011; Rao & Kelleher, 2000). Additionally, social divisions such as gender, class, and race/ethnicity always influence relations within a field (including the capitals that people value; Bourdieu, 1986, 1987; Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2008).

Drawing on these notions, I proposed an intersectional theoretical framework that recognises how First Nations people act as agents to negotiate social structures (including the barriers and opportunities of the education and other social fields) to enable their university transition. I used a biographical method or life history (as a form of narrative studies from a constructivist perspective; Roberts, 2002) that complements an Indigenous research paradigm, which is relational (Lavellée, 2009; Wilson, 2008), to examine the TYP at the University of Alberta (U of A). In biographical interviews, the participants told stories of their own views and meanings of social phenomena as they experienced and understand them. The stories are capable, on their own, of revealing personal, social, cultural, and political meanings (Chaitin, 2004; Kainan, Rozenberg, & Munk, 2005; Patton, 2002; Tierney, 2003; Wilson, 2008). The TYP is an alternate route to university for Aboriginal students (Arku, 2011).

I gathered data from semistructured interviews with 10 First Nations participants, five male and five female, who lived or went to a K-12 school on a reserve,[3] which is land set aside for use by First Nations (National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2017). Interviewing permitted a flexible exchange to obtain the participants' accounts in their own words (Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008) for credible and robust conclusions (Creswell, 2007).

I developed individual stories from the individual interviews (from phases 1 and 2) and identified common themes that ran through the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Richards & Morse, 2007) as they related to the research questions. The stories highlighted gender, race, and socioeconomic experiences; macro and micro barriers and opportunities; and how all of these intersected to shape the field, capital, habitus, and, ultimately, the participants' transition to university. I used quality strategies including member checks and integrated thick descriptions into the text; as well, I strictly complied with the ethical protocols of the U of A to avoid any potential harm (Maxwell, 2005; Smith, 2012; Weber-Pillwax, 1999).

Academics, policy makers, educators, counselors, and First Nations leaders should find this study insightful and useful because they can draw on it for their teaching and learning practices and advocacy work. My intention was to shift away from damage-centred research with "commonly held assumptions of responsibility, cohesiveness, ignorance and paralysis within dispossessed and disenfranchised communities" (Tuck, 2009, p. 417) by uncovering what is hidden behind the scenes of lived lives as well as the desires, hopes, inspirations, and successes. This is important to transform the discourse, empower First Nations communities, and advance approaches that inspire such transition.

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[3] "A reserve is the land that is set aside by the Crown for the use and benefit of a band in Canada" (National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2017, p. 1). About 500,000 First Nations people live on reserves. About 79% of the reserves have a population of under 1,000 resident, and 57% have less than 500 residents (Stastna, 2014).

The following section is a background description of how I identified the research problem; it outlines my goals and objectives.

## Study Background

I carried out a small-scale study in which I interviewed three TYP female students (two First Nations and one Métis) at the U of A as part of my Issues in Indigenous Education field-based course that gives students hands-on practice with Indigenous research protocols and experience. Prior to starting the course, I discovered the TYP through an annual students' conference that my department held in which the students presented their work. I visited the TYP centre and determined that it would be a suitable target group for the study. Because strength-based approaches that recognise individuals as capable (Cherkowski & Walker, 2016) of turning difficult circumstances into success stories inspire me, I was excited to find that the TYP students could have potentially significant stories to support the aims of this study. Having completed the reading course materials on Indigenous education, followed by a classroom session, we shared insights into our research topics and methodologies and uncovered ethical matters and procedures pertinent to Indigenous research that we would honour. Then we started our research process.

At the Aboriginal Students Services Centre (ASSC), which houses the TYP, the director and TYP co-ordinator very generously opened their doors to me to access their students for my small-scale exploration. I explained my study and purpose with them, and they gave me permission to engage with their students. I interviewed three TYP students, and we shared moments of emotional distress and excitement as the students' stories revealed real experiences of racism, discouragement, and motivation from various sources, including Aboriginal role models, family, and friends. Even though my focus was on university transition, the students often linked this transition to challenges in their K-12 education. The depth of understanding that I gained from this process validated the relevance of investigating further Aboriginal students' experiences of transitioning to university. I refer to conclusions from my small-scale study as I construct the research issue and position the study within the literature on Aboriginal peoples' education.

As I read literature on Canadian education, I found an increased participation of Aboriginal peoples in PSE in general and a call for more progress, especially in today's dynamic knowledge economy, where higher education and more skills are considered essential to sustain a reasonable standard of living (Kroes, 2008). Livingstone (2010) affirmed that "there is now a nearly universal expectation, in Canada, at least, that a postsecondary credential is needed to 'get along' in today's world" (p. 29). He also noted that underemployment is a growing problem. According to the CCL (2009), 7.7% of Aboriginal people have attained university credentials, compared with 23.4% of the non-Aboriginal population. Studies have indicated that Aboriginal peoples are more likely than others to leave school at an early age and return later (Statistics Canada, 2010c). The three-year high school completion rate of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students in Alberta increased by 8% (from 2010/2011, the benchmark) to 50.2% in 2014/2015. The three-year completion rate for students overall was 76.5% in 2014/2015, an increase of 2.3% from 2010/2011 (Mah, 2016). The reasons for leaving school early are to start a family, doubting of one's ability, poor relationships with school staff and peers, disinterest and boredom in school, low performance, social exclusion, feelings of discrimination, behaviour struggles, and attraction to work (Clandinin et al., 2010). Challenges in the K-12 experience such as racism, family struggles, and negative affirmation can limit the postsecondary transition (Arku, 2011).

The socioeconomic impacts of low graduation rates (with other factors) have been far reaching (Guimond & Cook, 2008). Many Aboriginal communities face unemployment of 50% to 75% (Malatest, 2004, p. 13). According to the 2006 Census data, the national employment rate for Aboriginal peoples of 25 to 54 years was up to 65.8% from 61.2% in 2001 compared to 81.6% from 80.3% in 2001 for the general population (Statistics Canada, 2015). Seasonal jobs and social assistance are the main sources of livelihood for some people who live on reserves (Malatest, 2004, p. 13). Studies have indicated that in communities where oil and gas activities have created vast amounts of wealth, Aboriginal peoples are more likely than others to work at low-paid or semiskilled jobs (Taylor et al., 2009).

It is not surprising that the issue of PSE participation among Aboriginal peoples has seen wide interest among Aboriginal leaders and communities, scholars, and governments (Battiste, 2002; Castellano, 2008; CCL, 2007; INAC, 2005; Townsend & Wernick, 2008). This is because it is one of the areas (among others) where investment is perceived to have the capability of advancing socioeconomic development (Taylor & Steinhauer, 2010). Alberta's Premier Rachel Notley and the Ministry of Indigenous Relations' *Business Plan: Indigenous Relations* noted that among her strategies was to "address barriers preventing Indigenous peoples from participating in the economy" (GOA, 2017a, p. 90). The Ministry of Education assured us that "the systemic education achievement gap between First Nations, Métis and Inuit students and all other students is eliminated" (GOA, 2017b, p. 52). Thus, they recognised the difference between Aboriginal and all other learners that needs attention. The reasons for furthering one's education vary. Although economic gains can drive such decisions, the motivation of some Aboriginal peoples to return to school can also be based on a noneconomic rationale such as the need to become role models for their children, their determination to transform negative stereotypes, and their desire to help others (Arku, 2011).

## Research Goal and Objectives

Studies have shown that students' transition from elementary to high school and then to PSE have been complex, nonlinear, multiple, and differentiated (Sawchuk & Taylor, 2010; Taylor & Steinhauer, 2010). More Aboriginal females than males are entering postsecondary training or preparing to enter it after having been away from school for a significant amount of time (Taylor et al., 2009). Some research has been conducted on the transition challenges of First Nations' youth in oil-sands communities (Taylor & Steinhauer, 2010) and, sparingly, on the events and experiences that inspired them to enter PSE or return to school.

Although Aboriginal peoples are enrolling in university, an intersectional analysis that details the gender, race, and socioeconomic experiences that have inspired their decision to attend university several years after their K-12 education is a gap in the literature that I wanted to fill. I chose to focus on First Nations learners as a target group instead of all three groups of Aboriginal peoples to ensure that my conclusions would be more compelling and credible for this particular group. The goal of this study, therefore, was to understand the experiences that inspire First Nations learners to transition to university by examining their gender, race, and socioeconomic backgrounds. In this study I asked the following research questions:

1. What experiences inspire First Nations learners to attend university?
2. How are Bourdieu's (1977, 1986) ideas about social reproduction and reconstruction helpful in understanding these experiences?

3. How do First Nations learners' experiences of inspiration take into account their race, gender, and socioeconomic background through the processes of transitioning to university?

In the next section I examine the terminology, inspiration, and importance of this concept in the university transition of First Nations learners.

## Inspiration: Could This Spur Transition to University?

*Inspiration*, *inspire*, *inspiring* and other grammatical forms that I use in this study suggest that inspiration is an important part of human life, whether it spiritually, emotionally, or physically affects a person. Inspiration creates new responses to something new, builds the confidence to do something again, and creates a better life. The life that individuals receive from the Creator or give to each other reinvigorates and renews life, bringing realisation and action to new possibilities, which is the emphasis of this study in which I sought an understanding of the experiences that could inspire First Nations learners' transition to university.

*Inspiring* (2017b), according to the *Merriam-Webster dictionary*, means, "causing people to want to do or create something or to lead better lives" (Definition of *inspiring* for English Language Learners section, para. 1), and the act of inspiring tends to have "an animating or exalting effect" (Definition of inspiring section, para. 1). Therefore, inspiring someone means that that person feels that anything is possible, sets creativity in motion, and has a can-do attitude, whether to develop a thing or improve his/her own life or the lives of others.

*Inspiration* (2017a) is defined as "a: a divine influence or action on a person believed to qualify him or her to receive and communicate sacred revelation. b: the action or power of moving the intellect or emotions. c: the act of influencing or suggesting opinions" (definition 1). This implies that inspiration brings out certain attributes and actions that would otherwise not surface without being induced. In other words, a person receives something (i.e., a message from seeing, hearing, feeling, touching, tasting, and smelling) that communicates understanding, which might have been hidden, because what that person understands is termed a *sacred revelation*. Therefore, if certain acts bring about revelation, then we might not know some things until we experience the acts. Further, inspiration is as action that moves intellect or emotions, which means that the movements in these faculties culminate in forms that include new ideas, products, beliefs, and behaviours as the person's intellect and emotions become stimulated to a place where the person can see possibilities. As well, a person who performs the "act of influencing or suggesting opinions" (definition 1) might be an inspiration to someone. This inspiration involves a scheme of things, events, something that makes a person desire and feel capable of doing, an idea, a force, "a person, place, experience, etc., that makes someone want to do or create something" (Definition of *inspiring* for English Language Learners section, para. 1). Thus, inspiration carries the potential for exchange, learning, and change.

The history of the word *inspiration* (2017a) indicates that it is used figuratively, and its original roots are in theology and human anatomy. It refers to breathing in (as in biology), similarly to the word *expiration* as breathing out in biology. Prior to its biological connotation, inspiration had a theological meaning:

> *Inspiration* has an unusual history in that its figurative sense appears to predate its literal one. It comes from the Latin *inspiratus* (the past participle of *inspirare*, "to breathe into, inspire") and in English has had the meaning "the drawing of air into the lungs" since the middle of the 16th century. This breathing sense is still in common use among doctors, as is *expiration* ("the act or process of releasing air from the lungs"). However, before *inspiration* was used to refer to breath it had a distinctly theological meaning in English, referring to a divine influence upon a person, from a divine entity; this sense dates back to the early 14th century. The sense of *inspiration* often found today ("someone or something that inspires") is considerably newer than either of these two senses, dating from the 19th century. (The inspirational history of *inspiration* section, para. 1)

Thus, the word *inspiration* (2017a) has evolved over the years. Having had its origin in the act of breathing suggests that it is a universally necessary part of human life, that a person is unable to exhale without first taking in or receiving a breath. In the same way, inspiration suggests that it is by "divine influence" (The inspirational history of *inspiration* section, para. 1); or, in other words, a sacred experience, as the dictionary noted. This theological understanding is consistent with my worldview as a Christian from an Aboriginal culture. As a Christian, I believe that God breathed into the first human and that breathing in and breathing out were part of God's immaculate design to ensure that creation would reenergise and revitalise itself. Aboriginal ontologies consider all creatures, including humans, interconnected, sacred, and spiritual; the Earth is their mother, and they value preservation by caring for and nourishing one another (Gamlin, 2003; Little Bear, 2000; Wilson, 2008). Therefore, the historical meaning of breathing in, which is associated with inspiration, is that the act of inspiring someone or being inspired can also be spiritually, emotionally, and physically invigorating.

Inspiration (2017a) is "an inspiring agent or influence" (definition 4). Anthony Giddens (1989) talked about what it means to be an agent: It is to be purposive and to exercise power.

> Agency concerns events of which an individual is the perpetrator, in the sense that the individual could, at any phase in a given sequence of conduct, have acted differently. Whatever happened would not have happened if that individual had not intervened. (p. 9)

Therefore, to be an inspiring agent or an inspiration is to act purposively and rationally and to understand that the actions of a person who receives the inspiration or is inspired will yield certain results in the person—results that might be impossible without the inspiring agent. Thus, if reinvigorating life-giving exchanges and communication, activities, opportunities, and events can spur educational progress and, ultimately, First Nations learners' transition to university, then how can educational policies and practice advance inspiration to facilitate more progress in the transition—which is an important rationale of this study.

Next, I explain how I became inspired to study First Nations learners' transition to university. My intent was to convey an understanding of how my life, education, and work experiences and other people shaped my decision to embark on such a study.

## My Inspiration for This Study

For an interpretive[4] study it is important that I articulate my background and preunderstanding because they shaped the research process and my interpretation of the findings as knowledge came through relationships with the cosmos (Smith, 1999). As Indigenous Cree[5] scholar Shawn Wilson (2008) said, "I have situated myself in the research process by giving a detailed explanation of my background. This is required by the Indigenous axiology and methodology of relational accountability" (p. 10). I begin with the presumption that we live in a social world with multiple interpretations and truths (Bruner, 1987; Hoppe, 1999; Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008) where there is no such thing as value-free knowledge. Yanow (2000) noted:

> In this world there are "no brute data" whose value is beyond dispute. Dispassionate, rigorous science is possible—but not the neutral, objective science stipulated by traditional analytic methods (as represented by scientific method). As living requires sensemaking, and sensemaking entail interpretation, so too does policy analysis. . . . It is not possible for the analyst to stand outside of the policy issue being studied, free of its values and meanings, and of the analyst's values, beliefs, and feelings. (pp. 5-6)

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[4] Interpretive analysis derived from neo-Kantian philosophy in the late 19th century and the 20th century relies heavily on the analysis of values. For neo-Kantian scholars, values cannot be separated from facts, as was the practice of scientific analysis. They believed that a priori knowledge is paramount to knowledge making and interpretation. Here, consciousness, or *weltanschauung*, paradigm, frames, and lenses all influence our sense perceptions and response to physical stimuli in sense making; thus, our backgrounds are central to sense making (Yanow, 2000).

[5] The Cree are a linguistic group of First Nations who comprise the largest group of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. They inhabited what is now Canada for thousands of years and live in northern Quebec, Ontario, and the Prairies. The Cree people of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, known as the *Plains Cree*, make up the largest population of First Nations people in the Prairie provinces. They live in cities and towns and on reserves (Government of Canada, 2006).

The researcher’s identity, in which tacit knowledge, predispositions, training, education, and individual, familial, and racial contexts are embedded, is paramount to knowledge making and interpretation (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005; Polanyi, 2009). Therefore, I articulate what in my life connects me to my research and my participants which shaped the analysis (Hoppe, 1999; Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2012). My journey to university involved people outside my immediate family who encouraged and advised me to arrive at a career in socioeconomic development. I was born and raised in Ghana and relocated to Canada in 2000. As the second of five children of working-class parents who did not have PSE, my transition from high school to university in Ghana was possible because my family, friends, and teachers motivated me. I sought their wisdom, particularly that of teachers, to understand my possible “selves” (Stead & Becker, 2010, p. 50), which I initially found difficult to conceive, probably because I had no academic and professional role models in my family. I devotedly listened to their insights and ideas on life and education. I began to act on the ideas in any small way that I could.

After my undergraduate studies, I was blessed with an opportunity to relocate to Canada, where I studied and worked. With inspiration from my education and passion for community development, I worked with Aboriginal community members in community socioeconomic development roles (which were also the focus of my undergraduate and master’s studies) in northern Alberta, and with local and provincial governments as well as the private sector. After many visits, conversations, partnerships, and conferences, I came to better understand the views of Aboriginal community leaders, Elders, and the community. One notable mentor, teacher and friend, a Cree Elder, leader and professional in the human services sector, Wally Sinclair, from Slave Lake, who had worked with Aboriginal communities and boards, Alberta and federal governments and university professors in Canada and US on matters relating to their well-being, taught me so much. Also, he inspired me to continue my efforts to facilitate focussed conversations and projects that were potentially inspiring to communities. Elder Sinclair's friendship and mentoring encouraged me to serve as Vice President on the Canadian Native Friendship Centre's not-for-profit board in Lac La Biche, Alberta, which provided the basic needs, employment and skills training, cultural enrichment and celebrations, parenting training, youth empowerment, and other life skills to Aboriginal members. My relationships in the communities with which I engaged deepened my understanding. I began to understand their successes, struggles, and aspirations as we collaborated on cultural celebrations, housing programs, business development, education, entrepreneurship development, and much more. During this time of working with the communities, I imagined that Canada's First Peoples would not struggle to thrive within the knowledge economy because they are the original owners of the land (Miller, 2004; Milloy, 1992; Truth and Reconciliation Commission [TRC] of Canada, 2015a). I saw their determination and awareness of their capabilities to achieve the future that they wanted, but sometimes I discerned a sense of powerlessness that some felt about their goals. These observations concerned me.

Prior to my PhD studies, I was involved in an education pilot project in rural communities in northern Alberta, the Youth Achievement Program (known as the Youth Apprenticeship Program [YAP] in its pilot phase), in public junior high and senior high schools in Lac La Biche and other remote locations in Alberta.[6] This program inspired my research on career development. Starting in 2004 with partners from government departments, schools, and businesses, as well as parents and municipal leaders, with this project we aimed to inspire K-12 completion, PSE completion, and PSE transition. In this program junior high and high school students carried out hands-on activities that linked to their theoretical lessons in class to make the learning more meaningful and enjoyable. The students were exposed to various trades and professional fields through job shadowing, where they tested their interest in work fields of their choice, and in camps, where they learned from adults in various fields. The impact of this program on career and PSE has been tremendous. An informal focus group discussion that I held with the first cohort of students who graduated from the program showed that these students had already chosen not only their careers, but also the corresponding college or university that they would attend after their Grade 12 year. Since then I have been intellectually curious about career-development endeavours and experiences that informed the PSE decisions of individuals who perhaps lacked similar opportunities.

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[6] The YAP group that I worked with is different from the Registered Apprenticeship Program (RAP). YAP on one hand, exposes learners to professional and trades lines of work. YAP participants do not earn hours worked job shadowing towards an apprenticeship. It is purely part of the learners' academic where they benefit by the hands-on nature of the program which connects theory learned in class with real life applications for a meaningful learning.

RAP, on the other hand, is a purely trades program in Alberta for high school students from grade 10 to 12. Students enrolled do a 125-hour internship with an employer in one of over 50 registered trades areas. The hours worked there would count towards required apprenticeship hours if they should decide to start first year of apprenticeship (Careers the Next Generation, 2017).

As I enrolled in my PhD studies, I continued to think more about what my particular topic would be, and soon my heart aligned with research with communities that have been described as marginalised—an interest that stemmed from my education, work experiences, and empathy to alter injustices and marginalisation, similarly to the work of Aboriginal peoples who wanted to redress the impacts of colonialism and repair the relationships between them and the settlers (TRC, 2015a). By the third semester of my PhD studies, I was certain that research with Aboriginal communities on transition to university was an important topic that would inspire me. I confirmed this passion from the soft nudges that I felt and joy that engulfed me when I thought about it. Sometimes they were Aha! moments when I came across words that spoke to me while I read course materials. I wrote on sticky notes and posted on walls inside my home words such as *imagination*, *lived experiences*, *attitudes*, *expectation in school*, and *motivation*. On the walls were also expressions such as “aiming for and achieving the best possible” and “mentors are great, but freedom from false identity is greater,” and so on. These wall expressions about matters that were important to me indicate my attachment to the issue of struggles in education. As I took more courses, I began to better understand the history of Aboriginal peoples and the rhetoric about their educational aspirations. I discovered the TYP at the U of A that facilitated Aboriginal students’ transition to university. After reading more about their issues in K-12 and PSE (Battiste, 2002; CCL, 2009) and undertaking a small-scale[7] study with TYP students, there was no doubt in my mind that it was a worthwhile endeavour that would not only contribute to the discourse on Aboriginal education, but also inspire me throughout the process of engaging and interviewing as well as writing about the experiences of these students. I approached my research with considerable excitement because it was related to communities with cultures that seemed familiar (because of my Indigenous African descent) and yet gave me an opportunity to learn and be transformed into a better person (Weber-Pillwax, 2001; as cited in Cardinal, 2010), as well as to explore insights that could guide the postsecondary educational efforts of Aboriginal peoples.

I therefore came to this study from a working-class family in Ghana as an individual who reached out for inspiration—or, in Bourdieu’s (1986) terms, capital—from a wide range of sources and arrived at my university decisions. These experiences from my schooling and family, coupled with my work in rural socioeconomic development, inspired my interest in understanding what inspires Aboriginal peoples' journey to university, as well as better ways to support this journey (see the theoretical framework in chapter three for further details of my story).

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[7] I undertook this small-scale study in May 2011 to assess the relevance of the topic under exploration. It was part of the Education Policy Studies 537–Issues in Indigenous Education course that I took with Dr. Evelyn Steinhauer, who is one of my two supervisors. This small-scale study received ethics approval from the U of A Research and Ethics board. I focussed generally on my reasons for attending university and the experiences that led to my decision. I interviewed three female students: two First Nations and one Métis in the TYP, which is an alternate route to university for Aboriginal learners.

In the following section I discuss how this study contributes to academia and its utility to various educational stakeholders.

## Significance of the Study

This expansive theoretical approach should enrich the literature in the way that I examined how some First Nations learners' identity characteristics have influenced their location in the field, capital, and habitus and how all of these factors inspire their transition to university. I offer insight into how Bourdieu's (1986) theory of practice compares with the workings of First Nations peoples as a cultural group; present conclusions to guide school curriculum, teacher education and professional-development policies and content, and professional and informal relationships; and recommend policies and programs that will ultimately inspire First Nations learners to transition to university.

Bourdieu's (1986) theory of practice is an interesting lens that adds new insights to the literature on university transition. Although this theory appears to explain various experiences of social inequality in several disciplines (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984), few researchers have drawn on Bourdieu's work or a strengths-based approach to First Nations learners. Its emphasis on the individual and structural dimensions and how identities create different social locations and outcomes by privileging some and underprivileging others (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; DeFrancisco & Palczewski) foster a fuller understanding of First Nations learners' transition to university. This study unveils new understandings from observable similarities and differences by juxtaposing Bourdieu's theory with findings on learners' perceptions, circumstances, and events as they journey into university.

Culturally relevant education policies and practices can bring social change to marginalised groups. These findings should help policy makers to design and implement relevant and effective policies and programs that will eventually spur this transition by promoting an understanding of First Nations learners' circumstances, perceptions of their transition process, and sources of inspiration from home and outside the home. The study will be a resource for governments, First Nations leaders, social movements, and Aboriginal associations (e.g., the TRC and the Assembly of First Nations [AFN] and Métis National Council) in their educational initiatives.

The findings from this study will guide educational practitioners and counsellors through offering culturally appropriate support that is consistent with the expectations and needs of First Nations peoples. Counsellors and school staff will better understand the kinds of professional and informal relationships and conversations that inspire First Nations learners. In addition, I hope that the results of this research will become a resource to build relevant school curriculums, school policies and teacher-education and professional development training.

In conclusion, this research not only offers fuller insights into First Nations learners' process of transition to university within the context of Bourdieu's (1986) theory of practice and identifies parallels and differences. The insights could enable educational policies and programs to respond better to First Nations learners' group, gender, and socioeconomic characteristics and advance relationships, supports, and the capacity of school, family, and community, to inspire educational progress and the transition to university.

In the next section I discuss limitations that could have tampered with the intentions of my study and the ways in which I addressed some of them.

## Limitations and Delimitations

In my attempt to understand the experiences that shape First Nations learners' transition to university, I faced limitations as well as opportunities. A focus on all three groups of Aboriginal peoples—First Nations, Métis, and Inuit learners—would have enriched the analysis, and my identity as a non-Aboriginal woman could be considered a limitation as well as a strength. Also, my awareness of the assumptions that I brought to the study and insights from Cree scholars helped to shape my interpretation of the data.

I did not tackle the experiences of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit learners separately. Separating the three might have created an understanding of the nuances in the experiences within and across the groups. My initial intention was to interview participants from all three Aboriginal groups. Seeking interest from First Nations students facilitated my focus on the First Nations participants only, who at the time of study constituted the major ethnic group (of all three groups) within the TYP. This exclusive First Nations focus has presented an opportunity to replicate the study with the remaining groups in the future. However, specific to this study, it is possible that the voices of the First Nations learners do not fully represent those of all Aboriginal learners, but I hope that their experiences are not uncommon among Aboriginal peoples.

My identity as an Indigenous African-Canadian allowed me to enter this study as a partially informed learner, but not an expert. Generally, I am passionate about issues of marginalisation. I have built strong relationships with Aboriginal leaders and organisations. I anticipated that this familiarity and passion would set the tone for positive engagements and conversations. However, as an outsider I believed that my participants might feel uncomfortable about sharing their cultures and experiences with me—which I observed when some participants chose to shirk questions—for example, about their spirituality—perhaps on the assumption that it was unfamiliar to me. Being respectful and authentic while honouring reciprocity in relationships and sharing (typical in Indigenous cultures; Cardinal, 2010; Smith, 1999; Steinhauer, 2002; Wilson, 2001) deepened our relationship as equal participants and enabled engaging and profound exploration in the interviews (Kovach, 2009). Additionally, our racial differences presented a two-way learning opportunity for sharing about our Indigenous cultures.

I assumed that Aboriginal learners would view postsecondary learning as a step toward economic viability, taking into account the different postsecondary institutions that are available and the kinds of outcomes that they offer. Although I view college as an important avenue to transition into a variety of careers, including hands-on careers, university education is also a part of the range of options that might also offer deep theoretical knowledge. These assumptions did not limit how I understood the findings. Being aware of these assumptions helped me to be open to hearing my participants' perspectives on their choices and reasons instead of mine.

Also, it was important to receive guidance from Northern Alberta Cree scholars to ensure that the research process would support community expectations and that the conclusions would be relevant to the First Nations community. First Nations scholar Margaret Kovach (2009) noted that "Non-Indigenous scholars who wish to engage with Indigenous knowledge need to connect with Indigenous scholars, people, and communities" (p. 172). They must also be cautious about the proper use of language to avoid misunderstanding the representations and stories. Pikes (2010) stated:

> We need to always remember the significance of language, and weigh up carefully how the words and phrases, the discourses, we use can be understood and experienced. Sometimes we may need other people to act as critical friends who can give us their impressions of what we have written. This can be especially important when the lives we

> are writing about are located in contexts or cultures which we are not, ourselves, members of. (p. 16).

I anticipated the limitations of this study. Focussing on First Nation learners' experiences only could obscure important differences. My Indigenous African identity gave me an opportunity for cultural exchange and for both surface and deeper exploration to help me to understand as much as possible the meanings that the participants would convey. My assumptions shaped the findings; however, the guidance and insights of Cree supervisors and scholars helped to centre the perspectives of the participants.

## Summary

I cannot underemphasise the role of PSE in well-being in an increasingly global, high-skills economy, although several factors influence prosperity (Brown, 1999, 2001). The literature on Aboriginal learners' participation in university pointed to historic and K-12 challenges and competing demands that hinder it. Thus, their transition to university might occur later. Their participation in PSE is rising steadily, but more females than males attend university. In this study I sought an understanding of how First Nations learners choose to attend university and the experiences that inspire their decisions. My personal experience, education, and work backgrounds inspired an interpretive study in which I drew on context-applicable aspects of Bourdieu's (1986) theory of practice to explain their transition, while highlighting differences as I compared his theory of practice with the experiences of First Nations learners. I used a biographical approach and interviews grounded in the relational accountability of the Indigenous research paradigm to ensure that this framework would result in a fuller understanding of how both individual and structural factors intersect and shape the transition to university. Analysis of the experiences of First Nations participants only and my Afro-Canadian identity could be viewed as limitations. However, I believe that this study contributes a rare comparative analysis of First Nations' learners from the point of view of Bourdieu's theory of practice and sources of inspiration that could guide schools, teachers' education and professional development, families, communities, and the advocacy efforts of stakeholders.

## Organisation of the Chapters

The previous section included an overview of the study. I highlighted my relationship with the study and some of the important literature and small-scale studies that shaped my study. I discussed the research goals and objectives, as well as why this study is personally important and how I came to focus on this topic. Additionally, I discuss the significance of this study and highlight ways that this study can inform educational practice and add insights to the First Nations' education discourse. Also, I present some of the issues that I consider limitations and delimitations to the research process as well as my analysis. In the following sections and chapters I discuss First Nations' education, the transition to PSE, ontology, and learnings that I derived from the data in the field.

In chapter two I discuss the literature that explained the nature of First Nations' education and the findings from the literature on Aboriginal ontologies that explicate their ways of being, including their lived values and a brief synthesis of the history of Native peoples' education from precolonial times until 1972 when they attained legal control over their own education. In addition, I present a snapshot of historical and contemporary processes that have culminated in the Canadian Aboriginal educational vision that Aboriginal leaders hold for their communities. Further, I address trends in the determinants of postsecondary transition and studies that explain the key factors in the transition to postsecondary learning. Also in this chapter I highlight challenges to Aboriginal peoples' postsecondary transition that arise from early socialisation until adulthood. I end this chapter with a discussion of policies and programs that have been in place in the interests of Aboriginal learners to facilitate their PSE in Canada.

In chapter three I present the theoretical framework for my study and explain how I used parts of Bourdieu's (1986) theory of practice, including field, capital, and habitus, to demonstrate how they can work together to inspire transition to university; I also discuss the differences between Bourdieu's theory and Aboriginal learners that make this theory not entirely applicable to this social group. I also tell my story of being able to attend university and how Bourdieu's theory explains my transition to university, taking into account how various elements of field, capital, and habitus, as well as gender, socioeconomic background, and race, might have played out in my case. Wrapping up chapter three, I lay out the analytical framework by drawing on Bourdieu's work, Aboriginal ontologies, literature on the topic, and my experiences in my journey to university.

In chapter four I discuss the methodology, explicating the biographical research methodology and the Indigenous paradigm and how I used them to conduct this study. Also, I describe the TYP that served as a research site and target. In addition, I identify the criteria and rationale for selecting my participants. Next in this chapter I discuss the semistructured-interview method that I used to collect data and how it suited the Aboriginal relational narrative way of life. I also discuss the mechanics of my analysis of the extensive data that I gathered from field texts by employing the constant-comparison method and my representation of the data by telling story units about each participant and then drawing on key themes throughout the data to extricate conclusions. I follow this with a discussion of the ways that I established the quality of this study to ensure that my conclusions are credible, as well as the ethical considerations that framed the process to ensure that I protected the participants' rights and that the research did not harm them. Finally in this chapter, I share my experience in the field by highlighting the relationships, the responses to my recruitment, the nature of our exchanges, and key moments and follow-ups that occurred.

In chapter five I present the research findings, with a brief introduction of the group of study participants—their backgrounds, which include age, family composition, perceptions of race, SES, and gender—to give the read a sense of who they are. Next, I present a thematic synthesis of each participant's story to demonstrate their historic lives and educational experiences, and I note key events, turning points, moments of inspiration, and decision points in their transitional journey.

In chapter six I discuss the findings by drawing on background information and the transitional story of each participant from chapter five, as well as the remaining data. I tease out parallels and differences by comparing First Nations learners with Bourdieu's (1977, 1986) perceptions of the educational field, capital, and habitus. Also, I discuss the extent to which gender, race, and socioeconomic background influence or do not influence the transition process. Further, I address the sources of inspiration for the participants' transition to university. I also note the similarities and differences in the experiences of the males and females.

In chapter seven, the final chapter, I present a summary of the conclusions and policy recommendations, as well as ideas for future related research and my reflections on the study experience. In the first part of the chapter I identify the key findings and conclusions as the basis for my policy recommendations, which include ways for educational policy to respond effectively; I consider existing policies, required alterations, and new approaches. It is clear from the study that an effective policy needs to take into consideration the transition from kindergarten through Grade 12 and into university. Therefore, I present policy recommendations to facilitate the K-12 transition and the transition to university to improve First Nations learners' educational experiences and overall enrolment in university. Also, I suggest ideas for future research on First Nations learners' transition to university to increase the understanding of this rather grey area. Finally, I conclude with my reflections on the research experience and explain how it did or did not reflect my own experiences and the influence of this study on my life as I journeyed with the participants, learning their stories in interviews, and as I engaged with their stories in the writing process.

In the next section I review the existing literature that is particularly relevant to the transition to postsecondary learning and Aboriginal peoples' worldviews on being and their educational goals. This explains the background of my conceptual framework for this study and is the basis of my theoretical/analytical framework and methodology in subsequent chapters.

# CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter I present the conceptual framework of the study, which comprises the elements of Aboriginal peoples, education trends, and experiences that are pertinent to an understanding of their transition to university. First, I explain Aboriginal ontologies and give a historical account of Indian[8] peoples' education, highlighting key educational policies and practices and their impact on formal education. Following this, I talk about trends in postsecondary transition and participation in Canada, the determinants of postsecondary transition, and gender, socioeconomic, and race issues in Aboriginal peoples' education. Finally, I provide an overview of programs in place that enhance the postsecondary transition of Aboriginal peoples. In this chapter the literature that I discuss falls into the following categories: Aboriginal ontologies; history of Native education: precolonial to 1972; Canadian Aboriginal educational vision and policies; trends in postsecondary transition: the determinants; challenges to Aboriginal peoples' postsecondary transition; and policies and programs to facilitate PSE in Canada.

## Aboriginal Ontologies

It is important to understand Aboriginal peoples' way of being because the cultural context is foundational to understanding their relationship with and purposes of education, expectations of appropriate pedagogical practices, and in understanding the research questions. Aboriginal peoples' cultures differ (Wilson, 2008). Descriptors of Aboriginal ontologies include a communal and holistic sense of well-being, in which positive virtues, creativity, and a moral relationship with the Earth are critical to sustenance. They learn this way of life in a pleasant atmosphere with the recognition that new learning bears the potential for them to change (Gamlin, 2003; Haig-Brown, Hodgson-Smith, Reginer, & Archibald, 1997; Little Bear, 2000; Mander & Tauli-Corpuz, 2006; Miller, 1996).

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[8] *Indians* means all Aboriginal peoples in Canada in all historical accounts. In contemporary times, each of these names has different connotations. *Indians* refers to First Nations and Inuit tribes of Aboriginal peoples, excluding Métis, in contemporary times.

Collectivity is often associated with Aboriginal peoples. This attribute is derived from the belief that all creatures are spirits (Little Bear, 2000). As spirit beings, everyone is related and although the constituents of the Earth are diverse, they are all interconnected and equal because they are all created in the same way (Friesen, 2000; Martin, 1996). Haig-Brown et al. contended that "this connectedness derives from the reality that everything is a part of a single whole which is greater than the sum of its parts" (p. 38). Smith (2012) added:

> Connectedness positions individuals in sets of relationships with other people and with the environment. Many indigenous creation stories link people through genealogy to the land, to stars and other places in the universe, to birds and fish, animals, insects and plants. To be connected is to be made whole. (p. 149)

Valuing connectedness—in other words, collectivity—implies advancing group interests, cooperation, and sharing both material and nonmaterial things to strengthen relationships that sustain good feelings and a good mind (Gamlin, 2003; Little Bear, 2000). This aspect of being implies that a collective approach to schooling that emphasises group interest might be more valued (Alberta Education, 2005) than competition among learners.

Aboriginal peoples value wholeness, which they attain when their pursuit of life is guided by the symbol of the medicine wheel (Eshkibok-Trudeau, 2000; Haig-Brown et al., 1997; Wilson, 2001). The medicine wheel consists of four quadrants, the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual, that serve as measures of well-being. Attainment of a balance among the four is equivalent to a good life (Gamlin, 2003; Lavellée, 2009; Smith, 2012). Thus, education that is complete needs to bring balance to peoples' physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual aspects (Lavellée, 2009).

Positive virtues are fundamental to maintaining relationships. Virtues such as respect, love, kindness, humility, honesty, friendship, the ability to be easygoing, humour, gratitude, and praise are valued behaviours that bring strength and harmony (Battiste, 2002; Friesen & Friesen, 2002). Additionally, self-control, physical strength, and adaptability to new circumstances are virtues of Aboriginal identity (Little Bear, 2000). Maintaining relationships suggests that the virtues of respect, love, friendship, self-control, kindness, and praise are necessary expectations of Aboriginal learners and characteristics of the classroom. These virtues are highly valued in Aboriginal school settings.

Aboriginal peoples believe that humans have a moral relationship to the Earth and its constituents, particularly the land (Cajete, 2000; Martin, 1996; Miller, 1996; Wilson, 2001). The Earth is considered everyone's mother because we are a product of the Earth. Each person must treat the Earth with care and live within reasonable means of subsistence to sustain rather than deplete the Earth. John Mohawk (as cited in Mander & Tauli-Corpuz, 2006) explained that people who live a subsistence life, in Aboriginal terms,

> see themselves as living in the world and in a relationship to the world in which not only does the world nurture them, but they have a reciprocal obligation to nurture it. . . . It's a cultural, spiritual, social exchange that's intended to go on for generations. . . . It's a way of dealing with that which is greater than we are in a respectful and coherent and sane manner. We're not going to use it up; we're going to sustain it for the next generation and the generation after that. (p. 27)

This highlights the sustainability of the environment as a goal that transcends all other human aims. It is a selfless principle, and adhering to it will ensure care for generations yet to come.

Culture is shared through language. In this view the Earth is considered capable of renewing and maintaining itself through "renewal ceremonies, the telling and retelling of creation stories, the singing and resinging of songs" (Little Bear, 2000, p. 78). This culture is rooted in language. People tell stories and model appropriate behaviour, and learners learn by observing and listening to Elders, important teachers of the culture. Traditionally, learning occurs naturally without knowing in a subtle, noncoercive atmosphere (Battiste, 2000; Couture, 1985; Eder & Holyan, 2010; Haig-Brown et al., 1997; Miller, 1996; Wilson, 2001). This situation suggests that learners value hands-on pedagogical strategies and learning from role models.

Creativity is intended to serve practical or useful purposes but must be pursued within the ethics of care. This creativity is not an isolated cognitive endeavour in which one applies skills in a fast and analytical manner to problem-solve without social and moral obligations to society and the environment (Gamlin, 2003; Mander & Tauli-Corpuz, 2006). Creative actions must be guided by a good mind so that actions are not harmful to others. Decisions on actions do not have to be spontaneous; they must emanate from reflection and critical thinking, guided by traditional values (Gamlin, 2003). Thus, learners might not spontaneously try to solve a situation or problem; rather, they might take the time to reflect critically.

Aboriginal peoples believe that all of creation is a constant process of becoming and that change occurs in cycles of stages. Human beings have the capacity to build on their potential because of the "the cumulative effects of learning and culture" (Haig-Brown et al., 1997, pp. 38-39). This suggests that people are not static and that individual lives are in a formative progress. Also, this shapes their views of events, learnings and experiences in life, and purposes for their future—which support my aims in this study to understand the experiences or learnings that draw learners to university.

As an Indigenous African (Canadian), most of these values resonate with me, especially the collectiveness, the sharing of culture through language, and the positive virtues required to maintain relationships. Several African authors such as Dei (2000), Mkhize (2008), and

Swanson (2007) pointed to traditional African societies prior to colonisation as communitarian and relational and as seeking moral and social harmony. However, I also recognise the influence of high modernity and the globalisation agenda on identities (Beck & Beck-Gersheim, 2002) and the introduction of Christianity in Ghana, which is transforming a hitherto highly Indigenous Ghanaian ontology into Western frameworks (Gyekye, 1997).

Aboriginal ontologies emphasise collective aims and holistic relationship with all aspects of life to sustain a balanced sense of well-being; virtues that nourish relationships and preserve the Earth and its constituents; a shared culture through expressions of oral language; listening, modeling, and observing; and a view of the individual as in a constant process of change. All of these beliefs influence learners' pedagogical expectations and understanding of the purposes of events and experiences for their future.

In the next section I discuss the education of Native people prior to contact with settlers and education policies. In addition, I address education policies that the government enacted up to 1972, when particularly First Nations had control over their own education on their reserves. This facilitates an understanding of the policy tensions in this arena.

## History of Native Education: Precolonial to 1972

Native peoples' education has seen significant changes since their encounter with European missionaries and fur traders from the 1500s until 1972 (Royal Commission of Aboriginal Peoples [RCAP], 1996). Before contact with the Europeans, Indians had their own education system in which the children learned the skills that they needed to survive and protect their communities and nation (Archibald, 1995). During this time, Native children learned from adults' stories in a noncoercive and natural environment, as they watched their behaviour and listened to acquire skills for their adult lives and survival (Miller, 1996; Ross, 1992). Many Aboriginal people share the view that

> families who use stories to teach children important life principles have raised their children "right." . . . To know stories, remember stories, and to retell them well is to have been 'raised right'; the family of such an individual is also held in high esteem. . . . If my children hear the stories, they will grow up to be. (Eder & Holyan, 2010, p. 13)

Children learned to hunt, fish, cook, sew, and mend clothes as they tagged along and watched adults do these things (Miller, 1996).

Initially, European missionaries introduced formal education, in which learning occurs in classrooms, to Native communities in approximately the 17th century (as a way to Christianise and assimilate Indians into modern ways and to improve their resiliency in the changing economy; Carney, 1983; Grant, 1984; Titley, 1992). Generally, Indian communities met this type of education with contempt because it undermined their traditional culture in content and was coercive in form (Archibald, 1995; Miller, 1996; Ross, 1992). The beginning of government involvement in Indians' education coincided with the loss of the fur trade in the 1800s (INAC, 2010), which necessitated alternative economic pursuits that were possible only when the Indians' inclination to resist resource exploitation was subdued by becoming subjectified to Eurocentric ways through education (Friesen & Friesen, 2002; INAC, 2010; Ledoux, 2008; Ormiston, 2002).

The government became considerably involved in Indian education with the 1876 Indian Act, which legitimised widespread residential schooling that forcibly segregated students from their families to attend school for about 10 months a year. The act barred students from practising their Native cultures at school (LaFrance & Collins, 2003). This approach had an immense capacity to hasten assimilation, which would make Indians a subservient underclass in the modernising economy and, ultimately, facilitate exploitation of their resources (Ledoux, 2008).

The harms of residential schooling were severe. Residential schools were likened to institutions because of their punitive character (Johnson, 1988). Deaths were common occurrences in the facilities as a result of the inadequate medical facilities and poor physical conditions (i.e., poor housing, lack of sewage disposal, and potable water; Johnson, 1988; Lakevold & Racine, 2000; Milloy, 2008). With the imposition of Western civilisation, students lost their heritage and self-esteem because the act did not permit their culture and languages in school (Grant, 1996; Miller, 2004). The skills that students learned in residential schools were inadequate for them to function in modern society because of the missionaries' insufficient skills and technology changes (Johnson, 1988). Students who valued academic skills still found the experience culturally gruesome. For example, Ida Wasacase did not hate school. She was successful academically, but she felt that the experience was negative:

> She lost her first language because of this ordeal. One day she forgot about English and spoke Cree. Punishment was swift and gruesome. She was hit hard over the head with a board. Tragically, there was a nail in the board, which the supervisor had not noticed, and the nail was driven into her head. After that incident she never spoke Cree again. (Grant, 2004, pp. 25-26)

Students could not function fully upon return to their Indian environment because they had lost their sense of belonging and self-esteem and felt ashamed of their cultural heritage (Antone, 2000; Makokis, 2009).

Towards the middle of the 1900s, the educational approach shifted from assimilation by segregation to an emphasis on integration after several years of Indian resistance, but the Indians also rejected the integration approach because they believed that it carried an assimilative intent (Friesen & Friesen, 2002; Miller, 1996). This approach encouraged Indians to enroll in day schools and common schools in White settlements for a mixed experience, where they learned Indian language and content. However, the students went to residential schools when day schools were unavailable (Carney, 1995). Uncertainties about the integration project's success grew because of the impact of funding cuts to the schools and that lack of staffing that characterised the post-World War II era. With only 40% of the Indian school population in integrated types of schools by 1964, the Indian Affairs branch doubted the success of this project, which thereby warranted an intervention (Carney, 1983). The government's survey to understand the social, political, economic, and educational needs of Indians led to *The Hawthorn Report* in 1967 (Carney, 1983). This report recommended that all denominational schools be closed and that boarding houses be converted to hostels. This information affirmed the closing of the residential schools (Carney, 1983), which began in the 1970s; the last residential school closed in 1996 (TRC, n.d.).

By 1969 the federal government drifted towards draconian assimilation of Indians. In a White Paper, the government proposed to eliminate the special status of the Native people, abolish the Indian Act and the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, and implement a policy that would end the treaties and make Indian people equal to other citizens (Friesen & Friesen, 2002; National Indian Brotherhood [NIB], 1972). The NIB (now the AFN), the National Indian Council, the Canadian Métis Society, the Indian Association of Alberta, and others launched a major protest (Friesen & Friesen, 2002; Milloy, 2008). In June 1970 the Indians' rejection of the White Paper with a Red Paper entitled *Citizen Plus* asserted that Indian people should "be given the chance to run their own educational system" to end the many "acts of discrimination against Indian pupils" (Carney, 1983, p. 628).

In the 1970s the federal government rescinded the White Paper and gave "complete control, responsibility and authority" (Carney, 1983, p. 629) to Indians to run their education. The federal government and Indian Affairs accepted the NIB's (1972) policy paper *Indian Control of Indian Education* for implementation, with recommendations, on February 2, 1973. The remnants of the residential schools closed (NIB, 1972).

Native peoples' education from precontact with Europeans to 1972 evolved from learning from stories, observing adults demonstrate skills, and modeling appropriate behaviour to learning in classrooms and structured settings. Missionaries' and the government's efforts to assimilate Native people into modern lifestyles led to a variety of approaches, including segregation via the residential school system, and an integration approach for a mixed cultural experience with non-Native students. Rejection of the assimilative intent of the integration approach led to the new policy meant to give Indians' control over their own education in 1973.

In the next section I discuss Aboriginal peoples' vision of education to shed light on their contemporary aspirations and work that turned their aspirations into policies. The vision and policies serve as a guide for efforts to advance Aboriginal peoples' education in Canada.

## Canadian Aboriginal Educational Vision and Policy

Aboriginal peoples envision a culturally grounded formal educational experience to enable students to become full participants in economic life and support cultural continuity (RCAP, 1996). This vision came about after careful consideration of the educational policy failures over the years. Several policies, such as Indian control over Indian education (NIB, 1972) and the Constitution Act (1982) have given Indians greater involvement in their education to affirm Métis treaty rights (RCAP, 1996).[9] More recently, work that advanced Aboriginal peoples' interests include RCAP's (1996) report, the *Gathering Strength: Canada's Aboriginal Action Plan*, which produced an *Education Action Plan* (in 1998; INAC, 2005a), and the 2002 Minister's National Working Group on Education's ([MNWGE] Kavanagh, 2002) recommendations. All of these documents and the deliberations within them pointed to an economic and culturally relevant education for Aboriginal peoples. For example, the RCAP report stated:

> Aboriginal peoples want two things from education. . . . They want schools to help children, youth and adults learn the skills they need to participate fully in the economy. . . . They want schools to help children develop as citizens of Aboriginal nations—with the knowledge of their languages and traditions necessary for cultural continuity. . . . [The RCAP] proposes that all children, regardless of status or location, have access to dynamic, culture-based early childhood (p. 46-47).

These documents explained that partnership is critical to advancing the Aboriginal educational vision because about 70% of Aboriginal peoples were taught in provincial and territorial schools where schools were usually staffed with non-Aboriginal teachers and use curricular and pedagogical processes that do not inspire students (RCAP, 1996). The 1998 *Education Action Plan* (INAC, 2005a) also pointed to the importance of not only quality, but also culturally relevant education (INAC, 2005a).

The MNWGE (Kavanagh, 2002) explained that "the new education strategy would celebrate our diverse cultures and languages, recognise our histories and communities, focus on student academic success, and reinforce quality through its teachers, curricula, student evaluations and education outcomes" (p. 3). Also, the MNWGE called for a "First Nations education system grounded in the wisdom of Indigenous knowledge" (p. 9). Thus, Aboriginal peoples seek an education that enables a holistic sense of well-being, which is possible when community is involved. Today, K-12 curriculum offers more Aboriginal content (Battiste, 2002), and a few postsecondary institutions offer Aboriginal teacher education programs (CCL, 2009).

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[9] Métis peoples, on the other hand, attend the same schools that non-Aboriginal peoples do; therefore, they lack the cultural experience that they expect. They have over the years received limited attention because the Canadian government did not recognize them as original peoples because of their intermarriages with the French (and other groups; RCAP, 1996). The government did not offer them as much support and as many services as the First Nation peoples had received, in spite of the Constitution Act (1982), which recognized Métis peoples as Aboriginal. The RCAP advocated the recognition of Métis peoples because they were involved in signing treaties and hence should be entitled to similar treaty rights.

More recently, the TRC (2015a) has had a mandate to reveal the truths; honour the resilience of survivors of residential schools; guide and inspire healing; and promote reconciliation among residential school survivors, their families, the community, and the perpetrators; Aboriginal peoples; and all Canadians. Commissioned in 2008, the process renewed relationships and built mutual understandings and respect (TRC, 2015a) "so that our children and grandchildren can live together in dignity, peace, and prosperity on these lands we now share" (p. 8). The TRC considered education key to reconciliation and made recommendations, among others, to educate Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in school and the general public on Aboriginal peoples, including the treaties, the impacts of residential schools, and their historic and contemporary contributions to Canada. Also, the TRC advocated for incorporation of Indigenous methods into classrooms and training for teachers on how to do so (TRC, 2015b), such as the exploration of holism with the medicine wheel (Kovach, 2009; Lavellée, 2009), learning linkages between mental and emotional reasoning, and conflict resolution via sharing/talking circles (Madden, 2015).

Aboriginal peoples' educational vision highlights the attainment of economically relevant education that enables viable employment grounded in Aboriginal culture, which is to be available to all Aboriginal peoples regardless of their location in Canada. This educational vision is owed to several policies and reports, including the RCAP (1996) report, the *Education Action Plan* (INAC, 2005a), the MNWGE (Kavanagh, 2002), and the TRC (2015a).

In the next section I discuss the trends in postsecondary transition to demonstrate the disparities and similarities among males and females, which are also partially a focus of this study. I set the background for subsequent discussions about the conditions that influence the transition to university.

## Trends in Postsecondary Transition: Determinants for Males and Females

Studies of postsecondary educational attainment have demonstrated gender disparities. According to Statistics Canada data, 24% of females in Alberta had received a college or nonuniversity certificate or diploma compared to 15% of males, and over 16% of males were in an apprenticeship or had obtained a trade certificate. With regard to university certificates or degrees, 8.2% of females and 5.1% of males received them (Taylor et al., 2009). However, generally, postsecondary participation and completion rates have been lower for women who are raising young children, divorced women, and lone female parents (Holmes, 2005; Zhang & Palameta, 2006).

Generally, a constellation of reasons account for the low postsecondary transition, including psychological, situational, and institutional factors (see Conrad, 2001). Psychological factors include learners’ motivation to seek learning or complete learning, which is the result of complex interactions of subjective and/or objective factors. Situational factors in life circumstances affect continuity in learning (e.g., location, money and participation in paid and unpaid work). Institutional factors include barriers in the form of policies and procedures that inhibit or enhance educational access (Conrad, 2001).

## Psychological Factors

Transition from secondary school to university or college is a major change in individuals' lives. Aside from acquiring the cognitive skills that they need (Goldthorpe, 2010; Voigt, 2007), this transition can be compared to marriage or retirement (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), accompanied by the stress of having to leave friends, family, and previous institutions. Other struggles include uncertainty, loneliness, academic, emotional and cultural adaptation, and unrealistic perceptions and expectations (Eiselen & Geyser, 2003; Jones, Coetzee, Bailey & Wickham, 2008). Underestimation of the abilities of those from low socioeconomic backgrounds can hamper the transition (Thorpe, Snell, Hoskins, & Bryant, 2007). Therefore, some students might deliberately delay the transition because of anxiety (Brady & Allingham, 2010). Aboriginal learners are more likely to complete college to prepare for the academic rigour of the university environment before they attend university (Taylor et al., 2009).

Self-conceptions shape the construction of aspirations and careers of males and females. Lehmann and Tenkorang (2010) reported that women have higher levels of educational and career aspirations in Canada. Interpersonal influences form and alter aspirations as people reflexively adjust to others' expectations[10] (Haller & Portes, 1973). Significant socialisers such as parents, teachers, counsellors, and other individuals impact people on multiple dimensions and in many directions because they influence their beliefs, attitudes, aptitudes, expectations, and experiences (Andres, 2002; Stead & Baker, 2010). St. Denis and Hampton (2002) noted that teachers' low expectations and well-meaning assumptions can be demeaning for students.

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[10] See Haller and Portes (1973) for the attainment model.

As well, unexpected encounters can confirm, dislocate, or revolutionise the career and educational path (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). Besides, perceived psychological barriers can positively influence aspirations. Although negative motivation from others can create self-doubt, it could become inspiration for some learners who strive to disprove the negative utterances, stereotypes, and perceptions of them (Taylor & Steinhauer, 2010). Hence, Dwyer and Wynn (2001) cautioned researchers to pay attention to the events in people's lives and how they shape their careers. Additionally, unexpected occurrences and other people's success can positively affect the transition to postsecondary learning, which my small-scale study confirmed. For example, encounters with Aboriginal professionals inspired a recipient to follow a similar career path out of an interest to help others in the future.

## Situational Factors

Several studies on transition to postsecondary learning have emphasised social reproduction as a major determinant (Desjardins, Rubenson, & Milana, 2006; Norman & Hyland, 2003). Students of lower SES are less likely to attend university, get high grades, and have a financial and/or program plan for postsecondary (Acumen Research, 2008). Willis (1977) also pointed out that youth from low SES backgrounds who reject the middle- and upper-class culture of the school systems perpetuate a stratified class system of inequality. The observation that university enrolment over the past three decades has gone up among first-generation students (i.e., students who are the first in the immediate family to go to university; Lehmann & Tenkorang, 2010) leaves room for the analysis of agency and other factors (Clegg, 2011; Colley, James, Tedder, & Diment, 2003; Reay et al., 2005). Noneconomic determinants such as family solidarity, social capital from formal and informal institutions, peers, teachers, and churches can explain the transition to higher learning of students from low SES backgrounds (Coleman, 1990;

Fuller & Hannum, 2002; Gofen, 2009; Putman, 2000). For example, my small-scale study demonstrated that even though these Aboriginal students faced considerable racism, their culture and poverty inspired their transition to university. They reported that this inspiration arose particularly from their cultural upbringing of respect for others, the avoidance of wrongdoing, traditions (e.g., ceremonies, dances, and cultural events), and family solidarity. In addition, their determination to reverse their poverty and role-model success to their children inspired them. Therefore, these findings challenge deficit-thinking in which students' social-cultural and economic statuses are blamed for social inequality. As well, their nonfamily capital, such as the school guidance counsellor, teachers, friends, programs, and other people's success, inspired the students.

Parents' educational level and knowledge factors influence the transition to PSE. Those whose parents have obtained a university degree are more likely to attend university (CCL, 2009; Voigt, 2007). As well, easy access to knowledge on the educational requirements for a chosen career (Frenette, 2010), information on programs, financial assistance programs (CCL, 2009; Nel, Troskie-de Bruin, & Bitzer, 2009), involvement in practicums, and internships are linked to PSE transition (U of A, 2000). For example, my small-scale study showed that providing Aboriginal learners with knowledge and a foretaste for university can facilitate this transition, especially for learners who might not have a family history of university education and might feel intimidated by university because it is unfamiliar.

The costs of higher education (Thomas & Quinn 2007; Usher, 2005) can limit nontraditional students' participation (Levin, 2007). In addition to direct costs such as tuition, accommodation, and books, the cost of foregoing earnings from a job to attend school can make the choice difficult (Livingstone & Scholtz, 2006; Zhang & Palameta, 2006), more for low-income earners with dependants (Holmes, 2005). Also, the travel and housing costs associated with schooling outside one's place of residence can increase the cost of attending (CCL, 2009; Frenette, 2002).

## Institutional Factors

Effective mobility across institutions and attractive course offerings facilitate transition. Sawchuk and Taylor (2010) noted that "opportunities for mobility across programs within secondary and postsecondary institutions clearly inform the possibilities and patterns of inter-institutional transitions" (p. 14). Systems that recognise prior learning ease the transition (Kennedy, 2003; Prior Learning Assessment Centre, 2008); and funding programs, including student loans, education tax credits, and grants to assist learners, can influence PSE participation (CCL, 2009). University program offerings such as Native studies that strengthen and embrace students' cultural identity and alternate routes to university can also draw them to university (Arku, 2011).

The preceding shows that, although females are more likely than males to attend university, psychological, situational, and institutional factors have a marked influence on the decision to participate. Self-perception, cognitive capabilities, parents' education, and an understanding of postsecondary institutions and program expectations ease the transition to postsecondary. As well, financial circumstances, competing demands on time, systems that recognise prior learning, and the ease of making interprogram transfers are important to the multiple pathways of transitioning to postsecondary learning.

In the following section I discuss how the social, historical, and economic backgrounds and experiences within education shape Aboriginal learners' transition to postsecondary learning. These key explanations of the likely factors that inhibit the transition also serve as points of reference for subsequent theoretical frameworks and conclusions from findings.

## Challenges to Aboriginal Peoples' Postsecondary Transition

Aboriginal peoples' barriers to PSE are rooted not only in the impact of socioeconomic and institutional challenges, but also in the repressive history of the residential school system. Aboriginal peoples' repressive history of domination and assimilation through education is widely cited as the reason for the low educational transition (Grant, 2004; Milloy, 1999). Residential school survivors' negative self-conceptions, disinterest in schooling, and addictive coping mechanisms also affect subsequent generations (CCL, 2009; TRC, 2015a) and contribute to their low SES (Castellano, 2008; Steinhauer, 2008). In addition, the distrust of educational institutions, fear of not qualifying for scholarships or loans because of existing debt, and disconnection from bureaucratic institutions are barriers to the transition to PSE (Malatest & Stonechild, 2008).

Difficult and expensive relocation in the quest for quality education has often produced unfavourable outcomes. Schools in remote Aboriginal communities in northern Alberta are perceived as substandard and as lacking subject options and competent and experienced staff; the turnover rate is 100% per year in some cases (Steinhauer, 2008; Taylor et al., 2009). Young students who relocate to urban centres seeking a better quality of education struggle with isolation from their families and community and inadequate financial support from their families (Malatest, 2004; Steinhauer, 1999; Taylor & Steinhauer, 2010). School transfers have been linked to low school-graduation rates (Aman & Ungerleider, 2008). Universities are not commonly located in rural communities, and the cost of education is higher for students who relocate to urban centres (CCL, 2009).

Although Steinhauer's (2008) study with First Nations parents showed that parents have been actively involved in making school choices for their children in an effort to ensure that they receive the best education, Taylor et al. (2009) and Kavanagh (2002), for example, noted that there is still a lack of parental involvement in many aspects of their education. Parental involvement has many benefits, which include creating a positive home environment for learning, instilling the value of education in their children, and giving families a sense of self-worth. However, parental involvement faces several challenges. The school environment can intimidate parents and families, and some parents and Elders have negative feelings about the school system because of their difficult experiences with residential school and discrimination that are consequences that the TRC (2015) has also addressed. Furthermore, parents might not know how to help their children because of language issues, stress because of poverty, and disruptive family interventions. The challenge of combining work with children's school can adversely affect a family's ability to support their children educationally (Kavanagh, 2002; Steinhauer, 2008). Parents might carefully select aspects of their children's education in which they feel comfortable being involved to avoid triggering memories of their residential experiences (Arku, 2011). As well, parents might resent schools if the staff undermine Aboriginal values. According to the RCAP (1996), if parents feel that their values, perspectives, and cultures are neglected in the school, which portrays a disrespect for cultural diversity, they are not encourage to become involved in the school (Sewepagaham, 1998). Therefore, Kavanagh and Sewepagaham concluded that parental involvement in school is inadequate.

In addition, universities do not adequately prepare teachers to teach Aboriginal students (St. Denis, 2010), and the K-12 curriculum has minimal Aboriginal content. Only a few universities in Canada have set Aboriginal education as a priority (Battiste, 2002, p. 9).

Although teachers can learn on the job, their lack of prior exposure to Aboriginal knowledge systems and pedagogy means that students continue to bear the brunt of this challenge. The school curriculum rarely recognises Aboriginal language and culture. Also, public schooling has created myths about Aboriginal culture, languages, beliefs, and ways of life that perpetuate cognitive imperialist (i.e., manipulations that disclaim other knowledge bases or values) policies and practices, with the assumption that a Eurocentric worldview is superior—a legacy of the residential school system that still pervades Canada's educational system (Battiste, 2000). Battiste affirmed the role of Aboriginal culture and language:

> Language is by far the most significant factor in the survival of Indigenous knowledge. . . . Where Indigenous knowledge survives, it is transmitted through languages. Where Aboriginal languages, heritages and communities are respected, supported, and connected to elders and education, educational success among Aboriginal students can be found. . . . Elders speak to the important role languages play in building strong communities of social relationships and in storing the collected wisdom and knowledge that enables Aboriginal people to survive and flourish. Ceremonies and rituals help communities and individuals learn the relationships and values manifested in language. (pp. 17-18)

Yet Aboriginal students lack the opportunity to learn their first language in school. Instead, they have the option of learning either French or English as another language (depending on in which province they reside), when they have little or no command over their first language. This Battiste (2000) described as *educational inequity*. Neglecting Indigenous knowledge undermines students' self-esteem, identity, and success.

Racism compounds these challenges. Aboriginal teachers face racism from parents, the community (St. Denis, Bouvier, & Battiste, 1998) and non-Aboriginal teachers (St. Denis, 2010). However, the widespread denial of racism and the White supremacy of individuals, institutions, and the victims reduces this social construction of imbalance in social relations to an occurrence in the past. The word *racism* has different connotations that go beyond the dictionary definition of "discrimination against people because of race and the belief that one race is superior to another" (St. Denis & Hampton, 2002, p. 11). According to Chartrand (1992), "Racism is always present in a situation where there is an imbalance of power, which permits the 'racist' behaviour to have effect" (p. 7). This therefore rationalises the socioeconomic advancement of one group to the detriment of another (Larocque, 1991). Racism is destructive when it is expressed in terms of verbal and psychological abuse. Also, low expectations, well-meaning assumptions that are demeaning, the feeling of being marginalised or not belonging, the failure to offer professional support/attention, and the meting out of harsher penalties are hurtful forms of racism (Malatest, 2004; St. Denis & Hampton, 2002). Skin colour matters in the extent to which Aboriginal students experience racism. Aboriginal students who are visibly White face fewer incidents, but those who look Aboriginal suffer constant episodes of racism (Gauchupin, 1995; St. Denis, Bouvier, & Battiste, 1998). Yet racism is often denied. Backhouse (1999) argued that "the ideology of 'racelessness' is a hallmark of Canadian tradition" (p. 14). Deyhle's (1995) study of Navajo students showed that administrators and Anglo students tried to deny and silence the existence of racism. Also, those who suffer racism might deny it because, as Larocque noted, admitting to having experienced racism is unsafe. Malatest's (2004) study of Aboriginal students' transition to postsecondary revealed that academic failure is the least common reason that students drop out and that the significant factors include discrimination and loneliness in an alien environment. Students who enter high school are full of promising aspirations for the future that racism can thwart (Deyhle, 1995). According to Sixkiller Clarke (1994), "Racism, prejudice, and discrimination clearly exist and may, in fact, be contributors to lack of school success of students in the school setting" (p. 5).

Many Aboriginal students have not completed the prerequisite courses and course levels to pursue PSE. Some Aboriginal youth leave high school early because of the competing demands of school, work, and the responsibility of caring for family, including children, parents, siblings, and grandparents (Applications Management Consulting Limited, 2007; CCL, 2009; Taylor & Steinhauer, 2010). The lack of adequate preparation in school leads to weak performance at the secondary level (CCL, 2009). Consequently, many Aboriginal learners require upgrading to qualify for PSE. Taylor et al.'s (2009) study showed that 40% of Aboriginal students who enrolled in a local college between 2005 and 2008 were enrolled in upgrading programs. In addition, the stigma of having to upgrade can deter their participation in PSE (Spellman, 2005).

Postsecondary institutions appear to be cumbersome to navigate. The widening of postsecondary access and participation in Canada is marked by the proliferation of colleges and universities during the 1960s and 1970s. These improvements to access were premised on human-capital theories, neoliberalism, and globalisation (Kirby, 2007; Myers & deBrouker, 2006) and were based on assumptions that might not necessarily be consistent with the views of individual learners (CCL, 2009). Canadian postsecondary institutions seem to be driven by the dominant neoliberal trend that involves expanding the influence of privatisation, a focus on meeting commercial and corporate interests, marketisation, internationalisation, and a growing government role in quantifying and monitoring quality; almost half of their funds come from private sources (Kirby, 2008). State intervention is increasing through policies for education, training, and the labour market (Fisher, Rubenson, Jones, & Shanahan, 2009; Kirby, 2008). The increasing marketisation of PSE has made it difficult for students to identify institutions and programs that are good for them. Although provincial and federal funding initiatives are meant to support students, they also pose overwhelming challenges to navigate (Myers & deBrouker, 2006). The enormity of the information that adults without higher-education literacy need to decipher can be challenging. This complexity can become an obstacle to participation and a source of unnecessary cost (CCL, 2009; Oldford, 2006).

Although the purpose of education is wider than just employment, PSE is drifting from an academic-humanistic orientation to, increasingly, a utilitarian, market-oriented ideological outlook (CCL, 2007; Livingstone & Pankhurst, 2009a). There is arguably less emphasis on broader goals (i.e., traditional academic-humanist), including moral and civic education, self-discovery and reflection, and education for citizenship and for the collective benefit (CCL, 2009). Focussing on the market ideals of education such as preparing people for occupational productivity, for research on new products and technologies, and for economic efficiency while neglecting humanistic goals does not support society well (Scholnik, 2004).

A myriad of challenges to Aboriginal people's education have had serious implications for their transition to postsecondary learning. The history of residential schooling, school institutions' and individuals' insensitivity to Aboriginal values and culture, and racism do not motivate the transition. These factors, coupled with a lack of entry requirements and the high cost of schooling because of the need for relocation, are challenges. The neoliberalisation of higher education and marketisation have made it difficult to access overwhelming amounts of information, and the aims of the market largely drive PSE institutions and learners.

In the following section I review the efforts to mediate the preceding challenges to facilitate the transition to postsecondary learning.

## Policies and Programs to Facilitate Postsecondary Transition in Canada

Canada's educational efforts at widening access follow OECD countries' agendas of alleviating inequities in postsecondary participation and completion (Kirby, 2007). They have included the expansion of providers to include private colleges and a couple of private universities (Fisher et al., 2009). Increasingly, significant attention is being paid to underrepresented groups, including Aboriginal peoples, women in nontraditional fields, people with disabilities, and rural populations, to increase their postsecondary participation. Next I discuss federal and Alberta government programs that support Aboriginal peoples' participation in PSE.

## Transition and Transfer Programs

Efforts to ease the transition into PSE have taken the form of university transfer programs and university programs (such as the TYP) in some colleges. The intent is to increase the number of seats to enhance access and alleviate the regional disparities in the programs (CCL, 2009; Fisher et al., 2009). Although making such diversity available has advantages, students with unclear career goals can find themselves moving across programs (Berger, Motte, & Parkin, 2008). Half of the students do not complete their programs in the same college or university where they began their studies (Myers & deBrouker, 2006). Policy approaches meant to streamline and ease interinstitutional mobility across provinces (Fisher et al., 2009) are still works-in-progress, but more work is required to address the gaps for adult learners (CCL, 2009).

Programs are designed and offered in specific formats to encourage postsecondary transition. Colleges offer university studies in collaboration with universities. In Alberta, distance learning is an option for university studies. Trades-in- motion (i.e., trade labs on mobile trailers) offer pre-trade training in communities and camps. Several colleges operate learning centres in a number of First Nation and Métis communities, as well as upgrading (Taylor et al., 2009).

TYPs also bridge Aboriginal learners who wish to attend university. Programs of this nature have been available at sites that include the U of A, the University of Toronto in Ontario, and several other universities in Canada. Learners prove their capability for university by successfully challenging first-year university studies, after which they can enroll in the second year of their program of choice within the social sciences (U of A, 2011).

**Financial assistance.** Canada's efforts to alleviate the financial barriers to PSE have led to financial assistance for students. According to Rounce (2004), participation in postsecondary training is still skewed to the detriment of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students and those of low SES. For example, people from wealthy families have shown relatively higher participation in university—a ratio of 2:1 (Berger, Motte, & Parkin, 2008). Funding cuts to PSE in the 1990s in Canada (Cruikshank, 2002) have meant that students have increasingly had to fund a considerable portion of their PSE costs from their own sources. Borrowing to fund PSE has increased tremendously (CCL, 2009).

The Canada Student Loan program and provincial funding are available, but the challenge is that the funding system does not favour adults, part-time studies, and upgrading (Myers & deBrouker, 2006). Students are expected to use their spouses' to support their education, even if the income is scanty. Students are also expected to tap into savings and assets first before they are considered for student loans and bursaries (Myers & deBrouker, 2006). Education tax credits to reimburse learners for a portion of their school expenses appear to benefit high-income earners only (Berger et al., 2008).

**Federal initiatives for Aboriginal students.** INAC funds the postsecondary training of Aboriginal learners. Programs include the Postsecondary Student Support Program (PSSSP) and the Indian Studies Support Program. The former directly supports students, whereas the latter supports institutions designed specifically for First Nations and Inuit students.

***Postsecondary Student Support Program***. The PSSSP,[11] formerly known as the Postsecondary Education Assistance Program (PSEAP), which the federal government created in 1977, was designed to provide financial support treaty/registered treaty Indian and Inuit students but excluded Métis students.[12] Support from the PSSSP also included financial assistance for students enrolled in University and College Entrance Preparation (UCEP) programs who are working to attain the qualifications that they need to enter college or university (INAC, 2005). Demand for the funding exceeds supply, to the point that between 1999 and 2002, over 3,500 students were deferred each year. Some believe that the PSSSP, though started as a universal support program, has, over the years, morphed into a cost-sharing program (Taylor et al., 2009).

***Aboriginal Skills and Employment Training Strategy.*** To replace the Aboriginal Skills and Employment Partnership program that ended in 2010, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) has collaborated with Aboriginal organisations, the private sector, and the provinces and territories to develop programs that expand employment opportunities in demand-driven jobs through both training and education for Aboriginal peoples, regardless of their status and location. These programs include the creation of childcare spaces (for First Nations and Inuit learners only), labour-market interventions, and programs for youth and persons with disabilities such as summer-student employment (House of Commons Canada, 2014; HRSDC, 2011).

**Provincial initiatives for Aboriginal learners.** Alberta Works, under the Ministry of Human Services, offers four programs: employment and training services, income support, health benefits, and child support services (GOA, 2010). Aboriginal peoples without a high school education who are unable to maintain long-term employment are eligible for funding for tuition and books, but not for a living allowance. Student loans are available to assist learners in need (GOA, n.d.). Also, since 2003 the First Nations Training to Employment Program has encouraged partnerships for occupational-based training and work experience that lead to employment for First Nations people who live on a reserve and are unemployed or marginally employed. Learners gain the skills to obtain and maintain long-term employment. Similarly, the Aboriginal Training to Employment Program, also established IN 2003, collaborates with either Métis or First Nations organisations towards the same end (GOA, 2010).

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[11] The PSSSP replaced the PSEAP in 1989 (Taylor et al., 2009).

[12] In spite of the Constitution Act of 1982 that recognized Métis as Aboriginals, they do not have rights as Indians (RCAP, 1996).

## Summary

Aboriginal ontologies uphold holism, collectiveness, good virtues, and creativity within the framework of sustainable development. Education from precolonial times until the 21st century has seen significant policy shifts, from informal learning from adults' stories and modelling to help children to acquire the skills for survival, to missionaries' and the Canadian government's assimilation. Resistance to residential schools' brutality and the failure of the integration approach to provide culturally and economically meaningful education to Aboriginal peoples culminated in Indian control over Indian education (NIB, 1972). Several policy documents have established an Aboriginal educational vision grounded in economic prosperity and cultural sustenance. Psychological and situational factors can either inhibit or facilitate males' and females' transition to PSE, and institutional challenges in the K-12 and PSE systems can hamper the postsecondary transition of Aboriginal learners. However, more females than males attend university. Canada's efforts to inspire increased access to PSE involve removing the inequalities by focussing on underrepresented groups, including Aboriginal peoples and women. This is against a neoliberal backdrop that emphasises utilitarian aims of education and the expansion of privatisation, marketisation, and government's role in PSE management. Strategies exist to encourage postsecondary participation.

In the next chapter I present the theoretical framework of this study and describe the theories, concepts, and experiences that informed it. The concepts that I discussed in the review of the literature, in conjunction with the theories, and my background and educational experiences, which I discussed in the preceding section, set the lens through which I view and understand the experiences of First Nations learners.

# CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For this study I borrowed ideas from Bourdieu's (1986) theory of practice and drew on the concepts of capital, field, and habitus to explain the transition to university and the influence of the macro (i.e., large social processes) and micro (i.e., small, individual) factors that pertain to the First Nations context and take into account gender, race, and socioeconomic background. I recognise that Bourdieu's theory might not entirely explain the experiences of First Nations learners because of differences in worldviews. Therefore, I highlight his theory's areas of dissonance as I compare it with First Nations' experiences and worldviews. I discuss Bourdieu's theory of practice (including the field, capital, and habitus); the intersection of field, capital, and habitus in shaping educational aspirations; the intersectionality of identities (including intersectionality theory); the intersectionality of gender, race, and socioeconomic background in Bourdieu's theory of practice; my story: my intersectional educational experience from Bourdieu's perspective; and an analytical framework for First Nations learners' transition to university.

## Bourdieu's Theory of Practice

My interest was in unveiling the strengths of First Nations students and their experiences of inspiration, because the research has often focussed on storying communities in ways that propagate damage-centred mentalities (Tuck, 2009). Bourdieu's work is not generally known for its optimism with regard to personal stories of transformative change. It is associated more with oppressive social and cultural processes that reproduce inequality (Bourdieu & Champagne, 1999; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). However, as I explored this theory further, I began to admire Bourdieu's work on the processes of capital, field, and habitus modifications that occur through an awakening to resist those 'less than,' subclass, disenfranchising, and deficit-oriented trends that have also been used to frame First Nations and their communities. I began to see how some of Bourdieu's ideas could explain the experiences of First Nations learners and form the basis for the unveiling of disparate and meaningful perceptions and experiences that inspire their lives.

Pierre Bourdieu's analysis draws on structural explanations without losing sight of the role of agents in social construction. Bourdieu's (1986) theory of practice is prominent in explaining systems of educational inequality (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 1977, 1986, 1987). Bourdieu was initially drawn to the structuration theory, until he came to understand the excesses of structuralism that consider structure as having primacy over actions, in that the inhibiting characteristics of structure are highly accentuated (Giddens, 1986, 1991). Functionalists and analysts understand structure as a "'patterning' of social relations or social phenomena. . . . Structure here appears 'external 'to human action, as a source of constraint on the free initiative of the independently constituted subject" (Giddens, 1986, p. 16).

Bourdieu's (1986) goal was to bring back the forgotten real-life actors, the agents[13] who were absent in theory (Ritzer, 2008). He saw human beings as agents. Anthony Giddens (1986) shed light on what it means to be agent: To be an agent is to be purposive,[14] capable of routinely reasoning and rationalising actions, and to be able to elaborate on how human beings arrive at their decisions. An agent ceases to be agent by losing the capability to exercise power (Giddens, 1986). Human beings are capable of executing the necessary actions that require both materials and certain kinds of knowledge to transform social structures, although the social structures are difficult to transform (Sayer, 2010).

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[13] "Agency concerns events of which an individual is the perpetrator, in the sense that the individual could, at any phase in a given sequence of conduct, have acted differently. Whatever happened would not have happened if that individual had not intervened" (Giddens, 1986, p. 9).

[14] Even though motivations or intentionality (i.e., the potential for action) are important for any action, not all of our actions are a direct result of motivations (Ritzer, 2008).

Bourdieu (1990a) desired to address the opposition between objective structures and the subjective phenomenon; in other words, the opposition between society and individual. He believed that Durkheim, Lévi-Strauss, and the structural Marxists are on the objective side **(**Ritzer, 2008) and critiqued other theorists for giving actors too much power and neglecting the structural constraints in the process. As Sayer (2010) asserted, there are limits to human power.

Ultimately, Bourdieu (1986) considered practice the outcome of a dialectical interaction between the structure and individual. Therefore, to view structure as independent of human agents is tantamount to emptiness (Ritzer, 2008). Structuration theory[15] explains the structure to which Bourdieu referred. Structure has two sides: "Structure is always both enabling and constraining, in virtue of the inherent relation between structure and agency, and agency and power" (Giddens, 1986, p. 169).

Fundamental to Bourdieu's (1985, 1986, 1990a) theory of practice are the concepts of habitus, field, and capital, which emphasise the simultaneous workings of both the macro-level and the micro-level processes involved in social action. These three concepts, which draw attention to the interrelationships between individuals and social processes (structures; Bourdieu, 1986), are a key analytical tool for this study to understand that structure (i.e., enabling and constraining) and individual characterise the dynamics of field, capital, and habitus.

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[15] Vital to structural theory is the duality of structure. Human action is portrayed as a constitution of agents and structures that are not independent phenomenon; rather, they represent a duality, because structure is not external to individuals (Ritzer, 2008). Archer (1995) demonstrated the duality and inseparability of structure and agency: "Production and reproduction by active subjects are the constituting processes of structure. There cannot be one without the other" (p. 94). Giddens (1986) added that, "human societies, or social systems would plainly not exist without human agency. But it is not the case that actors create social systems: they reproduce or transform them, remaking what is already made in the continuity of praxis. (Giddens, p. 171).

In the following section I discuss the three concepts. First, I explain the field and Bourdieu`s (1985) statement that it creates social inequality. Second, I discuss the capital, types of capital, and their workings within the field. Third, I present the habitus and explain how capital and field affect it and how the capital and field in turn affect the habitus.

**Field**

Bourdieu (1977, 1985) likened practice to a field (where people play games) without codified rules in an unintentional play in which players in competition use cards of different worth. The worth of their cards can change with successive games to position some players ahead of others. According to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), "To think in terms of fields is to think relationally (p. 96). They defined field as

> a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions. These positions are objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situation (*situs*) in the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relation to other positions (domination, subordination, homology,[16] etc.). (p. 97)

This field can be economic, religious, school, artistic, legal, workplace, politics, and education (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Reay et al., 2005).

The game occurs as a byproduct of an unintentional act. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) contended that "the field is not the product of a deliberate act of creation, and it follows rules or, better, regularities, that are not explicit and codified. . . . We have *stakes* (*enjeux*) which are for the most part the product of competition between players" (p. 98). However, Bourdieu and Wacquant pointed out that human beings are not mere illusions as subjects or biological individuals in the field; "they exist as agents . . . who are socially constituted as active and acting in the field under consideration by the fact that they possess the necessary properties to be effective, to produce effects, in this field" (p. 107).

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[16] Bourdieu defined homology as "resemblance within a difference" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 106).

Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) alluded to the field as a place of struggle where relations of force (i.e., symbolic violence) define the structure. Players play in opposition to each other, but not because they have established any form of contract. In the game, players use their cards (i.e., capital; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Players as agents display this symbolic violence as the dominant players make rules, introduce forms of capital and strategies that safeguard, and transform and uplift their capital. In the process they deny other agents resources, treat them as inferiors, and limit their mobility and aspirations. Yet it is a normal, natural order of things in the game. Players adjust their expectations depending on the capital that they take with them to the field. Those with the least capital tend to be less ambitious and satisfied. However, this does not mean that agents stop contesting for capital to improve their position in the field (Webb, Schirato, & Danaher, 2002). In effect, capital and field are intrinsically linked. Although two players might have the same amount of overall capital, each possesses different combinations of the various types of capital. Thus, the players' strategies and performance in the game are a function of several variables, including the volume and structure of capital, the chances one has in playing the game, the evolution of time in the game, and their dispositions (i.e., habitus; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) alluded to the discursive nature of agents as agents adjust their play with their acquisition of capital and new knowledge. As Web, Schirato, and Danaher (2002) explained, the game involves

> knowledge of the various rules (written and unwritten) genres, discourses, forms of capital, values and imperatives which inform and determine agents' practices, which are continuously being transformed by those agents and their practices. This knowledge

> allows agents to make sense of what is happening around them, and to make strategic decisions as to how a field or fields should be negotiated. (p. 50)

## Capital

Bourdieu (1986) believed that capital (including its distribution) is a force within the subjective and objective structures that organise the social world; it determines one's chances of success. He described capital as a "accumulated labour (in its materialized form or its incorporated, embodied form) which when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labour" (p. 241). Bourdieu pointed out that the family is the fundamental source of capital. Capital requires an investment of time to build and has the capacity to reproduce itself and create benefits to the holders (Bourdieu, 1986).

The immanent social world is differentiated because of the unequal distribution of capital. According to Bourdieu (1986):

> Capital, which, in its objectified or embodied forms, takes time to accumulate and which, as a potential capacity to produce profits and to reproduce itself in identical or expanded form, contains a tendency to persist in its being, is a force inscribed in the objectivity of things so that everything is not equally possible and impossible. (p. 241)

The differences in the social world stem from the configuration of the distribution of the various types of capital within and extending to all parts of the social world. Those with a higher value of capital appropriate profits and have the power to reproduce the nature of the field to retain their capital's worth or improve them (Bourdieu, 1986).

Bourdieu (1986) explained that capital exists in three fundamental forms—economic, cultural, and social—that that some have both direct and immediate effects and others indirect effects on the creation of economic and other benefits. Bourdieu described the various forms of capital:

> As *economic capital*, which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the forms of property rights; as *cultural capital*, which is convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the forms of educational qualifications; and as *social capital*, made up of social obligations ('connections'), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the forms of a title of nobility economic capital. (p. 243)

In the next section I discuss the kinds of capital and their nature and examine their origins and how they operate within the field.

**Cultural capital.** Cultural capital is the power inherent in cultural dispositions, such as proficiency, familiarity, and appreciation for dominant cultural tastes (i.e., highbrow culture), practices, and knowledge that are associated with one's social origin, which subsequently places a person in a position of advantage in terms of education and occupation. Bourdieu (as cited in Aschaffenburg & Maas, 1997), noted that the effort to differentiate between upper-class and working-class culture is in how the upper class values its capital, to the detriment of the working class. Bourdieu (1986) explained that cultural capital exists in three states:

1. *Embodied state*, which comprises the long-lasting mind and body dispositions, also known as culture. It is attained through deliberate socialisation or disguised transmission, such as hereditarily; it is cultivated over time and cannot be easily undone.
2. *Objectified state*, which presents itself as symbolic material cultural goods such as pictures, machines, writings, paintings, instruments, and the like; they are symbolic objects that can be passed on in their material state. Those who possess them also have economic capital.

3. *Institutionalised state*, also a form of objectivation that confers and guarantees original properties on a cultural capital (e.g., educational qualifications); they are legitimate sources of access to more capital.

**Social capital.** Bourdieu (1986) described social capital as collectively owned capital that accrues by membership in a group or institution or by being part of a network that produces symbolic and/or material exchanges. The social capital comes from affiliations; for example, with a particular family, class, tribe, school, or party. Bourdieu defined social capital as

> the aggregate of the actual or potential resources, which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintances and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word. (pp. 248-249)

Consciously or unconsciously, the aim of this relationship is to reproduce social relationships that are usable in both the short and long terms through the endless effort of applying investment strategies individually or collectively to produce material or symbolic benefits. The exchange of gifts, services, visits, and words, for example, transforms the items exchanged into signs of recognition (Bourdieu, 1986).

**Economic capital.** Bourdieu (1986) defined economic capital as an individual's or family's financial resources. The ability to convert financial resources into other forms of capital puts them ahead in the game. Economic capital gives instant access to some goods and services. Other things are attainable with social capital, but it takes time to establish and must be maintained (Bourdieu, 1986). According to Bourdieu, all other kinds of capital can be obtained through transformation to produce the kind of capital necessary to a particular field, but

> economic capital is at the root of all the other types of capital and . . . these transformed, disguised forms of economic capital, never entirely reducible to that definition, produce

> their most specific effects only to the extent that they conceal (not least from their possessors) the fact that economic capital is at their root. (p. 252)

Next, I discuss habitus, its characteristics, and how it functions to create, for example, new tastes, dispositions, and attitudes.

### Habitus

Bourdieu (1984) viewed habitus as a system of dispositions expressed in ways of being that are products of social conditioning from family that shapes subsequent experiences and perceptions of the social world, although these experiences and perceptions are subject to change over time because of the creative capacities of an agent. Habitus implies the unconscious elimination of groups that are not like the dominant and behaviours of self-exclusion. Habitus is "an unconscious acceptance of social differences and hierarchies, a sense of one's place" (p. 141). This is expressed not only in mental attitudes and perceptions, but also in ways of speaking, walking, talking, and feeling (Bourdieu, 1990a; Reay et al., 2005). Habitus is "a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which [integrates] past experiences, functions at every moment as a *matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions*" (Bourdieu, 1977, pp. 82-83). The action of the school transforms habitus acquired from family, which, in turn, forms the basis of subsequent experiences "from restructuring to restructuring" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 134). Thus, habitus is a multilayered and dynamic concept that spans more differentiated notions at the individual level to a more general notion at the society level. For example, students are all different because their personal experiences have shaped their attitudes and values. But at the same time, the social situations in which students find themselves dispose them to some common actions (Webb et al., 2002). In the context of the field analogy, Bourdieu (1985) described habitus as a "feel for the game" (p. 14).

Habitus is a continuum. At one end of habitus, the individual is involved in a field that reproduces itself; at the other end, the habitus is transformed into processes that raise or lower individual expectations (Reay et al., 2005). Bourdieu (1990a) called this the “art of inventing” (p. 55), in which one makes choices among alternate paths. However, like Giddens (1984), Bourdieu argued that choice is bounded by both structural opportunities and constraints. Within bounded choice, not all possibilities are conceivable or probable, and only a limited range is acceptable (Reay et al., 2005; Webb et al., 2002).

Although Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1990a) recognised the dynamic nature of habitus, he pointed to the constraining properties of the habitus to predispose individuals to certain courses of action). This calls into question the social determinism implied in his theory. Bourdieu insisted that people can think and act in strategic ways in trying to take advantage of the rules of the game; but at the same time, the values and expectations of their existing habitus influence them (Webb et al., 2002). Several authors (e.g., Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2008; Silva, 2005; Webb et. al, 2002) have stated that Bourdieu appeared to have focussed overwhelmingly on social reproduction rather than social change. This emphasis might have prevented me from considering the theory in my work; however, his ideas of the dynamism of the habitus drew me into further exploration of that aspect and thereby led to my realisation that his work could be a suitable part of the lenses for the study.

In the following section I discuss the processes and outcomes as field, capital, and habitus intersect. I talk about how this intersection creates certain educational aspirations within one’s habitus either within or outside the horizon of one’s family, as might be the case among First Nations families. Also, I discuss the contextual differences between the First Nations setting and the Eurocentric context.

## Intersection of Field, Capital, and Habitus in Shaping Educational Aspirations

Bourdieu (1977) argued that students' socioeconomic backgrounds and home attributes are fundamental to their educational success. He asserted that capital from their families has lasting effects on their educational paths and attainment and that the education system is responsible for reinforcing the dominant middle- and upper-class cultural tastes and dispositions (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984). In Bourdieu's terms, predominant differences in student learning and aspirations arise from differences in the attributes or capital that students take from home to school; that is, their abilities, attitudes, and family and community background (Bourdieu, 1977). This includes health factors, housing, clothing, and experiences with school language from home and texts, as well as school-like discourse from home (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2005).

The educational field is a bounded social space of struggle and power relations where occupants such as teachers, students, parents, and government administrators play by a set of objective structures that represent particular ways of thinking, being, and doing (Bourdieu, 1977; Reay et al., 2005). Within this system, students play competitively by competing for top grades. Both the structure and distribution of the capital acquired from the family, along with their individual habitus (e.g., ways of being), position some students to be better equipped than others and affect how they play the game. Students with high levels of capital are able to manoeuvre to attain top merits to further their privileged position. The constant employing of strategies means that changes are possible. Thus, aspirations and achievement can change because of strategies that agents employ (Bourdieu, 1977).

I examine the misrecognition of learners' capital to which Bourdieu's (Bourdieu,1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) theory of practice might allude: first, that the attributes of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are not those of the dominant class (who make the rules of the game), and therefore their attributes are undervalued. Thus, as Bourdieu explained, these learners often do not possess the cultural capital—for example, the ‘right’ abilities, attitudes, family backgrounds, tastes, and language—to ensure school success. Second, school success requires familiarity with middle- and upper-class culture (also the dominant culture) within the school field, but their unfamiliarity with it is a detriment to their success. I make the assertion that First Nations learners are well-endowed individuals who take with them to school a self that constitutes capital in its ore form. This is what I call *ore of capital*: the attributes that learners take to the field that might not necessarily immediately be capital for that field; however, identification and engagement with this ore transform it into capital for the field in question. An example is a learner who is known for being humorous. This humour (i.e., the ore of capital) can be harnessed to widen its benefit to various aspects of schooling. The learner can be encouraged to use it in drama or comedy at special school events or to help teachers to demonstrate lessons in class. These opportunities can build self-esteem and empower the learner (given that some First Nations learners might struggle with identity) to view him- or herself as capable. With this capable identity, the learner is empowered to apply him – or self to learning to succeed in aspects of schooling (e.g., social studies, math, English, and science) in which the learner may have previously felt incapable. Having an ore of capital does not suggest that it requires a refining process before it ultimately produces capital; rather, First Nations learners possess cultural, collective (e.g., traditions, ceremonies, and ontologies), and specific individual (gifts and talents) attributes that are important for them to thrive in various social fields; but they need to be discovered by engaging the obvious, which is the ore. Thus, school fields, like others, might require certain capitals to succeed that First Nations learners possess in an ore form. Therefore, when the school field identifies and engages with this ore of capital in First Nations learners, the product, capital, becomes empowering. It comes alive when the whole student becomes engaged in schooling, which includes engaging the uniqueness of the self and his or her culture, abilities, and community networks (e.g., Elders). The capital that a First Nations person has to succeed in schooling is dormant when it is unexplored and unengaged; consequently, this individual might exist as a ‘partial self’ during school and then become disengaged over time. Wishart’s (2009) study of urban youth, many of whom were Aboriginal in an alternate school, showed that early leaving results when Aboriginal youth are unengaged in school. Clandinin et al. (2010) also showed that disengagement issues might cause Aboriginal youth to leave school early; they leave on their own, feel that the disempowering nature of school has pushed them out, or school staff encourage them to leave because of their misbehaviour. I propose that First Nations learners have potential hidden in the ore of capital that, once identified, valued, engaged, and empowered, is capable of becoming capital in the school field to enable them to succeed in that field—which, I suppose, might partly be the reason that Bourdieu (1977) pointed to the marginalisation of some as a result of the dominant group’s misrecognition of their capitals (or ore of capital, as I termed it).

Second, Bourdieu’s (1985) idea that the field is a competitive arena that consists of structures of objective relations (of competition) is somewhat different from the worldview. Contrary to Bourdieu’s view, communal attitudes are significant to the understanding of the manner in which First Nations students approach schooling as well as their ambitions. As I pointed out earlier, their ambition might be driven by the desire to overcome poverty, to prove to their children and families that they are capable of succeeding, and to be able in the future to help other people who experience similar life difficulties. Thus, learners’ intention might not be to use their capital to reach the top of the class or an economic ladder or to attain higher status.

Instead, learners might focus on the collective good and the benefit of all within the social field or on ways to lessen the inequality among them, perhaps because of their Aboriginal ontology in which they also value collectiveness and the maintenance of a moral relationship with the Earth and all of its constituents (Little Bear, 2000; Mander & Tauli-Corpuz, 2006; Martin, 1996; Smith, 2012).

Further, following Bourdieu's (1977) logic, students' aspirations result not only from rational choice, but also from their habitus: "The habitus is the universalizing mediation which causes an individual agent's practices, without either explicit reason or signifying intent, to be none the less 'sensible' and 'reasonable'" (p. 79). The habitus or objective pattern of behaviour is in a mutual relationship with the practices and the structures that shape the practices. Iteratively, the structures shape practices and the practices shape structures that eventually tend to become objective structures (Swartz, 1997). Habitus is "an unconscious acceptance of social differences and hierarchies, 'a sense of one's place' and behaviours of self-exclusion" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 141). The habitus becomes a system of unconscious reproduction and self-elimination (Bourdieu, 1977). Hence, Bourdieu suggested a circular and iterative relationship among the field, capital, and habitus. Modifying the capital alters the field, which in turn affects the habitus. In the same way, a changed habitus creates possibilities for changes to the available capital, changes the field, and repositions the agents in the field in terms of their standing. For example, First Nations learners from families in which university attendance is rare might experience certain environments in school, work, or among friends and begin to desire a university education. Thus, from a position of relatively low capital in the school field, these learners have correspondingly low aspirations, which reflect the nature of the learners' habitus. But learners can acquire a new habitus (i.e., university aspirations) by exposure to university learners or graduates and environments or life events that awaken them to the possibilities with a university education.

Researchers have criticised (Lehmann, 2009; Webb et al., 2002) Bourdieu's (1986) description of educational social inequality and change for inadequately explaining social change. Bourdieu believed that family is a key organising unit within a capitalist structure that exposes people to patterns of behaviour embedded within their particular class habitus (Miller, 2003), including their gender attribution (Bourdieu, 2001; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). This situation implies that change in a field can be difficult because of the misrecognition of oppressive practices and the ways in which those who benefit seek to maintain their privilege. In effect, therefore, social change is difficult for the underprivileged. Bourdieu's stance has become a concern for me and others. I pondered how my story had changed from bleakness to the success in school and career endeavours that he might have considered the preserve of people who are not of my calibre in socioeconomic terms.

For example, Dr. Trudy M. Cardinal, a Cree scholar at the U of A and a co-supervisor of this PhD work, as a student found Bourdieu's (1986) theory of practice intriguing in that it explained part of her educational journey, but she also found the theory disturbing (Cardinal, 2010). She observed that Bourdieu conveyed a sense that the fault is with her people, that they lack some capital that leads to limited schooling success. Also, Bourdieu's idea that habitus is unconscious bothered her because she could not see a way forward. Cardinal stated, "Bourdieu felt too constricting, and from inside that theory of habitus, I couldn't see room for 'becoming.' I was uneasy with the idea that much of the effect of habitus was unconscious" (p. 179). Bourdieu's theory might give the impression that Aboriginal peoples are lacking capital and are unable to attain what they need to succeed in school. Cardinal contended that Bourdieu's theory could incoherently story her experience: “I haven’t yet found anything in Bourdieu’s theory that feels coherent with this ‘get back up’ story to live by that I slowly realize is also within my lived experiences” (p. 71). She therefore could not accept Bourdieu’s kind of stories to live by (Clandinin, as cited in Cardinal 2010, p. 5) and the way that they were storying her relations. I can understand why she found Bourdieu’s theory disturbing. I felt the same way for a while, and even more when I read that other authors were as concerned as I was about these constrictive concepts.

As I explored Bourdieu’s work further, I found that he addressed the possibilities for social change that relate to my experience, that appeal to my senses. He used words such as *awakening*, *creative*, *generative*, *transcending social circumstances*, and the like. He stated that habitus is not stationary and that the unconscious transactions and assimilations that occur in life can reshape it. Although Bourdieu (1990a) identified school and family as key influences on habitus, he suggested that the habitus also carries the potential for new and creative responses that are capable of transcending the social circumstances from which they are generated. I became intrigued when I saw another dimension to his theory that veered from deficit-centred explanations of social inequality. I thought that if Bourdieu could explain habitus in this more open manner, then he could explain my story, the story of how I responded to the possibilities as I understood from my acquaintances outside my family and inspiration from teachers. I could sense that I was growing in harmony with Bourdieu because of the meaning of words on the sticky notes that I had placed on the walls in my room that said “imagination,” “lived experiences,” “attitudes,” “expectation in school,” “motivation,” and expressions such as “aiming for and achieving the best possible,” “mentors are great but freedom from false identity is greater," and so on. I became fully immersed in Bourdieu's work to the point that I was comfortable with reaching into his ideas to shape this study.

In applying Bourdieu's (1986) theory of practice, I have framed this study through his lens because of its capacity to offer insights from a micro to a macro perspective while unveiling the dissonances and harmonies in comparison with Aboriginal worldviews and learners' interactions with the academic context. Its emphasis on the role of field, capital, and habitus in creating social inequality and transformation framed the explanations of experiences that inspire First Nations students to attend university. Significant to this study are his concept of capital and its effect on the field and aspirations or habitus, and vice versa. How First Nations learners construct capital from home and elsewhere and subsequently reproduce existing habitus or modify their habitus in the field are the focus.

In the next section I discuss Bourdieu's (1977, 1986) view of intersectionality of classified categories, including gender, race, and socioeconomic backgrounds (also referred to as *class* and *socioeconomic status*). These categories can affect the field, capital, and habitus.

## Intersectionality of Identities

Rooted in feminism, the concept of intersectionality is premised on the view that each person engages within a matrix of identities influenced by gender,[17] race, class, and other characteristics. Therefore, it rejects the overgeneralisation of identity that stems from individuals' common quality or belonging to particular categories with the aim of confronting domination within the interlinked categories of power relations that create and maintain disadvantage for some and privilege for others (DeFrancisco & Palczewski, 2007; McCall, 2005). Originally aimed to give voice to women's marginalisation today, feminism[18] has many perspectives and pedagogies[19] (Dentith & Peterlin, 2010). For the purpose of this study, the structural oppression orientation, particularly of feminist intersectionality, informs this study. Therefore, I briefly outline intersectionality theory.

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[17] The gender category, for example, is viewed as a cross-cutting feature of social relations. Gender has gained prominence in research since the 1960s (Chafetz, 1997; Weber, 2001). The primary argument for feminists is that gender shapes our experiences and vice-versa (Dentith & Peterlin, 2011; Rao & Kelleher, 2000; Skeggs, 2008). Historically, researchers viewed gender as having a structuring influence on capitalism, work, and society at large (Evans, 2003; Skeggs, 2008).

**Intersectionality theory.** The notion of intersectionality was birthed from the structural oppression orientation of feminism. Intersectionality theory involves the notion that oppression has varying degrees of intensity (Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2008) because of the "complexities of social life and categories of analysis" (McCall, 2005, p. 1772). The aim of intersectionality theory[20] is to avoid overgeneralisation with predetermined characteristics or *essentialism*, in which all members of a group are presumed to be equal because of one common quality (DeFrancisco & Palczewski, 2007). The configurations of locations around race, class, sexuality, ability, disability, and age, for example, vary and shape the degrees of inequality

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[18] Feminists strive to "describe oppression, elaborate on its causes and consequences, and suggest ways in which all related human suffering can be identified, resisted and overcome through awareness and social reform" (Dentith & Peterlin, 2011, p. 37), with the view that gender relations is problematic, linked to inequalities, and should be challenged (Chafetz, 1997). Sex was viewed as a biological identity such as being male or female, whereas gender is socially constructed and emanates from a person's social identity, history, specific beliefs, and values that are contingent on location, space, and time, which influence people's experiences and actions (Butler, 1990).

[19] This includes cultural, liberal, radical, and socialist feminism and intersectionality theory (Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2008; Weiler, 2009), which represent different perspectives; their difference lies in their answer to the reasons for the way that things are. Broadly, they address gender issues from four positions:

- *Gender difference:* that biological differences exist and focus on maintaining the reproduction of the status quo.
- *Gender inequality*: liberal feminism in which sexual division of labour is considered the reason for inequality.
- *Gender oppression:* that women's situation is the direct result of domination by men through the practice of patriarchy.
- *Structural oppression:* that certain groups benefit from the domination of others through the interplay of various differences (Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2008).

[20] Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) first used the word *intersectionality* and noted that an analysis of identities is insufficient without consideration of the intersectionality or multiplicity of identities (DeFrancisco & Palczewski, 2007).

(Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2008). An identity does not exist in "'removable, separable layers'; . . . identity actually occurs as a complex, synergistic, infused whole that becomes something completely different when parts are ignored, forgotten, and unnamed" (DeFrancisco & Palczewski, 2007, p. 9). Collins (1999, 2004) called the gender oppression from the interlocking of locations a *matrix of domination* that is rooted in hierarchical power relations from combinations and simultaneously linked categories that mutually create and maintain disadvantage and privilege.

However, misrepresentations are evident in some ethnic groups. Paula Gunn Allen (1992) denied the popular assertion that Aboriginal women everywhere and always have been oppressed and inferior and are of lower status than men. Traditionally, men's and women's role were as equal partners:

> Women traditionally played a central role within the Aboriginal family, within Aboriginal government and in spiritual ceremonies. Men and women enjoyed considerable personal autonomy and both performed functions vital to the survival of Aboriginal communities. The men were responsible for providing food, shelter and clothing. Women were responsible for the domestic sphere and were viewed as both life-givers and the caretakers of life. As a result, women were responsible for the early socialization of children . . . [from] oral histories. . . . Aboriginal men and women were equal in power and each had autonomy within their personal lives. (Manitoba Government, n.d., p. 1)

Although women "no longer enjoy the unquestioned positions of power, respect, and decision making on local and international levels" (Allen, 1992, p. 202), they are powerful. Allen added that Crow American Indian women, for example, have a great deal of spiritual power in ceremonies.

Women's roles became denigrated as a result of the imposition of patriarchal notions of gender from colonialism (Coulthard, 2014; Lugones, 2010; Maracle, 1996; Smith, 2005). The result was that

> women had few rights in European society at the time of first contact with Aboriginal people. Men were considered their social, legal and political masters. Any rights which women had were those derived through their husbands. The law of England, for example, held that women did not have the right to vote, to own property or to enter into contracts. (Manitoba Government, n.d., p. 1).

Smith (2012) also noted that

> family organization, child rearing, political and spiritual life, work and social activities were all disordered by a colonial system that positioned its own women as property of men, with primarily domestic roles. . . . Indigenous women would argue that their traditional roles of society included full participation in many aspects of political decision making and marked gender separations which were complementary. (p. 153)

The Native Women's Association of Canada identified the need to restore the value of Aboriginal gender roles by establishing the Culturally Relevant Gender-Based Analysis tool, which helps to identify the unique needs of Aboriginal women and address the barriers to meeting those needs throughout the stages of development planning up to evaluation. Both Aboriginal males and females participate in this analysis (Wolski, 2012).

Intersectionality does not reject the existence of categories; rather, it embraces the "intra-categorical approach to complexity that seeks to complicate and use [identity categories] in a more critical way" (McCall, 2005, p. 1780). Intersectionality "focus[es] on the process by which [identity categories] are produced, experienced, reproduced, and resisted in everyday life" (p. 1783). It has extended their sphere to include the analysis of men because of the tendency to exclude men in research that examines the lives of women. However, the remedy for a more comprehensive understanding is to take a relational approach (Lesko, 2000). For example, a phenomenon such as male underachievement and the loss of control over their lives since the 1990s can have multiple explanations that spans sex/gender, race, and SES issues (Epstein, Elwood, Hey & Maw, 1998; Francis, 2000).

Intersectionality theorists[21] draw on the power of human agency to apply strategies to resist the persistent expression of unjust power. Therefore, they desire to give voice to life experiences that stem from intersectional historic positions of inequality and believe in the collective effort to topple oppression:

> [They] argue for the need to bear witness, to protest, and to organize for change within the contest of the oppressed community, for only within community can one keep faith in the eventual triumph of justice—a justice understood not in a narrow framing of legal rationality but as the working-out within social institutions and social relations of the principles of fairness to and concern for others and oneself. (Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2008, p. 356).

In the next segment I talk about Bourdieu's (1986) theory of practice and this theory's view of identity categories. I demonstrate how Bourdieu perceived the intersections of identity categories and how they can shape social outcomes.

## Intersectionality of Gender, Race, and SES in Bourdieu's Theory of Practice

Intersectionality of locations is consistent with Bourdieu's (1986) theory of practice in which his emphasis remains on classification and the processes of domination and social change (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986, 1987; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Lengermann and Niebrugge (2008) maintained that, like race and SES, gender is an omnipresent identity classification that is always part of one's positionality that constructs social life and outcomes. In the same way Bourdieu's analysis of social life within the framework of field, capital, and habitus is not an exception because he highlighted the dynamics of identity categories and their role in shaping career and educational pursuits as well as the ways that domination can be challenged via becoming reflexive to enable the realisation of new possibilities. Therefore, this situation renders intersectionality theory a complementary tool in this study to demonstrate the complexities of practice that Bourdieu attempted to explain.

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[21] Intersectionality studies include study of gender and race (Kill & Sprague, 1999); race, gender, and class (Anderson & Collins, 1992); race, gender, and educational attainment (O'Connor, 2002; Edin & Kefalas, 2005); and gender and age (Gibson, 1996; Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2008).

Bourdieu's (1977) explanation of how social relations are reproduced and challenged has been useful to feminists (Adkins, 2003; Lovell, 2000; McNay, 1999). In *Masculine Domination*, Bourdieu (2001) alluded to the role of sexual identity in the formation of habitus and social identity. McNay (1999) framed this "gendered habitus" (p. 32). In his study of the Kabyle case in Algeria, Bourdieu saw coherence between the sexual division of labour and identity, between the use of the home and external spaces, as well as between the home and the rest of society. Thus, sex plays a significant role in their habitus formation (Bourdieu, 2001), although he has been criticised for narrowly equating sex with gender (Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2008; Silva, 2005). According to Silva, Bourdieu conveyed the sense that the habitus works both ways: It submits to the objective status within the field and at times shapes what determines it. This suggests that the habitus can shape and be shaped to construct a modified field. Adkins (2003), in analysing the reflexivity of habitus, pointed to Bourdieu's ideas on social transformation in which Bourdieu linked social change to the awakening of consciousness, which increases the capacity for critical reflection. Bourdieu believed that heightened possibilities of change exist that create dissonance between the feel for the game (habitus) and the game itself (field). "Between the previously routine adjustment of subjective and objective structures, . . . increased possibilities may arise for critical reflection on previously habituated forms of action when the adjustment between the habitus and the field is broken" (Bourdieu, 1985; as cited in Adkins, 2003, p. 26). Bourdieu (1985) suggested that creative responses follow an awakening when a social class becomes agents and impose themselves by speaking and acting authoritatively in their place. Consequently, social transformation occurs (Bourdieu, 1985).

The changing gender order of society can be explained as the habitus's change from Bourdieu's perspective (Bourdieu, 1985; Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2008). Colley et al.'s (2003) study of career choices among males and females showed that traditional gender roles influence students' career habitus. Women's movement into the labour market and their involvement in high-status occupations in the public sphere, which were previously preserved for males in late modernity, for example, indicate the potential for habituated forms of gender to change to preferred forms (Colley et al., 2003). McNay (1999) viewed Bourdieu's social transformation thesis as an act that entails moving beyond the gender status quo—beyond prereflexive, noncognitive, and practical consciousness and embodied experiences of gender.

Like gender, the division into relational categories of race defines one's cultural capital and shapes individual and collective habitus (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Schooling and aspirations can vary more for males than females at any point, based on race. This suggests that expectations vary because of the different locations (Reay et al., 2005; Skeggs, 2008). The few researchers who explored the role of cultural capital in school outcomes and higher-education choices pointed to the racial differences that were skewed against the people of the minority race (Kalmijn & Kraaykamp, 1996; Reay et al., 2005). Statistics show relatively low school outcomes, low high school completion rates, and less participation in higher education for students of Aboriginal origin compared to the non-Aboriginal population in Canada. Unfavourable experiences (as I discussed in chapter two) have been associated partly with Native students' historical experiences of marginalisation in schooling and racism that have, consequently, led to their disinterest in schooling; a habitus might be unlikely to result in school success and higher education (Castellano, 2008; CCL, 2009; Statistics Canada, 2010c; Stonechild, 2008). Because people's habitus can also be shaped by their race and their race can shape their educational aspirations through their habitus, intersectionality theory points to the complexity of intersecting forms of oppression.

Classifying the practices of agents is the basis of their judgements of other agents' practices and their own practices (Bourdieu, 1984). The SES divisions bear the "capacity to produce classifiable practices, works, and the capacity to differentiate and appreciate these practices and products (taste), that the represented social world, i.e., the space of lifestyle, is constituted" (p. 170). The generated SESs are the sources of internalisation of the division into social classes. The SES defines the relative strength and distribution of capital, which defines the structure of the field. Dispositions are adjusted based not only on the SES conditioning, but also on the relationally defined position within the socioeconomic structure (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Reay et al. (2005) elaborated on the link between SES and habitus and noted that, "because there are classes of experiences, there are also classes of habitus or the habitus of classes" (p. 25).

Similarly to gender habitus, critical reflection can transform the habitus of people of a particular socioeconomic background (Adkins, 2003; Bourdieu, 1977). The habitus is permeable and responsive to modification by experiences around rather than being passively taken in or reinscribed (Webb et al., 2002). Unfamiliar experiences of the working class can lead to the acquisition of an unfamiliar SES habitus (Aschaffenburg & Maas, 1997) or 'a cultured habitus' (Reay et al., 2005, p. 26). For example, Reay et al.'s (2005) study of working-class students who applied to attend university is a breakthrough that is partly attributable to human agency, as well as the proliferation of information, the expansion of university opportunities and marketing strategies, and policy and program interventions to facilitate participation. Following Bourdieu's logic, ultimately, this is the result of a modified habitus as people transform their perceptions and aspirations beyond the status quo within their matrix of identity categories to undertake university studies.

The foregoing paragraphs indicate that habitus is a function of a combination of various identity categories that are tied to the field, capital, and habitus, which is the basis for choices of pursuits in social life. The habitus of First Nations learners, for example, is the result of an intersection of gender, race, SES, and other characteristics. Bourdieu's (1986) theory of practice explains the inequalities in social relations and identity categories; how it is reproduced; and, to an extent, how it is challenged by an awakening. The increasing participation of Aboriginal learners in postsecondary learning suggests that this awakening might result in experiences of critical reflection and creative responses that disrupt the status quo, according to Bourdieu's thinking—which I investigated in this study. Hence, the intersections of the identity categories of gender, race, and SES are a suitable frame of reference for the exploration of the reflexive experiences that shape First Nations adults' transition to university.

Next, I present the story of my intersectional experiences because it is important that I further position myself in this analysis for an understanding of how my preunderstanding and experiences have shaped the study. I discuss how I made sense of my transition to university and draw on Bourdieu's perspectives on capital, field, and habitus.

## My Story: My Intersectional Educational Experience From Bourdieu's Perspective

As I reflected more and more on Bourdieu's (1986) theory of practice, I began to imagine how the theory could explain experiences of my transition to university. I perceived that my transition to university also had elements of the intersectionality of gender, race, and SES. As the second of three consecutive daughters, and coming from a working-class background, my socioeconomic background created protracted feelings of insecurity in my teen years, and my minority race did not offer the capital that Bourdieu suggested. My exposure to capital outside home and my spiritual awakening gave me a healthier self-concept, and I could only be thankful that I embarked on university to meet the expectations of family and habitus from high school and family business.

Hailing from the Greater Accra region of Ghana in a small ethnic group known as Ada within the Ga Adangbe tribe (of four main tribal groups), I found it unnerving because of the tradition of tribal tensions. From as young as I could comprehend speech, I understood the tribal tensions among the dominant and minority tribes and their attendant behaviours. I remember walking through the market and overhearing publicly charged exchanges between rioting parties that constituted an attack on racial identities without any legal consequences whatsoever. People from dominant tribes verbally slander others without repercussion. My family lived in a few neighbourhoods where people of my ethnic group had mostly settled, but my social circle expanded to include others through schooling and as we moved around. I heard a myth early in elementary school that people of my ethnic group frequently became teachers. I understood that, although teaching was a prestigious career, teachers were among the least paid. As I proceeded to middle school, I met more schoolmates and classmates of Ada descent. What I found fascinating is that I had rare contact with adults who had university degrees.

I cast my mind to my own family to assess our socioeconomic background and realised that my parents worked hard to make a living without tertiary education, and I could say the same for the few extended family members whom I knew well. My grandma on my mother's side and her two remaining children (four died early) had moved from the village to the city in the hope of finding a better life. They lived in the city with Grandma's sister and helped with her food business. My mother often reminded me that at about 15 years old she was desperate to attend school. Although she bought her school uniform (from her savings), her mother could not allow her to go. However, my uncle, who also helped with the business, sponsored himself and began elementary school as a teenager at the age of 17. I wondered why he could go but my mother could not. He sold newspapers and did other small tasks in the neighbourhood to support himself until middle school, after which he was hired for a government job that he did not keep because of political unrest and his drive to follow the career paths of his stepsiblings who traded in fishing gear. My father loved education, and as the last of seven who stayed at home, he had a responsibility to care for his aging father, including working on the farm in the village. After middle school, when farming was no longer their source of sustenance, he joined his sister in the city in search of greener pastures and secured a job with a government department, which he did not hold for long (like my uncle). During the boom in Nigeria in the 1980s, he migrated to Nigeria and worked in business administration in the oil sector and supported three children and a wife whom he had left behind in Ghana.

I could visualise in which socioeconomic category Bourdieu might place me. I understand the socioeconomic spectrum according to physical assets in laymen's terms, in which the poor are the lower class and the working class includes those who earn wages or hourly pay. Both working class and lower class comprise about 60% of the population, and the middle class (about 30%) includes wealthy salaried workers such as doctors and lawyers. The upper class forms about 1% of the population and wealthier than middle class (Abramowitz & Teixeira, 2008). I perceived that I was part of the working class or the lower class of society, with no family history of advanced educational achievements and wealth.

Later, I understood why my grandmother could not afford to send my mother to school. Mom's labour partly justified the stay with Grandmother's sister. I imagined an informal contract in which their labour contributed to their upkeep. Grandma's sister was a considerable help and a lifesaver to Grandma and the family. I grew up grateful for her assistance, without which life would have been impossible. I understood the affection and love that they demonstrated for Grandma until her death. I could not blame Grandma for rejecting the educational opportunity that my mother so eagerly desired to better her future. Nevertheless, I questioned why my uncle was permitted to go to school when my mother was not. This was gender at work! Bourdieu would opine that Grandma was in the process of reproducing herself, of reproducing another poor female (see Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu would characterise Grandma, without education, in a bounded state in which she could not recognise the possibilities that educating her daughter could offer or in which she misrecognised that not allowing her daughter to attend school was reproducing social inequality—an action that is a result of socially constructed constraints; or that Grandma made the best choice under the circumstances that my mother would remain in the business full time to avoid losing her job. Could she also have perceived my mother as better capable of domestic work, or could she have higher expectations for her son to become a breadwinner? Also, Bourdieu's theory would suggest that Grandma rejected the middle- and upper-class cultures that schooling offers and perpetuated the stratified class system of social inequality (Bourdieu; as cited in Willis, 1977) because she did not understand it. I was privileged to hear Grandma's stories about her life when she lived with us. However, I remember that she found life difficult until later when she enjoyed the care of her adult children, my father, and her grandchildren.

My mother always told us that she felt talented at several things, and yet she neither explored nor developed her skills in them. She always spoke about her skills at trading, hairdressing, and sewing. The demands of domestic work and her aunt's business made it impossible for my mother to disengage to train or seek her own fortune as a teenager. I imagined that Bourdieu would say that my mother was trapped in her own bounded space. Therefore, she continued to work with her aunt until she started her own family. My mother became interested in trading, which did not require additional training.

Having had three daughters first, my parents were keen to give us the best education that they possibly could. My father believed that he needed to give his girls the same quality of education as if he would his boys, if he had any. The two boys who came after us joined us at private schools (generally perceived as prestigious and of better quality than public school), although not regularly, depending on the performance of their businesses. We left the private schools when their businesses began to struggle. I recall that a new system and curriculum for middle school were introduced only in the public schools at the time, so I attended an underprivileged public school for the last year of elementary school and junior high school in the same location along the way. The physical structures there were not up to date, but we were fortunate to have good teachers who challenged me. My understanding as a little girl was that I could become a lawyer, airhostess, or doctor only if I became well educated. We were inspired to do well at school because of our parents' support and pride in our education.

My father and mother believed that girls could do whatever boys could do. He conveyed this understanding to me through his interactions with us. I found it tremendously inspiring when Dad challenged the traditional notion of gender division of labour. One day when I told him that I wanted to be a caterer because I enjoyed baking and cooking exotic dishes and desserts, as well as our local Ghanaian dishes, he responded, “You already know how to make *banku*” (the traditional cornmeal that we cooked almost every day). I knew that my father did not understand the career opportunities associated with the food and hospitality industry. I also knew that he was resisting gendered traditional expectations of women in our culture. He probably feared that I might live out the low expectations of women that clouded our society if I went into this industry. I imagined that he also feared that if I was unsuccessful in building a career in the food and hospitality business, then the chances were that I would utilise my skills full time at home as a wife—which would, in the end, be coherent with the ‘less than’ societal expectations of women then. My father was tried to persuade me to think beyond working at home to working in the public sphere to prevent my becoming a victim of what he feared. Bourdieu talked about the nature of sexual division of labour and how it can be reproduced. My father resisted this sexual division of labour. Why? He was from a patriarchal ethnic group for whom this division was starkly clear. I imagined that his experience of a white-collar job within the public service exposed him to the possibilities that awaited his daughters. My mother was also an avid supporter of our education, although she had had no experience of schooling whatsoever. She knew that education is important to create a better life. My father’s interest in his daughters’ education was inspiring to me, but my illiterate mother’s encouragement of our schooling was also inspiring.

My father often told the story of the difficulties he faced before he could complete middle school. Now I understand that he told his story to challenge us to devote ourselves to studying. At home, we did our assignments, studied during exams, and attended holiday classes at school. I longed for structure at home, similar to the structure of school. I wanted to know when it was time to study and when it was time to help in the kitchen or play. I longed for what Bourdieu called middle- or upper-class cultures at home that we could easily transpose to schooling or a replication of school culture at home. My father told his stories about schooling when he took us to school or we spent time together over the weekend. He enjoyed seeing me study, and often he brought me a cup of tea. I felt that his efforts inspired me.

When it was time for me to attend high school, I was obsessed with the idea of moving far away from home to a distant school to explore my joys of travel and, perhaps, to exercise the independence for which I longed. I felt that being far away from my parents would not hurt a teenager who desired to test how well I could manage without correction and punishment from my parents for wrongdoings. This obsession continued to the point that I was hesitant to attend a renowned, high-performing, popular school about six kilometres from home. It was obvious that my parents would give away a considerable number of their possessions to ensure that their children could attend.

I had teachers who believed in me even though I did not have confidence in myself. I spent time with them, listening to the wisdom that they shared about life. One of my favourite junior high school teachers, now Dr. Joseph Adonu, professor in University of Bedfordshire, UK, often shared tips during our lessons on how to succeed in life. Frequently, he would tell us, “Where purpose is not known, abuse is inevitable.” This saying became a slogan in my junior high school. I enjoyed the clarity he brought to my mind, and the inspiration. I began to visit with him and heard more about what he already knew about a life that I was trying to discern as a little girl.

My parents met this teacher and discussed my school choices to ensure that we (as a family) would make the best choice. This effort persuaded me to select this privileged high school as my first choice and my other favourite but distant schools as second and last. My junior high school exam result was impressive, so this nearby leading school admitted me. I felt that my teachers had been right, that I was capable, and that I was wrong for underestimating my abilities. I now understand from Bourdieu that I was acquiring capital from teachers that I did not have on my own or was unavailable within my family. My relationships with teachers were my social capital, and their belief in my capabilities helped me to subsequently develop acquired tastes and dispositions, which Bourdieu called habitus. Before I even began to attend this high school, I imagined myself walking down the school hallways and feeling that it was 'my place' because I deserved to be there, because I had earned it through hard work.

It was a good start to the school year, but it was not long before I encountered severe identity struggles. My father dropped me off at school frequently. He and my uncle were fond of French and enrolled me in private French lessons during the semester and on vacations. Later in the first year I became a boarding student, living in the students' residence. That was when my difference became a struggle. The culture on campus was different, and I felt different as students of mostly privileged backgrounds lived together. Bourdieu (1984) called it *highbrow culture*, which was unfamiliar to me. The school had several cliques, and I felt that I did not belong there. I made friends with those who appeared to be of similar SES. I noticed that some of my colleagues tried hard to fit into this elite school field by talking about their clothes or families or acting as though they were rich, when in fact that was not so. I was grateful to be able to attend this school based on merit.

In this high school the academic work was rigorous and the competition was keen. About this time my faith in Christ took a new turn and took care of the struggles as I developed a positive identity of myself. I understood that in my culture it was important to respect others, help others, be friendly, and cooperate. My faith in Christ also taught me all of these things, in addition to being kind. But the school culture of competition appeared to have overpowered these values. Competition seemed inevitable and irrevocable. Generally, in the school field, the teachers quickly singled out and rewarded students who had a form of capital that the teaches considered superior. They willed leadership over the rest of the class or school, were called to speak out the correct answers to a question, wrote down the names of 'talkatives' for punishment, rang the school bell, were prefects in various capacities, and led lessons when the class teacher was unavailable. Fear was common because students could be punished or intimidated for wrong answers or poor performance. Teachers were gatekeepers who encouraged those who were already doing well and discouraged those who struggled. I remembered feeling inspired when my drama teacher in elementary school pointed out my excellence in dancing in the hope that my colleagues would imitate me. But there, I felt that some of my teachers did not believe that I could excel in subject areas where I struggled. The students appeared friendly and cooperative but understood that the game was competitive, and although the relationships with teachers were generally respectful, they could also be tense.

Having excelled in elementary and junior high school did not guarantee less intimidation in senior high years. The new environment in high school was challenging because the socioeconomic cliques brought uneasy tensions for us as teenagers. The teachers could have been more motivating amidst the fierce competition in the field in which I participated during my schooling in Ghana. I recall the unproductive attitudes of some teachers in junior high years who seemed to take pleasure in seeing students struggle with or fail exams. They perceived that they were tough. The students whom they taught wallowed in fear, while the teachers' egos blossomed when they set the toughest exam questions. Such teachers were perhaps gatekeepers because they chose who would move to the next level. Bourdieu (1986) described this behaviour as *reproduction strategies* that the teachers and school staff implemented. It was several years before I found myself through spirituality.

I was raised Christian, and later in high school I experienced a deep transformation that helped me to overcome my personal struggles. My parents took us to a Pentecostal church. I remember that as a child I was frequently sick, and my mother would ask the pastor to pray over me. I realised that my symptoms began to subside when we returned home after the prayer. At church, people shared their testimonies of miracles that had occurred because of their love relationship with Jesus Christ and prayer. As a child I believed what I saw in the faith but could not understand it fully. When I was 16 years old in this high school Christian fellowship, one of the student leaders at my residence led me through prayer and into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. At this time I understood that my prior faith in Christ was partial and incomplete, so I changed it by surrendering my life entirely to this faith.

I began to experience a transformation in my mind and heart when I felt capable of succeeding, because I believed what the Bible said about my identity as an able, intelligent, and successful person. I survived the academic rigour, and after the final exam in high school, I emerged with qualifications to attend university. I recall Bourdieu’s (1986) description of the experience of awakening that comes from a dissonance between one’s circumstances (field) and the possibilities (habitus) within the field. I remember not faring as well as I had in my previous schools. I knew that if I continued in this way, I would not attain the future that my family anticipated. I rationalised why others achieved more than I did. I believed that it was because of, for example, their exposure to better schools and better SES, and I concluded that I could never match them. This changed when I experienced an awakening that compelled me to confront my failing or less-than attitudes and empowered me spiritually as I realised in my heart and mind that I was meant for more. As I critically pondered the possibly unfavourable outcome of the final exams, I began to act as an agent. I exerted my authority and took steps to prevent a poor examination outcome that would reproduce the depravity that I saw around me and in my colleagues in some of the previous schools that I had attended. As I reflected on the less-than-I-desired—in other words, the failing path on which I found myself—I realised that with the help of my Christian faith, I could change it, and I did. I believed in my capabilities, attended extra tutoring sessions, and studied with seriousness; and along with prayer, I succeeded in the exam. Could this deeper relationship with Christ that helped empowered a positive self-concept be capital? I recognise that several capital forms could be subsumed within Bourdieu's three categories of capital: economic, social, and cultural. Social and cultural capital somewhat explain my spiritual connection because it came from family and membership in a church group. However, I was careful not to confine the source of my spiritual experience to family or church, because I understood that spiritual experiences are available universally to whoever opens up to them. Therefore, I believe that my awakening was triggered by what I call the spiritual capital that enabled me to utilise or take advantage of other capital available to me to be able to exert agency to succeed in high school.

Although I had already succeeded in my high school exam, I had to take another qualifying exam because that year there was a backlog of two-year groups who wanted to attend postsecondary school. My group waited for over a year for their admission to be processed. I spent the little time that I could take from running my mother's business studying in preparation for our university qualifying exam. The work site was close to a university, and I often studied there. It felt good to familiarise myself with a university campus in the hope of becoming a university student. My qualifying exam result was reasonable, given that as a teenager I had spent most of my time single-handedly managing the trading business with the help of a couple of staff members. I believed that my passion for university came from my wish to fulfil expectations. At this time I had already ingrained in my mind that because I had attended a high-performing high school, it was inevitable that I would pursue PSE.

Until this point I had had no concept of what I wanted to become, although I was optimistic that I would succeed in life. I did not have a white-collar habitus of any particular kind, but I was already conversant with business; or, more specifically, trading. Considering my future, I could not envision myself in a particular career or work environment. One thing that I knew was that I enjoyed helping my parents with their business during weekends and vacations and eventually managing it. Where were the role models? Where is the cultural capital or social capital that I was supposed to have to succeed, as Bourdieu (1986) noted? Thinking of cultural capital, a distant uncle was a physician whom I did not know well. I often visited my brother-in-law to-be, who was then attending this university where I studied for my university qualifying exam. Could these relations have been forms of capital for me? I continued to feel confident and capable. The more time that I spent there at the university campus, the more that I developed an attraction to this intellectual environment. I was already practically familiar with business. Could business be my passion? Nevertheless, it was clear that I must continue school.

The prospect of attending university appeared to wane within my family as our resources dwindled. How would this situation affect my future? With a moderately developed entrepreneurial acumen at that point, I was certain that I could do well if I discovered a discipline that would help me to master business. My excitement over university heightened when I discovered that I could study entrepreneurship, a field for which I already had the habitus, or 'a feel for the game.' What happened to the doctor/lawyer/air hostess that this Ghanaian child had wanted to become since kindergarten. It was a difficult decision when one of the universities admitted me to entrepreneurship studies. My parents were uncertain whether I should leave the business for university studies or learn a trade. They were concerned about how far their limited resources at the time would go to support my university studies; trades training was cheaper. My illiterate mother was forthrightly and devotedly committed to my attending university, and she trusted that all would be well. Therefore, I enrolled.

This story shows that my intersectional location of ethnic identity, gender, and SES shaped my university transition, and Bourdieu's (1986) theory of practice explains how this transition occurred. My parents and uncle were a significant source of capital. Role models with university backgrounds were rare among the family or tribe members to whom I was close (social capital). My attributes were somehow engaged, especially in my elementary years when I danced at school events and on TV and in my junior high years as a girls' school prefect. I benefited from the inspiration of some of the teachers within these competitive and sometimes demotivating school fields. Although I struggled with the tension of identity in my high school, my encounter there with spirituality brought an awakening that instilled in me a can-do attitude and a freedom that resulted in my appreciation for my working-class background; I also exerted my agency by taking actions to succeed in school and overcame the tensions. Though I faced tensions in my high school field, I was pleased that I also acquired the cultural capital and habitus there, along with my spiritual awakening, which inspired me to continue to postsecondary learning. My rather undefined ambition became obvious because of my profound experience of a 'feel for the game' in my parents' business. My passion for business had grown to the extent that I decided to follow a similar habitus at university.

Following my personal story is the analytical framework in which I illustrate how the literature, theoretical framework, and my story and preunderstanding shaped the interviews and my interpretation of the findings.

## Analytical Framework for First Nations Learners' Transition to University

My conception of postsecondary transition draws on Bourdieu's (1986) theory of practice and intersectionality perspectives,[22] and I present the factors that combined to explain the processes involved in the transition to university and how inspiration within these processes shapes the transition of First Nations learners. I explain that the aspiration to attend university is linked to the concepts of the field, capital, and habitus and that these three elements exist within a social system that can be termed *structure* (Bourdieu, 1986). Within this structure, human beings act as agents. The system structure that contains the field, capital, and habitus is both enabling and constraining (Giddens, 1986). The field in question, which is the education field, interacts with capital to establish a habitus; and interactions among the three elements create a modified habitus.

Bourdieu (1986) noted that the field might be unequal because of the quantity and distribution of capital. But First Nations learners' relationships with other people within the field might not be as competitive as Bourdieu suggested. On one hand, the First Nations have resources or capital that includes communal support systems, cultural traditions, and spiritual observances that build the resilience of the members (Gamlin, 2003; Little Bear, 2000). The

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[22] Several researchers have explicated how the capital, field, and habitus work to shape educational decisions and outcomes (Butler 1997; Lovell, 2000; McNay, 1999; Reay, 2000; Skeggs 1997). Reay et al. (2005), for example, examined SES, race, and gender in higher education by referring to Bourdieu's (1986) theory of practice. Kooistra (2005) used Bourdieu's theory of practice to explore issues of race, SES, and gender in American youth soccer.

TYP at university is also an asset (Arku, 2011). Learners might forego competition within the field because of the collective ethos that is part of their worldview (Gamlin, 2003; Little Bear, 2000). On the other hand, Bourdieu suggested that certain characteristics of learners can inhibit their progress within the field. Low SES, for example, could mean that learners might attend school without food or miss the school bus and not have a family vehicle to take them to school. Additionally, parents can find it challenging to return to school. As well, discrimination on the basis of race can rob learners of self-esteem. Other issues are the lack of parental involvement, attendance irregularities, early school leaving, and the lack of entry requirements for college (CCL, 2007; Steinhauer, 2008). The challenges can culminate in a livelihood struggle and hinder the transition to university.

What happens to learners' capital, including the economic, cultural, and social capital that Bourdieu (1986) identified? How can their capital (as I noted earlier) shape their school experiences? According to Bourdieu, individuals need capital to advance their position in a field. It might be accessible outside the family, even though the family is the primary source of capital (Bourdieu, 1986). For example, in her autobiographical account Northern Alberta Cree scholar Trudy M. Cardinal (2010) explained from Bourdieu's perspective why she succeeded in schooling, but she did not like the way that this theory storied her and her relations. She believed that the theories portray her and Aboriginal peoples as non-elite and powerless. According to Cardinal, "Bourdieu's words 'not for the likes of us' show up when my ability to dream and imagine possibilities is squashed under the weight of frustration, and the 'not belonging' and 'less than' stories to live by" (p. 65). She talked about her engagement in unconscious self-eliminating practices and her attempt to resolve her perception of deficit in her educational experience by acquiring cultural capital from elsewhere, and she eventually became a teacher:

> Due to my ability early on to recognize that the dominant culture was not Aboriginal, I surrounded myself with white European friends and spent endless weekends immersed in their lives soaking up what cultural capital I could. There was not much that I could do about my economic situation; however, due to my hard work and dedication, as well as some luck, I had teachers who believed in me and insisted that I could be successful in school and that I should aim my sights higher. (pp. 74-75)

Cardinal did not like this manner of storying herself and her relations. She wondered whether storying this way might presuppose that she used her friends' capital or exploited her friends and used the inspiration of teachers to accomplish her goals. She could not change her economic situation, but she worked hard and was dedicated, and luck and her teachers' inspiration helped her. "I know that [Bourdieu's] theories didn't speak to me in ways that left me feeling hopeful" (Cardinal, p. 77). Consequently, she chose more relational theories as autobiographical narrative inquiry, along with Indigenous methods, that honoured her relational ways, respected all those storied, and recognised the temporal and 'becoming' nature of each person (Cardinal, 2010). I can understand her logic in storying herself this way from Bourdieu's perspective, but she also examined it from narrative and Indigenous perspectives, which she preferred. This situation meats that I needed to examine Bourdieu's theory cautiously as I framed the transition processes of First Nations learners from this point of view.

Further, I propose that First Nations learners bring what I call the *ore of capital* to any learning environment (e.g., K-12 and beyond), which requires attention to produce the capital for success. The metaphor of the ore of capital is what I call Bourdieu's (1986) capital, ready to be used, that learners take from home to school. I call it an ore because it still needs to go through processes before it can be valued as capital in a particular field. The ore can be utilised in various fields, including education. Bourdieu's stance is that the attributes of those who are not among the dominant group are undervalued in the academic field. Thus, even though First Nations learners have their own attributes that, when they are identified, valued, and integrated into schooling, can give them a meaningful experience and lead to their success in school; often, learners' ore of capital is undervalued and unengaged in the education field, which leaves them with little to no capital and limits their transition. Moll et al. (2001) explained that learners take with them to school knowledge from their families and their lived experiences that can be engaged in the school field to help learners find meaning rather than learn isolated facts. This approach aligns with perspectives that encourage linking instruction to students' lives, local histories, and community contexts for effective pedagogy (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Vygotsky, 1978).

With the struggles in K -12 learning, transition to university, for example, might occur later because of what Bourdieu (1986) called an awakening (Adkins, 2003; Bourdieu, 1986) following life events and certain transformational experiences. Bourdieu recognised the power of the individual and the possibilities for social transformation that happen in an awakening (Adkins, 2003) from events and experiences over the life course, amidst learners' matrix of identity (i.e., SES, gender, and race in this case). Also, he pointed to the bounded space in which learners might find themselves because of their already disadvantaged position (Bourdieu, 1986), which speaks to the challenges, for example, of needing to upgrade, childrearing and family responsibilities, the need to leave family to attend school, paid and unpaid work, and marriage that can hold learners back (CCL, 2009; Locker & Dwyer, 1998). Bourdieu conveyed a feeling of little hope when he said that these situations can limit change (Webb at al., 2002). Thus, interventions to remove barriers to fully benefit an awakening are necessary.

Opportunities that complement an awakening can include access to other forms of capital, such as mentorship from role models and inspiration from school and other locations, and a journey of self-discovery through cultural immersion, counselling, and training. They can also include grants, TYPs, online studies, university transfers, education tax credits, and student loans. The experience of awakening can affirm the talents, self-worth, and skills (i.e., ore of capital) of learners who might doubt their capabilities. This ore of capital that the awakening process identifies engages with other life experiences to create new career and educational aspirations or confirm existing ones. This is what I call a new or confirmed habitus. This awakening epitomises the disruption of what Bourdieu (as cited in Cardinal, 2010) termed an unconscious self-elimination of "the less than" stories to live by and "not belonging" story lines that some First Nations individuals accept and believe (p. 179). The transformation experiences that arise from an awakening modify learners' tastes, dispositions, and ambitions (habitus) so that they not only aspire or confirm the aspiration to university education, but also take actions to realise this ambition as agents.

The transformation that reengineers learners' ambitions and horizon of possibilities takes place within the context of globalisation, high modernity, open markets, a high demand for high skills, easy access to information, and the expansion of postsecondary opportunities (Livingstone & Pankhurst, 2009a; Ritzer, 2011). This is what Beck and Beck-Gersheim (2002) called "globalization of biography" (p. 25). Unlike the informal education system in the precolonial era, coupled with the rejection of Eurocentric-centred education, Aboriginal leaders and institutions have for several decades advocated for a new type of education for their communities (Battiste, 2002; RCAP, 1996) founded on Aboriginal culture and economically viable to sustain livelihoods within the ever-changing economy. Implicit in this vision is the goal of Aboriginal people for formal education that will ultimately lead to credentials and result in individualised career opportunities within the labour market (Beck & Beck-Gersheim, 2002). Also, the Aboriginal education vision integrates both economic and humanistic rationales in that it calls for economic viability as well as cultural sustenance (Battiste, 2000; Castellano, 2008)—a position that is consistent with human-capital theories and employability constructs that hold that more education is advantageous in terms of labour-market outcomes and economic returns for the individual (Livingstone & Pankhurst, 2009b; Walters, 2004). Aboriginal learners' reasons for attending university might include not only the desire to secure a livelihood, but also noneconomic goals such as the need to model success and use their skills to help others and the determination to disrupt stereotypes, as the pilot study revealed (Arku, 2011).

Figure 1 demonstrates that First Nations learners' transition to university occurs within a bounded educational structure that consists of field, capital, and habitus. Within the field are intersecting identity characteristics including race, SES, and gender that can affect individuals' capital and in turn their habitus. I suggest that First Nations learners have an ore of capital that is waiting to be identified and engaged for them to succeed in school. This ore of capital is the attributes that they take with them to school, such as gifts, talents, and the attributes from families of socialisation that are unique to each learner. The ore of capital is not comparable to that of another or in competition because each learners' ore of capital is unique. Identifying the ore of capital reveals individuals' gifts and talents and empowers them to use them for schooling. An engaged ore of capital promotes the effective use to learners of economic, cultural, and social capital. In circumstances in which the ore of capital is undermined, learner might not be fully engaged in school. I argue that struggles in transition are partly a result of learners' missed opportunity to engage the ore of capital. They might continue to face barriers of race or racial identity, gender, and SES (including others) even outside of K-12 learning.

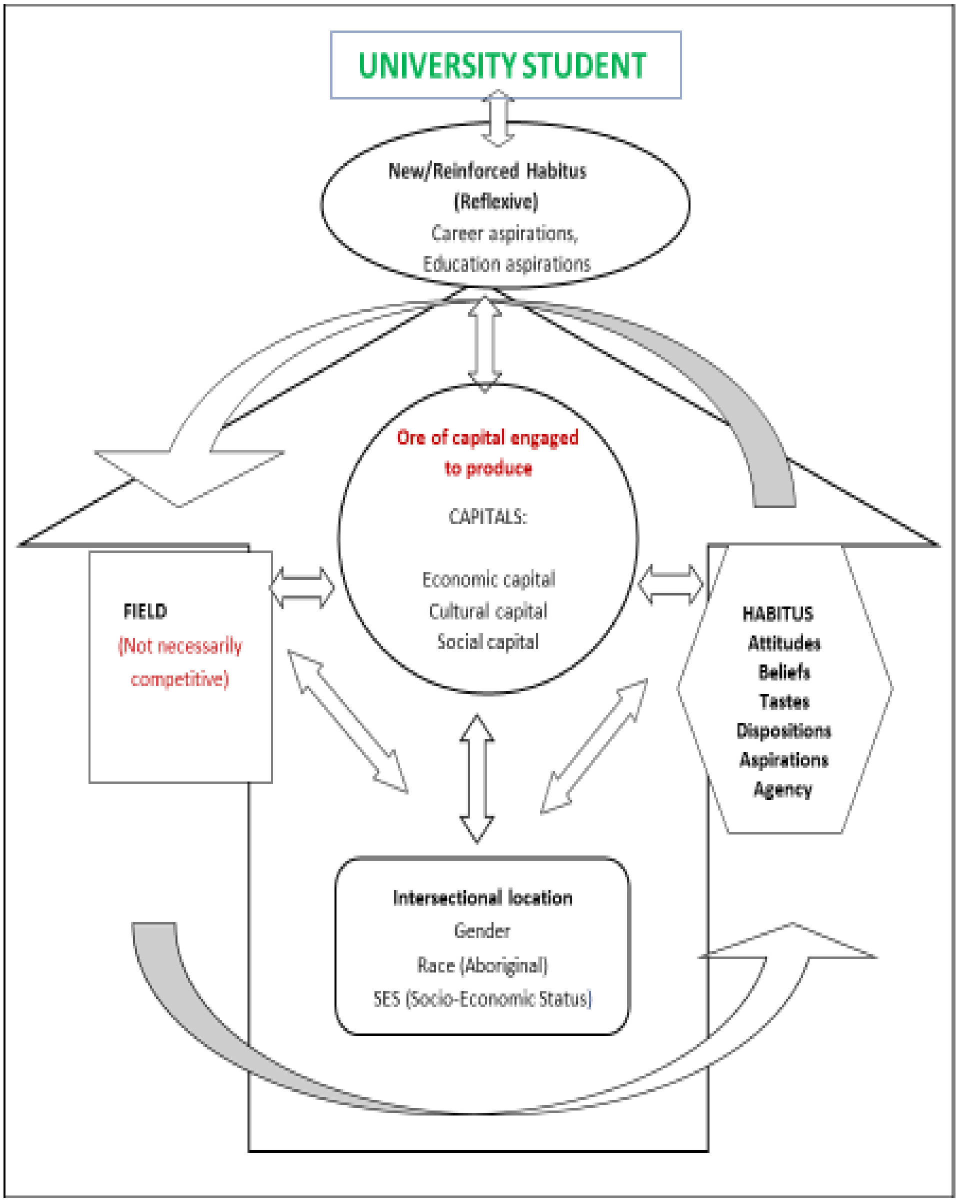
UNIVERSITY STUDENT
New/Reinforced Habitus
(Reflexive)
Career aspirations,
Education aspirations
Ore of capital engaged
to produce
CAPITALS:
Economic capital
Cultural capital
Social capital
FIELD
(Not necessarily
competitive)
HABITUS
Attitudes
Beliefs
Tastes
Dispositions
Aspirations
Agency
Intersectional location
Gender
Race (Aboriginal)
SES (Socio-Economic Status)

*Figure 1*. Analytical framework for First Nations learners' transition to university.

The moments of awakening that rise from the experience of inspiration and certain events form new habitus and confirm existing habitus (Figure 1), thereby leading to actions that result in admittance to university. As DiMaggio (1979, as cited in Reay et al., 2005) pointed out, the habitus that individuals form during early childhood socialisation is continually subject to modifications as they engage with the social world. When First Nations learners realise capital by engaging their ore of capital, they can see the possibilities and begin to embrace a university habitus. They can then act upon this new habitus or a confirmed existing habitus by tapping into their individual, cultural, and institutional supports to transition to university.

## Summary

Besides inspiration from my PSE journey and insights from working with rural Aboriginal communities, the context-applicable ideas in Bourdieu's (1986) theory of practice informed this study. The dynamic interaction of capital and habitus within the social field of education, as well as the combined effects of gender, race, and SES, explain how First Nations learners utilise their agency in negotiating structural barriers and taking advantage of opportunities to transition to university. My intersectional experience of transitioning to university, along with Bourdieu's ideas of how the interplay of field, capital, and habitus establish aspirations in the context of learners' race, SES, and gender, suggest that their transition can be a complex process.

The next chapter consists of the methodology and the strategies that I employed to conduct this study.

# CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY

This study draws on biographical research particularly through a constructivist lens and the recognition that the stories that researchers and participants co-construct unveil an understanding of human experiences. Biographical research highlights the social, psychological, and historical perspectives on subjective personal experiences (of first-person retrospective accounts) from personal stories with the aim of giving voice to new perspectives and disrupting the tendency to oversimplify complex phenomena (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Merrill & West, 2009; Patton, 2004; Tierney, 2003). Biographical research, which is increasingly referred to as *life history*, has become considerably important to social research with the realisation that empirical methods are inadequate to understand social life. Life history and life story are common in biographical research, but the difference lies in who the teller of the story is:

> The life history usually is used to refer to "collection, interpretation and report writing of the 'life' (the life history method) in terms of the story told or as the construction of the past experience of the individual (from various sources) to relate to the story. . . . Therefore, the term life story is commonly applied to the narrated story by the author while life history infers the later interpretive, presentational work of the researcher. (Roberts, 2002, p. 3)

It is apparent that this distinction is not practical to maintain in real life. Roberts used the example of a researcher who conducts an interview to elicit a story. Therefore, the resulting story is the life story, and what the researcher reports from the life story becomes a life history. Roberts simplified this by calling both kinds of research *biographical research*, which means "work which uses the stories of individuals and other 'personal materials' to understand the individual life within its social context" (p. 3). I also perceive this study as biographical research because I elicited stories from interviews (life stories) and produced life histories that constitute my interpretation from within the participants' and my social contexts.

In this chapter I describe how I operationalised biographical research to carry out this study to attend to the relational accountability necessary within Indigenous research contexts. Also in this chapter I discuss the TYP at the U of A, which was the study site; the purposive sample-selection approach, and the data collection via semistructured interviews. I present my analysis techniques and strategies to establish quality and the ethical considerations to which I adhered, and I talk about my field experience of collecting the data. I also discuss the following: the biographical research methodology in qualitative research; storying/the narrative process in the biographical method; co-construction and context in the biographical method; biographies as unfinished projects; the decolonisation of the research: Indigenous relational accountability; the study site: TYP; the selection of participants; the data collection and analysis; the establishment of quality; the ethical considerations, and the field-research experience.

## Biographical Research Methodology: In Qualitative Research

The biographical method helps to understand the participants' changing experiences and outlooks in their daily lives, what they consider important, and the interpretation of their accounts of their past, present, and future. The focus is on how people make meaning of their experiences rather than on the factual accuracy of their stories (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Dhunpath, 2010). Interest in biographical methods, rooted in qualitative research, surged because of reservations about static approaches to collecting data, the desire to understand the life course, and an increased interest in how best to express and reveal lived experiences (Lieblich, Tuvaal-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998; Roberts, 2002; Tierney, 2003). Drawing from the humanities fields, including literature, linguistics, sociology, education, drama, history, and religion, qualitative research gained popularity since the 1960s with the contention regarding the positivist position on validating a single, absolute truth and an accurate interpretation of text

(Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Herman & Vervaeck, 2005; Lieblich et al., 1998). Social scientists were convinced that what counts as knowledge is beyond the conceptions of positivist and realist assumptions. Early in the 1970s a reform was organised around the theme of qualitative inquiry after a large infusion of funding into generalisable social science research projects did not help to solve human social problems at the time (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). The argument was that certain aspects of the human realm are not observable through the lens of conventional knowledge practices, which gave way to relativism, plurality, and subjective conceptions of knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Lieblich et al., 1998). Dhunpath explained that "these positivistic approaches strip research of the rich tapestry of human experience and emotion" (p. 548). Researchers began to focus on the use of language to understand human experiences (Polkinghorne, 2007). For example, Bruner (1987), conceived an alternative:

> But logical thought is not the only or even the most ubiquitous mode of thought. . . . I have been looking at another kind of thought, one that is quite different in form from reasoning, one that goes into the constructing . . . of stories and narratives. (p. 11)

Today, qualitative research is used in several social-science disciplines, including psychology, psychoanalysis, sociology, and education (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Researchers have used a variety of terms to describe the biographical method in qualitative research:

> A family of terms combines to shape the biographical method: . . . method, life, self, experience, epiphany, case, autobiography, ethnography, auto-ethnography, biography, ethnography story, discourse, narrative, narrator, fiction, history, personal history, oral history, case history, case study, writing presence, difference, life history, life story, self story, and personal experience story. (Denzin, 1989; as cited in Roberts, 2002, p. 1)

The various terms subsumed under the biological method create challenges because researchers have used some of the terms interchangeably. A key example is life history and life story, as I noted earlier. According to Atkinson (1998):

> A common distinction is made between life story and life history. A life story is the story a person chooses to tell about the life he or she has lived, told as completely and honestly as possible, what is remembered of it, and what the teller wants others to know of it, usually as a result of a guided interview by another. . . . A life history is a fairly complete narrating of one's entire experience of life as a whole, highlighting the most important aspects. (p. 8)

Roberts points that this multiplicity of approaches under biographic research raises the problem of how to tease out the subjective meanings of life conveyed through language. Denzin (1989, as cited in Roberts, 2002) maintained that

> despite their diversity these approaches have some common problems of analysis, such as the 'reality' of events and the meanings attributed to them by life stories, the particular tools or conventions of language used to represent life experience, and issues in the means of interpretation. (p. 7)

## Storying/The Narrative Process in the Biographical Method

The biographical method is a kind of narrative research. Narrative involves the narration of a sequence of events in which an event is defined as the transition from one state to another (Van Eeten, 2007). Since the major turn towards narrative research (which includes life story, biography, oral history, and autobiography) in the 1970s, narrative research is applied to psychology, psychoanalysis, sociology, and education[23] (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Lieblich et al., 1998; Merrill & West, 2009).

Fundamental to the biographical method[24] is storytelling (Merrill & West, 2009). Jean-Paul Sartre (as cited in Bruner, 1987) stated that

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[23] Sociologists have used this methodology to explore matters of career, education, and workplace learning settings. It often focuses on particular periods in people's lives as well as on whole lives, from birth to the present. Feminists have used it to explore people's lived experiences in relation to gender, race, and class (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Kainan et al. (2006) used it to examine the reasons that students succeed in teacher education, and Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2004), to understand teachers' dispositions in workplace learning.

[24] A German sociologist, Schutze, introduced the biographical method in the early 1980s (Chaitin, 2004).

> a man is always a teller of stories; he lives surrounded by his own stories and those of other people; he sees everything that happens to him *in terms* of these stories, and he tries to live his life as if he were recounting it. (p. 21)

In other words, human lives are storied lives, and the stories form humans' identity (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996).

Stories reveal to the outside world an individual's inner reality. They are subject to change as new occurrences take place and shape the teller's persona and reality. This suggests that understanding people's lives requires a journey into their inner-world stories (Bruner, 1987). Lieblich et al. (1998) summed it up:

> People are storytellers by nature. . . . [The] . . . goal is to understand the inner world of individuals. . . . One of the clearest channels for learning about the inner world is through verbal accounts and stories presented by individual narrators about their lives and their experienced reality. In other words, narratives provide us with access to people's identity and personality. . . . Personal narratives, in both facets of content and form, *are* people's identities, . . . a story created, told, revised, and retold throughout life. (p. 7)

People's identity and personality lie in the narrative structures and content that they present. Stories give life meaning and shape life. Widdershoven (1992, as cited in Järvinen, 2004) noted that "life and story are not two separate phenomena. They are part of the same fabric, in that life informs and is formed by the stories" (p. 57).

The biographical method is based on the belief that everyone has a unique story and deliberately selects the sequence in which to tell it. Eliciting individuals' experiences as they tell their stories helps to understand their social and cultural contexts (including social structures, dynamics, cultural values, and norms; Chaitin, 2004; Kainan, Rozenberg, & Munk, 2005; Tierney, 2003). Widdershoven (1992, as cited in Järvinen, 2004) explained that, "in Ricoeur's view, lived life has a pre-narrative formless existence, which is changed into a meaningful whole by the plots of our stories" (p. 57). Thus, stories and their plot lines give meaning to lived life.

Widdershoven added that “the meaning of life cannot be comprehended outside the narrative processes. The contents of a person’s past cannot be separated from the structure of the stories told about it” (p. 57).

The understanding in biographical research is that individuals do not speak randomly in unconnected sentences. They choose the sequence in which they relate their lives and what to say and not say (elective memory). Thus, it is possible to interpret and analyse life stories systematically (Chaitin, 2004). In the same way, in their narration or reporting, researchers choose how to perceive tellers’ stories and the ways in which they sequence the events. Roberts (2002) noted, “Nevertheless, how these events are perceived and selected (even chronologically reordered or changed over time) and placed within understandings of the individual life—by metaphor, myth and so on—are necessary aspects of analysis” (p. 8). Participants and researchers both play an active role in the narration sequence and content.

Perspectives on past and current happenings in the biographical method help to understand changes in the ways that individuals in various settings perceive new experiences and help to track shifts in understanding. According to Roberts (2002), “Biographical research has the important merit of aiding the task of understanding major social shifts, by including how new experiences are interpreted by individuals within families, small groups and institutions” (p. 5). This approach to understanding new perspectives and the complexities of lived lives supports the depathologising of the researcher’s mindset (Tuck, 2009). It elicits the meanings that people give to their lives from their view as they experience and understand it (Chaitin, 2004; Kainan, Rozenberg, & Munk, 2005; Tierney, 2003), which significantly values stories as data that can stand on their own to describe experience (Patton, 2002).

Researchers who use the biographical research method achieve richness of depth by recruiting small samples to deepen the understanding that "empirical research involving larger samples is unlikely to yield" (Dhunpath, 2010, p. 548). Cortazzi (1993, as cited in Dhunpath, 2010) suggested that "in moving beyond reductionist explanations to contextual ones we begin not only to derive more adequate explanations of phenomena, but also to achieve insights more useful to practitioners" (p. 547). The goal is to attain richness and depth in the stories by selecting small samples.

## Co-construction and Context in the Biographical Method

Biographical research involves an act of co-creation and interpretation, as in narrative work. The researcher's role is to prompt and facilitate the participants to articulate their stories (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; van Manen, 1997). "Its emphasis is on the interactions between the researcher and the researched and on the researched's relationship to others. [It] is a culturally produced artifact in one light and an interpretive document in another" (Tierney, 2003, p. 296); the hand of the researcher is inevitably present (Tierney, 2003). This stance is on the assumption that

> empirical truth is simplistic and misconceived—a 'biographical illusion': stories are not simply referential of experience (see Denzin 1989: 14, 20–6). In fact, both the respondent's 'story' and its interpretation by the researcher are shaped by narrative conventions. The emphasis in analysis is also upon how the story is formed, including the 'performance' and collaboration with the researcher. (Roberts, 2002, p. 7)

For example, the researcher conducts an interview with a participant, and the manner in which the conversation occurs and the meaning that they share and gather are functions of the relationship between the two. Therefore, my actions as a researcher shaped what my participants shared and how they shared it. Because the purpose of this study was to gain insights into individuals' lives, exploring the wider cultural meanings of society (Miller, 2000) suggests not only that this knowledge came from the participants, but also that my preunderstanding and worldview became part of this interpretive document or thesis. Thus,

> a constructivist view can be used to help to analyse how the tellers shape the telling of their experiences of particular events—how the 'reality' (for them) is formed through the account. At base, the common pragmatic view would be that stories or accounts by individuals are central but that they are collected and used in different ways for different methodological and theoretical purposes. (Roberts, 2002, p. 8)

The stories that researchers collect from their participants become a tool that the researchers can use for different purposes. Pikes (2010) noted that,

> on the one hand, we, as academic writers of scholarship, have the responsibility to make interpretations and an obligation to take responsibility for those interpretations as conveyed through our re-representations, but on the other, we couldn't write if the lives hadn't been shared by those who lived them in the first place. (p. 16)

As I explained earlier, my participants' stories depathologised their communities when they highlighted the sources and experiences of inspiration to attend university. I did not use their stories otherwise, and I highlighted difficult experiences in the learners' journeys to university to amplify the magnitude of their resilience and success.

Context in biographical research is important for any kind of understanding, because lives are affected or affect a multiplicity of intersections. It is obvious that a strength of biographical research is the opportunity it presents to interact with various domains of human life, without which knowledge is inconclusive. Dhunpath (2010) maintained that

> it is crucial therefore that biography be located in a larger tapestry of individual, community, and institutional enquiry. Without a clear focus on this contextual intersection of life in relation to history, social science, education, feminist, and minority perspectives, writing biographies are indeed trivial pursuits. (p. 546)

Dhunpath (2010) emphasised the necessity of context analysis in biographical study. A life story can cut across a myriad of categories of identities, disciplines, and levels from individual to community and to institution that are important and cannot be overlooked.

Interpretation in biographical research can be checked against existing written, visual, or oral accounts because stories are frequently based on existing stories. Often the teller's life story involves real events and experiences, and it is possible that there are no other witnesses. Goodson (1992, as cited in Dhunpath, 2010) explained that "the story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity" (p. 546). In other words, the stories of the community to which an individual belongs become the points of reference when that individual tells the story. Thus, people tell stories of their lives in relation to what they perceive as common knowledge within the community and the social contexts of which they are a part. Järvinen (2004) commented that narrative interpretation and the stories that we tell and live out are always based on already existing stories (p. 57). Researchers interpret their participants' accounts in comparison with existing stories (i.e., literature) of the context to which they belong and those in other contexts.

## Biographies as Unfinished Projects

Biographical research recognises the temporal and dynamic nature of human beings as agents who are active in the making of their lives rather than as mere products of historical and social forces (Merrill & West, 2009). It views the self as impassive and continually changing and recognises the 'self as a reflexive project' as people compose their biography on different terms depending on social and economic circumstances" (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 17). Kelchtermans 1993, as cited in Dhunpath, 2010) noted that

> educators' actual thinking and acting constitutes one moment, a fragment in the continuous process of assigning meaning to the perceived and experienced reality. . . .

> Biography presents rich opportunities for individuals to re-examine and reconstruct their own perceptions of personal experience. In the Derridean sense, biography becomes a type of architecture, a vast array of impulses, instincts, memories, and dreams – visualized, theorized and told as a story. Biography takes this task seriously, as it is the task of self-formation, deformation, learning, and unlearning. (p. 546)

Biographies are considered a snapshot of a moment in life to which we assign meaning. The process of articulating a story helps individuals to examine their lives. This reflection process leads to a reconstruction of the stories by which we live. Therefore, biographical work is an important endeavour because it constructs lives.

The self is constructed not arbitrarily, but by design, and the individual is an active designer. In the same way that the sequencing of events in a story is not arbitrary, lives are constructed by design. Gubrium and Holstein (2000, as cited in Järvinen, 2004) "describe the self of our life histories as both constructing and constructed: In a sense we talk ourselves into being. But not just anything goes. Social selves are not without design or restraint" (pp. 61-62). This observation implies that the self is an ongoing project that involves the ongoing construction of lives. The self at any time is under construction. According to Kelchtermans (1993, as cited in Dhunpath, 2010):

> ….. self-concept is not a monolithic entity but rather a collection of different types of self-representations. Since one never has access to the complete set of representations of oneself, Markus and Wurf see the term "working self-concept or self-concept of the moment" as "a continually shifting array of accessible self knowledge." (p. 545)

In other words, the self is an active and ongoing social project. Mead (1959, as cited in Järvinen, 2004) described biography as "a history of becomings in nature leading up to what is becoming today" (p. 61).

A biographical research methodology was suitable for this study because it "offer[s] rich insights into the dynamic interplay of individuals and history, inner and outer worlds, self and other" (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 1). It would help me to explain the university transition of First Nations learners and draw attention to both internal (agency) and structural influences on the field, capital, and habitus constituents within Bourdieu's (1986) theory of practice and the dynamic nature of the self. Using this method also helped me to understand the ongoing complex lives, changing phases, experiences, and identities and recognise the human being as an ongoing unfinished project.

In the next section I talk about the Indigenous paradigm and how I integrated its tenets into the biographical methodology to be sensitive to the First Nations participants and their community.

## Decolonising the Research: Indigenous Relational Accountability

Indigenous worldviews on the nature of existence (ontology), how we come to know and how we gain more knowledge about reality (epistemology), and the morals and ethics (axiology) of knowledge-creation process are important considerations (Wilson, 2008) that shaped this research process and product; my goal was to decolonise the study (Smith, 2012). For the research to be credible and beneficial to this community, it needed to be grounded in the Indigenous paradigm, and I had to recognise and build on the relationality of knowledge (Weber-Pillwax, 2001; Wilson, 2008). Smith (2012) described the Indigenous research paradigm as "a field which privileges indigenous concerns, indigenous practise and indigenous participants as researchers and researched" (p. 111). She added that this paradigm involves processes, approaches, and methodologies that are dynamic and have many influences, which results in possibilities. Also, she pointed to the purpose of this method and its emphasis on elements such as healing, decolonisation, the spiritual, and recovery, which are all at odds with Western science:

> The agenda is focussed strategically on the goal of self-determination of indigenous peoples. Self-determination in a research agenda becomes something more than a political goal. It becomes a goal of social justice which is expressed through and a across a wide range of psychological, social, cultural and economic terrains. It necessarily involves the processes of transformation, of decolonization, of healing and of mobilization as peoples. (p. 120)

As I noted in chapter one, Indigenous people's ontology emphasises connectedness; the maintenance of a relationship with the Earth and all of its constituents; holism through balanced wellness of the physical, spiritual, emotional, and mental aspects; and the sharing of culture through language, storytelling, and the modeling of appropriate behaviour to foster creativity and possibilities for transformation from learning and to sustain life (Battiste, 2002; Cajete, 2000; Friesen & Friesen, 2002; Gamlin, 2003; Little Bear, 2000; Wilson, 2001). These worldviews have shaped the view of reality and how we come to know reality, as well as the necessary morals and ethics.

According to the Indigenous worldview, reality is not singular or an object as it can be in objective science (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). Multiple realities are found in relationships. According to Wilson (2008):

> In Indigenous ontology there may be multiple realities, as in the constructivists research paradigm. The difference is that, rather than the truth being something that is "out there" or external, reality is in the relationship that one has with the truth. . . . Reality *is* relationships or set of relationships. . .reality is not an object but a process of relationships. (p. 73)

This reality is not only in relationships with people. It is connected to and in relationship with the cosmos and all of its constituents (Friesen, 2000; Martin, 1996), which includes "interpersonal, intrapersonal, environmental and spiritual relationships, and relationships with ideas" (p. 74); the researcher, who is part of the cosmos, is "only an interpreter of this knowledge" (p. 38). It involves the formation of ideas and knowledge through relationships.

How has this understanding shaped this research? I used a narrative biographical research approach to this study, with a recognition of the importance of multiple truths and the creation of knowledge within a relational context (Merrill & West, 2009; Roberts, 2002); therefore, the knowledge in this study cannot be decontextualised (Kovach, 2009). I used biographical research from a constructivist standpoint because it complements the Indigenous research paradigm (Wilson, 2008). As well, Bourdieu's (1986) theory of practice, which is part of my analytical framework, is a relational theory that examines the interconnectedness of people and explains how the human activities and social processes within those relations often privilege some and disprivilege others (and perhaps some knowledges as well). This theory involves an analysis of social relationships and the outcomes that manifest in the social inequalities (Bourdieu, 1977) that the Indigenous paradigm seeks to decolonise (Smith, 2012; Steinhauer, 2002).

The Indigenous paradigm values knowledge from multiple sources (Steinhauer, 2002). Intuition is part of the human self, and inherent within it is knowledge. Cordero (1995, as cited in Wilson, 2008) stated, "We find, then, an emphasis on the western tradition of approaching knowledge through the use of the intellect. For Indigenous people, knowledge is also approached though the senses and the intuition" (p. 55). Steinhauer (2008) talked about knowledge from sources, including "dreams, visions, cellular memory, and intuition" (p. 1). In addition,, Castellano (2000) explained that "the knowledge valued in aboriginal societies derives from multiple sources including traditional teachings, empirical observations, and revelations" (p. 23). Biographical research, which is also a qualitative approach, relies on multiple sources of information and recognises the multiplicity of realities (Castellano, 1999; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) because of the dynamic nexus of individual, social, historical, and cultural contexts in which knowledge is negotiated and produced (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Patton, 2004; Smith, 2015; Tierney, 2003).

Relational accountability, in which researchers fulfil relationships with the world around them, cuts across from the conception of a research idea through to the analysis and writing (Wilson, 2008). In other words, relational accountability involves accountability to relationships by choosing the fitting topics, methods of data collection, data analysis, and presentation of information (Wilson, 2008). In a relational context, the entities involved co-create knowledge; because of this relational quality of knowledge, as Wilson explained, "Within the Indigenous research epistemology and ontology is the recognition that research and thinking need to (and are) culturally based. . . . We recognize that all knowledge is cultural knowledge" (p. 91).

An understanding and articulation of researchers' relationships with ideas and how they came to focus on particular topics are important to this type of research (Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008). Wilson added that research has motives, which are emotional because we feel them; therefore, feelings and reasoning are connected. Hampton (1995, as cited in Wilson, 2008) stated, "Humans—feeling, living, breathing, thinking humans—do research. . . . When we pretend . . . an objectivity that does not exist in the human world, we become dangerous, to ourselves first, and then to the people around us" (p. 56). Therefore, researchers need to situate themselves in Indigenous research because, "when listeners know where the storyteller is coming from and how the story fits into the storyteller's life, it makes the absorption of the knowledge that much easier" (p. 32).

Similarly, biographical research, as in qualitative studies, clearly establishes researchers' locations to help readers to understand how the researchers' preunderstandings and background influence the research process and product, which are their part of the co-creation (Denzin &

Lincoln, 2005; Roberts, 2002). Regarding biographical research, Dhunpath (2010) stressed the importance of identifying the ways in which the intersections of experiences and identities affect lives; therefore, biographical research is a trivial pursuit, or it is inconclusive if it does not articulate researcher's experiences and how they shape the retelling. As in Indigenous research ontology and epistemology, in biographical research both the researcher and the researched mediate information through a shared relationship, and the meaning depends on their performance and collaboration in the research, which is why it has more than a singular reality (Miller, 2000; Roberts, 2002; Sikes, 2010; Smith, 2012).

In operationalising Indigenous research, it is important to choose methods that facilitate face-to-face and less structured interactions to build relationships and help the participants to tell their stories (Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2012). Biographical research, particularly the life history that I used, involves primarily first-person accounts such as interviews to give voice to the participants in their own words (Patton, 2004; Tierney, 2003).

Relational accountability speaks not only to the personal, but also to the collective responsibility. Smith (2012) explained that "respectful, reciprocal, genuine relationships lie at that heart of community life and community development" (p. 125). It involves shared relationship and respect to ensure harmony and balance and avoid harm to the research participants and communities (Kovach, 2009; Weber-Pillwax, 2001; Wilson, 2008). Respect also requires that researchers follow the protocol for engagement when they ask for the consent of the community and participants (Weber-Pillwax, 2001; Steinhauer, 2002). Researchers also need to recognise the power dynamics in the relationship and ensure balance for a true co-creation of knowledge to occur. Wilson cautioned that "we must build the epistemological beliefs in egalitarianism and inclusiveness. . . . Hierarchy in belief systems, social structures and thought are totally foreign to this way of viewing the world" (p. 92). Although biographical researchers might recognise the relationship context of the co-creation, I integrated these specific moral or ethical standards for Indigenous research and those of the Research Ethics Department of the U of A (the guidelines for preventing harm) into this biographical approach to make my study more sensitive and relevant to the First Nations participants and community.

As a decolonisation project, Indigenous research, on one hand, gives voice to the stories of individuals and communities to influence discourse and bring about social change (Smith, 2012). Wilson (2008) advised that,

> rather than the goals of validity and reliability, research from Indigenous paradigm should aim to be authentic or credible. By that I mean that the researcher must accurately reflect and build upon relationships between the ideas and participants. The analyst must be true to the voice of all the participants and reflect an understanding of the topic that is shared by researcher and participants alike. (p. 101)

On the other hand, biographical research, particularly life history, which I used, also gives voice to new perspectives, reveals the complexities of human phenomena, and recognises the diversity and intersectionality of the experiences and identities that shape it (Roberts, 2002; Smart, 2010). As Smart stated, "The challenge for the life history researcher is to uncover the stories of the ignored, the forgotten, and the marginalized, as well as those of others, and to help reflect the richness and diversity of lived experience" (p. 111).

Storytelling is important part of Indigenous culture, in which learning occurs primarily in the telling of stories that represent multiple truths. Smith (2012) talked about the role of stories in Indigenous communities:

> Storytelling, oral histories, the perspectives of elders and of women have become integral part of all indigenous research. Each individual story is powerful. But the point about the stories is not that they simply tell a story, or tell a story simply. These new stories contribute to a collective story in which every indigenous person has a place. For many indigenous writers stories are ways of passing down the beliefs and values of a culture in

> the hope that the new generations will treasure them and pass the story down further. (pp. 145-146)

Smith (2012) described Jo-ann Archibald's description of story as "work that educates the heart, the mind, the body and the spirit" (p. 146).

The telling of stories affects the life of the teller, and the experiences of the listener shape the meaning of the stories. According to Wilson (2008):

> Indigenous people in Canada recognize that it is important for storytellers to impart their own life and experience into the telling. They also recognize that listeners will filter the story being told through their own experience and thus adapt the information to make it relevant and specific to their life. (p. 32)

Biographical research complements the oral tradition of Indigenous cultures because its primary tool is also storytelling on the premise that life informs stories and vice versa. therefore, life and stories are inseparable (Järvinen, 2004; Roberts, 2002).

In conclusion, the Indigenous paradigm, biographical research, and Bourdieu's (1986) theory of practice are complementary approaches to this study because of its focus on the multiplicity of the realities of intersectional experiences and the matrix of identity locations; in addition, stories adequately help to understand phenomena, the analysis of social processes creates social inequality and change, and interactions among the Earth's constituents create human dynamism—and they all point to relationships. Also, the relational accountability in Indigenous research goes beyond situating oneself in research or learning about life from relationships in stories. It also includes the use of Indigenous strategies that build relationship with the co-creators and shared respect and reciprocal benefits to individual and community—which I have honoured in this study throughout the research process.

Next, I discuss the TYP, my selection of the participants for this study, the TYP, and the admission process to foster an understanding of the study participants.

## Study Site: Transition Year Program

The participants were from the TYP,[25] an alternative university admission route at the U of A to facilitate the university transition of Aboriginal students. The ASSC offers a range of services to support Aboriginal students (First Nation, Métis, and Inuit), and the TYP is one of its programs. The centre offers academic advisory services, scholarships, counselling, tutoring, sociocultural and logistical support, and assistance from an Elder onsite to support students, including TYP students. Compared to the regular admission requirements of 70% or higher (85% since 2014) and five core courses from high school, Aboriginal students with an average of 60% to 65% in two required courses (social-science programs) and of 65% in four courses (physical-science programs) can challenge first-year university studies. They enroll in the second year of the program of their choice upon successful completion (personal communication, TYP-cordinator Elaine, January 31, 2014).

Next, I describe the participant-selection process and the criteria that I followed.

## Selection of the Participants

I used purposive sampling to select the participants because it allowed me to deliberately recruit male and female participants whose experiences prior to attending the TYP are relevant to this study (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990). The following are the selection criteria:

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[25] The TYP is modeled after the University of Toronto's program developed in 1970 in Ontario (Arku, 2011). Although such transition programs have existed in Canada since 1970, they appear to have been more prevalent within the last two decades. Institutions with TYP types of programs (sometimes called Access or Aboriginal Education Programs) in Canada include Dalhousie University, York University, University of Manitoba, University of Winnipeg, U of A, University of Lethbridge, Mount Royal University, and University of Saskatchewan. TYPs cater to a variety of visible minority groups such as Native Canadians, blacks, low-income people of all ethnicities, sole-support parents, LGBTs, persons with disabilities, mature students with and without school credentials, and students from rural locations. It is not uncommon for each university to cater to a specific minority group or a range of minority groups. The TYP types of programs at Alberta universities are mainly for Aboriginal learners. Some combine upgrading, postsecondary, and cultural courses (Dalhousie University, n.d.; U of A, 2012-2017; University of Lethbridge, n.d.; Mount Royal University, n.d.; University of Manitoba, n.d.; University of Toronto, 2014; University of Winnipeg, n.d.; York University, n.d.).

(a) students who self-identify as First Nations who are either in the TYP program or have gone on to take university studies and (b) students who lived or studied on a reserve for at least two years during their K-12 education.

The emphasis of the biographical method is on access to in-depth data, so I interviewed a small number of participants (Merrill & West, 2009; van Manen, 1997); an advantage is the ability to build a compelling social edifice from small number of cases (Miller, 2000). This study included 10 participants, 5 First Nations males and 5 First Nations females. The use of a combination of males and females results in an understanding of differences, similarities, or variations in their experiences (see Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2002).

In the next section I describe the data collection and analysis and discuss the phases of the interviews and what each entailed.

## Data Collection

I collected the data through semistructured interviews. An interview is "a meeting of two persons to exchange information and ideas through questions and responses, resulting in communication and joint construction of meaning about a particular topic" (Esterberg, 2002, p. 83). Because the focus of biographical research is the participants' unique stories and understandings, this interview technique opened the door to the telling of their full stories so that their uniqueness could find expression (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Chaitin, 2004). This method allowed flexible exchange or conversation to elicit the participants' views and feelings in their own words (Creswell, 2007; Kvale, 1996; van Manen, 1997; Yanow, 2007).

The key ideas from which I built the questions on how gender and other differences have shaped their transition to university focussed on (a) their career and educational aspirations and reasons for choosing to attend university; (b) activities in which the learners were involved prior to their attendance at university; (c) the barriers to their attendance at university earlier; (d) how the learners decided to attend university: what happened, who influenced the decision, and what events and activities led to the decision; (e) the events, activities, or person who inspired the learners to attend university and how this inspiration occurred; (f) how gender, race, and SES helped or hampered the learners' transition to university; (g) how the learners' challenged their circumstances to attend university; (h) the individual, cultural, and institutional opportunities that facilitated their transition to university; (i) whether and how the learners would change the experience of attending university if they could.

In keeping with the narrative-research quest for extensive and exhaustive data, I interviewed the participants twice (see Creswell, 2007). Phase 1 of the interviews, which were approximately an hour long, focussed on the participants' complete stories, followed by a second phase of probing and analysis. During the first phase 1 solicited their experiences with their career aspirations; events and activities after they completed K-12; and the experiences, people, and resources that shaped their decision, with reference to their location—gender, race, and socioeconomic situation. I asked the participants to tell their individual stories of how they transitioned to university. They were at liberty to share, uninterrupted, whatever was important to them; in keeping with biographical research, in which the participants narrate events and experiences that are important to their self-understanding, without judgement from the interviewer; and in which the interview questions are general to allow the tellers to react in the temporal or thematic order of their choice (Fischer & Goblirsch, 2009). If they had trouble, I prompted them to add whatever was relevant to them in their experience (Chaitin, 2004) by repeating the question and/or asking them to tell me more about their journey to university. I followed up with questions to elicit information on any areas that were unclear or needed more substantiation with regard to my research questions.

Phase 2 of the interview was a follow-up to phase 1. Typically, discussions are impersonal when the researcher and interviewee do not know each other well, but conversations become more revealing when researchers develop a deeper relationship their participants and are able to probe deeper into a particular area of focus (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). I anticipated a better acquaintanceship by phase 2. It was important that my participants open up and that their sharing be authentic. Therefore, in the first phase I focussed on building a trustful relationship by ensuring that they felt comfortable, by assuring them of the value of their experiences to me, and by sharing some of my stories to create a reciprocal conversation (Kovach, 2009). Also, prior to the interviews I focussed on building a positive relationship throughout our correspondence via e-mail, voice, or texting (Wilson, 2001). At this time I gave the participants the transcripts from phase 1 to obtain their feedback, probe areas that needed further explication, and elicit their analyses of their experiences; this would lessen the potential for any significant bias that I might unconsciously have imposed on the meanings of their stories (Creswell, 2007).

I recorded the interviews to ensure less distraction in the conversations because recording by writing or typing would have been more cumbersome and distracted me from my focus on the conversation (Creswell, 2007; van Manen, 1997).

## Data Analysis

Coding and constant comparison methods (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Richards & Morse, 2007) helped to extract themes and story units to construct individual stories that I analysed with reference to Bourdieu’s (1986) field, capital, and habitus. I also identified the structural and individual dimensions of the participants’ stories (see Verd & López, 2011) and extracted story units that spoke to the participants' understanding of the education field (particularly university) and the formation of and changes to their educational field, capital, and habitus. This included aspects directly related to individual (e.g., aspirations, motivations, attitudes, and agency) and structural circumstances that emerged from outside the personal (or subject) such as support systems, government policies and programs, and cultural conditioning. In addition, I identified causalities and transitions, including changes or amendments to their trajectories and turning points and moments that were important to them (Verd & López, 2011). Overall, the story units highlighted the ways in which the learners enacted agency within both enabling and constraining structures embedded in their matrix of locations; that is, gender, race, and SES. I compared the males' and females' experiences for differences and/or similarities. The stories depict each participant's journey to university, and their narratives have a beginning, middle, and end (Merrill & West, 2009). Because in the biographical method the sequence of events has important connotations, the story units that I developed captured the sequences (Patton, 2002; Tierney, 2003).

The data analysis included coding and comparison methods. In the coding I assigned a word or phrase to meaning units or pieces of each individual story, which helped to organise the data into malleable units for manipulation. Constant comparison involved comparing parts of the data (e.g., events, cases, groups, codes, categories, interviews, and observations) within the context of the data for differences, similarities, and variations to capture the common thread in the data (i.e., the themes). The themes helped to identify pieces of the stories that were related to Bourdieu's (1986) elements and the participants' inspiration for their transition to university (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Richards & Morse, 2007).

In the next section I discuss the strategies that I used to establish the quality of the findings. I explain the measures that I used to research complex parts of dynamic human social phenomena to ensure that my conclusions are credible, conclusive, transferrable, and reliable (Magolda & Weems, 2002; Sulivan & Segers, 2007).

## Establishing Quality

To ensure the quality of my findings and conclusions, I used strategies that included sampling criteria, the selection of participants of different ages and sexes, the use of member checks, and thick descriptions of the findings.

The criteria that I established to select the participants removed the danger of interviewing people who did not fit my research purposes and question. This resulted in trustworthy conclusions, which are necessary to establish knowledge in subjective research settings as qualitative biographical research (Creswell, 2007).

Including both males and females in equal proportions and participants of different ages resulted in multiple perspectives, which helps to verify and substantiate evidence within complex and subjective social phenomena (Merriam, 2002).

I enhanced the quality of the study by allowing the participants to tell their own stories, from their perspectives, and in their own words; the semistructured questions that followed the first round in which they told their stories ensured the integrity and credibility of the findings. Telling their own stories or receiving life stories directly from those who experience them prevent the errors that are typical of second-, third-, and subsequent-person accounts of someone’s life (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2005).

I guaranteed the depth and richness of the data that I needed to provide thick descriptions by conducting two rounds of interviews with each participant (see Creswell, 2007). The second interview resulted in more in-depth details that I might not have acquired during the first interview when I had yet to build trust with each interviewee (Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 2002).

I present the findings as rich and thick descriptions to enhance the reader's understanding of the phenomenon. The context-rich, thick, and detailed descriptive accounts that resulted from the interview conversations are beneficial in making the findings transferrable and credible (Bell, 2002; Maxwell, 2005).

I gave the participants an opportunity to review their transcripts to verify their correctness. I returned the transcripts of both interview sessions to each participant for feedback (i.e., I member-checked) to ensure that I had captured their perspectives correctly. This strategy helped to check any biases or assumptions that I might have imposed on the analysis (Bell, 2005; Creswell, 2007) and balanced the power dynamics that could have been present in this cross-cultural research in which I was an outsider (Smith, 2012).

In the next section I discuss several strategies that I used to protect the participants from potential harm from the research and its representation. This was critical because much of the information that they shared is personal.

## Ethical Considerations

Although as a researcher I have freedom throughout the inquiry and writing process, this research was a political undertaking in which I could not compromise limiting the harm and advancing the benefits to the participants and their communities (Magolda & Weems, 2002; Sulivan & Segers, 2007; Smith, 2012; Weber-Pillwax, 1999). Although I did not anticipate that this research would pose any critical risks to the participants, it is impossible to anticipate all harms in a qualitative-interpretive study (Magolda & Weems, 2002). Hence, I consulted with the

U of A’s research ethics board and the ASSC leadership to ensure that I met all of the set standards.

I sought the participants’ consent prior to conducting the interviews and treated them as anonymous storytellers. I used a consent protocol that articulates clearly and in plain language the research purposes and benefits to guide the participants’ decision to participate or not. As well, I reminded them of their freedom to opt out of both interviews at any time during the research process at (Cobin & Morse, 2003; Maxwell, 2005; Weber-Pillwax, 1999).

Anonymity was a critical concern in this study because the participants were part of a small community at the U of A, which suggests that their identity might be easily traced from their stories. I have maintained the confidentiality of the data that I collected and ensured the participants’ anonymity by using pseudonyms for names, places, and dates to make certain that their identity is not traceable (Magolda & Weems, 2002).

I used member checks to confirm the participants’ consent to be involved in the study and reduce the risk of misrepresentating their stories. Consulting with the participants on the findings and clarifying the research process and purposes gave them an opportunity to decide whether to allow me to include their stories in the research (Maxwell, 2005). As well, asking the participants for their feedback after they reviewed the findings permitted them to verify that I had not only accurately represented their views, but also represented them in ways with which they felt comfortable (Magolda & Weems, 2002; Wilson, 2008).

## Field Experiences

The field experiences were engaging and rewarding as I prepared the interview questions, completed the research ethics application process, recruited the participants, and conducted the interviews. As I noted earlier, the interviews occurred in two phases: In the first the participants told their stories, and in the second I probed and analysed the data with the participants. Interviewing was an interesting experience because the participants partly directed it. Several incidents and observations in the process enriched it and created a truly participatory sharing process.

With regard to the biographical method, the questions focussed on the participants' telling of their own stories, with little interruption; I then followed up with probing questions. The timing of the phase 1 interviews was challenging because the participants were studying for their end-of-semester exams and were under pressure.

Some unexpected delays occurred during the ethics application process, but I could not postpone phase 1 until a later date. It was important that I recruit participants who were new to the TYP and in their first semester. I also wanted to capture their perceptions after the first-semester exams.

The interviews lasted from 1 to 1.25 hours. The majority were willing to teach me as much as they could, which helped to keep the conversations engaging. In the following section I offer my insights into the recruitment of my participants and the interview experiences.

## Protocol and Recruitment

After I had completed the research ethics process, my recruitment of the participants was straightforward. The U of A research ethics board prepared me well to meet the expectations of the Aboriginal community as well as to cope with some of the unexpected situations. The ASSC leadership and the TYP co-ordinator supported and assisted me in diverse ways. After I shared the introductory letter with the director of the centre and gained approval to conduct my research, the TYP co-ordinator forwarded e-mail invitations to TYP students, both current students and graduates. I also made the invitations available at vantage locations at the centre. Potential participants who fit the research criteria and those with inquiries about the study reached me by e-mail and phone. Upon assessment of their suitability based on several criteria, I scheduled the interviews for those who were eligible via text, e-mail, and telephone phone conversations. The snowball method (Creswell, 2007) was also beneficial because the participants offered contact information on colleagues and friends whom they considered suitable and who had rich stories to share about their university transition. I had decided to speak with five males and five females. As I received e-mails, texts, or telephone calls from potential participants who expressed interest, I interviewed males and females until I had selected five males and five females.

### Phase 1: Interview Experience

The interviews were highly emotional for the majority of the participants. They were marked by positive expressions of triumph as well as moments of grief. I met with the participants at locations of their choice. The majority preferred to meet on campus, but a few preferred their homes. The timing of the interviews appeared to be a challenge for the students because it was a week or so before their end-of-semester exams in December. However, the participants were still able to find time to meet because they felt a need to honour their commitment to be interviewed. I sensed that they also honoured their appointments to maintain the relationship that we were developing, which also reflects their Aboriginal ontology (Battiste, 2002; Friesen & Friesen, 2002). Their relationship with the TYP co-ordinator, who allowed me to ensure their space and posted the recruitment information in the TYP students' common room, might have indicated to them that the interviews would be safe (Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008). Furthermore, I was an acquaintance, and their commitment could also have been a way of respecting the non-Aboriginal TYP co-ordinator whom they seemed to genuinely like because of her support of and warm attitude towards the TYP learners. In addition, I sensed that telling their stories was perhaps important to them. The TYP co-ordinator told me that she had overheard comments from the participants that they enjoyed having someone listen to their stories because it was empowering for them (Wilson, 2008). These TYP students seemed close-knit and talked with each other about my invitation and their interview experiences, which facilitated my recruitment of subsequent interviewees. As the interviews unfolded, I faced the decision to revise my initial target population because of the difficulty of securing the participation of all three Aboriginal groups, First Nations, Métis, and Inuit. I observed that the First Nations students were interested in sharing and were the majority group in the program. In fact, only one Métis student contacted me to tell his or her story. Eventually, upon consultation with my supervisors, I interviewed First Nations males and females.

Each interview was unique in that the participants' backgrounds shaped their experiences and stories. Our back-and-forth communication on scheduling the interview sessions led to the beginning of a level of friendship. At the beginning of the interviews I kept our conversations as informal as possible. The consent letter, preinterview questions, and audio recordings of the interviews gave them a sense of formality. For example, Kovach (2009) cautioned that "Indigenous researchers sometimes express discomfort in recording research conversations" (p. 127). However, neither the participants nor I felt any discomfort with the recording, probably because of the nature of our relationship and because they were delighted that I could listen to their stories. My understanding of the participants' culture and need for trust and humour (Wilson, 2001) helped me to continually deformalise our conversations with humour, as did my own story, which created a two-way sharing even though my goal was to capture the participants' stories. Some were nervous about talking to me, but I was keen to make sure that they were all comfortable. I explained the value of their stories to me and that I intended to learn from their experiences. The consent letter informed them of their rights, which I reiterated frequently to ensure that they understood that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. One of the shy participants told me at the beginning of our conversation that he had very little to share and would likely not talk about many things that he perceived as private. Although I was satisfied with and respected the data that he offered (Steinhauer, 2002), in the end his rich story resulted in an interview of over an hour.

At times impromptu family events, work commitments, or other endeavours that occupied the participants meant that the interviews did not occur at the schedules times. Patience is a helpful value to nurture, so I continued to reschedule the time and place for some participants until we could finally meet. I found it necessary to include their participation on their terms rather than mine and accommodated them and valued their commitment to honouring the interviews in spite of their busy schedules and emerging life events.

The participants and I developed friendships in the interview. I contemplated how much of a relational distance was ideal for authentic conversations and decided to open my heart and allow myself to be vulnerable because this position is comfortable to me (Kovach, 2009). I observed that they were more willing to share once we felt connected to each other. It is interesting that I continued to see the participants because I frequently went to the ASSC, where the TYP students spent time together, and they would share situations in their personal and academic lives. I found it necessary to share my thoughts in any way that I could to motivate them. It was an excellent opportunity for me to get to know them more beyond the realm of an interview. One conversation involved what I do for a living and how the participant could find such a job because of our common interests. They were curious about how I was able to multitask successfully: working on my PhD studies and at a job. I was able to develop a relationship quickly with all of them. This facilitated their sharing and the recruitment of other participants. In keeping with the value of reciprocity within the Aboriginal culture, I offered them a gift to thank and honour them for sharing their time and rich stories with me.

### Phase 2: Interview Experience

Phase 2 was a follow-up to phase 1 to solicit further insights where I needed further understanding. According to the strategies to ensure quality, I gave each participant an electronic copy of the transcription of the phase 1 interview for review before the phase 2 interview; and they offered their thoughts on their transcription. For the most part they were satisfied with their comments and were willing to continue to phase 2.

The second phase was less cumbersome. During the first interview we developed positive relationships. Scheduling the interviews was again challenging, but was easier in the second round, which occurred at the beginning of the winter semester. Although the TYP students' days was filled with tasks that included work, classes, assignments, and caring for their families, they were far from major exams; and we were already acquainted.

Each interview began with a review of the transcript of the first interview. The majority were comfortable with their comments, but one participant wanted to rescind a few comments. Before I began to ask the questions that I had prepared as a follow-up to the first round of interviews, I reiterated the participants' rights in this study and emphasised that I would maintain the anonymity of their information and that they had the right to withdraw at any point. Each participant was willing to continue with the second interview.

A few unexpected events occurred during this phase, including family obligations and personal difficulties, that required that I reschedule the interviews. Because researchers expect such occurrences, I was well prepared to accommodate any deferrals. Once again I helped the participants through some of their challenges by sharing my thoughts without compromising the authenticity of our phase 2 conversations.

The second round was less emotional for most of the participants. In affirming their position on various matters, they often referred to earlier comments that they had made in phase 1. The interviews lasted an average of one hour, after which I offered the participants a gift in honour of their time and stories.

## Summary

I used a biographical research methodology because it yields rich data from lived experiences in personal stories of social phenomena. I analysed and interpreted these stories to highlight the context and give voice to new perspectives in the spirit of recognising the plurality of knowledge and the reflexivity of the self and existing micro and macro knowledge, which give meaning to individual experiences and stories. The participants and I as the researcher co-created the knowledge from this study that shows humans as ‘becoming’ or as unfinished business. I conducted interviews with First Nations U of A TYP students or graduates and analysed the data by using coding and constant comparison to develop story units that highlight how field, capital, and habitus shape the university transition and reflect the influence of individual gender, race, and SES on First Nations males’ and females’ experiences. My use of quality strategies and harm prevention as well as my adherence to the ethical standards of the U of A were integral to this study. The field experience empowered both the participants and me. The help of the ASSC leadership and the TYP co-ordinator made the recruitment. The interviews became conversations because any steep formality would have robbed the conversations of authenticity, against the expectations of the participants.

In the following chapter, I present the research findings and highlight my perceptions of individual and community backgrounds and stories of the transitional process. The findings are only partial; I include more in chapter six.

# CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS

All of the participants self-identified as First Nations who were in the TYP at the U of A either in the current year or in the past. The average age of the participants was 26.5 years and ranging from 20 to 40+. The participants consisted of five males and five females, each of whom had lived on a First Nations reserve in either Alberta or Saskatchewan for at least two years before they attended university. Half of the participants have children whose ages at the time ranged from one year to four. Ninety percent of the participants were in the first year of their undergraduate studies.

Most of the participants considered their reserves home, but a couple perceived themselves as urbanites. About one third had lived on their reserves until they moved to the city for upgrading and/or university education. Eighty percent had attended school on the reserves from kindergarten until at least Grade 3. They described their reserves with a sense of pride and often referred to their struggles there. On one hand, the males had mixed feelings about their reserves; although they valued their communities, they were concerned about struggles such as difficult politics and violence. The females, on the other hand, were more likely to perceive only unfavourable experiences when I asked them to describe their reserves, for reasons that included a loose connection with the reserve and the experience of racism for those of mixed race.

Given that Aboriginal ontology centres on spirituality, in which everyone (i.e., all creatures) is considered a spirit and the Earth their mother (Little Bear, 2000; Martin, 1996), and that I too am spiritual via my Christian faith, which was significant in my transition to university, I sought an understanding of the participants' sense of spirituality. They spoke of Aboriginal spirituality and organised religion such as Christianity when I asked them to tell me about their spirituality and how they practised it, if at all. The majority had had spiritual experiences from their traditional Aboriginal practices, and a few associated with Christian spirituality, primarily through the Roman Catholic and Protestant faiths. It was not uncommon for some to practise both Aboriginal spirituality and Christianity. Spirituality to them meant trusting in God to help with their schooling, relying on the leadings of a higher power, turning over their will to God, and having a pleasant state of mind. As well, some mentioned maintaining spiritual observances and respect, praying and helping others, and participating in powwows, sun dances, and dancing competitions.

Regarding their SES, most self-defined as of middle and lower SES—which cannot be generalised to all First Nations. I asked them to select a point on a 3-point scale (i.e., upper, middle, and lower SES) that described their backgrounds and then asked them, "Can you describe what your chosen socioeconomic status means to you or looks like?" They described middle to upper SES as a situation in which their basic needs, including food and transportation, are met and they have luxuries such as expensive clothes and vacations. Those who considered themselves of low SES cited instances in which they did not have food and relied on welfare support from the government. While most considered themselves as of middle and lower SES, the females were more likely to report that they grew up with lower SES. A table with the participants' names and corresponding demographic details would have been more revealing; however, it defeats the promise that I made to the participant that I would keep their names and stories anonymous.

In terms of sex/gender roles, the participants had traditional perceptions of gender attitudes and sex roles: males as breadwinners and females as nurturers. The females perceived themselves as powerful because of their childbearing and nurturing roles, but the males did not describe themselves as such, even though they have a role in procreation. The males considered themselves providers for their families and as having a responsibility to respect females and other males.

In this chapter I present 10 brief stories on the transition of each participant to portray a sense of the sequence of key events within each transition process. I draw on their stories of key events as well as additional findings from the remaining data for a detailed analysis in subsequent chapters where I discuss the findings. I have captioned the events that led to the transition to university as follows: Charles's journey to university: "I'm meant for more"; Danny's journey to university: "I can give my family what we never had"; Allen's journey to university: "Because my mother, she wanted me to"; Eli's journey to university: "If you can't pick a hammer, pick a pen"; Wally's journey to university: "I wanted work in an office environment"; Deborah's journey to university: "I hope to get a piece of paper"; Jackie's journey to university: "I wanna make my family and my community proud"; Janine's journey to university: "It's a matter of when"; Andrea's journey to university: "I want to be different"; and Fiona's journey to university: "I want to inspire my students."

## Events That Led to the Transition to University

Most of the study participants reported that their university transition was delayed because they had left school early; however, most appreciated the journey that they had navigated to arrive at university. The males, on the one hand, delayed going to university because of depression, struggles with drugs and alcohol and their associated triggers, a deliberate choice to delay it until they matured, family responsibilities, working and training, and preuniversity studies. The females, on the other hand delayed their attendance mainly because of family issues, childbirth and family raising, depression, racism, drug and alcohol struggles, work, training, and preuniversity studies. The inspiration to enroll in university for both males and females came at various times in their lives from childhood to their decision to return to school and enroll in university. Family, including parents, grandparents, siblings, uncles, aunts, and friends; teachers; and school staff were key sources of inspiration in their transition to university. In their stories I focussed on the participants' stories of transition and captured key events, activities, accomplishments and turning points, and inspiration in their transition to university.

## Charles's Journey to University: "I'm Meant for More"

Charles left school early, worked, and then returned to complete his high school diploma in his early 20s when he resented his poor circumstances and wanted to explore his full potential. Charles struggled with his identity and tried to cope in ways that hindered his education. After several small jobs and a frustrating work circumstance that fueled his fire to seek more education, this aspiring filmmaker enrolled in university. His family, the school staff, and his friends inspired him along the way. His story reveals turning points and what inspired him to attend university.

**Deciding on future; seeing both worlds.** Charles had his eyes set on university credentials to avoid poverty. He had seen others on his reserve who were living in poverty. His parents were wealthy and wanted him have a good lifestyle, which he understood was possible with a PSE:

> I didn't grow up in poverty. My parents were both employed. My dad [a carpenter] was actually making really good money before he retired, so I had a very, very excellent upbringing. There was always money. . . . And like I know people [on the reserve] who live in absolute squalor and poverty, . . . and I never wanted that, ever, for my life. (Charles, personal communication, November 23, 2013)

Because of the poor people on his reserve, and having learned from watching TV that he could live comfortably, he chose to attend university to be able to live this comfortable life:

> And I have that understanding, . . . because, growing up, I watched a lot of TV and . . . movies. The image I have in my head of what I think of a good life is [this]: You need . . . money. And that's a big factor in why I wanted postsecondary education. You know, when I'm done here, I want to make, not like tremendous amount of money, but I knew, having a postsecondary degree, I will be able to live very comfortably. (Charles, personal communication, November 23, 2013)

Charles wanted a good life and enough money to sustain it, which would not necessarily mean being wealthy.

Charles returned to school when he realised that, without a high school diploma, his current path of working at entry-level jobs was not the future he desired. It was difficult to find his first job:

> I remember the last years of my real youth, my teenage years, I didn't have my high school diploma; . . . I didn't have a resume; I had nothing. . . . I couldn't even get a job, like a basic job for like a minimum wage, because no one would hire me because I don't have work experience, I didn't have a high school diploma, so I found it frustrating. (Charles, personal communication, November 23, 2013)

Charles found a job as a store clerk but felt that he could do more with his life:

> Finally, I got this job when I was 19 at [a grocery store], and I was a courtesy clerk. I'm not knocking that type of employment, but I do understand that some people make an honest living that way, and it works for them. But when I was cleaning toilets and sweeping floors and bagging all these nice, expensive groceries for people who drove big brand-new SUVs, it was a little disheartening. . . . Part of me felt like the servant. . . . I was earning $ 7.65/hour. . . . I just [said] to myself, . . . "You know, to hell with this! I know I'm meant for more." (Charles, personal communication, November 23, 2013)

He told me, "I had quit drinking that year. That was my first thing. I quit alcohol that year. All of 2004 I was sober, and January 2005 I went back to work towards my high school diploma. It took me a year and a half" (Charles, personal communication, November 23, 2013).

While he was upgrading and planning to attend university, the school principal inspired Charles to complete his diploma. At times he had felt stressed and was ready to leave his upgrading:

> I graduated, and it was the principal there. His name is Mr. Jonas; just the way he would look at me with so much belief and saying, “You could do this. I know you could do this,” because that year had so much [laughter] “I wanna quit; I hate this. [laughter]” (Charles, personal communication, November 23, 2013)

Charles struggled. However, he completed his upgrading and took a break from school, which was to have lasted a year, but it continued for eight years. “Then when I got my Alberta high school diploma, which was my goal, I said, ‘You know what? I’ve been stressing for a year and a half. I’m just gonna take a year off,’ and it turned into eight years” (Charles, personal communication, November 23, 2013).

**Facing giants on the way.** Charles worked at several jobs after he completed his high school diploma and some training. He worked at two or three different jobs but was still unhappy. He then enrolled in a UCEP course but could not complete it:

> I had an Alberta high school diploma. Then that November . . . I started working at a video store. And then I was working at a [coffee shop]. I was the brew staff. And then I didn’t really like that, so I tried to do a UCEP course in my community. That was a waste of time. (Charles, personal communication, November 23, 2013)

The UCEP program was an upgrading program to fulfill the requirements for either college or university, which bands sponsored their students to attend. Charles described his UCEP studies as unfruitful because “that was in 2007. This time, 2007, was a very hard year for me. [laughter] I was a very well-known party princess in my community. It was bad” (Charles, personal communication, November 23, 2013). The struggle with drinking returned.

Charles entered treatment, resumed a normal life, and found an office job that he considered prestigious. Later he took an administrative assistant program and then resumed his struggle with drinking:

> And then 2009, [I] sobered up again, got my first office job. I’ve always wanted an office job [whispers], because on the [reserve] that was like a higher . . . [laughter] . . . You work in an office; you’re better than everyone. So I was working at [the reserve

> business]. . . . 2010 I wasn't working; I did that other program. It was all through [the reserve business] Human Resources Department, and it was in partnership with [college]. It was a . . . Customized Administrative Assistant Certificate. . . . So [I said], "Aw, it sounds fancy," signed up. . . . I failed [about] three of the courses, [so] I never got my actual assistant's certificate. . . . From this point I was bad. (Charles, personal communication, November 23, 2013)

Charles completed the courses for his clerical certificate but did not obtain the full credential, and the drinking problem resurfaced. He was seeing the negative impact of this ailment on his dream to use more of his potential. What could have caused this struggle? Earlier in our conversation on his perceptions of community of origin, Charles identified identity struggles. He expressed concern about an unpleasant portrayal of his community and indicated that he was an authentic First Nations. Was Charles comparing his authenticity with that of other Aboriginal peoples? Could he have had some deep identity struggles that he had not articulated?

Then Charles stopped drinking, and when he returned from treatment, he began to apply for PSE. He tried to return to school following the treatment, which suggests that the healing and transformational capacities in the healing process empowered him. He expected an acceptance letter from the university where he first applied, but when he returned to the reserve from his work location (off the reserve) and discovered that he had not been accepted, he stayed and worked on the reserve.

**Facing low self-concept; a timely inspiration.** His low self-concept was crippling Charles's dream of going to university. He valued education and equated a good life with more education; he had set his mind on PSE at a young age. When he applied to the U of A, he felt incompetent and doubted that he would be accepted. He considered it a high-quality institution:

> I would always put U of A up like the patriarch, the top dog, and I'm looking at it like [this]: I'm never going to get there, because I'm so stupid. And I would look at courses like potentially what I could see myself studying. (Charles, personal communication, November 23, 2013)

Charles validated his fears of not being accepted: "Honestly too, my marks weren't the greatest. I had just wanted to get that piece of paper [high school diploma]. I couldn't care less if it was Cs and Bs" (Charles, personal communication, November 23, 2013). Charles perceived the high school and university credentials as pieces of paper.

University was an unfamiliar territory to Charles because none of his family members had university experience to guide him, and he was unsure of which program to study. He became motivated with the hope that he could receive another credential, one that would be part of his life as long as he lived: "I didn't know anything about university life. I had nobody to coach me. I had nobody to mentor me. So I'm looking at these courses, picturing myself walking on campus. What am I going to study?" (Charles, personal communication, November 23, 2013). He reflected on his family but could not find role models:

> It was hard too because I had no one to coach me. Out of all of my siblings, I am the only one that holds a high school diploma. . . . I am the only one to go off to university. . . . So I am in unchartered waters; . . . this is a new territory for me. (Charles, personal communication, November 23, 2013)

Charles continued to doubt himself:

> It all seemed interesting and appealing, and a part of me was like, You could do it; you could do it. There was even a bigger part of me saying, Why are you even wasting your time? You are not going to get out of [the reserve]. You're not going to get out of this trap. Don't even waste your breathe; don't even waste your effort. And then I would look at the entry requirements, and sure enough, I wasn't good enough. (Charles, personal communication, November 23, 2013)

Charles' beliefs about his ability wavered, but a friend affirmed and uplifted him. His conversation with his friend about his university plans revealed his mental swings:

> So I started looking at U of A website again in January, talking to a friend of mine back home. I was telling her, "I want to go back to school; . . . I wanna just work my ass off for another piece of paper," because that's how I pictured that high school diploma. . . . And I tell my friend, "I will work my ass off for another piece of paper. . . . That's something no one can ever take from me. Nobody, ever, till the day I die." Then she

> said, "Where were you thinking of going?" At first, I was thinking [a particular university in Alberta]. Then I [said to myself], "You're damn for university," And [my friend said to me], "You are not damn; you are not damn." (Charles, personal communication, November 23, 2013)

**Moment of decision; inspiration.** Charles faced difficult work circumstances at his office job on the reserve and decided to attend university. He had found it difficult to work with his boss and decided that it was time to do something more for himself, such as going to university. Although he enjoyed the clerical work, his relationship with his supervisor was detrimental to his remaining in this role, and he could not work with her any longer:

> I was so excited to work. I was [like], "Ooooh, I work in the office!" And that was the worst job I've ever had in my life. Not so much the workload; the work was very easy, although stressful, but very easy. What made it horrible though was my supervisor. . . . [She] . . . was in charge, you know, bossing me around. She was evil. I couldn't stand her. (Charles, personal communication, November 23, 2013)

With pressure at the workplace from his supervisor, Charles began to contemplate his options. He was focussed. He reported:

> I remember sitting at my desk in the office where I was working, and I hated my job; I hated it. And I remember my supervisor was giving me a hard time that day. And you know what? That kind of fueled my fire.

Charles's friend, who continued to inspire him, encouraged him to explore the TYP. This was the first time that Charles had heard of the TYP:

> She said, "Why don't you try TYP?" I said, "What the hell is TYP?" "You've never heard of TYP?" I said, "No!" "It's called the Transition Year Program at the U of A. It's for Aboriginal students. Sign up for TYP." . . . Go on the website; just search it up. And that's what I did.

Charles applied to enroll in the TYP and waited for admittance. The struggles at his workplace continued, coupled with personal and family struggles:

> There is one incident that happened—and I'm not going to get into it—and I wanted to quit. And it was directly in relation to like family, and I just thought I wanted to quit. I had had enough.

Charles was having a difficult time. His supervisor was unsupportive, and he complained to the director: "'I cannot do it anymore. . . . I'm quitting.' He is like, 'Noooo, noooo. Calm down. I'm not going to let you quit.'" The director validated his skills and abilities, which Charles revealed when he recalled what his director said to him:

> "You're a band member; you deserve this job. I love your professionalism. You're just so nice, neat, . . . and organized. Very amazing communication skills. We need you here; we need people like you here. You're dependable." Because this is full time; I'm sober, . . . because when I'm working and they are on Monday—I'm not hung over like some of my co-workers.

The director knew that Charles was already struggling with self-doubt, and his validation of his ability would have a significant impact. When the director intervened, Charles's role changed immediately, and he worked with someone else. This new role was a promotion. He was pleased, but it did not end there. He assumed a higher role within a short time as a result of turnover.

With mixed feelings, Charles' new boss released him to follow his educational dream at university. His boss had validated him and was pleased with his decision to study: "What am I gonna do without you? . . . I support you whole-heartedly!"

**Conclusion.** Charles's journey to university involved overcoming personal struggles and inspiration from his circumstances of deprivation after he left his K-12 education without a diploma. After upgrading, he accepted several jobs that included a couple of training programs. The frustrating work circumstances, his personal struggles, and inspiration from his friend, his family, the principal, and the workplace inspired him to attend university to be able to work for the better life that he had always imagined.

### Danny's Journey to University: "I Can Give My Family What We Never Had"

Danny was a first-generation university student who chose to attend university to become a lawyer to address the injustices that his people suffered and to support his family. He constantly moved between the reserve and the city while he was enrolled in his K-12 education. However, having graduated from high school a year earlier, Danny felt too immature to attend university. A legal battle that he fought as a teenager inspired him to pursue a law career to help Aboriginal youth. His family, teacher, and friends also inspired him in the process. His story reveals key events, turning points, and relationships that constituted his journey to university.

**Constant mobility; finding something to do.** Danny was educated on reserve and off reserve because of his constant mobility between his mother's and his father's homes until he was 14 years old, when his parents eventually separated their relationship. He stayed with his father permanently for a few years before he completed high school:

> I'm Danny Sinclair. . . . I . . . grew up with my dad in [province] for most of my life. Every year I would live with my mom and then go to my dad. So I spend maybe half a year in White school, and then I go to a reserve school for the remaining half. That worked until I was about . . . 14. Then after that I just stayed with my dad permanently, and I graduated in [name of town].

In addition, Danny's mother moved frequently to various small towns off reserve, which meant that he also changed schools frequently. He described his many school relocations while he lived with his father and his mother and then graduated a year early:

> From kindergarten to Grade 10 I have just really been everywhere. I have moved to [province and city outside Alberta]. . . . When I was younger I moved to [several small towns in Alberta]; basically everywhere in Alberta. That was with my mom. With my dad it was [reserve] school. And then from 10 to 12 I graduated there. I graduated in . . . Grade 11 because I got enough credits to graduate.

After high school, Danny worked in construction with his father in the winter and then spent time with his aunt in a small town over the summer and eventually joined his aunt in

Edmonton, where certain events led to his enrolment in university. In the city Danny looked for work, but when he did not find it, he moved in with his friend and joined her in an entrepreneurial program: "I wasn't really working or doing anything. . . . One of my best friends moved into the city and she [pauses]—and . . . we decided to be roommates. And then we both went to school at the academy . . . [for an entrepreneurial program]." Danny received student loans to pay for this program because his band would not fund a private program. However, he regretted having take, this program because it did not meet his high expectations: "So that was finished, and I really didn't feel like it was school at all. It didn't really feel like a school setting."

**Going to university.** Danny explained that he chose to delay going to university because he felt immature. Although he had always planned to attend university, he did not know which program to pursue. For these reasons he worked for a while after he graduated from high school:

> I've always known that I would come here. It was always my plan to come to the university—not necessarily this university, but it was 'a university.' I graduated . . . in Grade 11; I was just 16, going on to 17. And I just felt I wasn't ready; . . . I wasn't mature enough to do it, so I decided to move in with my auntie. That's when I got a job at [a coffee shop]. It took all these odd jobs to kind of mature me.

Danny eventually began to work while he pursued his entrepreneurship studies in the city.

Not only was Danny a first-generation university student and unfamiliar with university, but he was also uncertain about which program to take: "I had no idea what I wanted to do. . . . [I am] the only one coming to university in my dad's family—[actually] both sides of the family, my dad's side and my mom's side."

Danny emphasised that working was his priority to ensure that his needs were met before he attended university. Immediately after high school Danny worked with his father on the reserve in the winter and in small towns off the reserve where he lived with his aunt in the summer. He detailed the kinds of jobs that he found after high school:

> I've done a lot of really small jobs. Like, I've worked . . . as a chambermaid in a hotel; I worked at [a coffee shop] . . . and highway construction. [This] was how I spent two years of my life, about 17 to 19, and after that when I moved [to Edmonton, where the U of A is located]. I was still 19 when I moved here. That's basically it.

**The legal situation; moment of decision.** A legal incident and his dealings with legal professionals confirmed Danny's interest in a law career. At a nightclub he became caught up in an assault situation that required the services of a lawyer. Danny received legal advice from a not-for-profit firm. The path that Danny's Native legal representative suggested he pursue was unfavourable to him and could have jeopardised his life. He was frustrated because he was innocent:

> When I first moved to [city], I got involved with the wrong people. And I was at this one party, and this other guy, he was messing around with my own friend, and they got into this big argument. And then—actually, I don't know what happened because I wasn't actually there. But I guess my friend hit him, and then he called the cops. And then when the cops came, he said that him and I hit him. So I had to go to court for a year.

The no-cost legal aid that Danny received was not what he expected:

> I talked to some people at the courthouse, and they told me to go to this place. And I went there, and there were these Native lawyers there. I asked them to help me, and the thing they told me was, "We can't help you unless you wanna plead guilty." So I was like, "I'm not doing that because I didn't do anything; like, I didn't hit him." I know it's just that process of back and forth, running around, legal aid, that process for a year. . . . Just services from lawyers who are just in their final year of their law program, . . . get to. . . defend someone.

Danny's help from another source had a favourable result that immediately impacted his career choice. When he abandoned the first group of lawyers and received help from another team, he believed that it led to his success in court:

> So that went on. Then . . . the person who is helping me, he actually beat it, because he was looking at the statements and everything, and nothing included me. So we got away from the stuff because of where I went. Nobody wanted to help me; nobody wanted to help me unless I pled guilty.

Danny expressed his innocence and feared that he would be trapped if he agreed to plead guilty:

> These Native youths who can't get help [themselves], who can get help if they want to plead guilty, . . . I'm not going to let them off like that. So I wanna be there to actually help them. And I thought that was really unfair, and that's why it's kind of leads me more to this way, trying to apply to law school, because I want to be there to help . . . them, to defend them.

**Push from relationships.** Danny recognised the role of his family, teacher, and friend in his university undertaking. He talked about his sister, who cared for him as he grew up because of their mother's struggles; he implied that he wanted to care for her too:

> She is a year older than me, and growing up, it was not the easiest because . . . she is only a year older than me. She . . . basically had to take care of me, . . . because when we were younger my mom was sort of an alcoholic. So she [my sister] got me dressed. We went to school together. She was just a grade above mine. She will wait for me outside my class, and she will cook for me. She . . . [did] that for basically all my life.

Danny explained that "me and my math teacher also had a really good relationship. . . . He always wanted me to come here [to university], . . . and he always pushed for it." His teacher's relationship that included care, closeness, and inspiration was important to his transition to university.

Danny was initially hesitant about enrolling in the TYP but later realised that it was an appropriate choice. He was qualified for admittance to university through the regular route. His friend was a beneficiary of TYP and convinced him to consider it:

> And he actually told me, "Hey, university, they help you transition if you are Native, to the university." He said it helps a lot if you wanna do great. And my first thought was that, no, I don't wanna go there! I don't wanna . . . I called it "take the easy route,"

> because it was for Native people, was easy stuff. Then I didn't want to be a part of that because I just wanted to go where I'm used to.

Danny became interested in the TYP after his friend explained that TYP students were not secluded, received additional support, and made supportive acquaintances:

> Then he told me that . . . I can take the same classes as . . . everybody. It just helps you with, I think, the space to study and gives you acquaintances, friends, . . . tutors; and, actually, some are very good, and he sold me on it. That's why I applied.

Danny was impressed by the urgency with which the TYP co-ordinator processed his application, which likely inspired him: "For my interview, she [TYP co-ordinator] called me in like the next day, and she said, yeah, basically I could come; and I was actually really happy."

**Conclusion.** Danny delayed his transition to university for a little over two years after high school because he wanted to be mature enough and was not certain about his career goal. The legal situation that he faced developed his passion for law to advocate for Aboriginal youth. His relationships with family, friends, school staff, and the TYP co-ordinator inspired his transition to university. Danny worked and studied until he reached the maturity that he anticipated. His K-12 education involved frequent relocations and difficult home circumstances, but Danny rose above them to become a valedictorian with big dreams of supporting his family and community.

### Allen's Journey to University: "Because My Mother, She Wanted Me To"

Allen had a bumpy transition from high school to university because of personal struggles, and, inspired by his mother, he chose to attend university. Allen did not share the details of the events that led to his attendance at university but said only that he left school early in Grade 12 because of personal struggles. Allen was tired of his lifestyle, heeded his mother's advice, upgraded, and enrolled in university to become a writer. In this section I present the highlights of the key events, activities, and turning points that shaped his transition.

**Passion for writing; support from teacher.** Allen demonstrated tremendous passion for his career goal of becoming a writer. It was important that he elaborate on his passion for writing and English. He explained that his language/English course in high school had changed over the years when he was going to school on the reserve. He spoke about having lived on the reserve his entire life and playing basketball at school, and then he talked about language arts/English. Our exchange revealed his interests:

> Allen: I am from [reserve]. I lived there my entire life. Played basketball there. . . .
> CA: So, you are one of the athletic ones?
> Allen: Yeah. [laughter] When I got into high school, that was the first time I was in English class. Before then, it was called language arts.
> CA: So the first time you took English class was in . . . ?
> Allen: Grade 10. So, when I did, my teacher—I can't remember the name—. . . [my teacher] helped me. [I] started writing. I still write till this day.
> CA: Really? What do you write?
> Allen: Poetry, short stories. I'm actually working on a novel right now.
> CA: Wow!
> Allen: I've been working on [it] for like two years. It's a long process. English is my minor for university. I'm going for Native natives.

**Down the cliff; close to win.** Allen left school in his final year of high school. During this time he faced challenges that became evident in his excessive use of alcohol, which made it difficult to continue in school:

> Before I came here, . . . I went up to Grade 12. I went up to Grade 12. I finished one semester; but, like, the first year the things in my life spiralled out of control. I ended up dropping out. It was alcohol, yeah.

He added, "I ended up dropping out in Grade 12. I was 20 credits shy of graduating." Allen intimated that he was unable to manage the affairs of school because of the events in his life at the time. He said that "life spiralled," which meant that he was no longer in charge of it because it was spinning on its own, and he ended up leaving school early.

Allen pointed to other difficult situations that occurred after he left school and implied that these difficulties also spiralled out of control. Briefly, he told me, "I stayed away for a couple of years. [pauses] A lot of things happened during that time. I was in—like I'm choosing not to mention."

I asked Allen about the reason for his drinking problem. He answered, "It was grief. I did those after . . . two years [of] drinking, and I got sick of it. And I sobered up for eight months, and I started the journey again. Allen did not elaborate on how his grief triggered his addiction to alcohol.

**Doing university for mom, my inspiration.** Allen talked about the reason that he chose to attend university: He chose to end the lifestyle that he was living to start a new life by going to university:

> CA: How did you decide to come to university?
> Allen: I just, I didn't want to go back to the reservation.
> CA: You didn't?
> Allen: I didn't want to go back to [the reserve]. And TYP actually came to [upgrading college], and they did a presentation to the current students, and I applied to TYP.
> CA: So the students were encouraged to apply for TYP?
> Allen: Yeah. And I just [applied].
> CA: Anything else you would like to share about why you decided to attend university.
> Allen: I decided to go there because I was tired of the life that I was living; it wasn't great.

Also, aside from wanting to transform his life, Allen explained that "another reason why I came to the U of A is because my mother came here first. . . . She graduated in 2000." He told me that his mother is also a writer.

Allen emphasised again that his mother's inspiration was the reason that he entered university:

> CA: Why did you choose to come to university?
> Allen: Because my mother, she wanted me to.
> CA: Your mother wanted you to?
> Allen: She wanted me to. And it wasn't my choice to come here.
> CA: It wasn't your choice? How are you finding it so far?
> Allen: It's OK. [pauses] Yeah. I should have done all of this for her, because she would like to see her children succeed. I just wanna [do it] for her. So if it wasn't for her, I wouldn't.
> CA: Wow, she must be a proud mama!
> Allen: She doesn't show it.

Allen chose to honour his mother by attending university and attributed his success to her.

**Exploring jobs; resenting the jobs.** Allen said that he worked at a number of summer jobs before he attended university because he wanted to work rather than go to school but discovered that he did not like any of the jobs he did:

> CA: It wasn't your initial choice to go to school?
> Allen: I wanted to work.
> CA: So were you working before?
> Allen: No! No, just summer jobs; summer jobs from my band. . . .
> CA: What kinds of jobs were they?
> Allen: I was a plumber and a youth worker. I used to coach a basketball team from my old high school. I did that for once. Now they got a new coach. . . .
> CA: They got a new coach, so then you stopped doing it? Did you enjoy working?
> Allen: No!
> CA: No! [laughter] Why is that?
> Allen: Maybe I was looking forward to a desk job.
> CA: Like office job?
> Allen: Yeah.
> CA: When you say you're looking forward to a desk job, what do you have in mind?
> Allen: Like I told you, I want to use writing to focus on my abilities.

**Writing keeping me going.** Allen talked about the benefit of writing to his emotional well-being: "I write emotionally. That's how I get everything out, instead of, you know. . . . When I'm not writing formally, like essays, I still write for my own emotional gain, for my own well-being." Although he wrote various pieces of work to meet the academic demands of schooling, Allen also made time to write for therapeutic purposes. He felt better when he expressed himself and what he observed in life. Allen used to grieve over things, but his writing lessened his grief: "I benefit from it, yeah. I haven't cried in over—. . . I used to cry a lot. And then I found that writing, it helps me a lot. . . . Remedy is how I see it. When it's not professional, it's remedy. [pauses] . . . I become at peace when I write." He did not consider writing hard work: "Not for me. It's fun stuff."

**Family support cheers me on.** Aside from inspiration from his mother, Allen pointed to support from his brother and aunt. His mother inspired him because she had already graduated from the Native studies program at the U of A. Allen was grateful to his brother for sparing his time and other resources to assist him during his upgrading:

> One big thing that helped me get here is my brother, Peter. He is a hard worker. He, all of last [year] . . . helped me back and forth with driving. . . . He sacrificed a lot of time to help me get here. I just want to acknowledge him.

As well, Allen's aunt offered him accommodation while he upgraded in the city: "It's a tough one. It's not always easy. . . . I stayed at my auntie's when I was at [college upgrading], and then back to [the reserve]."

**Conclusion.** Allen's grief led to depression that manifested in the form of addiction to substances. He returned to school for his high school diploma after a couple of years as an adult learner, heeding his mother's advice and deciding to build a new life. Allen enrolled in TYP after upgrading, and his family supported him. He aspired to being a writer, and he enjoyed writing and felt better emotionally when he wrote.

### Eli's Journey to University: "If You Can't Pick a Hammer, Pick a Pen"

Eli enrolled in university after he encountered health challenges while he worked in the trades. Initially, he was motivated to attend school, but he faced personal struggles as a promising athlete and left school early. With the help of treatment and family inspiration, Eli returned to school, graduated from high school, became a father, and worked in the trades. After an injury at work, he sought nonphysical work options, and community leaders inspired him to become a politician on his reserve. The following is Eli's story of his transition to university, with a focus on milestones, key events, and epiphanies.

**Bright future in sports.** Eli pointed to a bright future in sports that ended suddenly. He grew up on a he reserve, where he was enrolled in the K-12 grades. He felt extremely competent at school sports. A coach from another team took interest in Eli's superior skills and invited him to join a high-calibre team at 12 years old. The coach said to him, "'You got a gift; . . . you gonna go far. . . . I never saw anyone play hockey like that in my life. . . . I almost thought that you are Wayne Gretzky [a hockey legend in Canada].'"

Eli deferred the coach's offer until he was 17, when he joined a provincial team: "I think I was about 17 by then, . . . and then I got invited to go play tryout for Team Alberta, so I went." Eli successfully joined the provincial hockey team: "I made it to Team Alberta, and I was pretty happy."

**Accomplishments and open doors.** Eli's success in playing with the provincial hockey team brought him and his family joy. On the reserve his achievement made him a role model, and because of his accomplishments, he won a scholarship: "My mom was pretty happy, and back home everyone was happy. For some reason, I was kind a role model for my reserve. . . . Those two years before that, I got this [a sports award for Native students]." The scholarship was in honour of a First Nations hockey player who was Eli's role model. Eli noted that this sport opened doors for him: "There's like a list of clubs out there that wanted me to come and try out, . . . and it was an experience for me."

**Abrupt end to a future in sports.** Eli described an eventful incident that involved his use of drugs at one of his hockey games and ended his hockey career: "I was really good at hockey. . . . Our hockey team, we were like beating every single team. . . . I guess it was from marijuana. . . . I loved to smoke . . . marijuana when I was younger and play hockey." At one of his games, his team lost and did not advance to the finals:

> After the game, because I thought we lost [so] we must as well have some fun now, . . . this hockey player came up to me and started like beating me up, literally. . . . I didn't even see him coming. . . . Then all of a sudden I was off to the ground, and then I was like getting stomped on in the parking lot. . . . I might have fractured my ribs back then and my spine, and damaged my spine too. . . . The coaches didn't do anything about it. I . . . was just feeling like I came back from . . . war.

Eli was a smoker and smoked marijuana for fun after the game that his team had lost; when the coach saw him, he was displeased. During this time a player from the other team attacked him, and Eli was disappointed that his attacker went free without any repercussions.

**Psychological struggles; quitting school.** When Eli returned from the sports trip, he faced depression and anxiety attacks; at the same time, his school grades spiralled lower, and he eventually left school before the end of Grade 12. He had several anxieties, including the fear that his life was over because he could no longer play professional hockey. He was afraid that the world was coming to an end. He also worried that his peers' dreams had shattered. All of this led to severe depression, and he left school:

> So [pauses] my teachers told me that my attendance was just failing. They told me that my grades were dropping dramatically. Everything was just going downhill for me. . . . I thought my life was over. . . . I started to get depressed from everything that was going on with the drugs and . . . everything. [pauses] I was really emotional, and all my life I was always . . . the one . . . absorbing people's feelings. . . . My best friends . . . started getting into drugs and alcohol and getting in trouble. [Also] . . . I heard that in 2008 . . . the world was ending. . . . It was dramatic, and . . . I was depressed. . . . I told my mom . . . that "I don't think I wanna live anymore."

**Shifting focus from sports to schooling.** Eli's family encouraged him, and he returned to school and caught up with the schoolwork he had missed. After completing high school, he received an offer of work in the school kitchen, and he began to think of careers:

> After that, I kinda set aside hockey. . . . And so I just like got back to school. . . . My grades were picking up again. . . . That's when I thought, like, Well, I will just go to university. I kind of figured it out, because at first I wanted to be a carpenter, and then I changed my path and I wanted to be a welder. But then I changed it; then a pipefitter.

**New responsibilities; working in the trades; loss of work.** Eli, who had thought about going to school, suddenly began to work in the trades because he was about to become a father and needed to be able to support his new family. He took courses and obtained his trades certificates. As a young father at 18 years of age, Eli believed that he was doing very well financially, working in the mining industry:

> So, you know, life was good and everything. And . . . I met a girl. [pauses] . . . Got her pregnant. I had just turned 18, and she was like 16. . . . I went and got my tickets . . . and everything, and all these courses, crash courses. And I went straight to work at 18 years old . . . with men in the field [industry]. I learned a lot there. . . . I saved up a ton of money for my baby because I knew . . . my baby was going to be born. . . . Yeah, I didn't have interest in school by then.

But Eli lost his work in the mining industry: "I lost my job, . . . and we weren't making as much money anymore."

**Injury in trades work; finding new work options.** Eli continued to look for work until he found a seasonal job in landscaping, yard maintenance, and warehousing. He then began to work in construction, building houses, to support his child, his partner, and his partner's mother:

> I started . . . framing up houses, and I was in that for a while—a long time. And then I broke my back and I broke my neck. I fell from a second floor. . . . I made a really fast recovery, and I went back into framing, and I kind of hurt myself again. . . . I was just like, "I think I will go back to school."

**Return to reserve; inspiration there; return to school.** Eli returned to his reserve, where he found more inspiration to pursue his dream of going to university while he worked with the Chief and Council as well as others off his reserve. He dreamt of becoming a leader too, like them:

> I moved back to the reserve and started a job. I had to work with the Chief. . . . [I] got to go . . . to the Assembly of First Nations as a student proxy for the Chief, and it was good a experience. And . . . I realised, though, [that] my main goal is to be in there; . . . one day to be, like, head of all First Nations, to fight for rights and . . . everything. . . . [It's] sad, but at the same time, I was inspired.

At the AFN meetings that Eli attended, he met well-educated Native leaders who inspired him: "Everyone in the Assembly of First Nations are all educated; they all have some sort of degree, master's degree, you know. Like, that's where the educated First Nations people are."

Eli's reason for enrolling in university was to impact Aboriginal people's lives:

> Yeah, I think that was pretty much like the story . . . why I wanted to get into the education, wanting to make change in the world, . . . in the Native world, . . . in this country. . . . And . . . coming to school is like my first step to making the change. . . . My main goal is to be educated and at least get a degree.

Eli was determined to complete his upgrading because he knew that it was necessary to be able to attain the requisite average before he would be admitted to the university through the TYP. He considered this a common process for his people: "It's like my marks were below average, so I had to go back, and I had to upgrade them. And . . . it's pretty much like a basic process for Aboriginals. They always have to go through that."

**Inspiration and gratitude.** Eli talked about inspiration from the legendary Nelson Mandela and his radical acts that brought about change in his society:

> You know Mandela? He just like really inspired me. He just like gives me strength . . . to fight for what's right. . . . He gives me . . . inspiration to be radical, because radical people . . . create change. . . . What I mean is, being radical for the right reasons.

Eli felt so much injustice had to be resolved. He spoke of the Indian Act as a tool to oppress Aboriginal peoples: “And I wanna be like that [Mandela]. . . . I wanna get rid of the Indian Act book because they use it to oppress First Nations people.”

Eli spoke about an old man who had advised him to consider going to school: “This old man told me [pauses], ‘If you can’t pick up a shovel, pick up a pen.’ And [pauses] I thought about that a lot. I thought about just going back to school, so I did!”

**Conclusion.** Eli chose to attend university after several years of working in the trades, being physical injured, and getting acquainted with Aboriginal community leaders and Elders who inspired him to seek training for a career in politics. Eli gave up his hockey dream; and, coming out of his depression with the support of his family, he returned to school and completed Grade 12. The birth of his baby brought on the necessity to work. Following the injury from his trades work, he returned to the reserve, was inspired by his involvement with community leaders, returned to upgrade his studies, and joined the TYP.

### Wally’s Journey to University: “I Wanted Work in an Office Environment”

Wally’s family supported him. His goal of receiving a postsecondary sports scholarship kept him in school until he enrolled in university. His story shows the activities, inspiration, and decision points in his journey.

**Not so good; moving away.** From Grades 5 to 8 Wally attended school off reserve, commuting by bus, and then he relocated to the city, where he completed Grades 9 to 12:

> I went to school in our community, where we had up to Grade 4, and then we went off reserve from Grade 4 to Grade 5 to 12, but I ended [up] leaving the reserve or the community . . . after Grade 8. So Grade 9, 10, 11 and 12 I was in [city]. (Wally, personal communication, December 13, 2013)

Wally lamented leaving the reserve because of the culture and network of relationships that he left behind: “In the community you have more opportunity to be involved in your culture, and I guess that's one of the main differences to live in [an] urban setting compared to the community" (Wally, personal communication, December 13, 2013). He added, "My family [has] . . . also been cultural, so we have a lot of support that way" (Wally, personal communication, December 13, 2013).

**Aspiring to a better life from a young age.** Wally valued schooling from childhood because he believed that it bore the potential for more opportunities for employment and a better life. He chose to live a better life and was aware that receiving an education was the way to do that. Could this also be the reason that he enjoyed school? Wally explained how he came to university:

> I think it was always . . . one of my goals. Also, I think the initial push from your parents . . . was an integral part of that. They see education as an opportunity, I guess, for a better life, and also an opportunity [for] . . . employment. But at the time it was—. . . not that life wasn't good growing up, but, it was just, education opens a lot of doors, you know. (Wally, personal communication, December 13, 2013)

Wally pointed out that his family did not lack money. His parents inspired him, and he found school pleasurable: "Yeah! I always wanted to [attend university]; I mean, I enjoyed school" (Wally, personal communication, December 13, 2013).

**Acquaintances with university; office job.** Wally knew family members and peers who had gone to university, and he desired an office job, all of which inspired him to go to university. He saw himself capable of doing university studies and did not want to work in labour jobs:

> I think . . . you just have peers. . . . There is some first-generation college or university . . . graduate from my family. A lot of it had to do with just learning more. And . . . I wanted work in an office environment. The other motivating factor [is that] you don't want to be working labour for the rest of your life. [laughter] (Wally, personal communication, December 13, 2013)

I was curious to know why Wally talked about labour work. He said, “Yeah, I did labour. Typical summer jobs. The only jobs available for students [laughter]” (Wally, personal communication, December 13, 2013).

**Support from family.** Wally emphasised the support from his family that enabled him to succeed in elementary and high school and attend university. Wally pointed to parental supervision and the little things that were important in helping him to complete his schooling:

> Growing up, . . . I have been fortunate enough to have good grades in school and also good attendance, which [are] important. But, also, . . . the very biggest piece was knowing your parents supporting you. And not only . . . supporting you, but getting you up, making sure every day—those are little things. (Wally, personal communication, December 13, 2013)

Wally talked about the basic needs such as lunch and transportation that he had and that made a difference for him, which he believed that some of the other Native students did not have. He reflected on his family’s support, particularly on the reserve:

> I was lucky to have both my parents working and . . . provide me . . . with lunch everyday going to school. . . . Transportation [was] . . . not a barrier. If you don’t have transportation, you miss the bus, how are you going to get to school? So there were a few times I missed the bus, but I was able to get transportation—. . . maybe not so much [a barrier] in the city because there are more programs out there. (Wally, personal communication, December 13, 2013)

**Delaying university entry by playing sports.** Wally’s involvement in high-level sports delayed his university entrance:

> Before I went to university, I went to high school, graduated, then ended up . . . playing high-calibre hockey. That was the only thing that helped me succeed. . . . You can’t just go to school. . . . That [hockey] contributes; it’s part of my success. . . . A couple of years, yeah, I moved away from home, and I played junior hockey. It was a good experience because you live on your own. . . (Wally, personal communication, December 13, 2013)

**Chasing a sports scholarship.** Wally emphasised that he remained in school because he understood that his school performance, coupled with sports, could earn him a scholarship for his PSE.

> In Canada—I don't know if you understand this, but in Canada they have scholarships. . . . In the US they have scholarships. So in order to get those scholarships, you need your Grade 12; you need to go to school. (Wally, personal communication, December 13, 2013)

Wally took some college-level courses before he eventually applied to the TYP at the U of A. He noted that his college studies gave him experience; he became familiar with the nature of university studies because of his prior college-level studies: "When I went to university, when I came to the U of A, . . . I took a couple of courses . . . at the college level, so I knew how to do the work at the university" (Wally, personal communication, December 13, 2013).

**Being accepted into university.** Wally believed that having completed the TYP allowed him to attend university without taking upgrading courses at a college. His goal was to study business:

> It was only for one semester [in TYP]. . . . I mean, when I came, . . . I graduated with a high school diploma. . . . I didn't continue school for a couple of years, and I decided to go back. It was one of the options, to get me into university . . . without going to a community college or tribal college [to upgrade]. So it can open up a door. And so, once I got in—that's one of the biggest barriers to getting accepted. (Wally, personal communication, December 13, 2013)

Wally was accepted into the TYP and was grateful for the opportunity because it was a conducive, culturally friendly school environment:

> I guess it opened the door, that like, . . . I didn't want to go through a regular program to get into university. . . . Other than that, you know, . . . you wanna make sure that you are in an environment where there are other Aboriginal people. (Wally, personal communication, December 13, 2013)

**Conclusion.** Wally aspired to attendance at university from an early age and laid out a plan in which his sports scholarship would facilitate his transition financially. First-generation and peer university graduates and his focus on office work inspired him. He took a break after high school to play sports and then took college courses before he enrolled in the TYP. He affirmed that he could not have succeeded in school without the support and inspiration of his family.

## Deborah's Journey to University: "I Hope to Get a Piece of Paper"

The journey to university of an aspiring social worker, Deborah, took a long trajectory that involved self-doubt, early school leaving, the overcoming of personal struggles, a return to upgrade, and, eventually, enrollment in university. Deborah referred to abuse, trauma, and family violence and their impact, which culminated in her leaving school early. After she received therapeutic help, Deborah returned to school and upgraded; this mother felt a spiritual leading and enrolled in university. Her transition story includes moments of decision, struggles, and sources of inspiration.

**Accompanied friend to university; spiritual signs confirmed it was time.** Deborah grew up in the city. At the age of seven she moved from the reserve to the city, where she completed most of her schooling. Deborah enrolled at the U of A, accompanying her friend. There she found signs that prompted her to consider applying to the TYP:

> Honestly, I believe it's God's will for me. My friend, who is an evangelist, asked me to come with him one day to the university. He had an appointment with Elaine [the TYP co-ordinator]. . . . So I went with him. . . . We walked in the door, and the first door that we saw said *314*. . . . So I was seeing these signs, and because of that, I thought, Well, I'm here at school; I must as well pick up an application for TYP. . . . It was something that I pondered doing for like 10 years. (Deborah, personal communication, December 5, 2013)

Deborah elaborated on the significance of the number 314 that she had seen at the TYP centre: It was an assurance that she was making the right decision. A year and half after she became a Christian, and after having seen various events that were beyond human ability, at the TYP office Deborah felt God's approval of her decision to attend university:

> John 3:14. . . . So just as Moses lifted the snake in the wilderness, so the son of man must be lifted. . . . Well, I became born again in June, May [a year and a half]. And I just experienced a myriad of miracles, being led to different places I was meant to be, and I could just feel it. And so John 3:14 is the number that shows up very often for me. . . . That's . . . [a] reassurance . . . [that I'm] . . . on the right path. (Deborah, personal communication, December 5, 2013)

**Accommodating her late application meant so much.** Deborah was inspired by the TYP co-ordinator's understanding. "And it happened to be the day after the deadline, but they accepted my application anyways, which was really, I think, kind of nice. . . . They made an exception for me. . . . Honestly, it . . . kind of inspired [me]" (Deborah, personal communication, December 5, 2013). She added:

> My decision happened when she said, 'If you fill [in] the paperwork right now, I will get it in for you.' And I was just like, 'Okay, I will do it.' So that's kinda when my decision was made kinda for me in a way. (Deborah, personal communication, December 5, 2013)

**Identity struggles.** Upon arriving at the city school in Grade 2, Deborah felt different from the other students. She understood why only several years later:

> I [have] . . . great memories in kindergarten and Grade 1. I loved school. And I remember coming to the city and feeling differently . . . already as a Grade 2, Grade 3, Grade 4 student, but not knowing precisely what it was that was so different about me compared to everybody else. But I think Grade 4 was when I started experiencing prejudice, . . . racism and discrimination. It wasn't until probably Grade 6 when I realised that I was Native and that not a lot of other people in the school I was in were Native. And then Grade 7, it was the same thing, . . . [but] more noticeable. . . . It wasn't pleasant. (Deborah, personal communication, December 5, 2013)

**What broke the camel's back?** Deborah spoke about leaving school early in Grade 11 and what led to her decision. Although she was a bright student—"I was a straight A student [laughter]" (Deborah, personal communication, December 5, 2013)—as a teenager, she left school early because of the social phobia with which she struggled regarding an English project that she was too shy to stand in front of her class to present:

> Do you know, it was the fact that I had a public presentation which was due in English. That's why I quit school, because I was that shy. Because I wouldn't get in front of the class. . . . I was beyond shy. . . . [pauses] I wasn't like prepared; I didn't know how to stand in front of people, and my self-esteem was really, really low. So, yeah, that's why I quit. (Deborah, personal communication, December 5, 2013)

Deborah added, "Yeah, it [my work] was all ready. It was just the day that we were supposed to do it that I didn't show up, and then I never went back" (Deborah, personal communication, December 5, 2013).

Deborah associated this phobia with an experience of trauma as a youth that she chose not to share: "When I was growing [up], something traumatic happened. That happened to me during my youth. It's too personal to disclose. Basically, it created a social phobia [pauses] inside me" (Deborah, personal communication, December 5, 2013). She talked about her experience with addictions, trauma, and seeking help with her struggles:

> I had to deal with my own addictions. I had to deal with the traumas growing up in a dysfunctional home. I had to do a lot of therapy. . . . I went to treatment a couple of times for drinking and doing drugs. . . . So I had to do a lot of self-discovery before thinking of going and doing well in school. It wasn't just yang in school. So it was a long journey that took a long time to get there. (Deborah, personal communication, December 5, 2013)

**Looking to family.** Deborah considered attending university a spiritual occurrence because of the way it happened. However, she also recognised the inspiration from her family. Her mother and sisters encouraged her to attend. She wanted to receive a university credential:

"I hope to get a piece of paper [laughs] with the degree" (Deborah, personal communication, December 5, 2013). As a mother of four children, Deborah wanted to better position herself to provide for her children: "I think [that I was] probably worrying about how I [could] provide for my kids without an education and a job. . . . Also, my mom really, really pushed education on me and my sisters. Something that we kinda have to do [laughs]" (Deborah, personal communication, December 5, 2013). Earlier, she spoke of a dysfunctional home. She implied that her mother and siblings were her cheerleaders, which suggests some healing in the home. Her children inspired her as well.

**Conclusion.** Deborah received help with her personal struggles and took advantage of an opportunity that she believed was miraculously orchestrated for her. She left high school early because of a social phobia. Deborah attributed her transition to university to her Christian faith; accompanying her Christian friend to see the TYP co-ordinator and receiving spiritual approval set her university admission in motion. Her family, including her children, mother, and sisters, have been her inspiration.

### Jackie's Journey to University: "I Wanna Make My Family and My Community Proud"

Jackie enrolled in university after having relocated several times between provinces and schools and facing personal/family struggles, leaving school early, and an awakening that arose from an offense to her First Nations tradition that troubled and inspired her to go to school. Peer pressure led to Jackie's delinquent behaviour, and in coping with her struggles, she disrespected her culture. She wanted to live a better life, upgrade, and then enroll in university to become a lawyer or psychologist. The following is Jackie's story.

**A snapshot of the transition process.** Jackie relocated several times and attended several schools in different provinces and on her reserve as a result of her parents' relationship difficulties. In summarising her transition to university, she highlighted her relocations, depression that led to substance uses, a turnaround, and, eventually, her enrollment in university:

> It's kind of a long story. But last yea, I moved to [the reserve] because I didn't know what I was going to do. I didn't even know if I was going to come to university. And I was really unsure, and my mom didn't want me to come back and just do nothing, so I decided to just enroll in school in [the reserve]. So I did that, and I was really, really depressed over there, but I still went to school. I went there for a semester. . . . I just . . . did a lot of drugs and drank a lot, and I was really, really unhappy. So then around Christmas time I decided to stop all of that, and I wanted to do what I could do to move back to the city and go to school. (Jackie, personal communication, December 6, 2013)

Jackie talked about her aspiration and following it:

> And I knew I wanted to go to university by the end. So I moved back to the city and . . . took myself to [upgrading school], and I enrolled, . . . and I got into the classes that I needed. And there's an Aboriginal liaison there. His name is Jonathan Littlechild. He told me about the TYP program. . . . He helped me out a lot. So I applied and I got in. (Jackie, personal communication, December 6, 2013)

Jackie spoke of her uncertainty about what to do after high school. Having graduated from high school, Jackie's mother wanted to know that she had decided on what to do before Jackie could join her in the city. Jackie decided to stay on the reserve because she did not know what to study. Although she had graduated earlier, she did not have full credits for a high school diploma: "I didn't get that [the credits] done, but they still let me walk the stage and everything" (Jackie, personal communication, December 6, 2013).

**Family challenges.** Earlier, Jackie talked about her parents' relationship difficulties that led to her constant relocation between different provinces and the reserve in her parents' effort to avoid each other. She lost friends not only because of the change of schools in this new province from junior high to senior high school, but also because of pregnancies when she reached high school:

> And I kind of had a couple of friends. I didn't really have a lot of friends, and then from there I went to [xxxxxx] [junior high school]. It's on the . . . east side too, and I had a lot

> of friends. But I was like drinking and doing a lot of drugs and everything. . . . I wasn't even focussed on school at all. . . . I just wanted to be with my friends like a normal teenager, whatever. And then after that I went to high school and kind of started losing my friends because they started having kids and everything. (Jackie, personal communication, December 6, 2013)

Jackie surrounded herself with friends. She was in the middle of the relationship difficulties between her parents as well as between her father and herself: "And things haven't been good between me and my dad. My mom and dad also have a really bad relationship" (Jackie, personal communication, December 6, 2013).

**Guilt of offending culture; turning point.** Jackie discovered an upgrading program through a university in which she enrolled in the hope of preparing for her transition to PSE. As part of her upgrading, she took a Native studies course. However, Jackie could not complete her upgrading to receive her high school diploma:

> When I was going to school [on reserve, a university], . . . they came to talk to us. They came to try and tell us to go to their university. . . . I realised that I wanted to go to university. . . . I really thought about it. . . . It was upgrading, . . . because I didn't have my diploma. (Jackie, personal communication, December 6, 2013)

Jackie took courses to receive her high school diploma but did not complete it because she could not focus. She completed the Native studies course that was included in the program.

Jackie narrated an event that offended her culture and resulted in so much guilt that she immediately stopped her substance use and returned to school for upgrading, fully focussed:

> I was on the reserve. . . . I would . . . do a lot of drugs and everything. And . . . one day it kind of . . . just hit me; like, that's not what I should be doing! It was just, one day my grandpa, he smudges our house every day, and I was just finished getting high and I went inside to go and get a lighter, and I was like high [on drugs] . . . So then my *mosom* [grandfather] . . .was smudging the house, and he came into my room and . . . offered me . . . to smudge. And you're not supposed to smudge when you are like drinking or like under the influence of anything, but . . . I smudged anyway because I didn't want him to know that I was high. (Jackie, personal communication, December 6, 2013)

After she smudged in this disrespectful manner, Jackie began to feel guilty for her action, knowing that she had done wrong, that she had offended her culture:

> And then after I did that, I just felt like so bad. I just started crying, and . . . from then it just made me realise that I have to . . . quit doing drugs and drinking. And I just felt …. so bad; I felt really bad, and [it] just made me realise that I need to smarten up and go to school instead of just staying at the reserve and not doing anything—just doing drugs and living off welfare. (Jackie, personal communication, December 6, 2013)

Jackie felt a deep sense of regret for abusing drugs and alcohol and disrespectfully participating in prayer. She lamented:

> And I know, I know I'm smarter than all of that. And I'm better than that, and I could be doing really good things. So from there is when I knew that I just have to do what I need to do, that I can go home, go back to [city in another province where her mother lived] here to go to school and go to university. (Jackie, personal communication, December 6, 2013)

From that moment of guilt, Jackie transformed herself, stopped the abusive behaviour, moved to the city, enrolled in upgrading, and then attended university.

**Good memories; I said I shall return.** Jackie told me about the ways in which she was inspired to enroll in university and recalled a time when she was in university classes with her mother, who was then a student. At about eight years of age she sat in her mother's large, overwhelming university class and in small Native studies classes, where she saw students sitting in circles; and she felt good about the experience: "Well, my mom went to school there [university] so sometimes she would bring me to classes with her. It was fun [laughs]. Just coloured and listened to what they were saying" (Jackie, personal communication, December 6, 2013). Jackie enjoyed being in her mother's Native-studies class. She was old enough to understand some of the discussions and enjoyed them. I asked Jackie what this experience might have done for her:

> It made me want to go to university, because I went to one of her classes, and it was in a big lecture hall; and it was really . . . amazing how big it was. . . . And then I went to a Native studies class. It was cool. They were all sitting in a circle . . . in a small class, and . . . it was really nice, and being on the campus. It was actually a really nice campus. (Jackie, personal communication, December 6, 2013)

**Reason that I chose psychology and law.** Jackie aspired to become a lawyer to advocate for the rights of her people and to help youth as a psychologist. She saw a gap in the area of counselling and support for youth when she was growing up and struggled with loneliness and suicidal thoughts. She believed that her studies in psychology with law would enable her to help struggling Aboriginal youth:

> I know how hard it is to be like a teenager, and especially in the city because I grew up in the city, and [there were] . . . a lot of . . . negative [influences] from friends . . . to drink and do drugs. And I know that, . . . when I was that age, I felt really alone. And sometimes I just like wanted to . . . commit suicide or something because I just felt so alone all the time. And . . . I really wished back then somebody would have been there to just say, "You can talk to me whenever you want," . . . because I know that they are important for our future, . . . . like Native people. (Jackie, personal communication, December 6, 2013)

Jackie stated, "I wanna do like a psychology minor so I could still work with kids if I want. And I wanna do law so that I could help fight for . . . Aboriginal rights" (Jackie, personal communication, December 06, 2013).

**Conclusion.** Jackie's journey to university involved constant mobility between the reserve, the city, and different provinces; peer pressure; offending cultural traditions; and the inspiration to return to school. Peer influence amidst family relationship struggles took her focus away from her studies, so she graduated from high school without the necessary credits for university admission. She tried to upgrade while she was unwell, until she offended her culture and changed her life by enrolling in university. Her visits to the university as a child inspired her.

### Janine's Journey to University: "It's a Matter of When"

Janine was certain at an early age that she wanted to go to university, but her journey was not straightforward. From a well-educated family of several university graduates, this aspiring lawyer grew up understanding the value of higher education. She left school early because of personal struggles and found jobs. Janine upgraded and enrolled in university studies after she had her first child. Her story includes her school experiences, family background, triggers of personal struggles, and events and activities that led to her enrollment in university.

**Family norm; going to university.** Janine described her family as well-educated people who had taken several levels of university studies and felt that this was a path for her to follow. When I asked Janine about how she decided to go to university, she enumerated her parents' university credentials:

> Both of my parents went to university. They both have two degrees each. They both are in the educational field. My dad is a school principal. He's been a principal for over 20 years, teaching for over 25 years. And my mother is a teacher too. She teaches Grade 3 at [reserve school]. And they both have Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Education degrees.
>
> . . . So growing up, I always knew I was going to go to university, . . . . from a very young age, because my parents often stressed to me that education is important. . . . So . . . from a little girl, I always knew I was going to go. It was always a question of when. When I graduated, . . . I was 18, . . . and I knew I was going to go. (Janine, personal communication, December 4, 2013)

Janine also acknowledged other graduates in her family who were part of her upbringing and influenced her choice to undertake university studies. Her uncles and aunts on both sides have higher degrees. Those who chose not to go to university established themselves in the trades:

> My mom has about five, six brothers and sisters, and my dad about the same brothers and sisters. And every single one of them, they all went to university, and they all have like at least two degrees, minimum. So education in my family, it's really important. If it's not a university degree, it's a trade. So I was just brought up with, I guess, a lot of . . . educated people. (Janine, personal communication, December 4, 2013)

Janine told me about a deceased uncle who had been an accomplished Cree criminal lawyer and inspired her. She followed the path of this uncle, whom she admired:

> I hope to get a degree, and I will go off to law school. . . . What influenced me to go to law school is that my dad's late brother—he passed away five years ago—he was a Cree criminal lawyer in [the big city], and he just really inspired me. . . . I could do it too. . . . I have a passion for Aboriginal rights of government, treaties and all that. That is what I love to learn about and read about. (Janine, personal communication, December 4, 2013)

**Working and distractions.** Personal struggles that became disparaging after high school distracted Janine along the way. She could not continue her schooling for about four years afterward. She described what happened to her: "And also after I graduated [high school], . . . I was gonna go [to university] but, as I said, I was distracted. . . . I realised that . . . I wanted to be, like, drinking and just wasting . . . time and my life" (Janine, personal communication, December 4, 2013). She added, "I would drink. I was always just bartending; just had a little waitressing or bartending job. It wasn't really getting me anywhere" (Janine, personal communication, December 4, 2013).

**Feeling low; peer pressure.** When Janine was working, she sometimes felt that she could do more with her life, but she could not get back on track toward her dream:

> Yeah, I thought about it [going back to school] probably when I was working, when I was waitressing, bartending. I remember I was [short pause] scraping the food off plates, you know, like when you clean up the tables and scrape the food and stack them [the plates] for the dishwasher. I was just thinking to myself like, Is this what I want to do for the rest of my life? Like, this is not me; . . . this is not for me. I should really go back to school. But I was thinking, . . . When? (Janine, personal communication, December 4, 2013)

Janine described the job as "just something that I did. I wasn't happy with where it was going, you know" (Janine, personal communication, December 4, 2013).

She explained why it was difficult to decide to go to school and pointed to peer influence and a lack of self-motivation. She blamed her circle of friends for keeping her bounded in her bartending/waitressing space. When I asked Janine what held her back from returning to school, she responded, “I just didn’t have anything to motivate me, just no motivation. . . . I just wasn’t around the right people, I guess. The people I surrounded myself with were doing the same thing, as I was” (Janine, personal communication, December 4, 2013). Janine had the liberty to choose which friends she wanted to influence her future, but she chose to spend time with friends who were as demotivated, drinking, and struggling as she was.

**Making sense of the personal struggles.** Janine explained the reasons that she was drinking and noted the experience of watching her parents part ways. She did not realise that the difficulty of her parents’ separation would affect her several years later:

> I think I was just trying to suppress the pain and the hurt and, yeah, just the pain and the hurt I felt and what I had seen, because I had seen it. I was the oldest one of my three sisters at the time when they separated, so I knew I was old enough to understand what was going on. . . . I was nine, . . . so I’d seen the abuse, . . . the actual separation, and then him leaving. . . . That whole thing was overwhelming for me. And growing up, . . . when I started to become a woman, . . . I didn’t know how [short pause]—. . . I felt like my dad just left us, so that really hurt. (Janine, personal communication, December 4, 2013)

Janine added, “I was nine; I was still in school. But, you know, when you are older, when you are about that teenager [in adolescent years] you start to rebel. That’s when it started to hit” (Janine, personal communication, December 4, 2013).

**Birth of new life awakens senses; return to school.** Janine talked about one important event that inspired her: the birth of her child. Janine became pregnant when she partied one night, and after she had her child, she went back to school to upgrade and enrolled in university:

> After I had my son, I was [ age], and he just motivated me. Now I have to go back to school. You have to get educated. You have to give this little boy the best life that he deserves. So I tried hard and went back to upgrading . . . for about six months, and I applied to university, and I got accepted.
>
> . . . But just after I became a mother, . . . I wanted to give him everything I had growing up. Basically, when I was growing up, I was privileged. . . . I never needed

> anything. I just had an excellent upbringing, and I wanted that for my son too. That's why I decided to come here [to university]. (Janine, personal communication, December 4, 2013)

Janine grew up in an affluent family with parents who both worked. She described herself as middle to upper SES, and she realised that she needed to go back to school to study for a career that would enable her to provide for her child adequately:

> He [her baby] gave me, like, a sense of purpose, I guess. . . . This is, like, the push that I needed. . . . Before I had him, I was just really going the wrong direction, going nowhere, and he strengthened me up. . . . I got my senses together, and I decided to go back to school. (Janine, personal communication, December 4, 2013)

Janine hear out about the TYP while she was studying at the upgrading college. After attending a postsecondary outreach session where she learned about the TYP, she decided that it was right for her:

> I was actually going to the [college]. I was upgrading there, and there was this recruitment lady from here [TYP]; she was over there. . . . So I went and spoke to her, and she gave me like a TYP package, and she explained to me what the Transition Year Program was. I just figured that that was for me, and I figured out everything that was needed, and I applied right away. (Janine, personal communication, December 4, 2013)

**Grandparents instilled education long ago.** Janine talked about her grandparents' inspiration of her parents, who, in turn, inspired her to further her education. She traced the history of her grandparents' value for formal education after they experienced the changing world. Her grandparents understood that their livelihood would come from education:

> Well, it started with my grandparents. They grew up in '20s and '30s, and they've seen how, . . . when the settlers came, how everything was changing. They've seen how everything was working in the White man's world. . . . And so they knew that education is important. (Janine, personal communication, December 4, 2013)

She added, “So my grandparents taught my mom and dad as they were growing up: ‘You have to go to school.’ And it’s just something that they always pass on to the kids. . . . All my cousins all in university, gone to school” (Janine, personal communication, December 4, 2013).

**Conclusion.** The birth of her baby inspired Janine’s transition to university. Although she knew that her well-educated family expected her to attend university, her personal struggles, which she believed were a reaction to her parents’ separation, preoccupied her. She returned to school to upgrade after she had her baby. She attributed her decision to inspiration, strength, and the awakening of her senses that accompanied her becoming a mother and wanting to be able to ensure the best care possible for her child. Janine entered university after upgrading and credited her family’s large number of graduates for keeping her focussed on going to university.

### Andrea’s Journey to University: “I Want to Be Different”

Andrea left school at 14 while she faced personal struggles, but with the inspiration and support of family and adults at her workplace, she returned to upgrading school and then enrolled in university. Andrea struggled in her youth. She moved away from home because she could not live with the guidance of her foster mother. During this time Andrea’s brother encouraged her, and a team of adults with whom she worked inspired her, to follow her passion to become a social worker. Her story explains her life trajectory that led to university.

**Found my fit.** Andrea described her K-12 experience as a shifting process in which she moved from one school to another. She left school early in Grade 10. Although she took courses by correspondence to catch up on the parts that she had missed, this method did not work for her. Andrea knew that she needed face-to-face interactions with teachers to learn effectively, and she found an upgrading school where she attained her high school diploma. At this school Andrea learned about the TYP:

> I went to [upgrading school], and that was the only reason why I got my diploma. . . . I stayed with them for about two years and then graduated last year with my diploma, and they were the ones that introduced me to TYP at the U of A. (Andrea, personal communication, December 5, 2013)

I was curious to know how Andrea decided to upgrade. She told me that at the upgrading school she was inspired to attend university. I asked her what drew her to university, and she responded:

> What drew me to it? It was a very big push from my administrator. I never really thought about [university]. . . . I thought about going to college; never really thought about university. But I always thought I would see myself . . . [at college]. But I had a lot of struggles in my life, just like everybody, a lot of that. A lot of the time it affected my marks. (Andrea, personal communication, December 5, 2013)

Andrea heard about the TYP at the upgrading school and the cultural experience and sense of belonging that it offered, and she was immediately interested. She did not waste time applying:

> And when I found out about this program and the fact that it revolved around Aboriginal students, immediately I was, like, okay people just like me going there. Have the best grade; that wasn't what it was about. . . . Like, finding a sense of belonging and being able to . . . come in here and just be me, you know. And my administrator told me about it, and right away I kind of grabbed the opportunity. I got my paperwork . . . in. (Andrea, personal communication, December 5, 2013)

**Push from ambition and family.** Andrea explained one of the reasons that she decided to go to university: "I wanted to . . . work in an office environment. And that was one of the. . . motivating factors. You don't want to be working labour for the rest of your life" (Andrea, personal communication, December 5, 2013). She said, "I had just started looking into things, . . . welding, crane operating" (Andrea, personal communication, February 3, 2014).

Like her mother, Andrea aspired to being a social worker: "I feel like I have bigger passion to change somebody's life. . . . Oh, I feel like my priority was set long time ago, and that's just where my passion is" (Andrea, personal communication, February 3, 2014). Earlier she had stated:

> Yeah, I've always wanted to be one [social worker]—. . . at age 14. . . . I never changed my mind on it once. . . . I literally have a passion for it. Like, I'm a social worker, and I'm certified. . . . [I] can probably cry, it means so much to me. (Andrea, personal communication, December 5, 2013)

Andrea pointed out that she chose to become a social worker like her foster mother even though her foster mother advised against it:

> My mom who fostered me from 2 to 16 was a social worker too. She doesn't push me to do it. In fact, she begs me not to do it. . . . I know that I have a lot to give in that area, and I know it's kinda a passion for me. It's huge. . . . I know it's something that I want to do for life, . . . to work with Aboriginal youth especially. [laughter] (Andrea, personal communication, December 5, 2013)

Her foster mother had warned her, "[Social work is] . . . a really stressful job" (Andrea, personal communication, December 5, 2013). However, Andrea was unremitting in her decision. Her desire to give back and to assist Aboriginal youth was a strong influence.

**Peer influence; pursuing affection.** Andrea talked about what had distracted her K-12 schooling, given that she intended to become a social worker. When she began high school, she spent time with friends, using unhealthy substances, and her schoolwork began to suffer. She stopped going to school in Grade 10 at the age of 14:

> In Grade 10 when I left school, I was surrounded by the wrong people. I had no idea I wanted out of [school]. I got caught up in drugs, and that was pretty much the breaking point of my life. . . . That's all I cared about; that's where all my money went. (Andrea, personal communication, December 5, 2013)

I wanted to understand why Andrea had given in to peer pressure. She said that she wanted to be loved, accepted, and known. I asked what was going on in her mind while she was taking drugs:

> A sense of a relationship that mattered I guess. . . . Just wanting to be loved, accepted, known by many, and that's why . . . I have to be around my friends all the time, partying, drinking, laughing, making memories, having a good time. I always wanted to be the life of the party, just like everybody else, right? . . . I was more focussed on my social life than I was anything else. (Andrea, personal communication, December 5, 2013)

Andrea touched on some important needs that her circle of friends met. Her foster mother was strict and rarely demonstrated her emotions. She commented on her foster mother's emotional posture, particularly toward Andrea's attending university:

> It's hard to get things out of her when she is trying to be sentimental or anything. She tried to be, like, solid all the time, and just no emotion showing. But at the end of the day I know she is going to be proud of anything that I do. (Andrea, personal communication, December 5, 2013)

**Leaving home; turning point.** Andrea left school at 14, and when she was 16, her mother asked her to leave home because of her substance use and lifestyle. She entered rehabilitation a few times: "[My mother] showed tough love. . . . [She sent] me away to, like, a five-day rehab facility" (Andrea, personal communication, December 5, 2013). However, Andrea began to think more sensibly when she left home:

> Off I went. I think that's when it . . . really . . . hit me, and I was [like], Oh, my God! What am I doing? [whispers] It's not worth it! . . . That's when I knew I was on my own. . . . It was, like, huge for me: What am I gonna do? (Andrea, personal communication, December 5, 2013)

Andrea believed that leaving home helped her to put her life back on the proper path. She settled down, worked, upgraded, and then enrolled in university:

> It was, like, the biggest turning point in my life. . . . It changed my whole life after that. It took, like, a year, but after that year I had my own place, I was going to school, came here. . . . Don't know where I would have been if I didn't get booted out of home. (Andrea, personal communication, December 5, 2013)

Looking back, Andrea was grateful that her foster mother and her brother's frank and tough conversation had inspired her:

> My big brother, . . . he is so genuine; he is real. . . . You know, he just lays them out, like, . . . how they are. . . . I have to thank him . . . for being there for me, because without that inspiration, bringing me down to reality, mak[ing] me feel really little, but at the same time knowing that . . . it's going to make me rise up, . . . it was something I needed to hear. (Andrea, personal communication, December 5, 2013)

Andrea's brother supported her: "And I was like, I am going to do—and then he helped me throughout the week, finding me a job and doing this and doing that. It was a huge steppingstone. . . . Taught me the way to do it (Andrea, personal communication, December 5, 2013).

**Push from 'work family.'** Andrea worked to develop her skills, but also felt inspired by the team of adults at her workplace. Her job at a high-quality restaurant that hired troubled youth and taught them life and other kinds of skills directed her toward schooling:

> So eventually I found [name of restaurant], which is a bistro, and they actually aim towards helping troubled youth, right? . . . They provide . . . [addiction prevention and recovery] programs, . . . schooling through them. . . . You work . . . full-time. . . . They have managers, . . . chef; . . . everyone working there is a kid [youth]. . . . They want to make a difference in a child's life. [They] teach you right from wrong. . . . I've been with them for, like, six years.
>
> . . . They are a huge support system. They are, like, a second home for me. . . . They helped me speak out . . . all my problems. (Andrea, personal communication, December 5, 2013)

She again attributed her turnaround to this workplace:

> [It] kind of blossomed me; . . . [I] started being happier. Worked, had money, can support myself. . . . They were kind of my support system, . . . and they . . . pushed me in the right direction of getting back into school. . . . [The] program was definitely amazing; [it] shaped and moulded my life. (Andrea, personal communication, December 5, 2013)

**Conclusion.** Andrea arrived at her decision to attend university following personal struggles after she left school early and then left home and came to an awakening. Andrea's brother's encouragement helped her to decide to leave behind her partying lifestyle, and inspiration from working in a restaurant tailored to building youths' life skills and the adult mentors there encouraged her to return to school, where she upgraded with the guidance of an administrator and enrolled in the TYP afterward.

### Fiona's Journey to University: "I Want to Inspire My Students"

Fiona left school early, and after she had had many jobs and several job losses, which led to her depression, Fiona's friend inspired her to further her education. She loved school and had earlier considered going into education. After having had many emotional struggles from an early age, she left home, left school, became a mother, and worked. After one of her job losses she began to reflect seriously on her future. With inspiration from her friend, guidance, and the support of her family, Fiona began to upgrade and enrolled in the TYP to meet her course requirements. Fiona's story follows.

**Parenting dilemma and leaving home.** Fiona completed Grades 1 to 9 in a town off reserve where she lived with her mother. She responded to her relationship difficulty with her mother by running away from home at 15. Fiona believed that her mother did not have healthy parenting skills:

> My mom's . . . father . . . was in the military, and my grandmother had been raised by . . . the residential school, . . . so Grandmother didn't know how to parent. . . . My grandpa . . . had a very authoritarian [attitude]. . . . After I finished Grade 9, . . . then I ran away. So I was 15, and I left home. (Fiona, personal communication, December 13, 2013)

Her grandparents' experiences led to an uneasy parenting environment in which her mother grew up and raised her. Fiona left home because of her background and lived with her boyfriend on a reserve. She worked part time and no longer went to school in the town. However, she and her boyfriend struggled. She described him as "pretty jealous and possessive. He didn't want me to go to school; . . . [he was] trying to make me have babies. . . . I was only 16, so . . . [laughs]" (Fiona, personal communication, December 13, 2013).

Fiona returned home but soon left again because her mother asked her to leave: “I was 17 and a half, and then I went back . . . to stay with her. And then she kicked me out when I turned 18 [laughs]” (Fiona, personal communication, December 13, 2013).

Fiona remained in the same town, found a house, and worked there: “I stayed in [the town] and bought my own place. . . . Yeah, I was working at this little farm store in [town]. . . . I had to put up with a lot of racism” (Fiona, personal communication, December 13, 2013).

**More relationship struggles; mental health.** Fiona, struggling to understand her difficult relationship with her mother, believed that her mother disliked her:

> She [my mother] doesn’t like me. I’ve taken on a lot of . . . discovery, self-identity [discovery]; just, like, I have regularly seen psychologists. I real[ised] my mom is really jealous of me! Nothing that I do or say has ever been right! Or it was always . . . abuse since I was little. (Fiona, personal communication, December 13, 2013)

Fiona concluded that her mother had a mental illness; Fiona sounded frustrated and recognised the loss that this had caused: “She [my mother] is . . . mentally ill, so I don’t know what goes on in her head, and I don’t care anymore. . . . I have given up a lot” (Fiona, personal communication, December 13, 2013). She lamented the impact of this ailment on her and her family: “It’s really hard being alienated from your mother. . . . I noticed alienation from her end is really affecting her relationships with her sisters and her dad. She has isolated herself completely” (Fiona, personal communication, December 13, 2013).

**Racism at school and in the community.** Fiona talked about the experience of racism throughout our conversation. She considered the town in which she schooled and worked racist: “I grew up around a lot of racism. [Town] is the worst place for racism” (Fiona, personal communication, December 13, 2013).

At school, Fiona also faced racism from Whites and Aboriginal peoples because she was half-Native and half-White. She referred to people like her as *misfits*, which she explained as follows: “It was because we were half breeds, because we were half White and half Native” (Fiona, personal communication, December 13, 2013). Fiona stated that the racism peaked during elementary school and then was less evident as the diversity of the student population increased in junior high when students from other schools enrolled in her school:

> It was really, really hard. Elementary was hard, not making friends. The girls didn’t want to hang out with me because I was a ‘dirty Indian.’ And then the Indians don’t want to hang out with me because I was a White girl. . . . And then when I got to junior high it wasn’t so bad, because [students from]all the different schools ended up coming [and] mixing together. . . (Fiona, personal communication, December 13, 2013)

**Her own mental health struggles; loss of a relationship.** Fiona’s unhealthy mental state led to her use of substances:

> I suffered from depression, and it’s come and it’s gone. It’s since I was little. . . . I remember the first time I wanted to kill myself; I was 7. And then the next I was trying to kill myself, I was 12; and then again at 15, and then again at 17, and then again at 19. And then I had Jerad [her son]. . . . I didn’t try to kill myself; I drank myself to death when I was 23. (Fiona, personal communication, December 13, 2013)

Fiona’s boyfriend loved and supported her but went to jail, and this loss made her drink heavily: “He [Andre] was the love of my life. And then when he went back to jail, I was just . . . drinking about 16 coolers a day” (Fiona, personal communication, December 13, 2013). Fiona began to show symptoms of depression and was surprised that her family had not recognised her symptoms and helped her: “None of them said, ‘Hey, Fiona what’s wrong’? Then I could’ve told them, ‘I’m sad’” (Fiona, personal communication, December 13, 2013).

**Birth of her child; a big push.** The birth of her son inspired Fiona to consider looking for other job opportunities because her retail job did not pay her enough to care for them. She found a clerical job and began to work when her child was three months old and she was attending school to obtain a clerical certificate:

> I realised that working at the farm store, I couldn’t make enough money to have a good life for my son, . . . and I found a secretary job. . . . My son was only three months old. . . . It was a really big struggle, . . . going to work every day, 7:30 [a.m.], . . . taking him to day care. Go to work all day, go back, pick my baby up, go to my mom’s house, drop him off [at her mom’s], and then . . . drive to the [college] every night for two years. . . . But in the end, I got my clerical skills certificate, so I was paid more money to be a secretary. (Fiona, personal communication, December 13, 2013)

**Inspiration from a friend; validation of her career.** Fiona’s friend inspired her to consider upgrading. Fiona lived on a reserve and worked at her first and second clerical jobs there; but she lost both and eventually moved to the city, where she worked as a clerk in a correctional facility, a job that she also lost:

> In 2009, after I lost the job, I was depressed for a bit, and then me and my girlfriend, . . . I told her I was sick of being a secretary and not getting enough pay and not enough time off, you know. She said, “Let’s go look to the . . . college there.” And we went together. . . . And I said okay; I wanted to be a teacher. (Fiona, personal communication, December 13, 2013)

Fiona contemplated her career options, such as a corrections officer, a property-management professional, and eventually a teacher; she chose to become a teacher because of her passion to teach. She had aspired to becoming a teacher early in her life: “I just started thinking, You know what? I lost my job; why not go and do what you wanted to do from the beginning, . . . to be a teacher?” (Fiona, personal communication, December 13, 2013). She added, “I love to teach people new things, new skills; little kids, I really love little kids” (Fiona, personal communication, December 13, 2013). Fiona had acquired some experience in a school: “I worked one summer there [on the reserve] for education, so I got to see what was going on” (Fiona, personal communication, December 13, 2013).

In addition, Fiona wanted to become a high school teacher because she believed that she could inspire young people:

> I would like to inspire my students to see that, even though you run away, you don't finish high school, . . . things don't always come in a straight line. . . . You just gotta make a plan, . . . make your plan adaptable to change. So . . . I want to inspire my students. . . . I went through the same racism; I went through a lot of . . . abusive relationships. . . . I want them to be able to see that they are not alone and that someone out there wants to help them, wants to teach them . . . and listen to what they have to say. (Fiona, personal communication, December 13, 2013)

**Someone to look up to; support.** Fiona returned to school and began her upgrading. During this time the death of her supportive and inspiring grandmother stalled Fiona's education:

> And my last year of college, my last semester of college, she [my grandma] ended up getting sick and dying, . . . so . . . I took off my last year of college. . . . My pure math 30, I still haven't finished that. . . . I still got accepted in for TYP just as an open-studies student. (Fiona, personal communication, December 13, 2013)

Fiona valued her grandmother's inspiration, encouragement, support, and accomplishments:

> She is always the one who is always pushing me, saying, "Go, go, go!" . . . My parents never said "You are doing good." She was a major loss for both me and my son. [cries] . . . Even if it's just cooking supper or saying "You did really good on your chemistry exam" [cries]. (Fiona, personal communication, December 13, 2013)

Fiona also wanted to emulate her grandmother because "she helped make laws and do all sorts of things for Native people in [province]. . . . I wanna be like her, . . . educated, and speak out. . . . [She] was a social worker (Fiona, personal communication, December 13, 2013).

**Conclusion.** Fiona worked, became a mother, and, wanting to better care for her family, took clerical training; she worked again until a third job loss and depression led her to consider pursuing studies to become a teacher—her childhood aspiration. With guidance from her friend and an opportunity for open-studies status, she enrolled in university. Although she had had difficulties with family relationship early on, her grandmother stood out as an inspiration and supported her transition process.

## Summary

These learners were undertaking studies in the social sciences. Two females chose to pursue social work, and the remaining, teaching and law. The males chose programs in law, business administration, politics, film-making, and writing. The reasons that they chose to attend university included a desire to use their full potential, to ensure financial sustenance for themselves and their families, to work in White-collar jobs, to bring justice for Aboriginal youth, to advocate for and be the voice of Aboriginal peoples, to offset the social-support gaps in counselling for Aboriginal youth and recovery for Aboriginal women, and to inspire Aboriginal youth in their schooling. Some intended to take a variety of university programs to achieve their multifaceted goals to become, for example, an Aboriginal lawyer or psychologist and a politician or psychologist. The males' and females' transition stories indicate a rugged process for most of them. The majority worked off their reserves and a few on the reserve before they attended university. Aside from those who were lacking credits returning to school to upgrade to complete their high school diplomas, most pursued training-for-work programs. Personal struggles that manifested in the form of substance use deterred the transition for several of them. Additionally, the learners faced family-relationship struggles, mental-health issues, racism, peer influence, and frequent relocations. As they explained in their 'get-back-up' stories, they benefitted from the inspiration of family, friends, and significant others, as well as some of the school staff in K-12, leaders at work, the upgrading school, and TYP staff. The majority learned about the TYP at their upgrading school and credited the staff there for inspiring them; they appreciated the TYP staff's warmth, promptness, and consideration of late application. Family support in most cases, participation in sports, determination, staff at work, and faith were important to their transition.

# CHAPTER SIX: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this chapter I present my analysis of the experiences that inspired the learners to attend university. I examine race, gender, and SES backgrounds in relation to Bourdieu's (1986) theory of practice. I draw on the findings that I discussed in chapter five, as well as on additional data to explicate the participants' transition stories. My analysis reveals the observation that the participants often referred to their K-12 experiences when they spoke of their transition to university. Additionally, they spoke of having received inspiration from a variety of sources, including home, community, school, and friendship circles, that contributed to their transition to university. In this chapter I discuss the following topics: First Nations learners in relation to Bourdieu's theory of practice; First Nations learners' cultural capital; First Nations learners' social capital; First Nations learners' economic capital; First Nations learners within the education field; the social reproduction of university learners; the social deconstruction/ reconstruction of habitus; awakening and acts of agency; career choices and reflexive habitus; and the inspiration for the transition to university: a form of Bourdieu's capital?

## First Nations Learners in Relation to Bourdieu's Theory of Practice

In this section I juxtapose issues related to Bourdieu's (1986) concept of capital, field, and habitus with findings that explain that nature of the First Nations learners' capital, field, and habitus. I tackle each of these concepts and tease out how they either conform or are incongruent with the worldview of First Nations learners. In essence, I promote a new understanding of what capital, field, and habitus can mean and how they informed the transition to university of the First Nations learners within their cultural specificity. First, I discuss First Nations learners' cultural, social, and economic capital.

## First Nations Learners' Cultural Capital

In this focus on First Nations cultural capital, I discuss the learners' perceptions of capital for success in school and their understanding of their attributes in relation to Bourdieu's (1986) ideas. I also explain the learners' vulnerability to inhibitive behaviours and some temporal aspects of engaging an existing capital. Then I discuss how upgrading and university transition programs constitute cultural capital for First Nations learners.

**Learners' perceptions of attributes for school.** According to Bourdieu (1986), capital stems primarily from the family, but the findings from this study suggest that capital has a perceptive quality. Does what one perceives as capital within a particular institutional field matter, or does the capital that others observe that one possesses in that field matter? In this study the males projected a more positive sense of capital and confidence in their capital than the females did, irrespective of their socioeconomic backgrounds. The male participants identified the attributes that they believed they needed for school success—which questions Bourdieu's thought on capital that people with a higher socioeconomic background or a dominant class naturally possess more and a better distribution of capital by virtue of their family of origin: ". . . holders of economic power have more chances than those who are deprived of it also to possess cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 507).

The male participants recognised some of their attributes for school as social skills, optimism, leadership skills, and high expectations. For example, Charles, who described himself as middle to upper SES, considered his ability to hold a conversation, network, and co-exist peacefully with everyone, as well as his humour, as the capital that he brought to school:

> I remember, I'm always talking to people, all kinds of people, whether it be like the farm kids or . . . ranch kids or the popular kids, or even the nerdy kids. . . . I'm an outgoing person, and that's something that I often brought [to school]. And I remember . . . when I was a little boy, being able to do that, just being able to talk to everyone and make people

> laugh and. . . comfortable, especially people who are really introverted. And I used . . . to get along with everybody, and I'm still like that today. (Charles, personal communication, January 29, 2014)

In spite of his sociable and peace-loving attributes, Charles was disappointed that he could not graduate from high school with his classmates:

> When I was at off-reserve school, . . . I truly believed that, you know, especially middle school, . . . I was so excited. . . . I told myself, I'm halfway there. . . . And I truly believed that I was going to graduate with the people that I went to kindergarten with. But it didn't work out that way. (Charles, personal communication, January 29, 2014)

Danny also felt capable of succeeding during his K-12 schooling. Describing himself as a person from a low to middle socioeconomic background, he wanted to utilise his potential and had high expectations that were important to his success in school: "I know I had everything, but I know I wanted to use a lot. I've always had, like, high expectations for myself" (Danny, personal communication, January 31, 2014).

Coming from middle SES, Allen was confident about his capital for success in school. However, his apathy plagued his school completion. This perception was evident in our conversation:

> CA: When you were doing K-12, did you think you had everything you needed to succeed?
> Allen: Yeah, I did. It was just the lack of interest on my part.
> CA: Why did you lack interest?
> Allen: Because—I'm not really sure. I just . . . didn't wanna go to school. (Allen, personal communication, January 30, 2014)

Allen reported that when he walked into his classrooms during K-12, "I bring my writing abilities, optimism, leadership, [and] humour" (Allen, personal communication, January 30, 2014).

From middle SES, Eli felt confident that he had the capital to succeed in school in spite of his personal struggles; this included his appreciation of education as an opportunity, family expectations, competition, assignments, discipline, security, focus, fun, positive thinking, and resilience to peer pressure:

> I feel like it's an opportunity. . . . As a young kid . . . I always had a clear control of my conscience. . . . I knew, like, the choices I made in school were positive ones, and . . . we all . . . [make bad choices] sometimes. But you know, I still had what it takes to overcome that and still succeed. (Eli, personal communication, February 3, 2014)

Eli elaborated on the necessary capital for success in school that he possessed. I asked him about the skills that he needed to succeed in K-12:

> I knew . . . I needed some competition; . . . I needed some assignments! Something to do, something to focus on. You need discipline; you need to feel secure, . . . and you need guidance. You . . . have to be able to overcome peer pressure. . . . You always have to think positive . . . and then always look forward to fun days. Focus very hard on the work days so that the days that you have fun activities, . . . like daily physical activities and . . . computering and stuff [then you can relax]. (Eli, personal communication, February 3, 2014)

I asked Eli, "Did you bring these things going to K-12? He responded, "Yeah, yeah, yeah" (Eli, personal communication, February 3, 2014).

The males believed that they had the attributes to succeed in school. Three (of the five), who were from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, from upper and middle to low, although they felt confident about their attributes for success in school, left school early either in junior high or senior high school. It is unclear whether they engaged their attributes in the school field. However, it is evident that they left school early because of personal struggles.

On the other hand, the females' perceptions of their capital for success in school confirm Bourdieu's (1986) assertion that people of low SES may have less capital. Four of the five females who came from both privileged and less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds felt incapable of succeeding in K-12 schooling.

Andrea considered her family of origin's low socioeconomic background, but she grew up in privileged socioeconomic conditions with a foster parent. Andrea struggled in school partly because of her self-doubt: "I think I went through . . . lots of struggles and a lot of doubt. I mean, there were times where I wanted to quit, and there was the point in Grade 10 where I stopped school, right?" (Andrea, personal communication, February 3, 2014).

Coming from a low SES background, Fiona felt that she lacked the capital to be successful at school because of child poverty, her responsibility for the care of a sibling, and the lack of parental support. She demonstrated this lack of capital in our conversation:

> CA: When you went to school, did you feel like you had everything you needed to succeed in school?
> Fiona: No.
> CA: Why?
> Fiona: Well, . . . it started at home, you know. One, I didn't have lunch in the day. . . . I couldn't sleep at night because I'm gonna have to take care of the baby; the baby is crying in the middle of the night. . . . I . . . didn't even have [food] in the morning. (Fiona, personal communication, January 31, 2014)

Because her mother worked at night, as the oldest child, Fiona bore the responsibility of care:

> She [her mom] was doing shift work; she was working. So I would too. I would have to get up in the morning and get her [her sister] ready, get her dressed, make her lunch, and walk her to school. And then I have to walk to my high school. . . . I was [pauses] 11 [years old]. (Fiona, personal communication, January 31, 2014)

In the same way, Jackie, who was on the low end of the socioeconomic range, believed that she was incapable of succeeding in K-12 because of the absence of the family support she needed:

> CA: You always felt that there was something?
> Jackie: I don't know; I felt I couldn't do it. I always felt I couldn't do it. But I don't know; . . . maybe able to succeed if I really tried.
> CA: If you really tried?
> Jackie: Yeah.
> CA: So, there was this voice in you?
> Jackie: Yeah.

> CA: What did you think was needed to succeed in school?
> Jackie: It was, like, really good family support. (Jackie, personal communication, February 3, 2014)

Deborah, too, of low SES, did not feel capable of succeeding in school. She attributed her poor capital to her lack of a stable family and mental health support and her struggle with addictions:

> I don't think I really thought about success in school until I was older, . . . high school, junior high. . . . I don't think I had what I needed to be successful. . . . I always . . . just tried to stay in the shadow, unnoticed, from kindergarten to Grade 12. (Deborah, personal communication, January 31, 2014)

When I asked Deborah, "What do you think you needed to be successful in K-12?" she responded, "A stable home life [laughs], no addiction issues—that was a big one. . . . Probably help with my mental health" (Deborah, personal communication, January 31, 2014).

Gender in this ethnic context played an important role in the learners' perceptions of capital for school success. The males tended to perceive that they possessed the capital for school success regardless of their SES, whereas most of the females felt a poor sense of competence whether they were of a lower or a higher socioeconomic background. Bourdieu's (1986) theory of practice generally relates higher capital with people of high SES and vice versa. In this study gender appeared to be the issue. On one hand, could this be a way of underestimating their potential because of more pressure from parents on the females than on the males? Adkins (as cited in Whitmire, 2012) noted that parents tend to put pressure on their daughters more than they do on their sons with regard to succeeding in school. Or were they internalising the unequal gender relations (in the face of years of affirmative action globally) in which their sense of capital might have been subjectified? On the other hand, could the males have exerted themselves by articulating a positive sense of their capital to make up for their struggles to maintain their position within the unequal gender relations of contemporary society? Whitmire, for example, pointed out that boys might lack some skills because of the bewildering new school environment in which, in order to succeed, they needed particular abilities such as reading and writing earlier on in their schooling but may attain them at a later time. Although these are important questions, they are beyond the scope of this study.

Although the perception that having a wealth of capital can be important, it might not lead to progress in education in the short term. In this study I observed that some of the males who said that they possessed the capital to succeed in school left school early and were unable to graduate with their cohorts. Charles, Eli, and Allen are examples. They left school early and returned to upgrade before they enrolled in university. Most of the females left school early because they felt incompetent to succeed in school in the first place. Could other issues, including race, have played a role in the males' and females' early leaving? Furthermore, could the females have faced not only racial struggles, but also gender issues in their transition?

**First Nations learners' perceptions of attributes to succeed in school: Bourdieu capital?** Bourdieu (1986) explained that players adjust their expectations to correspond with the capital that they bring; however, his view that capital can change over time (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Webb, Schirato, & Danaher, 2002) could explain why the First Nations learners were dissatisfied with their lives and developed career and education aspirations. For example, Jackie contended that she deserved a better life, as did Andrea. Danny wanted to give his family a life better than they had had when they grew up in poverty. Charles believed that he was meant for more. These were their thoughts at some point even they struggled with addictions and uncertainty about their careers. This observation suggests that high aspirations might be linked to capital (Bourdieu's kind of capital) that originates from family and might be different for First Nations learners.

Moreover, I refer to the existence of the ore of capital among First Nations students, which is different from Bourdieu's (1986) kind of capital (in which capital is capital only when it is in relation to others). This ore of capital is tied not only to family, but also to people as unique individuals with the gifts and talents with which they come into the world, as well as the environment with which they engage. My view of the ore of capital is that it is universal, that each learner one was born with a unique set of this ore. It is not comparable until the ore is transformed into capital for a particular field. At that point one can speak of any differentiation in capital among the parties involved in the school field. When this ore of capital is identified, empowered and engaged, it creates value for the field. In this study the participants provided evidence of attributes for success in school, and the nature of these attributes demonstrated this concept of ore of capital. The participants who were certain that they had the attributes for success (mostly the males) indicated that, when they arrived in elementary school, they believed that they could succeed in school—which I call ore of capital. The male students of all calibre including upper, middle and lower SES suggested that they had this ore of capital. Charles said he had social skills, Danny had high expectations of himself, Wally had immense support from his family, and Allen had writing skills, optimism, leadership skills, and humour. They were convinced that their individual attributes had set them up to succeed in school and that the school environment would identify their individual attributes and empower and engage them in them. Those who lacked the attributes for success in school (mainly the females) referred to issues such as the lack of family support, lunch, acceptance, and nice clothes to boost their self-esteem. The nature of the students' perceptions of their attributes for success in school suggests that they were not synonymous with Bourdieu's sense of capital. Unlike the ore of capital, which is unique to an individual and not comparable, Bourdieu's capital exists because those who possess capital do so because their attributes are superior to those of others in the same field. Each of the learners in this study had the potential to attain considerable value when their ore of capital engaged in a conducive and supportive educational field.

It is unclear whether the learners engaged their ore of capital and/or whether it was valued in the school field. The role of institutions is to help learners to channel their ore of capital in ways that help them to transform it into capital in the school field. Collectivism-oriented cultures (70% of all cultures), such as Aboriginal culture, "espouses the importance of group well-being, family and group success, social intelligence, interdependence and cooperation—perspectives and beliefs echoed in the concept of ecoliteracy. In mainstream education, collaboration, cooperation, and interdependence are often approached from an individualism perspective" (Triandis, 1989; as cited in Cherkowski, 2010, p. 28). For example, how is it possible to enable a First Nations learner who is kind, sociable, humorous; a leader; and collective oriented (i.e., ore of capital) to transform these attributes into capital for success in the school field? This is where inspiration becomes key to learners and in the school field. Who will ensure that learners have positive attributes, that they channel them into subject areas or particular career paths, and that they empower the learners to see themselves as capable in their school work and certain career areas? Learners will be inspired to work hard to attain their aspirations if they feel capable of succeeding in school. In the earlier example in my discussion of the analytical framework of a humorous learner, learners such as this can be enabled to use this skill in, for example, drama clubs, in comedy at special school events, and in the demonstration of lessons in class. This exposure of learners' ore of capital can give them a positive sense of their attributes and self-esteem and help them to extend this capable identity into other subject areas (e.g., social studies, math, English, and science) for high achievement in them. In addition, various authors have proposed that learners need to integrate the knowledge from their families and lived experiences (individual, local historical and community contexts) into schooling for a meaningful and effective pedagogical experience (González et al., 2005; Moll et al., 1992; Vygotsky, 1978). Thus, First Nations learners possess capital in ore forms that are waiting to be identified and engaged in the education field, irrespective of SES and circumstances.

**Vulnerability to inhibitive behaviour because of family background.** Bourdieu (1986) discussed the distinct cultures of various socioeconomic have; however, this study has shown that certain behaviours might be universal to all socioeconomic groups and form the basis of capital that either inhibits or facilitates advancement to university. An example of such behaviour that cuts across all socioeconomic groups is addiction to drugs and alcohol, which is rooted in the legacy of residential school in Canada (TRC, 2015a). Describing how capital works, Bourdieu affirmed that those with better quantities and better distribution of capital are poised to be successful. My observation from this study is that First Nations with disparate capital can face particular struggles that will disrupt their transition to university. Bourdieu noted that differences in the social world arise from the configuration of the distribution of the various types of capital within fields. He added that those with a higher value of capital appropriate profits and have the power to retain their capital's worth or improve it. It is unlikely, in Bourdieu's terms, that the First Nations learners in this study had the same economic, social, and cultural capital. They were from various economic backgrounds: upper, middle, and low. Consequently, they included students from families with and without the cultural and social capital that Bourdieu discussed. However, most of the participants (with the exception of two) faced drug and alcohol addiction. All five females had drug and alcohol challenges, as did three of the five males, and they all attributed their delayed attendance at university to this addiction. This situation suggests that alcohol or drug addiction did not depend on SES for these learners; it is not a SES issue. It is clear from the literature that addictions have underlying causes that tend to be psychosocial (O'Driscoll, 2014; Wishart, 2009). The psychosocial struggles of the First Nations learners are rooted in colonisation and the legacy of residential schools. Smith (2012) noted that "many indigenous activists have argued that such things as mental illness, alcoholism and suicide, for example, are not about psychological and individualised failure but about colonisation or lack of collective self-determination" (p. 154).

The apparatus for colonisation, which included the cultural genocide of the residential school system, which was meant to destroy the structures and practices that held this group and enabled them to continue as a group and to "cause Aboriginal peoples to cease to exist as distinct legal, social, cultural, religious, and racial entities in Canada" (TRC, 2015a, p. 1), produced many of the addictions that the learners experienced. As the TRC (2015a) noted:

> The impacts of the legacy of residential schools have not ended with those who attended the schools. They affected the Survivors' partners, their children, their grandchildren, their extended families, and their communities. Children who were abused in the schools sometimes went on to abuse others. Many students who spoke to the Commission said they developed addictions as a means of coping. (pp. 135-136)

The survivors faced several struggles. Some did not learn how to parent because of their absence from their families at a young age and could not show affection for their children. A mother who had attended residential school spoke of her children's exposure to difficult home circumstances and addiction. The TRC (2015a) reported:

> Alma Scott of Winnipeg told the Commission that as :a direct result of those residential schools because I was a dysfunctional mother, . . . I spent over twenty years of my life stuck in a bottle in an addiction where I didn't want to feel any emotions so I numbed out with drugs and with alcohol. . . . That's how I raised my children, that's what my children saw, and that's what I saw." (p. 136)

For example, Janine faced drug and alcohol addiction that she attributed to peer pressure on her reserve. She had a middle to upper socioeconomic background and went to school on the reserve. Both of her parents had received postgraduate degrees. She explained how her addiction began:

> It was just influenced by my peers. Not that I wasn't, too; . . . there wasn't anything else to do on the reserve but drink. . . . And then I got into even harder drugs like cocaine, ecstasy . . . for about a couple of years. Just the people that I hang around with. (Janine, personal communication, December 4, 2013)

Janine also traced her use of substances partly to family struggles:

> Another big issue that I think caused that is, when I was about 9 years old, . . . my parents had split up. And I was the oldest, . . . so I understood more about what was happening, and it affected me the most. So I just . . . was really depressed. . . . I had abandonment issues with my father. So I felt like if I drink, . . . it will just repress it. Then I got to a point where . . . I lost control, . . . not even caring about anything, just drinking my life away. (Janine, personal communication, December 4, 2013)

Janine understood how her previously intact loving family had disbanded. After several years, she began to cope with the pain from the divorce by using substances.

In the same way, Deborah also struggled with drug and alcohol addiction, a behaviour that she learned from peers at school and in public places. Deborah's parents did not attend university or have any tertiary education. She considered herself of low SES. She attended school mainly in the city where she lived and revealed how she became addicted to drugs and alcohol:

> CA: Did you experience any drug or alcohol issues?
> Deborah: Yeah, when I was in Grade 7 . . . is when I started.

> CA: So were you taught by non-Native kids drinking and drugs?
> Deborah: Yes.
> CA: Where did you learn that?
> Deborah: Kids that hang out at the mall. They would have drugs and [that] led to parties.
> CA: And were these kids in your school?
> Deborah: Yeah.
> CA: And is that how you joined?
> Deborah: Yeah. (Deborah, personal communication, January 31, 2014)

Deborah believed that the drugs and alcohol delayed her early university attendance: "I was actually bold and everything ready to go in [year ], but because of my addictions, it didn't work out" (Deborah, personal communication, January 31, 2014). Deborah struggled with self-esteem because of the trauma and abuse that she faced as she grew up. She quit school early because her low self-esteem prevented her from presenting an assignment in front of her class. Deborah was already vulnerable and succumbed to peer influence.

As well, Jackie was of low SES and became addicted to alcohol, which she attributed to peer influence rather than to her parents' divorce at the time: "It's just peer pressure, I guess. I didn't really worry about my mom and dad's divorce because my dad was really mean. He was abusive" (Jackie, personal communication, February 3, 2014). Jackie mentioned earlier that she had relocated several times because her mother wanted to avoid her father; therefore, she went to various schools and lost friends in the process. With difficult home circumstances and without affection from her father, Jackie was lonely most of the time, and in her teen years she was suicidal. Consequently, she likely sought affection from outside the home, particularly among her peers. Her peers' approval was important to her. It was not surprising that Jackie attributed her use of addictive substances to peer influence.

During her K-12 education, Fiona, who grew up poor in the city, often saw substance abuse at school, and she struggled with addictions. She observed in her K-12 schools that both rich and poor, native and non-Native students were involved in substance use:

> Oh, yeah, kids are going to class high. There were kids going to class drunk. . . . Lunch breaks, everybody goes to the ball diamonds, because the little tall things—I don't know how they call it. When the cops drive by, you couldn't see what's going on. Actually, you can sit in that, drink beer, smoke weed, . . . walk out, and go right back to school. [laughs] It wasn't just . . . Native kids; . . . [it] was, like, a whole different mix of groups. (Fiona, personal communication, January 31, 2014)

Fiona's struggles made her vulnerable to peer influence and substance use. She reported that she felt unloved because of the residential school experience of her grandmother, who had raised Fiona's mother; her mother was mentally ill; she had had intermittent suicidal thoughts on five occasions between the ages of 7 and 19; and she had had to deal with racism from Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples because of her mixed race. As a young working mother, Fiona worked hard to care for her family. She lost five jobs within a short time span and a significant other (who had shown her some affection) to incarceration, which led to severe depression. More recently, during her upgrading, she lost her grandmother, who had loved and supported her.

As well, three males from various socioeconomic backgrounds struggled with addictions. Charles grew up with a middle- to upper-class background and said substance use interfered with his education. It became habitual because of the burden of trying to fit in at his reserve school:

> The first time I tried drugs, I was 14 years old, and that was off reserve in [xxxxxx]. . . . And the first time I ever drank was off-reserve. . . . However, when it came to on-reserve school, I used drugs and alcohol as a way to fit in. (Charles, personal communication, January 29, 2014)

Charles spoke about the impact on his self-concept:

> As I move into my future, I will always look back on my past and look back at . . . what factors led to me being here [university] in the moment, and it was alcohol that should have robbed me of self-confidence, self-worth, self-esteem. (Charles, personal communication, November 23, 2013)

Charles explained how his past had delayed his transition to university. He was raised in an affluent family; his parents had considerable household income. His father worked hard in the trades and expected Charles to do well too. Charles pointed out that his father struggled with alcohol. He indicated earlier that substance use made him doubt his capabilities, and he lived by the affirmation of the friends with whom he drank: "I would be straight up and upfront: 'I'm a gay person'" (Charles, personal communication, November 23, 2013). Charles drank to fit in with his peers because none of his friends cared about his sexual identity when they were drunk:

> I used to use drinking as a way to get accepted by people. Especially if I was around guys and they were uncomfortable while they were sober, as soon as we start drinking, . . . they are all like: "You are cool. I don't care who you are or what you are; . . . it's your life. You're still a cool guy. . . . You are so awesome. You're funny." And so that's how I will use alcohol, as a way to be accepted by people. (Charles, personal communication, November 23, 2013)

Charles' struggles included grief and identity issues, with which he coped by drinking.

Similarly, growing up in middle-class socioeconomic conditions, Eli began to use substances in high school because it was common behavior among his peers. His father prevented him from drinking earlier:

> I kept myself away from it . . . until I was in Grade 11. . . . And I first started drinking . . . in Grade 11, and that's when I first started partying, . . . thinking that drinking was really cool. . . . We have a close family, so all of us hang out together regardless of what the differences are. (Eli, personal communication, February 3, 2014)

Eli commented that his involvement selling and using substances affected his transition: "I was making, like, a lot of money. I had a ride; I was coming in and out of the reserve; and . . . it was superbad. But . . . that's . . . what derailed me" (Eli, personal communication, December 6, 2013). Earlier Eli had mentioned his emotional problems, including anxiety that the world would come to an end and worry about the struggles of his friends and the loss of a future in hockey because of his substance use and depression. He quit school because these struggles prevented him from focusing.

Allen, raised in with a low SES background, also faced addiction issues that interrupted his high school education in Grade 12. His life spun out of control when he began to use alcohol to cope with his grief. It was unclear who the deceased person was, but he faced other struggles and chose not to reveal the details of the events that led to his drinking.

It is clear from this study that substance use existed in mixed or secular school and community settings, given the evidence, as Deborah reported, that some White, rich, and all calibres of students [of all social and economic backgrounds] in the city's mixed schools that she attended were also involved. In a study of Registered Apprenticeship Program (RAP) students in general, Lehmann (2007) noted that "a common theme was that of drug addiction and prostitution alternatives to high school completion and solid, middle-class careers" (p. 258). Further, O'Driscoll (2014) identified the emotional reasons that people become addicted, such as to 'switch off' from difficult situations; to compensate for various insecurities; to block out unpleasant psychological processes (psychoses/neuroses); to deal with stress; to help them to sleep; to block out difficult memories; to manage interpersonal/social anxiety or fear; to deal with boredom, guilt/shame, or phobias; and to cope with trauma. According to the participants, one or more of these reasons triggered their addictions.

This points to the importance of analysing the intersectionality of identities to understand social experiences and how they shape outcomes (DeFrancisco & Palczewski, 2007). The First Nations learners' race, sexual identity, and SES could all have influenced their experiences, which therefore warrants the intersectional dimension of this study. Further, the vulnerability that these participants, who were from various socioeconomic backgrounds and attended mixed and all-Native schools in the city, identified implies that more research is needed to understand the impact of the legacy of residential schools on Aboriginal youth and any other reasons that they might struggle.

**Does existing capital have an expiration date?** Bourdieu (1986) emphasised the impact of capital on the perpetuation of social inequality when he explored educational transition from a linear perspective. However, those who have capital might benefit from it later in life (even capital can be unyielding over the short term) after several breaks in their education through the life course. Their commitment to the advancement of the Aboriginal community was at the core of the learners' career focus, although it might have taken them several years before they could place themselves in an institutional setting that would prepare them to achieve their goals. Bourdieu described social capital, for example, as an actual or potential source of benefit from an affiliation with a network of mutual relationships, such as a particular family, school, and tribe. This is "membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word" (pp. 248-249). This capital is capable of reproducing itself to accrue more benefits to its members. The participants in this study intended that the careers that they chose and the reasons for their choices would benefit their communities. Their choices arose from their aspiration to give back to their Aboriginal communities.

It is interesting that some of the participants aspired to a university education. Nevertheless, several events later in life led to their choices of particular careers. Some desired to go to university when they were still growing up, because their families had attended and they were familiar with it. Bourdieu (1977) called this familiarity a form of cultural capital (i.e., the power inherent in familiarity) such as familiarity with the family of origin's appreciation for highbrow or dominant cultures, which placed some of the participants in a position of advantage with regard to educational attainment. Thus, some might already have had cultural capital for PSE. Aside from this, some were connected to PSE because extended family members had degrees or college diplomas or because acquaintances at work and in the community had them. Janine's parents, Jackie's mother and sister, and Allen's mother attended university. Deborah's cousins have multiple degrees. Their familiarity with PSE resulted in an easy transition from high school directly to university or college. This capital still existed in a latent form until they were ready to use it after several meanders on their educational journey. Therefore, this suggests that it is possible to use capital at a later point in life and that its impact is not limited to a specific point in an educational experience. The impact of capital can be evident at any point in the life course.

**University transition programs as capital.** Upgrading and university transition programs for Aboriginal students facilitate their transition. Sawchuk and Taylor (2010) noted that "opportunities for mobility across programs within secondary and postsecondary institutions clearly inform the possibilities and patterns of inter-institutional transitions" (p. 14). Studies have shown that the majority of Aboriginal students require upgrading to be able to pursue college or university programs. Taylor et al. (2009) reported that 40% of the Aboriginal students who enrolled in a local college between 2005 and 2008 were in upgrading programs and that approximately 80% of the participants were in some form of upgrading before they qualified for the TYP. Taylor et al. suggested that the TYP eliminated all forms of potential delay because the students had fewer requirements (i.e., few core subjects and lower marks) to begin their studies at university compared to entry via general admission. Also, most could not have attended university in the year that they enrolled if not for the TYP. Apart from two males who had the requirements for enrollment at the U of A via regular admittance, the remaining five females and three males completed some upgrading before they qualified for the TYP. They had left school early or had not performed well and thereby missed some of the necessary qualifying credits for university admission. The two males who enrolled in the TYP, although they had the entry requirements, did so because they wanted to benefit from the solidarity, cultural immersion, and support that the program offers students.

Fiona had started upgrading in a number of subjects when the untimely death of her child's caregiver and her support person, her grandmother, occurred, and her plans came to a halt. She grieved the loss; as a result, as a single mother, she could no longer continue her upgrading to enroll in the TYP that same year. However, the TYP co-ordinator made concessions for her to complete her upgrading while she was enrolled in the TYP:

> [I] talked to [TYP co-ordinator], and it was really [the co-ordinator] who sold me on the idea, because she was just . . . so awesome about explaining things. And, like, when I came in, . . . I had been crying, and I thought, I'm not gonna . . . be able to go to university. And she changed everything for me for me to be able to be here without my [one subject]. (Fiona, personal communication, December 13, 2013)

The special exemption to accommodate Fiona's circumstances that gave her time to fulfill the entry requirements while she was in the program made it possible for her to attend at that time.

After her upgrading, Jackie was admitted into the TYP, which she believed would have been impossible through the regular route because she would have required additional upgrading to qualify: "To come through the traditional route? Oh, no! I just have to do more upgrading" (Jackie, personal communication, February 3, 2014).

Deborah found the TYP helpful for her transition to university: "In TYP you can get in with lower marks, lower requirements. But at the same time, I'm very grateful for it" (Deborah, personal communication, January 31, 2014).

Wally believed that the TYP eased his entry into university. He returned to school a few years after he had graduated from high school and played sports. He considered the TYP a path to university that would not require upgrading:

> TYP is an open door. . . . I graduated with a high school diploma, . . . but . . . I didn't continue school for a couple of years. And I decided to go back, and [the TYP] was one of the options to get me into university without going to a community college or tribal college. So it can open up a door. . . . So I got in. (Wally, personal communication, December 13, 2013)

Wally added, "The TYP program helped expedite the process" (Wally, personal communication, January 31, 2014).

Eli reported that it would have been difficult for him to attend university if the TYP had not been available: "It was the TYP program that put me [in university] . . . . It will be really hard, . . . the upgrading, . . . you know" (Eli, personal communication, February 3, 2014). The additional upgrading that Eli would have needed for the regular route was no longer required because of the TYP.

Danny, on the other hand, had the prerequisites to enroll in university through the regular route and chose to attend the TYP because he believed that it would help him to decide which courses to take. Without the TYP, it would take a few years before he would know which courses suited his career goal; consequently, he would have delayed his university entrance. When I asked whether he would have attended university if not for the TYP, he replied:

> Not this year, . . . no; . . . in the next few years, . . . [perhaps in] two years . . . . I have always wanted to come to university. . . . I didn't know what to take, and being in TYP helped me figure out what I want to do. So it would have taken me a little while longer, but I know I would have come here. (Danny, personal communication, January 31, 2014)

Thus, the TYP eliminated the barriers to university attendance for these Aboriginal learners who faced struggles and school experiences that hindered them from receiving competitive grades and credits in their prior studies.

Programs that eliminate psychological fear, offer orientation, strengthen cultural identity, and build solidarity are capital for the First Nation learners' transition to university. Brady and Allingham's (2010) showed that anxiety causes students to deliberately delay their transition, and Cree scholar Noella R. Steinhauer (1998) concluded that attending postsecondary at the local community college for a couple of years prepared First Nations learners to relocate to urban areas to complete their programs. The Aboriginal learners In her study were concerned about how they would feel at university, who their friends would be, and, generally, whether their interactions within the university would be inspiring. They found programs tailored to Aboriginal peoples inspiring and supportive. Evidence from the current study shows that the learners who were qualified to apply through the regular route also chose to attend the TYP for similar reasons to those of the students in Steinhauer's (1998) study. They joined the TYP partly for the 'community of Aboriginal students' and staff who fostered a sense of belonging, the orientation that prepared them to succeed, and the opportunity to connect with their culture.

The community of Aboriginal students is an important entity that gives some assurance of relationships with those from similar cultural backgrounds and the sense of belonging for aspiring Aboriginal students who leave behind family and friends to attend university. Evidence of this is the TYP students' attraction to the program because of other Aboriginal students who would attend and support each other. For example, Eli noted that the TYP and the support that it offered eliminated his fears about university. I asked Eli whether he would have attended university if it were not for the TYP program:

> That's a tough one. . . . I don't know. If it wasn't for TYP program, it would be pretty intimidating, you know? Like, where do you go? Like, here, there is the home base right there. And . . . that's . . . why I think it would be tougher, if it wasn't for TYP program. (Eli, personal communication, December 6, 2013)

The preparation that the TYP gave the Aboriginal students equipped them to succeed. For example, Jackie was well aware of the repercussions of the lack of an extensive orientation as a new university student when she referred to her mother's unfavourable experiences at another university. She valued the orientation and skills, such as time management, that the TYP offered:

> Yeah, [orientation is] so informative and educative, because [they] tell you everything about university. She [TYP co-ordinator] is going to be teaching us how to arrange our time schedule for next year. . . . My mom, when she went to university, she didn't have anybody to do that, and it was really hard for her, and she failed in her first semester. (Jackie, personal communication, February 3, 2014)

Jackie understood firsthand the benefits of devoting time to orientation. She might have been aware of the support programs that the TYP offered before she enrolled. Her mother's struggles in university and Jackie's own experience in the TYP imply that orientation for Aboriginal learners is an essential capital that can be critical to their decision on which university or postsecondary program to attend.

In the next section I discuss social capital in relation to its importance to First Nations learners, with consideration of Bourdieu's (1986) discourse on social capital.

## First Nations Social Capital

I detail my observations and discussions that speak to the role of social connections in nurturing and strengthening learners' cultural identity as they transact the process of attending university. Although it is important to discuss how learners perceive their culture and whether and how it is capital, I did not collect significant data to be able to do that. In the subsequent discussion I emphasise social capital's critical importance to First Nations learners who return to school and enroll in programs such as the TYP.

Although cultural capital is important, social capital is necessary to the transition to university, especially for First Nations individuals who return to school after a break to mature for a few years or a long period of many events during the life course. This situation is evident in this study in that the learners transitioned to university because they tapped into social capital available in the form of information and inspiration at the strategic time that they needed it. In this study Charles considered going to university immediately after his friend informed him about the TYP while he was at work and feeling distraught because of the difficult work relationship with his supervisor. Not only did this friend lead him to the TYP, but he also inspired him to believe that he was capable of succeeding in university at a time when Charles had a poor concept of himself.

Deborah is another example. She accompanied her friend to the university with no intention of applying that day. However, being there, she believed that it was the right thing to do and thereafter applied to the TYP. Deborah believed that this was a spiritual event and that a friend who had led her there was the vehicle; signs that she saw there confirmed that she had made the right decision.

Danny's friend, a TYP student, informed him about the program, and he decided to apply. Andrea, Janine, Jackie, Fiona, Allen, and Eli were introduced to the TYP while they took upgrading courses at their schools. Their relationships with these schools and support persons led to their positive response to the invitation to consider attending the TYP. Their individual transition stories all pointed to a person or institutional figure. This situation suggests that the influence of people in both formally structured institutions and informal relationships all play critical roles in such major transitions as enrolling at a university for First Nations individuals who have confronted tremendous challenges during their life course.

In the next section I discuss the economic capital that supports First Nations students' transition to university.

## First Nations Learners' Economic Capital

Economic capital (as the basis of all capital because of its capacity to convert to other forms of capital, according to Bourdieu, 1986) was not a deterrent to transition to university even though Bourdieu explained that economic capital is convertible to other kinds of capital that are necessary for a particular field: "Economic capital is at the root of all the other types of capital" (p. 252). From this perspective, economic capital is a prerequisite for engagement in the field. Studies have shown that the cost of PSE is rising and becoming a deterrent to the university transition (Lehmann, 2007). Without this capital, success is almost impossible. This study showed, however, that economic capital was important to move forward with education, but individuals or families who did not have the economic capital necessary to cover the cost of postsecondary did not feel handicapped because their First Nations community offered them some support. None of the study participants cited a lack of money among their reasons for delaying their enrollment in university. In fact, 9 of the 10 participants had relied on band funding for their education. Their SES was not a considerable influence on their decision to attend university. Similarly, other studies have indicated that money is not the main reason that Aboriginal students drop out or do not transition to higher education (CCL, 2009).

A prominent example of economic capital that the study participants accessed is the PSSSP, which provides funding to treaty or registered First Nations and Inuit students (but not including Métis) enrolled in university and college preparation programs. Both the male and the female learners in this study cited the role of the PSSSP in their transition, pointing to their dependence on it to pay their education costs. Danny, for example, was poor when he was growing up; he had already received a student loan for a previous entrepreneurial study and could not afford a second loan for university: “We have our treaties. Education is promised to us; it’s free for us. And I have dealt with, like, student loans already. And it is really hard because of the amount of challenge if I were non-Aboriginal” (Danny, personal communication, December 13, 2013). Eli added, “Yeah, . . . if we didn’t have treaty rights, I don’t think my mom and dad [would] have enough money to send me to university” (Eli, personal communication, February 3, 2014). Wally explained that “if it wasn’t for band funding, I don’t think I would have been here” (Wally, personal communication, January 31, 2014). Charles sympathised with nonbeneficiaries and was grateful his band supported the high cost of his education: “I know for me to be funded from my reserve is a blessing. Like, my roommate talks about how much school debt he is in from student loans. I couldn’t imagine what the non-Native people go through for that” (Charles, personal communication, November 23, 2013).

Evidence from this study shows that, although the First Nations students were not financially prepared and found the costs of PSE a challenge, treaty rights ensure access to the required economic capital by virtue of their membership in a band. This might be the reason that the learners viewed economic capital as necessary to attend university, but they did not perceive it as a major constraint to their university transition, perhaps because of other issues that they had to address before they considered the resources that they would need for university. For example, Allen said that because of his middle SES, he did not have the resources for university, although money was not a hindrance “because I have funding for postsecondary from Indian Affairs. That’s what it is there for, for people like me to use it” (Allen, personal communication, January 30, 2015). Deborah was of low SES and said, “I’m not sure if financial would have made any difference because . . . the finances . . . wasn’t a barrier, because I’m a status Indian, so . . . [it’s] paid for by my band” (Deborah, personal communication, December 5, 2013). This suggests that economic capital does not commonly differentiate between who can and who cannot attend university and that they did not attend university for other, noneconomic reasons such as personal struggles.

Next I discuss the First Nations learners in the education field and demonstrate its distinctness from Bourdieu’s (1986) field. This is part of my discussion of all three concepts in Bourdieu’s theory of practice.

## First Nations Learners Within the Education Field

I analyse the learners’ behaviour in the field with regard to competition, the resources available to them, and their notions of gender in their transition within their specific education fields and discuss my sense of the impact of gender. First, I consider Bourdieu’s (1986) sense of competition and whether and how First Nations learners compete in the education field and for the resources available to them within this field. I examine how capital is positioned and how this positioning affects First Nations learners’ educational progress. Second, I discuss what is missing from First Nations learners’ field from their perspectives, as well as the future of exclusive First Nations education. Finally, I highlight the learners’ perceptions of gender and its influence on the transition process, in addition to my sense of the impact of gender based on the findings.

### Competition or no competition in the First Nations education field.

Bourdieu (1986) understood the field (education) as a network of competitive relations in which players compete in an attempt to get ahead. This view is somewhat different from the Aboriginal worldview.

Bourdieu believed that players in the field compete with one another by using cards (capitals) of varied worth and that the worth of their cards can change with each successive play. He added that the play is unintentional and has no codified rules (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In this study, competition at school was evident among the males, but less among the females. Evidence of the females' competition in school was almost nonexistent, but a few males pointed to competition in which they participated. Two males expressed a strong sense of competition that transcended school and community.

For example, Allen, who completed his K-12 schooling on the reserve, explained his view on competition. In school he did not compete with his colleagues except in sports. He played basketball because he liked it:

> CA: I've asked you about competition back in school. Did you compete in basketball?
> Allen: Yeah.
> CA: Did you find yourself competing in your academic work?
> Allen: No not really.
> CA: Did you find other people competing around you?
> Allen: Yeah. . . . People . . . competed on the grades.
> CA: Among themselves. They wanted to beat one another.
> Allen: Yeah. I didn't really care to be part of it.
> CA: Was this something common in all your classes?
> Allen: Not really. It was just a few people.
> CA: So when competition was happening around you in school, you didn't care.
> Allen: I was only worried about myself.
> CA: So were you competitive in sports?
> Allen: Yeah, in sports. (Allen, personal communication, January 30, 2014)

Danny also competed in sports but not schoolwork. He focussed on doing his best when he did his schoolwork in K-12 on the reserve. I asked Danny whether he competed with his colleagues for top grades:

> Not really. I just wanted to do the best for myself. But there was this other kid that was really smart and will take, like, a competition. I know he would appreciate someone who is also smart. No, I did not really look for competition. (Danny, personal communication, January 31, 2014)

Wally was among the few who competed in academic work and played competitive sports. He schooled both on and off the reserve for K-12. The community was aware of school happenings, including students' academic performance. Wally saw competition in both reserve and off-reserve schools and believed that the surveillance of families and the community over the affairs of school played a role in this competition:

> There was competition in school [on reserve]; is always. In school there [are] so many grades, you always compared grades. . . . That's [a] pretty common one, I think. . . . Yeah, off reserve too, comparing grades; what's on my non-Aboriginal [colleagues' report card]? I used to get high grades, . . . 90s, you know. [I] was just . . . really competitive. . . . You know, your family members, . . . your community members, and, unfortunately, people talk. If you do bad, everybody's going to hear about it. . . . Pressure. . . . But if you do well, no one talks about it. They always want to talk, . . . you know; it's competition. (Wally, personal communication, January 31, 2014)

Wally competed academically and felt pressure from other students and the community that he ignored. I asked Wally whether he cared about the pressure and competition, and he said, "No! No! I just did my school and made sure I studied" (Wally, personal communication, January 31, 2014).

Eli competed at everything because it was his disposition; he was an athlete and believed that the world is a competitive place. He saw all fields of life in Bourdieu's (1986) terms. He considered competition necessary, from school to sports to the entire community, and he believed that the competition in his reserve community and classrooms was a general phenomenon in human society:

> Academic anything. Anything. It didn't matter. It's competition; any competition. I am alive. . . . Even on the reserve there was competition. Like, since the beginning it's been competition. Yeah. You have to compete like other people. . . . Our world revolves around competition. [laughs] Like, it's obvious. If it's happening way out in the large areas, it [must] be happening in the small. (Eli, personal communication, February 3, 2014)

Eli described the competition in his K-12 classrooms: It was about "who is smart and who is not? Who is fast and who is not? Who can answer a question and who cannot? . . . pretty much based on anything. . . . You do or you don't" (Eli, personal communication, February 3, 2014). Eli believed that competing at everything was his disposition: "It already existed in me [laughs]" (Eli, personal communication, February 3, 2014). Although Eli was preoccupied with competition to win, he was satisfied as long as he had tried his best. Moreover, he believed that being in school involved than just competing, such as helping others:

> Yeah, yeah, I really . . . didn't care about . . . winning. Just . . . the fact that I tried my best, . . . whatever the outcome was, I was satisfied with it, . . . if I wasn't winning. . . . [In K-12] it wasn't all about competition, but it was also like going to school and having . . . friends, . . . just being there, trying to. . . make people laugh, . . . you know. [To] just stand behind somebody when they are not feeling all right. Beside somebody, being side-by-side, you know; . . . trying to make a difference. (Eli, personal communication, February 3, 2014)

Both Eli and Wally were aware of the intense competition at their reserve schools, as well as Wally's off-reserve school. They both played competitive sports and also felt a sense of competition within the community at large. As they spoke of the intense competition, they carefully indicated that they focussed on their schoolwork and not the pressure, as though the pressure could be unnecessary. Eli recognised his disposition for competition and winning and for a communal ethos such as co-operation and contribution to a positive school experience for all. He sensed that the community field had spectators, which suggests that the members were interested in how the learners were doing at school. The findings also suggest that, although competition might have been important to them in school because of their dispositions and it affected the way that they played the game, they often rejected the competition because they valued co-operation rather than competition and helping others to succeed rather than getting ahead of them. This finding implies a clash between a competitive personal disposition and the collective expectations that First Nations learners might navigate cautiously.

The female students perceived little to no competition in the education field, particularly at their reserve schools. However, competition might have been more noticeable in their off-reserve schools. They had a sense of competition, but not all of it was over academic performance. Fiona and Deborah portrayed a competitive disposition in their schoolwork. Fiona was excited when she received top marks. Deborah enjoyed being the teacher's favourite because of her stellar performance. Janine had no sense of competition in academic terms, but saw the greatest competition at the off-reserve school. Andrea was competitive in trying to fit in with her peers and becoming popular, in sport, but not in schoolwork. Jackie aimed to receive a pass and nothing more.

Janine did not find the field in the reserve school competitive and noticed nothing seriously competitive except sports, where her team strove to win as an expectation of any game. I asked her whether she competed:

> Not really, no. I just always did my best, no matter what. Like, yeah, a few times, you know, my little friends there, we were having little competitions to see who would get the highest marks; but that was it; nothing really serious. (Janine, personal communication, January 30, 2015)

Janine compared her disposition in sports to that in school and pointed out that the academic fieldwork was not a competitive field such as in sports:

> CA: You were competing in basketball.
> Janine: Oh, yeah, that.
> CA: You're supposed to win, right?
> Janine: In that sense, yeah, all the time. But as a team we are competing, not just . . . as yourself.
> CA: Okay, you're competing as a team. But in school you didn't have that sense. It's basically, "I wanna do my best."
> Janine: Mm-hmm. (Janine, personal communication, January 30, 2014)

Janine reported that the mainstream off-reserve school was more competitive than the on-reserve school: "For the mainstream school, there was just competition about who would get the highest marks, and for off reserve, I would say, it would just be competition, just to pass, you know; . . . just to complete it, just to do it" (Janine, personal communication, January 30, 2014).

Similarly, Jackie did not notice a sense of competition in her K-12 education. In the early years when she moved back and forth between on- and off-reserve schools, her goal was to be popular; then later, in high school, she was preoccupied with maintaining just minimum grades to graduate from high school. Our conversation highlighted Jackie's noncompetitive disposition:

> CA: You weren't into grades [in K-12]; what were you into?
> Jackie: Being cool. [laughs]
> CA: Being cool?
> Jackie: I don't know. Junior high, I just was thinking about partying and stuff, and then once I got to high school, . . . I wanted to pass, but I just wanted to [get the] minimum. I didn't really try to shoot far.
> CA: Did you see your colleagues competing around you?
> Jackie: No, it's the same for everybody. They just—they wanted . . . to just pass; they didn't want to do better. (Jackie, personal communication, February 3, 2014)

Andrea emphasised that her priorities during her K-12 schooling, had nothing to do with academic excellence; rather, she wanted to fit in and be noticed. I asked her if she competed in school for top grades: "Yeah, even trying to fit in. It was just how to make yourself noticeable. . . . Friends, being popular, hang out with your friends" (Andrea, personal communication, February 3, 2014). Andrea pointed out that she participated in the competition to be popular.

Andrea was competitive academically during the early elementary school years when she felt out of place in a predominantly White school. In the later grades she had socially adjusted to school and had made friends. I asked her whether she cared about her colleagues' competing in school:

> Maybe [I cared] when I was younger and . . . in elementary when I didn't fit in. . . . Then I [was] not part of the popular crowd. [In] junior high [and] high school, when everybody started to grow up [in the city], we all kind of stayed in the same classes. As [you] get older and you have your friend, that was it. (Andrea, personal communication, February 3, 2014)

Andrea also competed in sports:

> CA: Were you involved in any athletics?
> Andrea: I used to play basketball, like, in high school.
> CA: Were you competing in basketball?
> Andrea: Always. (Andrea, personal communication, February 3, 2014)

Two females, Fiona and Deborah, who had witnessed competition over academics and participated in it attended mainly schools off their reserves of origin. Fiona competed to some extent in school. She was interested in doing well but did not care about achieving the highest marks, and enjoyed seeing that she had done well. I asked her if she competed at school:

> A little bit. I knew there were things that I was good at, and I knew there were things I was not so good at, but I still, yeah, like to see my 90%. You know, I like getting a sticker on my paper saying *Good*; right to 99% or 96%: "Great Fiona, I really liked [how you did this or that]." (Fiona, personal communication, January 31, 2014)

Although Fiona participated with cohorts who were competition inclined, she also wanted to help other students to succeed. She taught classmates who struggled with schoolwork. I asked her whether she cared about the marks that her colleagues were receiving:

> Yeah, I did, but not in the sense of competition. . . . If my girlfriend gets a really low mark, 50 or 60, [that means] something bad; we would try to fix it. [I] will say, "I'll show you how to do this." . . . I would show the ones that need that help. . . . We set aside some lunchtime, recess, because usually it was way harder for, you know, kids from the reserve, so we had to do it during recess. And . . . boy, sometimes we will stay over after school so we can go to the library and get it done. (Fiona, personal communication, January 31, 2015)

Deborah also considered her education field competitive, and she competed in Grades 1 to 12 at the city schools. She attempted to be the teacher's favourite, which she believed that she would achieve by doing well in school. Not only did she aim for top marks, but she also wanted to do the best that she could. She confessed:

> I was always trying to [be a] . . . teacher's pet, I guess. I was very competitive. [laughs] . . . Now that I think of it, [I was] trying to get the best mark all the time. . . . I always felt good when I would beat them [my classmates] [laughs]. (Deborah, personal communication, January 31, 2014)

Those who took competition seriously were likely to have attended school off the reserve, where there was likely to be a considerable influence because of the diverse cultural backgrounds of learners who may attend.

These students might have participated in selective competition, in which they chose the aspects of the field in which they wished to compete. Those who competed did so in subject matter or activities of interest to them. Charles competed in art, and Wally in math and science.

Charles did not compete for top marks in school but found that he was competitive in the art, which he particularly enjoyed. He also felt no need to compete generally because he was not an A student and was apathetic to some extent. I asked him why he competed only in art classes:

> Because I used to like arts a lot. I know this one [occasion], for example. It was in Grade 7 we have to draw a picture. . . I saw a *Vanity Fair Magazine* with the Spice Girls, . . . and I found a picture of Victoria Beckham [a model]. . . . And I drew it, and it was perfect! . . . And I thought, I did so good. . . . Everybody's drawing sucked, and for me, everyone [who] walked by [the billboard where the drawings were displayed] will be like, "That's a really nice picture." And I will be, like, "Yeah. I drew it." (Charles, personal communication, January 29, 2014)

I asked Charles why he did not compete in other classes or activities aside from art: "I truly don't know. Maybe because—. . . I know I wasn't an A student, so I didn't try" (Charles, personal communication, January 29, 2014).

Another male, Wally, chose not to compete in subject areas in which he felt less capable. He aimed only to complete his schoolwork in English and social studies. However, he wanted to achieve more in the sciences and math, which he truly enjoyed and in which he did well. I asked him whether he cared about the competition that occurred around him during his K-12 schooling: "When I got to the math and sciences, . . . [where] I was doing well, I cared about my grade. But the English and the social studies, it was more about getting my work finished" (Wally, personal communication, January 31, 2014). Charles' and Wally's selective competition suggests that individuals know which capital they take with them to the game and likely compete consciously when they perceive a relatively greater of advancing their position in the field than that of others. Those who felt that their chance of getting ahead in particular aspects was slim were uninterested in putting in more effort and were satisfied with the minimum that they needed to remain an eligible player without facing detrimental consequences. Thus, for these First Nations students, the more enjoyment that they derived in certain subject areas or the better their performance in them, the more likely they were to compete in these subjects. With regard to sports, everyone who participated in it, both males and females, competed when they played. Their goal in any sport was to win. Andrea, Eli, Danny, and Allen demonstrated their obsession with competition in sports. For example, Andrea was competitive in basketball but not particularly competitive in schoolwork; she only tried to be popular. Also, Allen was keen on winning his hockey games but was not interested in competing in academic work. This observation suggests that First Nations students are not less competitive in sports but might have a laissez-faire attitude toward schoolwork.

Bourdieu's (1986) conception of the field as a competitive arena of constant struggles describes First Nations learners' experience of school; however, their resistance to competition among themselves in the manner in which the game is constructed to privilege Eurocentric values demonstrates that they valued their culture. It is evident that the game generally involved competition in off-reserve schools and that the learners who attended participated in the competition there to some extent, but they tended to be less competitive sometimes, because they preferred to help others to do well academically. The reserve school fields involved less competition; but those with a competitive disposition were preoccupied with competing, but they often gave it up because they respected other collective interests. Contrary to my comment in the conceptual framework that First Nations learners do not necessarily compete in the education field, the findings suggest that those who might compete in the school field might also resist competition for the sake of the collective interests of their community, that competition might be more evident in off-reserve schools than in reserve schools, and that competition might occur in selected aspects of schooling.

**Disparate school fields.** Bourdieu (1986) acknowledged that the field is uneven, which is how these learners described their reality of the nature of reserve school. Reserve schools follow provincial curricula; this responsibility is a federal-government fiduciary requirement for these schools (RCAP, 1996). Comparing reserve schools with off-reserve schools, the participants observed deprivation and disadvantages that partially explain why it was difficult to transition to postsecondary from a reserve school. Even those who attended reserve schools had gathered information from friends at off reserve schools and had concluded that their education was not as challenging as at off-reserve schools. Both the males and the females commented on the notable differences that they observed in their quality of education.

The female students who attended reserve schools, off-reserve schools, and all-Native schools[26] in the city were not impressed with the standard of education that they received. For example, Janine had changed schools several times because of the frequent relocation of her family. She noticed an inequality between her experiences in the reserve and off-reserve schools that she attended. She attended kindergarten to Grade 2 in the city, Grades 3 to 7 on the reserve, and Grades 8 to 12 off the reserve. She found that the schoolwork at the reserve school was relatively less. Janine described her reserve school:

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[26] All-Native schools are located mainly in cities that offer K-12 and upgrading programs (and might offer postsecondary programs) exclusively to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit learners. These programs immerse students in a learning environment that honours Aboriginal culture, traditions, and language (Edmonton Public Schools, 2013).

> It was good. The teachers were qualified, but the work and things that I learned wasn't . . . as good, and the amount of work wasn't as much as [in] mainstream schools. Like, we still got taught a little bit of stuff, but I was always . . . at the top of the class. (Janine, personal communication, January 30, 2014)

Janine skipped a grade when she returned to the reserve school from a city school because her knowledge was well advanced:

> Well, in Grade 1 and 2, I learned . . . a lot of stuff, so when I went back to the reserve school in Grade 3, I was kind of [more] advanced than the other[s] . . . And just when I went to a reserve school, all the work was, like, a piece of cake for me. . . . I got upgraded. . . . I didn't go to Grade 6; I went from Grade 5 to Grade 7. So [laughs] it was pretty easy for me. (Janine, personal communication, December 4, 2013)

Similarly, Jackie felt competent at her reserve school. Though she pointed out the deficiencies there, she appreciated being able to learn her native language there. She spoke about her reserve experience:

> I really liked the fact that . . . I felt really smart when I went there, because . . . reserve schools, they are kind of behind with their curriculums and everything. They [are] . . . really slow; . . . I'm not really sure why. . . . But . . . I liked . . . [that] I was . . . taking a lot of Cree. . . . I just really liked the Cree that I was learning and the fact that the school was so slack. . . . It wasn't hard work at all. (Jackie, personal communication, December 6, 2013)

Not only did the learners find a stark difference between on-reserve and off-reserve schools, but they also criticised an all-Native city school for its poor education standards. For example, after Grade 2, Deborah's family moved to the city, where she went to mixed and all-Native schools. She considered the education at the all-Native city schools inferior:

> Well, I know firsthand, because in Grade 8, I went to an all-Native school because my mom realised I was having a hard time in Grade 7 and in Grade 8. . . . I could definitely notice that the teachers had no expectations or standards. . . . In fact, I ended up quitting . . . in Grade 8, three months before graduation. They still sent me a report card and passed me. [laughs] Yeah, so that's the difference between Native education and non-Native education. (Deborah, personal communication, December 5, 2013)

The male students made similar observations of the low standard of education at their reserve schools. Eli contended that the curriculum and courses offered at the reserve school did not prepare the students for the postsecondary entry requirements. He considered the curriculum lax and called it "the cheapest in Canada" (Eli, personal communication, February 3, 2014):

> You know, the curriculums . . . aren't as good, apparently. I noticed the curriculums in the reserves are . . . not as useful. . . . The courses they . . . provide on reserve aren't enough to get into postsecondary or university, so that's what causes them to upgrade. That's why I had to, . . . because the courses . . . there weren't enough, . . . and the curriculum wasn't as strict. (Eli, personal communication, December 6, 2013)

Also, Allen found that challenges abounded in the reserve education: "School on the rez is easy. There's a whole lot of challenges in the system for the Aboriginal youth in terms of education" (Allen, personal communication, January 8, 2014). Also, Charles commented that schooling was easy because the reward system at the reserve school was different in that he was honoured if he handed in his schoolwork on time, comported himself in class, and helped other students with their school work. He was also considered a leader because of such positive behaviour that was perhaps undervalued in his off-reserve school. In addition, Charles' schoolwork at the reserve school might have been below his grade level because he felt more advanced than his colleagues there.

Danny problematised the lack of challenge at his reserve school, which he linked to lower standards at the reserve school in the jurisdiction where he attended school:

> School! . . . The work there was really easy. . . . I was in Grade 11, and I had enough credits to graduate, and I still took their valedictorian award. [In addition], I took the math award, the science award. . . . It is actually a lot simpler, especially [name of jurisdiction]. . . . The curriculums are not that good, and it was just . . . a lot easier. (Danny, personal communication, December 13, 2013)

Charles attended an off-reserve school, where his teachers considered him an average student, and reserve schools, where the teachers considered him a high-performing student. He noted the lower expectations of his teachers on the reserve. Charles reported that he was a couple of years ahead in his schoolwork when he relocated from the off-reserve to the reserve schools. He began to absent himself from school until he eventually left early:

> I've been, like, a B, C+ student my whole life. And as soon as I got to on-reserve school, I was, like, an honours student. So I knew that there . . . was something wrong [with] . . . the level of education that they were giving on-reserve students compared to off-reserve students. I didn't like that. At first I thought it will work to my advantage, but eventually [it] led to my demise. . . . When I got there in Grade 10, a lot of the stuff that we were learning, I had learned that, like, two years before . . . in Grade 8. I felt like I could get away with stuff; started skipping, start[ed] missing school, and eventually I just started dropping out. (Charles, personal communication, January 29, 2014)

Although the reserve schools use provincial curricula, Charles found the schoolwork there easy, perhaps because the teachers did not teach as much content or the reward system differed.

Parents can choose to send their children to school at off-reserve locations. In her study *Parental School Choice in First Nations Communities: Is There Really a Choice?* Steinhauer (2008) reported that

> the Director of Education and a school board member estimated that approximately 75%-80% of all school-age children from these two communities [Saddle Lake Cree Nation and Whitefish Lake (Goodfish Lake) First Nation] attend schools off-reserve. As little as 20 years ago, approximately 50% of all on-reserve school-age children from

> within these communities attended the band-operated First Nations schools, but there has been a steady decline in these numbers. (p. 12)

The parents in Steinhauer's study preferred off-reserve schools because of the perceptions of and issues with the reserve schools, such as those that the participants in this current research identified. The parents believed that their children could benefit from attending off-reserve schools because their adherence to the curriculum was an advantage that facilitated the transition to postsecondary, and they recognised that "academics outweigh everything else for success in today's society" (p. 57). Steinhauer reported that the parents said, "All parents—rich and poor, black and white—want what is best for their children" (p. 101); but the parents were willing to expose their children to racism at schools off the reserve to ensure that they received quality education and perhaps also to inure them to racism (p. 101). This means that both the children and their parents sacrificed one thing for another and suggests that the educational field for these First Nations learners was unequal to that in mainstream schools.

Thus, although reserve schools might lack the economic capital of provincial schools, they were more likely to value learners' social and cultural capitals (such as co-operation, sharing, friendship, silence, spiritual awareness, cultural knowledge, and Aboriginal knowledge [Alberta Education, 2005]). Further, they might play the game differently by placing less emphasis on competition. In contrast, provincial schools might emphasise competition and academic preparation for PSE but undervalue the social and cultural capitals of First Nations learners.

The First Nations learners perceived and valued the sense of rigour in the schoolwork in the off-reserve mainstream schools. Evidence of their complaints demonstrates that these First Nations learners expected more than they were receiving. Even those who did not attend off-reserve schools appreciated the hard schoolwork that acquaintances in off-reserve schools completed. Academic challenge is important for all children to help them to extend their ability and utilise untapped aspects of their capacity. The fact that students who attended either reserve or all-Native schools at some point left school early implies that low standards and low expectations are related to school incompletion. Allen, Charles, Deborah, Janine, and Jackie, who were from various socioeconomic backgrounds and represented both males and females, dealt with low expectations: Would they have succeeded in studies that they considered of low standard? Why would they chase a dream that was flawed in the first place? Of the five who left school early, Jackie was positive about her reserve-education offerings: She enjoyed learning Cree at the reserve school but also wondered why the schoolwork there was not challenging. The learners' opinions demonstrated that they considered their school fields unresponsive to their expectations and the courses that they required to transition to postsecondary. The capabilities of the students who attended the reserve schools were underestimated, and they became demotivated. However, like many parents, the participants did not understand entirely why these circumstances persisted in the reserve school field. The First Nations learners neither equated academic rigour with competition, nor wanted to have their social and cultural capitals valued at the expense of academic rigour. They expected academic rigour and to be treated as intelligent by learning content that was equivalent to their grade levels, and they wanted to be able to do this in a co-operative environment that built on their social and cultural strengths to attain the academic excellence necessary for the transition to postsecondary learning. In other words, the learners wanted to work hard and merit good grades whether in reserve schools or in the mainstream school field. They accepted the essence of the game, which is to work hard and achieve good grades to be able to transition to postsecondary learning. However, they recognised that parts of the school field were problematic.

**Symbolic violence in First Nations education, unequal fields? The future of reserve schools.** Bourdieu (1986) perceived the field as a product of unintentional creation; however, for the First Nations students, the deprivation within their reserve school system, including funding cuts or the lack of increased funding, and low teacher expectations combined to constitute a deliberate act of social inequality. According to Bourdieu (as cited in Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992):

> The field is not the product of a deliberate act of creation, and it follows rules or, better, regularities that are not explicit and codified. . . . We have stakes (*enjeux*) which are for the most part the product of competition between players. (p. 98)

Janine contended that the teachers deliberately lowered their standards, that even though the teachers might have been well trained, they could choose to assign a minimum amount of work to their students:

> I think it has to do with the teacher. Like, for example, I have this Grade 5 teacher [who] . . . graduated with my mom [as a teacher]. . . . I feel like she could [have done] a whole lot more, because when I was in mainstream . . . they . . . were doing everything, . . . teaching you a lot. Just because they are at a reserve school, [they think that] they don't have to try as hard; they don't have to educate these kids . . . as much. . . . Maybe . . . they feel like they just need to give them the minimum because they think that they are not capable. (Janine, personal communication, January 30, 2014)

Janine began to question why they had learned easy material at a young age:

> I remember thinking that when I was, like, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 [years old], I was like, Why aren't we learning other stuff? . . . I was just thinking, This stuff is so easy; I feel like the teacher should be doing more. I was only [laughs], like, 6 [years old] thinking that. (Janine, personal communication, January 30, 2014)

It is interesting that Janine began to expect challenging content from the teacher at age 6, because she already knew the lessons and was bored. Wishart (2009), in *The Rose That Grew From Concrete*, referred to such racialised views that Aboriginal peoples sometimes hold of each other: "That's just feeding racism" (p. 13).

Danny attributed the issues at the reserve to flaws in the entire education system and the board leadership. I asked about the cause of the low quality: "I think it will be the whole thing. The education board there, it is not as great, . . . especially in the reserve schools" (Danny, personal communication, January 31, 2014). Danny held the school board partly responsible for the low quality of his education. He trusted the leadership (which comprised community members) to ensure that the reserve school was of high quality. Further, Danny was concerned that the entire system had problems, which means that those responsible included the federal government, provincial governments, school boards, universities that train teachers, teachers, and all others associated with reserve education. He pointed to the complexities of reserve education.

Charles believed that his education experience was a result of system failure and the underfunding of reserve education. He compared funding between on-reserve and off-reserve schools and suggested the reasons:

> I feel like on-reserve schools . . . wanna do better. . . . I know now the level of funding they get . . . is a system set up for failure . . . . Well, I guess, education-wise, I know now [that] on-reserve schools are so underfunded compared to where I was going at the [xxxxxx] [off-reserve high school]. (Charles, personal communication, January 29, 2014)

Charles considered inadequate funding for reserve schools part of the problem, which he perceived as an intentional act of deprivation for an ultimate premeditated and organised consequence. The learners understood that the lowering of standards, funding problems, and board leadership were matters that could be resolved. Their persistence spoke to Bourdieu's (1986) characterisation of such problems as acts of violence to suppress agents. Bourdieu described a situation in which players, as agents, face some forms of violence (which he called symbolic violence) in which the dominant players (i.e., federal governments with the fiduciary responsibility to fund reserve education) make the rules and introduce forms of capital and strategies that safeguard, transform, and uplift their capital. The result of this process is that other agents (i.e., First Nations learners) are denied resources and treated as inferior, and their aspirations and mobility are handicapped—which Bourdieu suggested is the normal order of things (Webb, Schirato, & Danaher, 2002). Evidence of the participants' awareness of the educational disparity in these two locations and its impact demonstrates not only that this act of violence created a 'lower-than' education system on the reserve, but also that the participants framed themselves as inferior because of this education system in which they knowingly participated. Hence, Bourdieu's view that the field is not a product of intentional creation is contrary to the perceptions of these First Nations learners. They believed that the field was deliberately set up to obstruct their transition further.

The future of the First Nations education field remains to be seen, because First Nations students have conceived ways to resist the continuation of the acts of violence against First Nations education. Some of the participants decided to delink their children from reserve schooling. Danny expressed dissatisfaction with the reserve school and did not intend to enroll his children there. I asked him why he preferred to attend school off the reserve: "Because the curriculum is way better, especially, you know, in White schools, because our schools are far behind in almost everything that they teach there" (Danny, personal communication, January 31, 2014). I also asked Danny if he would send his children to reserve school: "No, I wouldn't. Like I said, the curriculum is just not to par as it is in [off-reserve schools]" (Danny, personal communication, January 31, 2014). Danny considered the reserve school curriculum different from the curriculum elsewhere in his province, which is not the case. Charles also gave a similar response:

> CA: So the problem is funding. Would you have your kids [someday] go to school on the reserve?
> Charles: No!
> CA: Why?

> Charles: Because I know if they go to off-reserve, their level of education will be higher. (Charles, personal communication, January 29, 2014)

Is delinking from reserve education the solution to the nonequalisation of the field? This kind of resistance strategy is a cause for concern. Bourdieu (1986) pointed out that institutions and the dominant players design the game in such a way that it privileges some groups and marginalises others. The learners recognised that the reserve school field marginalised them and called for governments and schools to change the terms of the game. Therefore, they asked that the rules of the game be altered to reflect their lived experiences and that the available resources not be skewed in favour of mainstream schools. They also desired that their cultural and social attributes be recognised in all school fields. Given that First Nations people's guidance is necessary to change the terms of the game, Jules (1999, as cited in Steinhauer, 2008) suggested that "Native people must provide the answers" (p. 42). Furthermore, "the answers must come from we who understand the problem best, we who have been there" (p. 12).

In the next section I discuss how gender perceptions affect First Nations learners because gender issues were an important aspect of this study.

**Gender matters in the field for First Nations learners.** The claim of most of the learners was that family obligations but not gender have a significant influence on the university transition, although gender and family relations are clearly linked. Several researchers have identified gender as a significant influence on career aspirations or habitus (Bourdieu, 2001; Lehmann, 2007). It is interesting to note though that most of the males and females in this study reported that their sex or gender did not influence the experiences that led to their attending university, although one female contended that her gender had held her back and another chose a career that suited her disposition. The males added that family responsibilities rather than gender can challenge the transition. Their views were surprising, given that the study included three mothers who juggled several tasks while they upgraded their courses and attended university, and two males had family (with children) obligations while they attended school. One of the females was a caregiver at a young age for her baby sister and found it difficult to sleep at night because of this.

Jackie, for example, considered males' university-transition experiences similar to those of females, except that being female could influence her career choice if family members were involved in making the career decision. Her mother encouraged her to consider university studies because her mother knew that Jackie did not like the trades:

> CA: Do you think your journey would have been easier if you were male, coming to university?
> Jackie: No. I think it's the same. The same for pretty much all of us. Yeah.
> CA: Why?
> Jackie: Everybody has their own problems. . . . I don't know; everybody just has a different story. Different things motivate people and don't motivate other people. . . .
> CA: Did your being female set you up for the kinds of struggles that held you back for your journey to university?
> Jackie: . . . I'm not really sure. I don't know.
> CA: Did your being female set you up to make it to university?
> Jackie: I don't know. Maybe! Because my mom said a girl should go to school. [laughs]
> CA: Because you are a girl, so you should go to school?
> Jackie: Yeah, because it [would] be really hard for me . . . if I got into the trades and stuff. Because my mom knows me; I don't really like doing that kind of work. (Jackie, personal communication, February 3, 2014)

Jackie carefully assessed herself and concluded that she was not motivated to take the pathway of trades.

Andrea, on the other hand, felt that gender had nothing to do with the transition to university; she believed that anyone could attend university if they chose. She talked about her brother, who had no desire to attend university:

> Everybody kinda goes through their own paths through life, whether male or female. . . . There are different points of view on how a male should act and a female should act, and that impacts you throughout life. . . . So I know my brother . . . cares about education.

> He got his [high school] diploma. He was a very smart guy, but college or university was never his thing. . . . He loves school, but that wasn't his thing, right? . . . I guess it depends on what you want. At the end of the day, I don't think what determines it is either male or female. (Andrea, personal communication, December 5, 2013)

Andrea believed that what matters is the disposition of the individual—in other words, the habitus—in terms of whether he or she will attend university.

Janine also did not consider gender a determinant of the university transition. Her perception was that anyone, boy or girl, could go to university and that the decision depended on the individual. She suggested that both the males and the females in her extended family could achieve great success. I asked her whether it would be easier for a male than for a female to attend university:

> No. To me . . . . gender doesn't really matter. . . . I've seen my auntie. . . . She has a master's in business admin, . . . and she is my role model. . . . And then seeing my uncle go . . . to law school. To me there is no difference in gender, you know. It's not your gender; it's how you are as a person, I guess. (Janine, personal communication, December 4, 2013)

Janine referred to disposition as an important determinant in the transition to university, not gender.

On the other hand, the male students also noted that gender did not affect their transition to university. Those who alluded to the influence of gender pointed to the challenges associated with going to university for those who have a family (with children) and suggested that it is not a gender problem, but a family problem. Wally commented:

> I think it comes back to more whether the question should be if you have a family or not. I think there is more [challenges] . . . if you have a family. There is no gender specific if you have a family; . . . have to study when kids are sleeping. [laughs] I did that through my [xxxxxx] program. [laughs] So yeah, I think, . . . across the board, if you are in a university program first year and you have a family, it's difficult to survive. (Wally, personal communication, December 13, 2013)

Wally did not consider gender an issue with regard to attending university; what he found worrying, from his experience, was coping with the responsibility of caring for a child. He suggested that it might be more challenging for single mothers to attend university. Wally said, "There's more challenges . . . if you are a single mom. But, yeah, it might be easier [for males] (Wally, personal communication, January 31, 2014).

Eli also believed that the transition to university is not influenced by sex or gender. He maintained that attending university would prepare him to take on leadership role as a politician in his community, which he believed predominantly men held: "Well, girls can do that, but my belief, you know, is the leaders have to be men. I like getting into politics" (Eli, personal communication, February 3, 2014). It would be interesting to know to what extent this perception permeates First Nations communities.

Allen thought that gender influenced neither his schooling experiences nor attendance at university. In fact, he perceived gender influence as a thing of the past. I asked him whether being male was an advantage to attendance at university: "No! There are a lot of females who had similar problems. Times have changed; not 1915. . . . Anybody can go to university—males, females, Native, and non-Native" (Allen, personal communication, January 30, 2014).

Although Bourdieu (2001) and others (e.g., DeFrancisco & Palczewski, 2007) contended that gender can affect the schooling of males and females, the findings from this study also show that gender relations can create different challenges because of the responsibility of care for children. It is reasonable that the learners viewed gender through the lens of family. In other words, they believed that gender relations are fundamental to childbearing, which has implications for parents who wish to further their schooling. The Manitoba Government (n.d.) reported that Aboriginal societies have generally been matrifocal, which means that in their kinship structures women and mothers rather than men hold prominence and power (New World Encyclopedia, 2016; Smith, 1996). Wolski (2012) noted:

> Prior to first contact, many Aboriginal societies were matrifocal in nature and focused on family, community and the continuity of tradition, culture and language; Aboriginal women were central to all of this as teachers, healers, and givers of life. While Aboriginal men and women had distinct roles, their roles were equally valued. (p. 1)

Historically, the discriminatory and sexist provisions of the 1876 Indian Act, which relegated Aboriginal women's rights to land and community through Bill C-31, the pre-legislation name of the 1985 Act to Amend the Indian Act, imposed patriarchal notions of gender on Aboriginal people, so that Indian women who married non-status men no longer lose their Indian status (Coulthard, 2014). Lugones (2010) noted in her article "Toward a Decolonial Feminism" that such discriminatory structures came from "the colonial imposition of gender binaries on Indigenous communities" (p. 749).

The learners' perceptions of gender roles was synonymous with those of most traditional societies in which the males view themselves as breadwinners and the females as nurturers. Some of the males asserted that raising children affects a parent's decision to attend school and the school experience, which suggests that couples with children and single parents face challenges in the transition to university. Also, the learners saw the responsibility of raising a family from a dualist perspective in which it impacts both the male and the female partner. Eli, for example, suddenly gave up his ambition to further his education, received his trades tickets, and began to work immediately at 18 years old because he was going to become a father, and he wanted to be able to provide for his new family. Wally also reported that he had children while he was in school and found the responsibility for their care challenging. However, the single mothers who raised children were perhaps disproportionately challenged in their effort to transition to university because they did not have a partner to help and had to carry the brunt of the care. Fiona, for example, was a single mother who noted the difficulty of caring for her child; she depended on her grandmother's help and postponed her upgrading when her grandmother passed. As a mature student and the oldest female participant, Deborah, a single mother, had four children, and her abusive relationships delayed her transition because of her care responsibilities. Also, Janine found it difficult to turn her life around by returning to school and upgrading after she had been a teenage mother for about a year.

The learners' views also reflect the modernised perspectives on gender in which females are equally valued counterparts to males and both share the responsibility for care within the family. However, *care* for family includes both nurturing and meeting the family's financial needs, and both males and females play a role. This finding supports precontact traditional Aboriginal gender relations in which the roles were distinct and equally valued. Allen (1992), Maracle (1996), A. Smith (2005), D. E. Smith (2012), Wolski (2012), and others indicated that Aboriginal peoples equally valued the distinct roles of males and females for the continuity of family, community, and culture. Females were spiritually powerful, lifegivers, nurturers, and teachers; whereas males were responsible for providing shelter, food, and clothing; both males and females had personal autonomy (Manitoba Government, n.d.). Nevertheless, males and females who intend to attend university are more likely to struggle, which is more evident for single mothers who are raising children (unlike those without children) because it is an additional demand on them. Therefore, gender relations can determine whether it is possible to transition to university.

In the next section I discuss how family backgrounds and exposure to certain careers can affect the decision to undertake university studies.

## Social Reproduction of University Learners

Bourdieu's (1985) transformational power of habitus describes the First Nations learners' decision to attend university. Bourdieu (1985) believed that the habitus (also described as "feel for the game" [p. 14)) that constitutes disposition from social conditioning shapes subsequent behaviour (p. 14). He emphasised that the actions of school transform the habitus acquired from family and is the basis for further restructuring of one's habitus (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Lehmann (2007) pointed out that, although young people insist that their career decisions are independent of their parents, family still plays an important role in forming their disposition. This study clearly shows that the participants who were first-generation university students acquired the disposition to receive a university education in the environments where they became engaged. Those who had already acquired university habitus from their families were certain of going to university some day because it was the norm in their families. Both males and females who acquired the disposition for university from their families and those who developed it by engaging outside the family benefitted from key events in their lives that resulted in their acquiring university habitus. This was evident in their stories of transition to university, particularly in the key events and turning points, and demonstrates the transformational or conformational power of habitus.

For example, Janine already had university habitus from her family, which was confirmed later in life. She comes from a family in which people have multiple degrees; both parents have a master's degree. Although she considered going to university a necessity, she could not go sooner because personal struggles obstructed her enrollment. Soon after Janine had a baby, she felt the urge to enroll because she wanted to ensure that she built a career that would enable her to provide well for her child. Janine was in the process of social reproduction. She was likely to continue and acquire multiple degrees like her parents because she intended to become a lawyer. I asked her what had inspired her to attend university, and Janine pointed to her family's influence: "I would say, basically, it's my family that brought me here. My family, . . . yes, [includes] my son, my dad and his family, my mom and her family. Like, my whole family. Yeah, . . . so it would be my family; I guess it's the one word" (Janine, personal communication, December 4, 2013). Janine was undoubtedly aware that her family had set the path and inculcated a desire for a university education in her. She recounted her family members' influence on her transition to university:

> Everybody—my auntie Kate, my mom, my dad, my auntie Jessica, my late uncle who was a lawyer, and [pauses] I just have . . . on both sides of my family, my aunties and uncles, to look up to because they all went to university. So I knew that's where I was gonna go one day. (Janine, personal communication, January 30, 2013)

Allen's story was similar to Janine's in that social reproduction was occurring. His mother and several aunts had attended university. When he decided to go to university, it was to make his university-educated mother happy. Even when he alluded to his established university habitus, he credited his mother's wish for him: "I used to . . . pretty much wish to be here [at university] even though it wasn't my initial choice; [it was mother's wish] to . . . come to school" (Allen, personal communication, January 8, 2014).

Some of Jackie's family members too had gone to university, including both parents, who had some university education, although neither one completed it. Jackie had been exposed to university early. At eight years old she attended one of her mother's classes at university and enjoyed the experience so much that she hoped to return to become a student when she was older:

> I didn't know that I was going to go to university. Well, my mom went to the university of [xxxxx] when I was younger. And I remember I would always look at her. . . course

> [book]. . . . It had all the courses in it. I would always look through there, and I was only seven years old and I would tell her, “I’m gonna take these classes. . . . I’m gonna be a lawyer.” And I would always tell her things like that. And, like, I lost sight of that goal, and in high school . . . I didn’t think [that] I could do it. . . . So . . . I knew [that] I was going to come to university; I just didn’t know when or how. But I did it. (Jackie, personal communication, December 6, 2013)

Jackie still remembered her decision as a seven- or eight-year-old to attend university, because she had read her mother’s university course books. She pointed to the established university habitus when her mother attended university:

> Probably, yeah! I would have either way [attended] because I knew from a young age I wanted to come here myself. It didn’t really matter. I think when you’re younger you’re worried about your friends and what they are doing. But when you get older, . . . it’s not about them; it’s about you. You have to do [what you have to do]. . . (Jackie, personal communication, February 3, 2014)

Professionals at the school where Jackie upgraded directed her to the TYP. She was in the process of reproducing what she believed was already a norm in her family.

Deborah’s family members had university and college credentials, and she believed that her transition to university was certain; however, she recognised that personal and relationship struggles hindered her: “Other than my addictions, the bad relationship . . . stopped me. . . [With such a relationship and addictions], you don’t feel capable” (Deborah, personal communication, December 5, 2013).

Andrea was a first-generation university student because none from her biological family had attended; however, her foster mother had gone to university and was a social worker. Andrea tried the trades first:

> I was going to take a year off to figure out what I wanted to do, because I didn’t know. At first I wanted to do trades, and then, you know, it was up in the air kind of thing, and I always knew I wanted to be a social worker. (Andrea, personal communication, February 3, 2014)

Andrea’s foster mother had tried to discourage her from entering this field because it is a difficult job, and yet Andrea insisted. She rationalised her passion and decision:

> My mom who fostered me from two to 16 . . . [is] . . . a social worker too. She doesn’t push me to do it. In fact, she begs me not to do it. . . . I know that I have a lot to give in that area, and I know it’s kinda a passion for me. It’s huge. It’s not just something I want to do because I want to just try it. (Andrea, personal communication, December 5, 2014)

This observation suggests that, having been raised in the home of a university graduate, Andrea was exposed to what attending university can make a person. Therefore, she chose to attend to become a social worker.

Wally benefitted from the postsecondary habitus of extended family and peers. He shared his inspiration for attending university: “I don’t know what it is, but, I think . . . [my] peers [influenced me]. . . . [Also], there are some first-generation college . . . graduates from my family” (Wally, personal communication, December 13, 2013). He added, “When I was younger, 15, 14, 16, I think it was always a goal of mine to go to university” (Wally, personal communication, December 13, 2013).

Jackie, Janine, Deborah, Andrea, Allen, and Wally were typical examples of social reproduction in that they possessed university habitus because of the education of their families, both nuclear and extended. Even though they decided to attend university, their families had already planted the seed. Lehman (2003) described this as a decision “based on a very powerful set of dispositions, habitually enforced through a home” (p. 236). This evidence demonstrates that family background influences the university transition of First Nations learners, although it might not occur in a linear path. As well, this finding underscores that family education alone does not explain the complex process of transitioning to university and that an examination of the intersectionality of various factors such as gender, sexual identity, family education, ethnicity, individual agency, and institutional and economic environments is important to understand such a transition.

**Social Deconstruction/Reconstruction of Habitus**

Social deconstruction occurred when learners from families in which university habitus did not exist acquired a university habitus by engaging with external environments and then attended university. Therefore, I too, like many others (Lehmann, 2009; Webb et al., 2002), question Bourdieu's (1986) proposition of the socially deterministic influence of familial origins. Evidence of this in this study is that the individual stories of transition of three males and one female who were first-generation university students entailed their acquiring a new habitus that was different from that in their families of origin. Juxtaposing their individual career choices (including politics, law, business, social work, and teaching) and the relatively low educational levels of their families of origin spoke to their creative responses to events in their life course. Their experience calls into question Bourdieu's idea of social determinism, in which their backgrounds can limit individuals.

Charles, a first-generation university student, was influenced by his work environment when he applied for university entrance. He wanted to do whatever was necessary to reach his full potential because he believed that he was "meant for more." He worked at a few small jobs, took upgrading courses, worked at a few more small jobs, took clerical studies, and worked with his new skill set until he felt the drive to tap into more of his potential at work and decided to further his studies at university. The wealthy customers whose lives he wanted to life, the principal at his school who believed in him, and the staff at work who challenged him to achieve more inspired him. His father encouraged him at an early age to follow in his footsteps to trades training, but Charles was not interested in the trades. After several years before he eventually enrolled at university to pursue his passion in film studies. Charles had deconstructed his family habitus by rejecting it and then reconstructed a new habitus. He could have been a tradesman like his father, but he chose a new direction: the reconstruction of a future that would be different from his father's. Evans and Heinz (1995, as cited in Lehmann, 2007) described this as *strategic risk-taking*, in which the choice conflicts with an individual's origins. Charles' hope to do better shaped his habitus in a nondeterministic manner.

As a first-generation university student, Eli rationalised his choice to attend university as he reflected on his family's brilliance. They were not recognised for their work because of their lack of appropriate credentials, and he sensed that an education would give him that recognition:

> I'm the first one in my family to go to university on my one side. I hear stories about all of these people, that my family is really smart. You know, they are philosophers. . . . But they can't be credited because they don't have any education, and . . . I notice that. And my uncles . . . are poets. . . . They are really highly intellectual, but no one notices because they don't have an education. (Eli, personal communication, February 3, 2014.

Eli was aware of how society functions and the importance of credentials for recognition.

Eli believed that, even while he was working in the trades, he had always been interested in attending university; but he also realised that it would be difficult for people to take him seriously without more education. Again, he understood what he needed to succeed as a politician. He explained his rationale for acquiring a university education:

> CA: So you were in the trades first. Why did you not return to another trades-type field?
> Eli: . . . . When I was working, . . . I was always talking [about] going to university, so people can actually listen.
> CA: People can actually listen?
> Eli: Yeah, and that's, like, my mentality.
> CA: People can actually listen. Is that why you're in university?
> Eli: Yeah, so people can listen. I noticed that a lot of people are tending to listen more now, starting to really pay attention to what I say, because I'm like . . . a role model. . . . Education is like a key; it's like our new buffalo; it's like what we need to survive. (Eli, personal communication, February 3, 2014)

Eli wanted to advance his philosophical talent by attending university so that he would be heard as a voice for his people. He had found reasons to pursue his longstanding interest in attending university in the absence of his family's university habitus.

Danny was another first-generation university student whose family did not have a university education. Therefore, he engaged with the habitus of individuals outside his family, just as I did. His father was in the trades, and his mother was not working: "So [my mother] . . . didn't finish high school, and neither did my dad. I think my dad made it to Grade 6" (Danny, personal communication, January 31, 2014). None of Danny's siblings attended university. His encounter with lawyers when he faced a legal situation built a law habitus and ultimately led to his enrollment in the TYP. Danny might have originally acquired his habitus for university from a teacher, and it was confirmed in the legal situation in which he gained familiarity with lawyers. He had long been interested in going to university: "I've always known that I would come here. It was always my plan to come to the university, [but] not necessarily this university" (Danny, personal communication, December 13, 2013). Danny had a teacher (a university graduate) on his reserve who advised both him and his father and inspired Danny's desire to attend university when he became deeply involved in his education and made suggestions. Neither Eli nor Danny was limited by a lack of university habitus within their families. They created a new habitus that was different from what was common in their families. They deconstructed a family habitus that excluded university education and reconstructed a new one that included a university education.

### Awakening and Acts of Agency Into University

Whether these students did or did not have university habitus, Bourdieu's (1990a) concept of awakening might have triggered their decisions to further their education. As Bourdieu noted, habitus is transformed into processes that raise or lower expectations. It is the art of reinvention in which individuals make choices among alternative paths (p. 55) while they think and act in strategic ways to take advantage of the rules of the game; nevertheless, they can be influenced by the expectations of their existing habitus (Webb et al., 2002). Thus, the participants at some point were on one end of the habitus continuum, where they had lower expectations. When they were exposed to life events such as health problems, a new child, a fulfilling job, inspiration from family, highly educated Aboriginal leaders, professionals in schools and Aboriginal institutions and others, unpleasant work, loss of work, and the sense of being stuck in small jobs, these experiences conditioned their lives differently from the way that they were before. Their new conditioning triggered a need to pursue more education to achieve their own or their parents' dreams. Bourdieu called this experience an awakening of one's consciousness that increases the capacity for critical reflection, spurs creative responses from agents, and leads to transformation (Adkins, 2003; Bourdieu, 1977).

In this study both the males and the females cited various moments of awakening. The males' awakening occurred when Charles realised that he could not remain in an entry-level job; when Eli decided to find alternative work that was not physically demanding because of a physical injury from previous trades work; when Danny felt the confirmation of his career as his life intersected with the law; and when Allen decided that it was time to stop the pain-numbing addictions and change the course of his life. The females' awakening occurred when Janine decided that it was time to do what her family expected from her, which was to go to university and give her child a good life by furthering her education; when Deborah saw spiritual signs and responded positively when she arrived at the TYP office; when Jackie chose to leave her addictions behind and meet her full potential by going back to school; when Fiona decided that it was time to move beyond her depression and pursue the career to which she had always aspired;

and when Andrea, upon encouragement from her brother to leave behind the ‘mess’ of her life, was determined to overcome her addictions and responded to guidance and the inspiration to pursue her dream career. Each of the students experienced moments of awakening when they realised the social inequality that their lack of further education was perpetuating and were prepared to intercept it as agents.

Agents act on their agency after from an awakening to set their lives on a path that will lead to social transformation. Evidence of this act of agency occurred in spite of any structural barriers in the path of the study participants. As agents, “they reproduce[d] or transform[ed] them [social systems], remaking what is already made in the continuity of praxis” (Giddens, 1986, p. 171). Those who struggled in their lives pointed out that their choices would turn their lives around. They exerted their agency to actualise their aspirations or new habitus. In the same way, those who did not face challenges also felt that they had made their own choices. A couple of the participants recognised the support of family, which inspired their decisions to attend university. The participants’ comments were evidence of moments of critical reflection and of action on their agency to attend university. Eli, for example, contemplated the moment that he chose to go to university:

> CA: I have this statement to which I would like your reaction. Tell me if you agree or disagree: “I did it myself. I chose to do it. It was my decision to turn things around and come to university.” Do you agree?
> Eli: I agree.
> CA: Do you want to add something to it or take away something? [I repeated the statement].
> Eli: Yeah, yeah, it was all up to me to change. It’s my life, and it’s up to me to pick the right path, and it was . . . my choice that I want to be here, . . . that I envisioned starts right here. That’s . . . why I’m here. (Eli, personal communication, February 3, 2014)

Eli emphasised how he had acted on his agency. He took responsibility for his decision to enroll in university as a necessary step to reach his career goal.

Danny recognised that, although his agency enabled him to go to university, his family played a role in the process. He believed that his individual choices actualised his university aspirations. When I asked Danny to comment on the statement "I did it myself. I chose to do it. It was my decision to turn things around to come to university. Is that you?" he replied:

> [Sighs] Basically, it's not so much not so. I don't wanna say, like, that statement kind of sounds . . . . almost really selfish, and it sounds hard. And you know, I did wanna recognise the family where I came from as well. And at the end of the day, it's my decision. (Danny, personal communication, January 31, 2014)

Wally acknowledged that the decision to attend university was entirely his, but he wished that he had had family role models, some university experience, and family members with whom to deliberate on his ideas: "My parents just said, 'You've got to keep going." . . . Yeah. "Keep going; don't stop [laughs]." When you are a first-generation college student, it's really, you learn on your own, right?" (Wally, personal communication, January 31, 2014). Earlier, Wally told me that his family included a few first-generation university graduates but that his parents had not attended. He suggested that he would have benefited from the guidance of close relatives such as his parents, aunts, and uncles if they had had a university education. However, he chose to attend university because his parents had inspired him to do so.

Charles also believed that his own efforts resulted in his enrollment at university, and he felt responsible for the actions that enabled him to enroll, "because it's what I believe in, . . . the whole education thing and knowledge. . . . It's going to be what will sustain me for the rest of my life. . . . Nobody else is here doing my work for me" (Charles, personal communication, January 29, 2014).

These males—Eli, Wally, Danny, and Charles—articulated their sense of agency. Wally and Danny pointed to the role of family in acting on their agency; while other males, such as Eli and Charles, credited agency considerable for their transition. The latter's view, perhaps, suggests that family support and other kinds of help, such as inspiration, funding, and TYP-like programs, were necessary but inadequate alone to enter university and that acting on agency was also a critical part. Jackie perceived that her transformation after she ceased her obstructive behaviours and took steps to enroll in university resulted from the application of her own agency. She responded in the affirmative that it was her decision to turn things around and eventually enroll in university:

> Jackie: Yeah, it's how I feel. I just [think] it's people's choice.
> CA: And it's your choice?
> Jackie: Uh-huh.
> CA: So are you making all these decisions?
> Jackie: Yeah, [I'm] making them myself. (Jackie, personal communication, February 3, 2014)

She added:

> So then around Christmas time I decided to stop all of that [substance use], . . . and I knew I wanted to go to university by the end. So I moved back to the city and . . . I took myself to [upgrading school]. . . . And I enrolled, and I got into the classes that I needed. And there's an Aboriginal liaison there; . . . he told me about the TYP program. . . . So I applied, and I got in. (Jackie, personal communication, February 3, 2014)

Janine also explained that her self-effort and choice resulted in her attendance at university:

> CA: Let me know if this statement applies to you. Here it goes: "I did it myself. I chose to do it. It was my decision to turn things around and then come to university."
> Janine: 100%.
> CA: Yeah?
> Janine: Mm-hmm. That's exactly what I thought.
> CA: Really!
> Janine: Yeah. [laughs] (Janine, personal communication, January 30, 2015)

I thought that Janine's position was extremely strong that she owned her decision. Could it have been because she already possessed the knowledge—in Bourdieu's (1986) words—the habitus of university because of the multiple degrees that her parents and other members of her family held? Her personal struggles held her back, but she moved back on track and enrolled at university after she had a baby. Therefore, Janine felt that she fully owned the decision to enroll in university.

Andrea also believed that she acted on her agency to take the steps that led to her studying in university to pursue her career of interest and that her determination to build a career kept her from procrastinating. I asked her whether she had made the decision to enroll in university herself:

> Yeah. Huge! I didn't wanna just sit around and be able to get a job in a retail store and . . . keep asking myself what I wanna do with my life. I . . . kept going, and I [thought], I must as well just keep going [to school] . . .[Regarding who made the decision to attend university], it was myself, because that's the only person I was living for. At the time I had a family, and . . . I was living on my own, doing things on my own. So, yeah, I decided . . . to . . . make a career out of my life. (Andrea, personal communication, February 3, 2014)

Andrea believed that she owned her decision to attend. Further, she validated her agency and self-effort on her journey to university:

> I think finding inner strength more than anyone else supporting me. I had to want it for myself more than anybody else wanted it for me. So getting here was all done by myself. I did it by myself, you know, so I gotta thank myself for that. I gotta give myself a pat on the back. (Andrea, personal communication, December 5, 2013)

Both the males and the females demonstrated a sense of agency and considered themselves active participants in the creation of their biographies, including their transition to university. This suggests that, amidst support and inspiration, First Nations learners recognise their agency and understand that it shaped their actions that led to enrolment in university.

Although Bourdieu (1986) emphasised the role of agency in overcoming structural barriers or in taking advantage of opportunities within the changed habitus, certain individuals likely do not recognise or accept that they are acting on their personal choices (exerting their authority as agents). For example, Deborah was the only participant who did not entirely accept that her choices played a role in her enrollment in university. She understood it as a spiritual occurrence because of the signs that she saw at the TYP that indicated that the timing was appropriate for her to enroll in university, given that she had desired to do so. This attribution to a higher power was evident in our conversation:

> CA: I'm going to read a statement. Tell me if you agree: "I did it myself. I chose to do it. It was my decision to turn things around and go to university." Is that you?
> Deborah: Yeah.
> CA: To what extent to do you agree? 1 to 10.
> Deborah: At least 5.
> CA: Don't really agree? You are in between?
> Deborah: [laughs] Like I said, it's so weird how it happened. (Deborah, personal communication, December 5, 2014)

Deborah's understanding of her transition does not suggest that Bourdieu's (1990a) concept of awakening and of people acting as agents is questionable in her cultural context. It implies that people, depending on their worldviews, may interpret their experiences differently, even though it might require agency to act on spiritual revelations, for example.

In the next section I examine the ways that the learners' established their aspirations to attend university and how the process supports Bourdieu's (1985, 1986) ideas on the workings of the habitus.

## Career Choices and Reflexive Habitus

Habitus is a decisive factor in the careers that individuals choose. Bourdieu's (1986) understanding of habitus, or 'feel for the game,' is that habitus is subject to change because of changes in one's environment (Bourdieu, 1986). In this study the learners chose university programs according to their experience or exposure. The male and female participants who made career choices already had family members in their prospective careers or had engaged with individuals in them, had worked in a similar capacity, or wanted to bridge a service gap that they had observed. Their career choices were gendered because none of the males chose feminised professions (Brice-Baker, 1996; Colley et al., 1997; Kosberg, 2005); however, three of the five females chose those professions, particularly in teaching and social work (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997; Kosberg, 2005; Williams, 1995). The males chose masculinised professions such as politics, law, writing, film making, and business (Collier, 2010; Kleif & Faulkner, 2003). In addition, their environments influenced their career choices. For example, Fiona wanted to become a teacher because she wanted to give young people the emotional support that her teachers had not given her. Andrea chose social work because she wanted to help others, as her social-worker foster mother was doing. Deborah was interested in psychology (and eventually social work) because she was already working in the field and believed that more professionals were required to help abused or struggling Aboriginal women to recover. Janine wanted to become a lawyer because she admired her uncle's work as a lawyer. Eli wanted to become a politician because he had engaged with chiefs, caucuses, politicians, and other leaders at the AFN gathering when he worked with his reserve administration, and he aspired to becoming the Nelson Mandela of his people. Danny wanted to become a lawyer because of the legal assistance that he had received. Allen intended to become a writer, like his mother. The sense of familiarity with the career fields that they wished to pursue resulted from their closeness to people in related careers, experience in the field, or the service gap that they identified firsthand. Thus, habitus, either from family or acquired by exposure as well as gender, plays an important role in career choices.

The reflexivity of habitus is evident in this study in the way that the participants' career aspirations changed over time. Bourdieu (1977, 1990a, as cited in Adkins, 2003) explained that heightened possibilities of change exist when there is dissonance between the feel for the game (habitus) and the game itself (field): "Between the previously routine adjustment of subjective and objective structures, . . . increased possibilities may arise for critical reflection on previously habituated forms of action when the adjustment between the habitus and the field is broken" (p. 26). Parallel to this proposition, some of the participants' career aspirations changed after they had been in contact with other types of careers. Eli, for example, began a career in the trades until he faced physical health problems that no longer allowed him to do this type of work; he then began to consider furthering his education as he reflected on and became interested in the leadership of his community and people:

> I . . . thought, [when] . . . you . . . just drive through the reserve, . . . look [ing] from your age down, and you [imagine] . . . within 30 years . . . who is gonna lead this place, really, there is no one! . . . These are the kind of thoughts in my mind . . . [about], how are you're gonna . . . build a community? . . . How are you going to create opportunities? . . . You no longer can feed your tribes with . . . a buffalo. . . . Education is the buffalo. . . . Education is what it takes to survive and . . . do things to make changes. (Eli, personal communication, February 3, 2014)

Eli's exposure to leadership work and his reflection validated his choice of career as a politician. He intended to fill a leadership gap in the foreseeable future because he doubted whether the youth would be competent to take over the mantle of leadership. Eli realised that he could better lead and build his community by acquiring more education.

Fiona had a variety of jobs and was unsure of a future career until she lost her job and suffered depression, after which she validated her interest in a teaching career. Fiona had worked in retail and done clerical work before she eventually decided to become a teacher. This suggests that habitus is a living characteristic that continues to evolve over time.

In the next section I discuss what and who inspired these learners to attend university.

## Inspiration for the Transition to University: A Form of Bourdieu's Capital?

Inspiration, as I noted earlier in this study, is the act of lifting one to a place where creativity and a can-do attitude precede real actions to improve oneself or the lives of others. Inspiration leads to an understanding that might otherwise be hidden until an uplifting situation, communication, or event reveals it (Merriam-Webster, 2017a, 2017b). This implies that, more often than not, inspiration occurs in social interactions between individuals (although it can also occur through spiritual experiences). Because inspiration can occur within a network of relationships of varying levels of familiarity, it is not unreasonable to suggest that inspiration is a form of capital that enables possibilities, actions, and outcomes that might not otherwise occur. This capital can be social, cultural, and economic in nature. Studies have shown that noneconomic capital, including family solidarity, social capital from formal and informal institutions, peers, teachers, and the church, facilitate the transition to higher learning of students of low socioeconomic backgrounds (Coleman, 1990; Fuller & Hannum, 2002; Gofen, 2009; Putman, 2000). Bourdieu (1986) described these kinds of social capital as potential or actual resources from a network of relationships among mutual acquaintances and recognition from tribe, class, school, family, and the like.

I discuss First Nations learners' inspiration (as capital) to attend university that came from their family members (including grandparents, parents, siblings, aunts, and uncles) and their families' socioeconomic situations, significant others, and nonfamily relations, including school staff and friends. As well, events such as the birth of child, individual goals, and involvement in community governance inspired these learners to attend university.

**Inspiration from grandparents.** Support and encouragement from First Nations grandparents who have been successful in their work and volunteer roles inspire their grandchildren to undertake university studies. For example, Fiona's grandmother's inspiration and support drove her to attend university. Fiona's mother struggled with mental health and could not give her the affection for which she had longed since childhood, which was part of the reason that Fiona left home as a teen. Fiona was suicidal on five occasions between the ages of 7 and 19 years, and struggled with addictions after a failed relationship with a significant other who had filled the gap in affection. Her grandmother supported Fiona and her son and was her caregiver when she fell sick. She described her grandmother as her cheerleader, support, and role model. A social worker, activist, and advocate, her grandmother retired from social service, where she was involved in the development of policies and legal instruments for several years. Fiona grieved her grandmother's death, which occurred as she was upgrading and preparing to attend university. She explained how her grandmother inspired her university studies:

> She died two days before I was supposed to go back and finish my . . . [upgrading]. It was just really hard. . . . She was my biggest cheerleader. [cries] She would always say, "You can do it; you will get it done." She was always encouraging me. (Fiona, personal communication, December 13, 2013)

Fiona's grandmother's accomplishments challenged her granddaughter:

> [Grandma] was always somebody that I looked up to because she went to residential school. . . . She ended up becoming a real social activist in [name of province]. . . . She knew how to rock the boat. [laughs] . . . I still look up to [her], you know. She helped make laws . . . for Native people in [name of name]. . . . I wanna be like her, . . . to [be] someone who is educated and speak out . . . and be passionate about things. . . . My grandma was a social worker. . . . She was in the child welfare system, police commissions, the addictions [commissions]. . . . She did a lot of work. (Fiona, personal communication, December 13, 2013)

Fiona was proud of her grandmother as a survivor of residential school whose resilience and many accomplishments benefited her people. Fiona identified family members who had a university education: "I have an aunt who is a teacher. My other aunt . . . is a social worker, but she is not doing anything with her degree. My mom never finished her degree" (Fiona, personal communication, December 13, 2013). Of everyone in her family, her grandmother was her greatest inspiration, perhaps because of their closeness and affection for each other. Fiona was very satisfied with her grandmother's assistance that allowed her to concentrate on her upgrading studies; however, her affection for her son was also important because Fiona was busy with her studies and did not have enough time for that:

> My grandmother had moved to Edmonton to help . . . me and my son. She would make dinner. . . . If I have to get up and be at school at 7 in the morning, she would let my son sleep at her house, and could stay on and get him ready and take the train to school. She was supportive in a lot of ways. Yeah, so I could do my studying and whatnots. So she helped me for one year. (Fiona, personal communication, December, 2013)

Fiona's grandmother inspired her: "Yeah, she did. She wanted me to go to school. She was the only one who . . . didn't discourage me. Like, my mom was happy when I had my secretary training. [She] thought that was good enough" (Fiona, personal communication, January 31, 2014). Fiona again singled out her grandmother, noting that she affirmed her and wanted Fiona to follow her dreams. These experiences demonstrate that grandmothers play a critical role in inspiring their grandchildren to attend university because of their careers and through affirmation, affection, and support for grandchildren and their families.

The importance of Aboriginal families' strong kinship ties (Alberta Education, 2005) and the commitments that young people make to their families cannot be overemphasised because they can be a determinant in their transition to university. First Nations children might honour promises that they make to family members because of this relationship that they recognise as importance to their survival. For example, when Eli was a young boy, his grandmother requested that he attend university to make her happy. This request remained in his heart. Even though she had passed on, Eli felt obliged to honour it; it was an inspiration for him. He considered attending university after he returned to the reserve with an injury from a physical trades job off the reserve. But he said that a promise he had made to his grandmother as a child kept him interested in university:

> When I was . . . a few years old, [I remember], no one in my family has been in university before. And am like, I wanna [go to university]. And my grandma said if [her] grandkids ever went to university, it will make her the happiest grandma alive. And [pauses] I told her, “Grandma, I’m going to go to university, okay?” (Eli, personal communication, December 6, 2013)

This suggests that grandparents’ conversations with the younger generation can have a deep impact. They can culminate in requests and promises that have the potential to inspire several generations of First Nations learners to pursue education.

**Inspiration from significant others.** Significant others can also contribute to the transition to university, as is evident in this study. The process of transition to university involves various people and events, but a relationship with a significant other can initiate the transition process. In this study Fiona explained that her boyfriend had set the foundation for her subsequent transition to university:

> But Joe was the one. He was going to school when we were together. He was in the [xxxxxx] college, and he was bugging me that “you should go to school.” And I was talking about it and was, like, “I wanna be a teacher.” And he said, “. . . Go to the school, fill out the form, and say [you] wanna be a teacher.” He explained to me . . . everything! So . . . he started it then. . . . He planted the seed. (Fiona, personal communication, January 31, 2014)

At one point Fiona received inspiration from her boyfriend, who was also a student, to go to school, but she did not do so until several years later. They had discussed her career goals, and Fiona chose to become a teacher in her early 20s. However, she attributed her university enrollment partly to inspiration from this relationship. Thus, inspiration can come from a significant other to pursue university studies.

**Inspiration from parents.** Like many studies who attribute postsecondary transition to social reproduction, in which individuals whose parents have been to university are more likely to attend (CCL, 2009; Lehmann, 2007; Walpole, 2003), this study has indicated that parents who have not graduated from university can also be an inspiration. The students pointed to their parents as inspirations, including those without a university education. Either both parents or the mother or father of Andrea, Jackie, Fiona, Janine, and Allen had a university education. Jackie and Allen wanted to pursue their mothers' careers (social work and writing, respectively). Wally's parents did not have a university education, yet they inspired him. He reported that he had planned to attend university through a sports scholarship and recognised that the inspiration came from his parents, neither of whom had a university education: "I think it was always . . . one of my goals, and I think the initial push [was] from [my] parents. . . . [My] parents were an integral part of that. They see education as an opportunity" (Wally, personal communication, December 13, 2013). Wally understood his parents' position on the importance of education and their desire that he pursue education, and he followed their advice to do so. The findings suggest that parents inspire their children to attend university regardless of their educational background.

**Inspiration from fatherhood or motherhood.** Although several events can reinforce, change, or direct an individual's course, the transition into fatherhood or motherhood inspires some to pursue their university aspirations. The decision to enroll in university does not necessarily immediately follow the moment of inspiration along the life course. However, these students began to choose actions to actualise their aspirations after major life events. Such events better focussed them to consider a university education on the assumption that it would provide financial security and instil pride for their children. Eli, for example, referred to his newborn as his inspiration:

> But mostly because I know . . . my baby is going to grow up, and they will ask her, “What did you[r dad] do for a living?” Well, I want her to say, “My dad has a master’s.” . . . [I want to] make her say that I am one of the best, you know. I wanna be able to . . . give her what she needs and provide for her and . . . have, like, financial stability. (Eli, personal communication, February 3, 2014)

Eli wanted his child to be well taken care of and to be proud of his father’s accomplishments. Similarly, Janine recognised her family’s role in her attending university. She believed that her child and family on both her mother’s and her father’s sides were influential in her educational journey to the point of enrollment in university. I asked whether one thing had brought her to university:

> Basically, it’s my family that brought me here [to university]. My family. . . . Yes, my son, my dad and his family, my mom and her family. Like, my whole family, yeah. And I think that, even if I didn’t have an educated family, I would still do it to make them proud of me. So it would be my family; . . . it’s the one word. (Janine, personal communication, December 4, 2013)

The way in which Janine ordered the list of family members who inspired her university education is relevant to this analysis. She named her son first. Earlier, Janine told me what inspired her to return to school, and she referred to her son:

> I was preoccupied with the wrong stuff. After I had my [son], I was 21, and he just motivated me. Now I have to go back to school. [I said to myself], “You have to get educated; you have to give this little boy the best life that he deserves.” So I tried hard and went back to upgrading. . . . I applied to university, and I got accepted. (Janine, personal communication, December 4, 2013)

Janine’s desire to position herself to better provide for her child was the trigger that encouraged her to follow her university aspiration. At the moment of decision the birth of her child also inspired her. Thus, motherhood and fatherhood can become reflection points that inspire young parents to build careers to provide for their families and establish a positive identity for their children.

**Inspiration to provide for family and support community.** Bourdieu (1986) recognised that structure can be enabling, which this study has confirmed in that the low to high socioeconomic backgrounds of these First Nations males and females positively impacted them either to reconstruct their lives and family or to take advantage of their privileged SES. The aspiration to meet the needs of family and community can become an inspiration to attend university because of kinship ties. Family, including extended family, is an important institution that binds First Nations peoples together.

For example, Danny was motivated to go to university because he wanted to give his family a better life. He had grown up poor and thought that more education would help him to provide for his family. I asked him whether his socioeconomic background had held him back from attending university sooner:

> But growing up poor . . . did not set me back. I think it just made me strive to try and get a better future. . . . It made me strive for better education to provide for my family; . . . it's just what . . . kind of [told] me that I . . . needed to go to university, because I wanted to get higher, help my family, not [to] struggle anymore. (Danny, personal communication, January 31, 2014)

He also said, "I can give my family what we never had. . . . That's why I came to university" (Danny, personal communication, December 13, 2013).

Jackie also believed that her family's poverty that motivated her to attend university. She did not perceive poverty as a disadvantage to her transition to university. Rather, she focussed on strategies to free her from poverty, and she considered going to university one of them:

> CA: Did your being of low SES set you up to come to university?
> Jackie: I guess so, yeah.
> CA: How is that?
> Jackie: Yeah, because I didn't want that for myself when I was older.
> CA: You didn't want that?
> Jackie: Like being so poor and everything; I didn't want that for myself when I was older.
> (Jackie, personal communication, February 3, 2014)

Jackie had told me that her mother lived in poverty. Her mother had started university but did not complete it, which her mother regretted. Jackie understood the reasons for this lack. So Jackie's SES became an opportunity for her; it was her inspiration to pursue a university education.

It is interesting that even though Andrea was not poor, she plunged into poverty before she discovered university. Andrea left her affluent life with her foster parent and lived on her own in poverty and homeless, but she eventually managed to attend university. Her friends were surprised that she had left home so young, especially because she came from a wealthy family: "You know, . . . I will bring my friends, and they will be like, 'Andrea, you had it, like, set. Why did you leave?' And then I [said], 'I just had to do it. Like, I found my own path in life" (Andrea, personal communication, January 31, 2013). She found her path through hardship: "I had family, support . . . and . . . everything I needed! It was there; it was always there for me; it wasn't a struggle. Really, it was always a [request] away. Nothing was really a struggle, until I . . . I decided to leave" (Andrea, personal communication, January 31, 2013).
Andrea reengineered her life and lived with hardship, from which she discovered own path to more education and then to university.

All three examples (Jackie, Andrea, and Danny) challenged deficit thinking, which attributes lack of progress and educational success to low SES. Also, this situation questions Bourdieu's (1985, 1990a) theory of practice in which the values and expectations of people's existing habitus influences them as they try to act in strategic ways to take advantage of the rules of the game (Lehmann, 2007; Webb et al., 2002). Perhaps the perception that poverty can stimulate students to strive for further education suggests that this is a creative response that arises from an awakening that goes beyond their social circumstances; such a perception is consistent with Bourdieu's (1990a) thoughts. This suggests that First Nations students' poverty gave them an opportunity to transform their lives for the better and that poverty conditions learners to strive for more education.

The communitarian or collective ethos within the Aboriginal ontology that deems all beings spirits and interconnected (Little Bear, 2000) and rationalises the desire to support family can become an inspiration to pursue university studies. It is not surprising that the First Nations learners aimed for careers to help their communities. Eli, for instance, grew up on a reserve, learned, and was actively involved with his culture. He was a role model in competitive sports. The leaders mentored Eli, and he had many opportunities to meet other Aboriginal leaders. He saw a future gap in leadership because he rarely saw young people who would accede to the leadership in the future. Eli wanted to fill this succession gap by returning to his reserve after his studies to become a politician. He intended to be a voice for and contribute to building his community.

Deborah had a similar communal drive. She wanted to become a social worker to bridge the gap in services for Aboriginal women who lived in shelters in the city. Andrea also wanted to become a social worker to help struggling Aboriginal youth fulfill their dreams. Fiona desired to become a teacher to give hope to Aboriginal youth who have family difficulties and need inspiration, just as she had had. Jackie also faced several mental health challenges and wanted to become a psychologist or lawyer to counsel Aboriginal youth (she had not had this service). These instances demonstrate that First Nations learners who enroll in university are inspired to do so because of their desire to improve the well-being of their families and communities, and not only their own. Thus, family and community needs inspire First Nations learners to advance their education.

**Inspiration from high family expectations.** The high expectations of families are an important inspiration in First Nations learners' transition to university. Learners who are expected to achieve more are likely to work harder to honour this expectation. It is apparent from the literature that First Nations learners struggle to complete school because they face several challenges (CCL, 2009; Taylor et al., 2009) and therefore are more likely to pursue PSE later in life. In families with only a few members who have achieved their dreams, the assumption might be that only certain people have the potential and can secure university credentials. This sense can inspire those perceived as possessing the abilities to pursue further education. Andrea, for example, considered herself different from her siblings, because, although she was the youngest, she had achieved many aspirations that had caused her family to believe that she had considerable potential:

> Always they [my siblings] see the greatest potential in me. Even . . . though I'm the baby, . . . I have accomplished a lot more than any other family member. And I am still the baby, you know. The oldest one is [in her 30s], and she is not really doing well. . . . She . . . never finished high school. . . . They just know I have a lot of potential. They know I will go far farther than [they will]. (Andrea, personal communication, January 31, 2014)

Andrea was aware that her family had high expectations for her and that they believed that her accomplishments pointed to her superior ability. Andrea was inspired, knowing that she was the 'shining star' in her family. Thus, families' high expectations of students who are advancing their education and succeeding can be inspiring.

**Inspiration from intergenerational relationships.** Intergenerational relationships between young people and Elders in First Nations communities have the inspirational capacity to facilitate their transition to university. Elders are perceived as knowledge teachers and preservers of the Aboriginal culture. Battiste (2002) noted, "Where Aboriginal languages, heritages and communities are respected, supported, and connected to elders and education, educational success among Aboriginal students can be found" (p. 17). The study participants also valued Elders' knowledge and inspiration. For example, they inspired Eli long before he considered enrolling in university. He was involved in community governance committees and talked and worked with Elders:

> I . . . listened to my Elders. . . . The Elders . . . have the knowledge; that's key. . . . Now, they understand that education is good. . . . If an Elder that isn't educated, . . . [that] lived her entire life without education, but traditional education, [is] saying that [education is important], in this day and age, . . . it really means something. (Eli, personal communication, February 3, 2014)

Eli added, "[The Elders] always tried to include me on committees . . .and even, like, the circuit, the whole area . . . [when] they all come together" (Eli, personal communication, February 3, 2014). Eli credited his inspirations to the advice that he received from Elders, even those without a formal education, to make education a priority. An Elder encouraged Eli with a proverb when Eli returned to the reserve and was weighing his options because his future in the trades was no longer viable because of his work injury. He understood that he had the option of attending school for white-collar work. Eli's story shows that he had been involved with Elders from childhood to the time when he considered a career change, which implies that the knowledge, wisdom, and inspiration of Elders have a long-term influence on the educational attainment of First Nations students.

**Inspiration from teachers.** Not only the network of family relationships can inspire the transition to university, but also nonfamily institutional relationships with teachers can also inspire First Nations learners to pursue a university education. In Lehmann's study (2007), Edmonton RAP students acknowledged, for example, the role of teachers in streaming students into apprenticeship. One student noted, "[Teachers] . . . recognize talents, create interest in career options, and provide support during the decision-making process" (p. 214). The findings from this study are evidence of teachers' positive relationships with First Nations learners and their continued influence on their students' education even after they complete it. Danny was grateful that a non-Native teacher in high school inspired and encouraged him, as well as his father, to ensure that Danny attended university:

> When I was in high school, he [my math teacher] actually used to get in contact with my dad, and they used to talk about how he used to think that I should go to university right away, because my best class in high school was math. I was just . . . actually good at math; I was really good with numbers and formulas. And he always wanted me to go to university. We were really close. (Danny, personal communication, December 13, 2013)

Earlier, Danny said that he chose to delay his education because he wanted to mature. He took an entrepreneurial program before he eventually applied to university. Danny explained how this teacher's high expectations of and positive relationship with him inspired him:

> My math teacher . . . said he saw . . . potential in me, [that] I'll come to university. . . . We had a really good relationship, and he always wanted me to come here, and he helped me [to] apply. Even after I left . . . my reserve, he kept contact with my dad and told him that I should apply. And he always pushed for it. (Danny, personal communication, January 31, 2014)

Fiona also revealed that her positive relationship with a teacher early in her education inspired her. She was initially inspired to undertake a career in teaching because of her pleasant experience with her Grade 4 teacher, who made her feel valued. Fiona identified the attributes that contributed to this positive relationship and inspired her to attend university and become a teacher:

> There is this Miss Benson. She was a teacher, and . . . she was just so awesome and very loving. . . . She made me feel like a human! She made me feel important. . . . She just loved my poems, my poetry, my writing. She was always reading things that I had done in the class. . . . I just loved her charisma and . . . everything about her. She was such an awesome teacher. (Fiona, personal communication, December 13, 2013)

I can imagine what this relationship meant to Fiona, given that she longed for the affection that her family could not offer because of her mother's mental health and a difficult parenting environment. This finding suggests that Fiona's encounter with this inspiring teacher resulted in her career. Many potential careers are formed or wither because of negative or positive relationships with teachers.

Studies have pointed to the significance of the social capital of socialisers such as parents, teachers, counsellors, and other individuals who impact multiple dimensions of students' beliefs, attitudes, aptitudes, expectations, and experiences (Andres, 2002; Stead & Baker, 2010). Steinhauer (2008) noted that the First Nations parents in her study worried that the teachers encouraged high-performing students and discouraged the poor-performing students. The parents wished that the teachers would also support the latter. A student said, "Even if one teacher would have showed care, concern, and encouragement, it might have made a difference in my schooling experience. But I never received any of that. . . . Even one teacher can make a world of difference" (Steinhauer (2008, p. 68). Haig-Brown et al. (1997) tracked the reasons for the tremendous success of the students at Joe Duquette High School in Saskatchewan; students from reserves and other locations attend this off-reserve school. The teachers were almost second parents in the sense that they cared, wanted to know how the students were doing, shook the students' hands in the hallway, and were supportive. Moreover, the teachers were confidants, counsellors, and motivators; and the school staff felt like an extended family to the students. They idealised school as one big family in which the principal was their father.

**Inspiration from school administrators and staff.** School administrators and staff who articulate and demonstrate inspiration can also be key determinants in First Nations people's transition to university. Blasco (2004) reported that for Mexican secondary students who faced family and economic difficulties, their feelings towards the school and teachers were critical decision factors in whether they remained in school or left early. Similarly, First Nations students rely on inspiration from others, including school leaders and staff, to succeed in their education. It is important for First Nations students to hear encouraging comments from the adults at school, especially if they face challenges with their self-esteem and identity. For example, Charles believed that he could do well in his upgrading to qualify for the TYP because of his school principal, who saw his potential, encouraged him, and speedily wrote reference letters for his university application. Charles explained his school principal's inspiration:

> I was like, Wooooow! I saw it right there and just fell into place. I called it the principal who looked at me differently, from past educators who see me with such belief [and say], "I see you Charles. You're gonna do it; you're gonna go somewhere." I got hold of him, actually, and [with] no hesitation, he wrote me a reference letter. (Charles, personal communication, November 23, 2013)

Charles attributed his success in his upgrading studies to the principal who articulated his belief in him. Charles later spoke about his fondness for the TYP co-ordinator (who was the first contact for admission), who guided him through the admission process and the various modules to help them to adjust to university life. Danny was also impressed with how quickly the TYP co-ordinator scheduled his admission interview for the day after he submitted his application. Danny might have sensed that his admittance to the TYP was important to her.

Deborah as well was inspired when the TYP co-ordinator made an exception for her to allow her to submit her application after the deadline: "And it happened to be the day after the deadline, but they accepted my application anyways. . . . They made an exception for me. Yeah, I feel like, honestly, it . . . kind of inspired [me]" (Deborah, personal communication, December 5, 2013). Deborah, who had faced many challenges including abuse and trauma, left school in Grade 11 because her struggles with self-esteem, racism, and addictions made it difficult for her to make a presentation to her class. The act of making an exception for her made her feel valued and the beginning of a positive relationship with the TYP because she knew that the TYP co-ordinator cared enough to remove the barriers.

**Inspiration from friends.** Friends play an important role in First Nations peoples' transition to university. Lehmann (2007) explained that even peers who were less motivated and less focussed gave the apprentices in his study the sense that they have made the right decision. In this current study, some of the students had to leave friends who were a detriment to their progress before they could attend university. Positive friends inspired these students and were sources of information about the TYP.

Charles, for example, Charles doubted his capability to undertake university studies, and had described himself as 'damn' but his friend assured him that he was capable. Charles followed his friend's advice and enrolled in the TYP. Charles would not have known about the TYP or enrolled if his friend had not inspired him.

Danny's friend, who was a TYP student, also told him about the TYP, and he enrolled:

> And then about 7 months we, [myself] and Kirk, got our own place. And then . . . between that time, . . . he told me about TYP because he was in TYP last year. So I applied here. I got in and I was waiting, and then, yeah, this is how I came here. (Danny, personal communication, December 13, 2013)

Deborah accompanied her evangelist friend to the TYP centre because the friend wanted to make inquiries. There Deborah saw spiritual signs that told her that applying for university entrance was the right thing to do.

Danny made major decisions on his education because of friends. The first occurred when he arrived in the city after high school and connected with a friend whom he joined in an entrepreneurial program. He enrolled in the TYP upon the recommendation of his friend, who had just completed the TYP and was going on to his second year of university. These illustrations suggest that friendship can influence the university transition because of knowledge that students share and the inspiration that accompanies it. It is clear that friends can be positive influences on First Nations learners' transition to university.

**Inspiration from sports.** Sports can create opportunities for First Nations students to receive support to further their schooling, which in itself is as inspiration for school completion. Aside from studies that have shown that participation in school sports increases academic performance and enhances the efficiency of learning (Trudeau & Shephard, 2008), sports can also be a tool to maintain self-confidence, resilience, mutual support, mutual respect, social connections, team skills, empathy, and to build a sense of responsibility (Holt, Sehn, Spence, Newton, & Ball, 2012; Tufte, 2012). Scholarship programs that encourage students to stay in school also support the university transition. Wally, for example, set his mind on scholarships to be able to attend university. He played sports until he received a scholarship to pursue the program of his dreams: "I always wanted to go to university. In Canada . . . they have scholarships; . . .[In] US, they have scholarships. So in order to get those scholarships, you need your Grade 12; you need to go to school" (Wally, personal communication, December 13, 2013). Wally assessed the possibilities of going to university with a sports scholarship and implied that this was the reason that he played sports. He was inspired to complete high school as a condition for qualifying for a sports scholarship. As a successful athlete, Eli was also a role model on his reserve. Although his future in sports was doubtful because of issues with substance use, being an athlete exposed him to other locations and talented players, made him a role model, and won him a sports award. Eli talked about leadership and a sports award that he received:

> For some reason I was kind a role model for my reserve. . . . People were just amazed by how talented [I was],. . . and they are proud of me. They say, "That's a young Aboriginal from the community that's doing things for himself. . . . Those two years I got [sports award for Native students]. (Eli, personal communication, December 6, 2013)

Eli's excellence in sports and subsequent recognition as a role model perhaps raised his expectations, both for himself and for his community. Eli said that, as a role model, "I did a lot of groundwork" (Eli, personal communication, December 6, 2013), which implies that he undertook activities to build a leadership image and influence his people. It is not surprising that Eli aspired to become a politician to advance the cause of his reserve and his people. His opportunities to play sports influenced both himself and Wally. Sports scholarships for PSE can be a form of inspiration for school completion and university enrollment for First Nations students, in addition to the leadership identity that accompanies sportsmanship.

**Inspiration from career exploration.** Career exploration programs are important to enable students to align their passion with careers. Programs such as Career and Technology Studies (CTS), in which students learn life skills for different careers and determine their aptitudes, help them to discover themselves and shape their postsecondary decisions.[27] For example, Fiona benefited from a CTS program at school. Eventually, she began her university studies after she spent over a decade in different activities, including working. Nevertheless, Fiona was certain as far back as Grade 10 that she wanted to become a teacher after she took the CTS course and learned about different careers.

> [I knew I wanted to become a teacher] . . . in the first semester of Grade 10, because we did a career class, career planning. It was a career and technology, a CTS class that I took. . . . The career planning helped for looking at the different amounts of money you make a year and all that. (Fiona, personal communication, December 13, 2013)

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[27] Career and Technology Studies (CTS) is an authorized curriculum for Alberta secondary schools in which high school students explore their career interests and options. The skills that they learn are helpful in their daily lives and improve their employability after high school. Schools adapt the curriculum using community resources: "Through the CTS program students are provided with opportunities to personalize their learning, identify and explore their interests, manage transitions between high school and the workplace or post-secondary, and develop the attitudes and behaviours that people need to participate and progress in today's dynamic world of work" (Alberta Education, n.d., para. 3).

This situation suggest that knowledge and choices of careers are critical to facilitate the transition to university. In this study some of the participants were unable to go to university because of their lack of knowledge and clarity on a career. For example, Danny was undecided on a career, but he had three options in mind: business, law, and drama. Then he decided to wait until he matured to undertake university studies. Jackie was also undecided about her career and enrolled in upgrading because she was uncertain about her career goal. An incident that involved substance use and an offence to the First Nations protocol of prayer led to an awakening in which she reevaluated her life. Subsequently, Jackie realised that she wanted to become a lawyer or psychologist to assist Native youth with mental health problems. Earlier, I discussed a career development program, YAP, that begins in junior high school and gives students hands-on practice with theoretical concepts that they learn in class in the professional and trades fields while they also learn in the field or shop with experts and job-shadow in partnership with industry, businesses, schools, and families. This program facilitates career decisions before the end of high school. From my observations of the YAP as a GOA representative and then in this study, career exploration programs that teach learners about various careers, connect theory with practice, and expose them to the world of work early in life can shape their career choices and facilitate their transition to postsecondary even if the transition is delayed by several years. Thus, if students can identify their passion and career fit early, they will be inspired and have an easier transition to PSE.

**Culture as inspiration.** Aboriginal culture can become an inspiration to overcome struggles. The participants who had addictions talked about treatment. Charles, for example, received treatment from a cultural place where he revisited the teachings he had learned when he was growing up; that was when he began to fully appreciate his culture. He received treatment several times. After one of the treatments, he began to explore going to university:

> And then I went to treatment again, and that's when I got home and got the job in [off the reserve]. I moved away from [the reserve]. First time away; came back to [reserve], wanting to go school. I was trying all summer to get into . . . university. (Charles, personal communication, November 23, 2013)

Charles' treatment was a transformational experience that caused him to put his life back on course and pursue work and education. Charles had earlier followed the teachings of his culture, with some reservations; but later, in treatment, he embraced it as a result of an experience that he chose not to disclose because of certain protocols. He explained how he became a believer in his culture:

> It's probably when I wanted to quit drinking back in 2012. . . . I just followed it [my culture] because I was taught . . . as a little boy. I was always around it, but . . . I never necessarily believed in it, until something happened to me. . . . I can't talk about that . . . [because] you have to follow protocol. (Charles, personal communication, January 29, 2014)

An experience that widened Charles' understanding caused him to believe in his culture. Then he began to apply for university entrance. Thus, Charles's cultural participation during treatment inspired him to dream again and follow his dreams.

Another illustration of how culture can inspire is Jackie's story. She had a strong sense of culture; she had grown up learning about and observing her culture. After her smudging offence, she recovered from her addictions and began an upgrading program on the reserve to further her education because she did not know which career suited her. Jackie came to her senses after she participated in smudging and prayer with her grandfather, and these acts inspired her:

> I felt really, really bad, and just made me realise that, I need[ed] to smarten up and go to school. . . . I could be doing really good things. So from there is when I knew that . . . I

> have . . . to go to school and go to university. (Jackie, personal communication, December 6, 2013)

Jackie stopped using all substances, upgraded in the city, and eventually attended university. Jackie ascribed her turning point to this incident. Her guilt and turnaround after this offense suggests that she deeply respected her culture and her grandfather and realised that her impairment was the reason that she had disrespected both. Thus, respect for culture and traditions and the inspiration of healing centres and cultural observances can heal and transform individuals to pursue further education.

## Summary

In this chapter I analysed the experiences that inspired First Nations learners to attend university. I examined race, SES, and gender from the perspective of Bourdieu's (1986) theory of practice. My findings and discussions portray the learners' experience of different fields and their particular capital, as well as certain life events and inspiration from family, community, and external sources, that triggered their actions towards university enrollment. Their school fields differed from Bourdieu's with regard to competition. The perception that they possessed capital (particularly the males) were important to their transition, but what they possessed can also be described as *ore of capital* because of the process necessary for it to have value in the education field. Social reproduction and social reconstruction are important in explaining the learners' transition, in that some followed family habitus and others acquired new habitus that was different from that of their families. Further, family relations hindered the transition for some, and socioeconomic conditions encouraged some to aspire to better lives. Though SES was not a factor in the personal struggles that inhibited these students' transition, some of the struggles can be attributed to the influence of colonialism. The intersection of a variety of factors that hinder or enable the transition demonstrate the complexity of the transition. Nevertheless, the TYP and study grants from their First Nations bands were sources of social and economic capital, respectively, for their transition to university.  Also, inspiration from family and external relationships were important to the learners' transition.

The following chapter is a summary of the key findings and conclusions that constitute the basis for policy recommendations, potential areas for future research, and my reflections on this study.

# CHAPTER SEVEN: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this study I inquired into the intersectional experiences that inspire First Nations' transition to university. I collected data from interviews, have drawn conclusions, and have made policy recommendations to understand the process of transition to university and ways in which to facilitate this transition. This study originated from the strengths-based, positive-development standpoint that characterises an intentional shift from a deficit-oriented understanding of well-being (Catalano et al., 2004; Cherkowski & Walker, 2016, 2014; Rasmus, Allen, Connor, Freeman, & Skewes, 2016) that emphasises social assets for well-being rather than the barriers to well-being. This approach resulted in new insights and new language to create a sense of belonging, connectedness, and compassion within the school field. However, because I set out to understand the ways that First Nations learners negotiate socioeconomic, race, and gender structures, I collected stories that offer a rich nexus of enabling and constraining conditions and experiences from which the learners made key decisions and took actions that eventually led to their becoming university students. To capture the triggers of this transition and what made the learners succeed, it was necessary to map the journeys of each of the participants and highlight their social backgrounds, including their perceptions of identity, spirituality, aspirations, reasons, key events, activities, experiences, attitudes, and turning points in their stories as they told them.

In this final chapter I first summarise the findings and conclusions, which I have not intended to generalise to the entire population of First Nations in Canada. As a qualitative exploration, I intended to unveil deep insights into the journey of selected First Nations learners who were attending university and to understand the perceptions, experiences, constraints, and opportunities that inspired them throughout the process and at moments of critical decision. Then, from raced, gendered, and socioeconomic perspectives, I interpreted how the field, capital, and habitus shaped this process. Because I studied a population that is similar in many ways to First Nations learners raised in remote reserves and peri-urban and urban communities, the conclusions arguably apply to them as well. However, additional research is required to validate the conclusions and explore the various themes that I have underscored. Finally, I offer policy recommendations, suggest areas for possible future research, and conclude with my reflections on the research process and the results.

## Summary of Findings and Conclusions

The findings and conclusions of this study, which I derived from Bourdieu's (1986) perspective of the theory of practice, which explains the influence of gender, race, and SES on the process, address the experiences that inspired First Nations learners to attend university. First, I outline my conclusions on the learners' experience of capital, field, and habitus that Bourdieu described. Second, I summarise how inspiration functioned as a form of capital in their transition. Then I present the conclusions under these headings: First Nations versus Bourdieu: parallels and differences in capital, field, and habitus; race makes or breaks the transition to university; gender makes or breaks the transition to university; SES makes or breaks the transition to university; inspiration from relationships as capital to transition to university; inspiration from family relationships; and inspiration from external relationships.

1. First Nations versus Bourdieu (1977, 1985, 1986): Parallels and differences in capital, field, and habitus:

- The males projected a positive perception of their sense of capital to succeed in school, but the females' perceptions were less positive, which suggests that gender results in different experiences for males and females.
- Having a positive perception of capital early in life can be beneficial because it translates into educational progress over the long term.
- Everyone has an ore of capital unique to each person, unlike Bourdieu's (1985, 1986) capital (which is relative to others), that is waiting to be explored, because schooling can stimulate emotions and intellect to a place of possibilities and empowerment to engage the ore of capital and transform it into what is necessary to succeed in school; it thereby becomes capital.
- Behaviour that inhibits educational progress does not depend on SES, which indicates the intersectionality of various factors, including the legacy of residential schooling that continues to affect several generations of First Nations learners.
- Social capital can have an impact at any time during the life course. The social capital that First Nations learners receive can benefit their communities eventually, irrespective of when they pursue their education aspirations.
- Social capital is necessary to the transition to university and is the 'lifeblood' and 'power to break through' of First Nations learners who have encountered tremendous challenges and returned to school.
- Economic capital is not the only principal deterrent to participating in university studies; other personal struggles may need to be addressed before First Nations

students can receive grants through their treaty rights to assist with their transition to university.

- The reserve-school field is not as competitive as the off-reserve school field. Although competition is evident in selective aspects, learners with a competitive disposition can moderate it because of the communal way typical of First Nations communities.
- The unequal school expectations and resources between on-reserve and off-reserve schools suggest that this is an act of violence against the former, rooted in the colonial relationships between Aboriginal communities and settlers, which the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada sought to reverse.
- Socioeconomic background does not always predict career aspirations. Aspirations are not linked perpetually to capital from family, and higher aspirations are possible, irrespective of SES.
- Family habitus shapes university aspiration. The learners who lost track returned to reproduce the family habitus of the pursuit of a university education.
- Because learners can deconstruct family habitus and reconstruct new ones, capital from the family of origin is not socially deterministic.
- The absence of agency inhibits existing university habitus. The absence of actions that lead to postsecondary learning indicate that the personal struggles that arose with colonialism and the legacy of residential school, as well as other issues, intersect to hinder it.

  - Awakening can occur from various life events and circumstances and, accompanied by agency and family and/or institutional support, preceded enrollment in university for those who struggled and left school early.
2. Race makes or breaks the transition to university:
   - University transition programs facilitate university enrollment, especially for learners who have faced challenges in their education journey, when they have an opportunity to challenge university studies via the TYP or similar programs.
   - Removing fears and strengthening solidarity through cultural enrichment and support attracts First Nations learners to university.
3. Gender makes or breaks transition to university?
   - Gender relations and children's care affect the transition to university. Gender relations can hinder the transition to university, more for females because of their double role in balancing family care and schooling.
4. SES makes or breaks the transition to university:
   - Learners' material condition encourages them to work toward a transition to university; however, supports such as family, others outside the family, funding, and institutional capital that are available to learners facilitate the transition.
5. Inspiration from relationships as capital to transition to university:
   - Inspiration from family and community:
     - Grandparents' affirmation, high expectations, accomplishments, and assistance inspire the transition to university.

  - First Nations parents with or without a university education inspire the transition to university. Parents' lives and perceptions of the value of postsecondary learning influence their children in this regard.
  - Family/community needs inspire learners to undertake university studies. Care for family, including extended family, and the desire to contribute meaningfully to building their communities facilitate this decision for First Nations learners.
  - Learners find inspiration in past or present close relationships with significant others. Significant others can influence learners at various points before the learners make the ultimate decision to attend university.
  - High and positive family expectations of members can inspire the transition to university, especially when the family perceives the members as being capable of succeeding.
  - The responsibility of care with fatherhood or motherhood inspires educational progress in the hope of better employment opportunities to support the family and building pride in children.
  - First Nations culture inspires new desires, including the aspiration for a university education because of its transformative capacities.
- Inspiration from external relationships:
  - In intergenerational dialogue with young people, adults, including Elders, shares knowledge that inspires First Nations learners' transition to university.
  - Learners are inspired when teachers affirm, take an interest in, and hold high expectations for them. Positive K-12 teacher-student experiences support the transition to university.

- School principals’ and staff’s articulation of their beliefs in First Nations learners’ capabilities and positive relationships with them inspires them and sets the foundation for learning outcomes that eventually lead to university learning.
- Friends’ affirmation and sharing of important information inspire learners to enroll in university.
- School sports scholarships inspire First Nations learners’ transition to university because they rationalise high school completion, which is necessary for consideration for postsecondary scholarships.
- Connecting theory to practice in school career exploration inspires the transition to university.
- Exposure to university environment for a foretaste of it develops interest in university education.

In the next section I present a framework (Figure 2) that describes the transition of First Nations learners to university. It is a product of the findings with regard to Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of practice, which are the basis for this framework. Figure 2 shows how the interactions of field, capital, and habitus create a new habitus or aspiration for university or reinforce First Nations learners’ existing habitus for university learning. In this framework the text in black is the elements of Bourdieu’s theory of practice and that in red is the findings from the study that add to Bourdieu’s theory to describe the learners’ transition to university.

The field is not necessarily competitive, and learners take with them to school an ore of capital such as optimism, leadership skills, culture, and social skills that they might or might not engage. The ore of capital might not be recognised or valued in school, and the resources can be unequal between reserve and off-reserve schools. Generally, learners might be less inclined to compete in academic areas. Learners with a disposition to compete in the school field might choose not to do so because of their collective ethos that encourages co-operation among

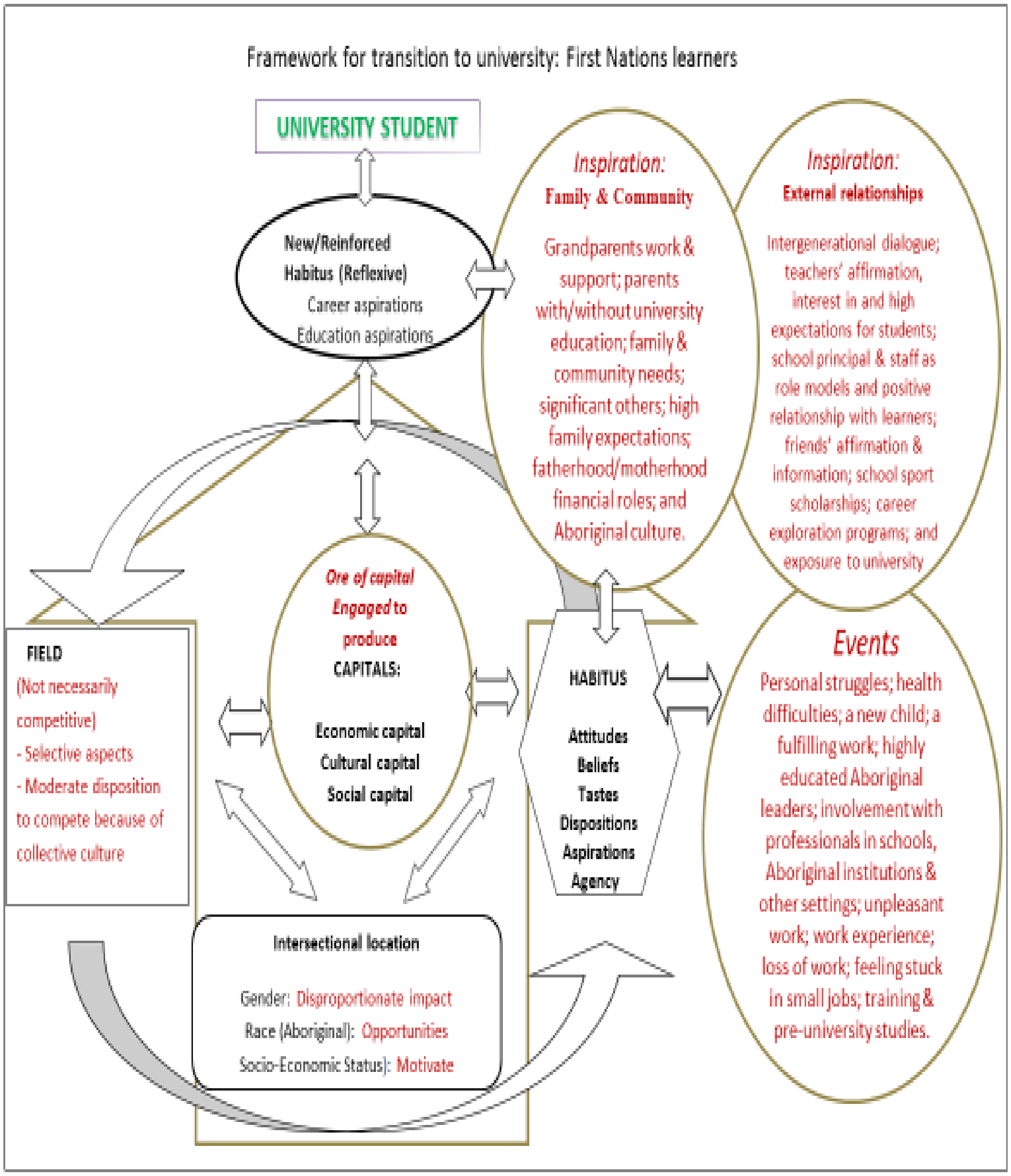
Framework for transition to university: First Nations learners
UNIVERSITY STUDENT
New/Reinforced
Habitus (Reflexive)
Career aspirations
Education aspirations
Inspiration:
Family & Community
Grandparents work & support; parents with/without university education; family & community needs; significant others; high family expectations; fatherhood/motherhood financial roles; and Aboriginal culture.
Inspiration:
External relationships
Intergenerational dialogue; teachers' affirmation, interest in and high expectations for students; school principal & staff as role models and positive relationship with learners; friends' affirmation & information; school sport scholarships; career exploration programs; and exposure to university
FIELD
(Not necessarily competitive)
- Selective aspects
- Moderate disposition to compete because of collective culture
Ore of capital
Engaged to
produce
CAPITALS:
Economic capital
Cultural capital
Social capital
HABITUS
Attitudes
Beliefs
Tastes
Dispositions
Aspirations
Agency
Events
Personal struggles; health difficulties; a new child; a fulfilling work; highly educated Aboriginal leaders; involvement with professionals in schools, Aboriginal institutions & other settings; unpleasant work; work experience; loss of work; feeling stuck in small jobs; training & pre-university studies.
Intersectional location
Gender: Disproportionate impact
Race (Aboriginal): Opportunities
Socio-Economic Status): Motivate

*Figure 2*. Framework for First Nations learners' transition to university.

individuals rather than competition. Learners' gender, racial background, and SES can result in different experiences. For example, female learners might have a less positive sense of their capital because of the patriarchal perceptions of gender that bestow on females a less favourable identity or an identity that is subsumed under their husbands (e.g., Bill C-31, which clarifies treaty rights; Coulthard, 2014; Lugones, 2010). First Nations learners have opportunities such as grants for education and transition programs because of their treaty rights (CCL, 2009; INAC, 2005), and their socioeconomic background can motivate learners to improve their living conditions or maintain the standard of living in which they were raised by advancing education. Learners' aspirations (part of the habitus) might or might not include a university education, but their awakening through life events such as the loss of work, pre-university studies, the feeling of being stuck in a small job, exposure to professionals, family expectations, and work situations requires critical reflection and a change in habitus to include university learning or the reinforcement of an existing university habitus. Throughout their journey learners benefit from capital that includes inspiration from family (e.g., parents, grandparents, financial roles in the family, the family's high expectations and culture) and from external relationships (e.g., culture, positive relationships with school staff, career exploration, and friends) before they transition to university. In addition, grants, upgrading, and university transition programs facilitate their attendance at university.

In the next section I present the policy implications and corresponding policy recommendations that have arisen from the conclusions. The policy recommendations are intended to redress barriers and improve policies to improve learners' transition to university.

## Policy Implications and Recommendations

The conclusions call for policy actions to improve the ability of First Nations learners to succeed in the education 'game' by changing the rules of the game, the capital available to them, and the nature of the field to ensure that they are not marginalised in the game. The conclusions show that certain existing policies need to be altered and that new policies are required. In this section I offer recommendations for policies, processes, and programs that will improve First Nations learners' capitals and ultimately improve their education field and increasingly inspire their transition to university. The policy recommendations speak to capitals in terms of funds to reserve schools, exposure to role models, mentorship, counselling and treatment, access to the TYP, supports at upgrading schools, and scholarships. Also, they speak to family and external relationships, intergenerational dialogue, school curriculum and teacher practices, mental-health training, and culturally relevant teacher education and professional development. I direct them to multiple stakeholders in education, including federal, provincial, and municipal governments; academia; educators and counsellors; NGOs; the private sector; community leaders; and families and individuals.

1. I recommend that governments review the resources for reserve schools and address any gaps. Reserve schools have the potential to provide quality education to enable First Nations learners to achieve and eventually transition to university; however, without addressing the funding gaps, this is impossible. Learners enjoy the cultural environment and racism-free environment in which they learn on the reserve, but the field there marginalises them because of inadequate resources. My dialogue with Dr. E. Steinhauer (co-supervisor of this thesis; personal communication, May 11, 2017), who has served on a reserve school board and researched school choice in First Nations communities, reveals that teachers in reserve schools are paid 30% less than those in off-reserve schools; the members of boards are not compensated well, unlike their counterparts off reserve, given the extensively long hours of work that is required; and few board members have the educational background to be able to govern schools well. Thus, I

recommend that governments review and fill the funding gap to enable reserve schools to hire motivated, qualified teachers; offer college- and university-bound students courses and programs to inspire their transition; and compensate board members properly.

2. I recommend that governments increase the funding for university preparation and university studies. It is apparent that First Nations learners recognise the financial difficulties that accompany the meagre funding for education offered to bands over the years, despite increases in the costs of university education and the increasing population (INAC, 2005) that marginalise reserve schools and learners in the education field. One participant spoke of inadequate PSSSP funds for beneficiaries: "It's highly competitive. . . . Population increases; . . . the dollars stay the same, right? So there is either less money to go around, or . . . only a few get selected" (Wally, personal communication, December 13, 2013). As well, the cost of living alone in the city stretches the funding that First Nations learners receive. One participant faced financial difficulties while he upgraded in the city: "You can't live alone here in the city on that money they give us. You can't do it" (Allen, personal communication, January 8, 2014). As well, given that learners fear not being able to qualify for regular scholarships or loans because of existing debt and their fear of bureaucratic institutions (Malatest & Stonechild, 2008), attending university with funding from their bands enhances their self-esteem.

To ease the financial burden on First Nations learners, a participant involved in university administration recommended the following:

> Whether it's is grant funding, this should be a goal of any institution in the provinces to have a waiver program for Aboriginal peoples or for First Nations or Inuit—waiver program, . . . not a scholarship, [where they] . . . waive the fees for people who go to school here. . . . Anything the province can do [to help is necessary]. (Wally, personal communication, December 13, 2013)

Aside from considering a waiver of tuition fees for First Nations learners, I recommend that the government act quickly to increase the PSSSP funding to match the population growth in these communities and ensure that the transition to university is not hindered.

3. I recommend that community programs be strengthened to celebrate success and showcase role models. Because in the Aboriginal worldview (Little Bear, 2000) human beings are spirits, nourishing and building the human spirit through inspiration are important to vitalise individuals by instilling ‘can-do’ attitudes that lead to educational accomplishments. Programs such as Aboriginal Achievement Awards, Aboriginal Business Awards, graduation ceremonies, and cultural events in which organisers focus on building self-esteem by recognising and articulating (verbally and in writing) accomplishments at all levels, of all magnitudes, and by members of both genders and any socioeconomic background should be implemented and encouraged. Such programs will improve First Nations learners’ ability to play ‘the game’ within the education field. I also recommend that governments, communities, educators, education institutions, and other stakeholders adopt policies that intentionally establish and strengthen such community programs, celebrate accomplishments, and highlight role models.

4. I recommend that role models mentor learners and develop relationships with them. Programs that give First Nations young people opportunities to become acquainted with mentors and for role models to mentor them are instrumental to their educational success and transition to university. Learners value role models’ stories and relationships with them; however, students who return to school after a break and have no family members or acquaintances with a university education might disproportionately value social capital from mentors. A participant described why he needed role models: “You need advice to

make choices. . . . I mean, if you don't have someone there to bounce ideas off of, then you're really making your own decision. . . . I didn't have that growing up" (Wally, personal communication, January 31, 2014). Therefore, I recommend the development of policies and programs to enable Aboriginal university students or graduates and role models to mentor young First Nations people to bridge the gaps in social capital and habitus.

5. I recommend the implementation of policies and programs to ensure timely access to counselling and treatment programs to inspire dreams and a 'can-do' attitude. Timely culture-based and professional interventions to assist children, youth, and adults who have personal struggles are critical to prevent unintended delays to the transition to university. It is evident that certain life events, whether good or bad, can spur resilient actions immediately. The mental health of both males and females should be the priority of any form of education, because it is a fundamental precondition for learning; and easy access to supports can enable individuals to build resilience, mental health, and capable identities. Prioritising wellness in this way is a step toward reconciliation with colonialism and the legacy of residential schooling and supports the recommendations of the TRC (2015b). The participants recommended sources of help: "Probably to make sure there is support in place for youth. . . . More people to talk to when I was depressed" (Allen, personal communication, January 8, 2014). Another said, "I really wished back then somebody would have been there to just say, 'You can talk to me whenever you want'; . . . [it] would have helped a lot" (Jackie, personal communication, December 6, 2013). School counsellors, family counsellors, addiction counsellors, treatment centres, and psychiatrists have a role as service providers in mental-health

matters. They help their patients to deconstruct inaccurate perceptions and unhealthy habits and to reconstruct new ones, including new dreams and better coping skills, during and/or after the periods of awakening that come with reflection on major life events and difficult experiences. Another participant recommended, "[The guidance counsellor] kind [of is] like a third parent. Everyone needs those in their lives. Yeah, . . . a lot of . . . information. They are gonna listen to somebody else than their own parents." (Eli, personal communication, December 6, 2013). It is critical that education policies make such services easily accessible to First Nations people, without stigma and other impediments, irrespective of age, gender, sexual identity, and the frequency and duration needed for good mental health (because mental health issues can be repetitive and escalate, as I observed in this study); and with families, schools, and the community serving as key informants on the early signs.

6. I recommend that more programs be offered to give learners experiential knowledge and a foretaste of university life and expectations. Learners who visit and explore university campuses and programs and attend university lectures in large and/or familiar culture-based settings typical of Aboriginal-related courses would become familiar with university life and inspired to enroll. A participant commented, "In fact, I think they should have given us a better idea of what university would have been like versus school [K-12]. . . . I think that was huge for me" (Andrea, personal communication, December 5, 2013). Therefore, I recommend that K-12 institutions on and off reserve, upgrading institutions/programs, and universities collaborate and increase the number of visits to universities for students as part of their career exploration programs to enable

them to develop and reinforce a university habitus and have an accurate view of university to inspire their transition to university later.

7. I recommend the implementation of mandatory, experiential, and accessible career exploration programs and courses in elementary school to facilitate self-discovery and career decisions. To cultivate students' imagination and help them to envisage the possibilities (Winch & Gingell, 2004), it is essential that career exploration programs and courses be mandatory and experiential to expose learners to potential career and education pathways early in their education. In Canada, many career exploration programs are available (Government of BC, n.d.; Northern Lights School Division, n.d.; The Learning Partnership, 2013). But, as one participant noted, they might be limited in reserve schools: "You don't really hear much of opportunities. . . . [The information should be coming from] . . . school advisors [guidance counsellors], . . . which my school [on reserve] didn't have" (Danny, personal communication, January 31, 2014). The Learning Partnership study of career education programs across Canada showed that there is no consistent approach, although the pockets of innovative work that are occurring need to be shared. However, data on students' transition are unavailable to assess their effectiveness. The Learning Partnership concluded that "some provinces offer few experiential learning opportunities outside of the classroom walls" (p. 24). One participant suggested that students need to be "aware of the opportunities, . . . things that they can learn; . . . I mean, hands-on learning" (Andrea, personal communication, January 5, 2014). Monyiham (2015), drawing on Engeström's ideas on how learning from diverse situations and environments engages learners, recommended the integration of "vertical and horizontal learning" (p. 205) as well as formal and informal learning.

Hence, I recommend that governments ensure that schools offer mandatory career exploration education before high school that are appealing and hands-on and that include learner-tracking systems to assess the programs' effectiveness. Continuous and expanded partnerships among schools, governments, the private sector, the public sector, and NGOs are necessary for its success.

8. I recommend that institutional support for learners at upgrading institutions/programs be increased to facilitate their career and education decisions and assist them with the admission application process. Assistance with career and education plans and the completion of their applications is critical to the educational transition of First Nations learners. One participant identified what students need:

> Being able to talk to my administrators at school on what my goals were, where I wanted to go. They [the upgrading school] look for my options for me and lay it all out for me. . . . I wouldn't know where to start. . . . I wouldn't know how to apply for university. (Andrea, personal communication, December 5, 2013)

Therefore, I recommend that governments recognise upgrading institutions/programs as key players in the transition to university and make this role part of their core mandate, if it is not already. I also recommend that governments and universities collaborate with upgrading institutions/programs and bolster their resources to help these institutions to maintain adequate guidance and counselling services and application assistance for learners at such strategic periods in their lives to improve the interinstitutional transition.

9. I recommend that schools increase access to sports and scholarships for high school completion and university to inspire First Nations learners. It is apparent that investing in sports scholarships for a university or any PSE education and broadening First Nations students' chances of receiving these scholarships for either the competitive or the

intramural sports in which they participate is required in their education field. Participating students at any grade level who excel in their academic work should be eligible for these scholarships. Although sports involvement motivates academic achievement (Trudeau & Shephard, 2008), this type of scholarship motivates and rewards students for the time-management skills, hard work, and focus that culminate in good academic performance (Tufte, 2012).

10. I recommend that the capacity of First Nations families and communities to improve their support for individuals with personal struggles be increased and that they be inspired to pursue further education. It is critical to build their competency to instill positive qualities in families and communities to enable them to offer informed career advice and identify and support members who are facing personal struggles. This recommendation is premised on the devastation of the First Nations cultural and social infrastructure through colonialism and its policies, which need to be rebuilt (TRC, 2015a). Also, research-based strategies to instill equal expectations for males and females to succeed in the school field would minimise the disparities in males' and females' capital. This will enable healthy and motivating expectations to flourish among both genders. Key training for families should include parenting/guardianship and mental health training that is built on First Nations' cultural understanding of parenting, mental health, and wholeness and grounded in a preventive strength-based approach that "focuses on building protection, rather than reducing risk" (Rasmus et al., 2016, p. 162). As well, I recommend that the families, schools, communities, and peer groups in children's lives learn to build the capacity for positive youth development that

> 1. Promotes bonding 2. Fosters resilience 3. Promotes social competence
> 4. Promotes emotional competence 5. Promotes cognitive competence

> 6. Promotes behavioral competence 7. Promotes moral competence 8. Fosters self-determination 9. Fosters spirituality 10. Fosters self-efficacy 11. Fosters clear and positive identity 12. Fosters belief in the future 13. Provides recognition for positive behavior 14. Provides opportunities for prosocial involvement 15. Fosters prosocial norms. (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004, pp. 101-102)

I further recommend that training integrate secular knowledge and cultural knowledge in ways that are compatible with, experiential, and relevant to the Aboriginal worldview and deliver them in tandem with community events that generate significant interest and participation.

11. I recommend the establishment and promotion of programs to recognise, celebrate, and reward family and external individuals who inspire the transition to university. The strategic activity of participating in recognition ceremonies in which learners have nominated people in their lives who have inspired their educational transition focuses attention not only on learners who have excelled, which is often the case, but also on those who inspired their transitions who are often undisclosed and hidden from the limelight. This includes families, (i.e., grandparents, parents, siblings, and extended family), friends, significant others, teachers, school principals, school staff, mentors, coaches, role models, and others. I also recommend that schools, communities, governments, NGOs, and other stakeholders partner to establish such recognition events.
12. I recommend that programs be expanded to bring multiple generations together and facilitate dialogue to enable young people to gain wisdom and be inspired for their future. Adults are often interested in sharing ideas about life from their passion to influence young people positively. A safe informal or formal avenue for these kinds of conversations would have a transformational impact on young people’s careers and education. Workshops, career fairs, conversation cafes, and community gatherings are

vehicles for such dialogue. Thus, I recommend that communities and educators establish and expand opportunities for multigenerational dialogue between young people and Elders to enable the young people to learn and become inspired by the Elders' wisdom. This will lead to the intentional utilisation of social and cultural capital.

13. I recommend that mandatory K-12 courses include a mental health enhancing component and the history and contributions of Aboriginal peoples to Canada to build respectful relationships. Rather than voluntary programs outside the school, I recommend that mandatory curriculum from K-12 include various content on wellness topics such as anger management, stress management, family-relationship skills, positive self-esteem, and ways for students to motivate themselves and inspire others and to help them to build a positive self-concept from childhood. As Rasmus et al. (2016) noted in their strengths-based study in Native communities in the Pacific Northwest, "Gaining knowledge of one's own personal strengths and special abilities contributes to protection. Honoring oneself, as one is, and learning to speak from the heart, build resilience" (p. 174). Also, the TRC (2015b) recognised that educating Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people on treaties, the impact of residential school, and the historic and contemporary contributions of Aboriginal peoples is critical to reconcile and establish a nonracist, respectful relationship between Aboriginal peoples and non-Aboriginal people. Therefore, I recommend that the province integrate this content into the curriculum and civic education. Sharing knowledge about Aboriginal peoples has the potential to disrupt the misrecognition and undervaluation of their capitals. These strategies serve to decolonise education (Abdi & Richardson, 2008). I also recommend that Aboriginal community

leaders play a significant role in the development and delivery of the curriculums and programs.

14. I recommend that teacher education and professional development incorporate an understanding of careers, Indigenous methods in classrooms, and ways to inspire students’ educational progress. New knowledge constantly emerges from research, and it is critical to keep teachers up to date to improve their understanding of Aboriginal learners and develop strategies to inspire them. I recommend that the knowledge from this study be incorporated into the teacher education curriculum and professional-development modules to ensure that all teachers, both those in training and those already trained, have this knowledge to guide their praxis. Further, I recommend that teachers who are experts in career education be assigned to teach career exploration courses to ensure that their students understand the full range of careers and education options. Also in keeping with the TRC (2015b), because the use of Indigenous methods is necessary in classrooms with Aboriginal learners, I recommend that teachers be taught and utilise tools to incorporate Indigenous methods in their classrooms. Some of the methods include:
    - Hands-on learning via mentorship and apprenticeship;
    - Land-centred activities in which teachers use land to teach students about the relationships among humans and other constituents of the Earth to build identity and a sense of place;
    - Learning with artisans and Elders as the holders of knowledge to observe Indigenous protocols and pedagogical practices through story work and songs

will inspire teachers to reflect critically on the Eurocentric protocols and practices that they learned in teacher-education programs; and

- Community co-learning/investigation involving partnership with Elders, teachers-in-training, and practicum supervisors, in which teachers are considered as experts to share what they know as a way of negotiating Indigenous knowledge and their standard curriculum and teaching practices (Madden, 2015).

When teaching and learning are grounded in the lived experiences of learners, the democratic platform empowers them (Bohman, 2004; McLaren, 1998, 2009; Steinhauer, 1999). Teachers can then identify, value, and engage First Nations learners' ore of capital in the school field and inspire them in their transition to postsecondary learning.

12. I recommend that education policy be implemented to enforce teaching at grade level and tutoring for those who are struggling to ensure that classrooms are challenging. Policies that enforce teaching at grade level in regular classes prevent the temptation to lower standards, which demotivates others. Therefore, I recommend that governments and education leaders establish and enforce policies to ensure that teachers teach at learners' grade level. As Cherkowski (2010) noted, teachers play a unique role in reshaping school culture by recognising and addressing issues of diversity, for instance, within the education space. To complement this policy, I recommend school-funded tutorial sessions in small classes to offer students one-on-one assistance in a supportive, rigorous, motivating environment that includes snacks and rewards to attract learners and maintain their interest, both after school and during vacations to help them to catch up. Addressing low expectations will encourage school achievement and ease learners' transition to PSE.

13. I recommend that institutions and communities employ the help of TYP students and graduates to increase the awareness of TYP-like programs. Knowledge of the TYP and its admission requirements earlier rather than later is pertinent to First Nations learners' transition to university. Graduate students, undergraduate students, band offices, and ASSC outreach teams can become instrumental advocates and advertisers of the TYP if they hold frequent TYP information sessions and trade shows for learners in upgrading schools and high school (and even in the earlier grades). One participant suggested a way to disseminate this information to learners: "I think the band should have more grad students and undergrads go and do talks, and not just once a year; like, once a month. I think that would be good" (Charles, personal communication, November 23, 2013). Aside from offering outreach in high school and the earlier grades to help learners to understand their options and be able to make informed decisions on postsecondary studies, involving TYP students or alumni in advertising and on marketing teams will inspire other First Nations students to consider themselves capable and will be an effective tool to recruit learners. One participant suggested:

> And if . . . someone like me who could be a poster boy to go around and tell these organisations, tell all these bands in the Alberta area, not just Treaty 6, but Treaty 7, Treaty 8 to the north. Like, [you tell them], "You wanna go to university? There is a way." (Charles, personal communication, November 23, 2013)

Therefore, I recommend that First Nations learners receive information on the TYP early in high school or sooner and that the outreach include monthly workshops and trade shows involving TYP students and graduates, band administration, upgrading schools, and ASSC teams.

14. I recommend that governments and universities expand the TYP types of programs to improve learners' access. It is important to bridge gaps in the education field by

increasing access to these types programs because of the difficulties that First Nations learners face in school. The effectiveness of the TYP in facilitating First Nations learners' transition to university makes it critical that governments and universities allocate resources to increase the number of such programs. A participant validated this idea: "TYP [should be] in other universities. [It] will probably do really well, because it did with me. . . . If it wasn't here, . . . I wouldn't be here!" (Fiona, personal communication, December 13, 2013).

15. I recommend that universities expand the TYP to include support services such as housing for First Nations learners and childcare for those with families to encourage them to transition to university. The significant cost burden on students with families who enroll in university in the city makes it necessary to provide childcare and housing, at minimum, to encourage potential First Nations individuals with children who are considering a university education. According to a participant, "A lot . . . of kids wanna go to university. . . . The TYP is one of those routes. . . . TYP not only should include academics, but should also include . . . housing, . . . childcare, because you have a lot of mature students" (Wally, personal communication, December 13, 2013). I also recommend that federal and provincial governments and universities should collaborate with existing government social/affordable housing agencies, university housing, and the PSSSP programs for convenient and minimal to no-cost housing and childcare solutions for learners to ease the disproportionate gender effects of child-raising responsibility on females' transition to university.

This study revealed several grey areas, as well as areas that require more exploration. In the next section I offer my ideas for potential research.

## Potential Areas for Future Research

This study has demonstrated that more research is required to understand more deeply the various complex aspects of First Nations education at play in learners' transitional journey. The following research questions need further exploration, which might benefit from qualitative and perhaps quantitative research:

- How do First Nations new parents as a demographic group navigate their way to university or other PSE, and what strengths and challenges does this experience involve?
- How are former TYP students faring six years after they enter university? This study will help to understand retention, attrition, and the school-to-work transition.
- How do students feel about their community's perception when they are in university, and how do they adapt when they return? Such studies would unveil the experience of adapting the knowledge and skills that they learn in their communities and how the community's response to learners' university experience affect their ambitions and work decisions.
- What supports are available in the community for First Nations university learners, and how do these supports help learners to adapt to the community during their university attendance and after graduation?
- What are families' perceptions of TYP learners' transition process and their role in the process, from the families' perspective?
- What are the perceptions of junior high and senior high school students of university education? What do they know about university? Are they interested in a university education, and what shapes their interest?

- What is the role of spirituality in the transition of First Nations learners to postsecondary learning?
- What is First Nations learners' sense of capital? Do gender disparities exist? How does their sense of capital shape the education transition of males and females?

The final section constitutes my last words to readers about my expectations, surprises in the study, the impact of the study on me, and the next steps.

## Reflections on Research: My Last Words

This study was more than an academic endeavour to extend the boundaries of the intellect by generating insights to inform educational policies and practice. My passion to understand the ways in which First Nations learners are inspired to transition to university by examining their hopes, their 'get-back-up' attitude, and their triumphant stories (see Cherkowski & Walker, 2016) rather than taking a deficit-oriented focus has been rewarding. However, this passion would be unfruitful if this study did not make me a better person. Aside from some of the surprising findings, I wondered whether my readers would find the inspiration and courage in this work to follow dreams that seem impossible and whether they would feel empowered to inspire others.

I value the work of Bourdieu, which was foundational to this study; my initial doctoral supervisor, Dr. Alison Taylor, who guided me in exploring my fascination with Bourdieu and shaped my conception of the study; and my First Nations supervisors, who made me question my assumptions and those of Bourdieu, which deepened my engagement with this study. As Cree scholars from northern Alberta, my doctoral supervisors, Dr. Evelyn L. Steinhauer and Dr. Trudy M. Cardinal, encouraged me to think carefully about how I used Bourdieu's work. Their cultural and intellectual insights helped me to understand the data and centre the voices of my participants to produce credible conclusions, and they enabled me to apply Bourdieu's theory in ways that honoured and respected the lives of the learners.

Further, my initial intention in this study was to focus particularly on gender, race, and SES issues to draw out the importance of spirituality (which is key to the First Nations identity) in the learners' transition. My emphasis on gender resulted from my prior research on gender issues in community development. I was intrigued to discover that gender affects the transition to university, although it is often subsumed under the struggles of families with children. Unlike in my transition story, in which spirituality was a prominent inspiration, I discovered that the learners rarely identified spirituality as a key trigger of inspiration. However, I recognised that the learners might have chosen not to open up to me on this aspect of their journey, in keeping with protocol, and might have perceived my lack of familiarity as a non-Aboriginal woman of African descent.

Because I understand that no First Nations learners come into this world empty handed, and I identified what I called *ore of capital*, I believe that inspiration is necessary to enable this ore to become engaged in the education process. I remember my elementary teacher who asked others to emulate my impressive dance moves in drama and dance class and another middle school teacher who said that I could qualify for enrollment in a high-performing school. Teachers are not the only ones who inspire others; everyone has a role in eliciting creativity, a can-do attitude, and actions toward achieving dreams/goals that seem impossible.

Finally, my passion has been to inspire others through my actions and words, and this study has invigorated me to continue to do so and to reach out to those who can become inspirations to others on their education journey. Therefore, I call on people of all races, colours, creeds, sexes, genders, socioeconomic backgrounds, and the like and to all those with whom the responsibility to be an inspiration lies (which includes family, community members, and external relations) to join the cause of inspiring others. Perhaps the findings also validate the call to mentor those who will join me in inspiring others to pursue further education and enjoy the benefits thereof. I trust that my readers will find hope in circumstances that are perceived as difficult as I did. I hope that they will also find the inspiration to shake off the doubts and struggles that challenge their dreams. I hope that we can lift each other's spirits to soar like eagles. I hope that education will fulfil its promise of "aiming for, and achieving the best possible outcomes for all who partake" (Abdi & Richardson, 2008, p. 8).

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# APPENDIX A: NOTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Date: | October 30, 2013 | |
| Study ID: | Pro00040061 | |
| Principal Investigator: | Cynthia Arku | |
| Study Supervisor: | Alison Taylor | |
| Study Title: | An Intersectional Perspective on University Transitions Among Aboriginal Adult Males and Females | |
| Approval Expiry Date: | October 29, 2014 | |
| Sponsor/Funding Agency: | SSHRC - Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council | SSHRC |

Thank you for submitting the above study to the Research Ethics Board 1. Your application has been reviewed and approved on behalf of the committee.

A renewal report must be submitted next year prior to the expiry of this approval if your study still requires ethics approval. If you do not renew on or before the renewal expiry date, you will have to re-submit an ethics application.

Approval by the Research Ethics Board does not encompass authorization to access the staff, students, facilities or resources of local institutions for the purposes of the research.

Sincerely,

William Dunn, Ph.D.
Chair, Research Ethics Board 1

*Note: This correspondence includes an electronic signature (validation and approval via an online system).*

# APPENDIX B: INFORMATION LETTER TO INSTITUTION

**Research Investigator:**
Cynthia Arku
7 – 167K Education North
Educational Policy Studies
University of Alberta
Edmonton, AB, AB T6G 2G5
**Email:** carku@ualberta.ca
**Phone:** 780 531-3189

**Supervisor:**
Dr. Alison Taylor
7- 142 Education North
Educational Policy Studies
University of Alberta
Edmonton, AB, T6G 2G5
**Email:** ataylor@ualberta.ca
**Phone:** 780 492-7608

September 26, 2013

To Whom It May Concern

Tansi, Good day:

I am inviting your Transition Year Program (TYP) students and a couple of your staff to participate in a research that is looking at how Aboriginal adults journeyed their way to come to university. I am a graduate student in the Educational Policy Studies program in Faculty of Education at University of Alberta.

As part of my PhD studies, I am researching Aboriginal adult learners' journey to university. The research is titled **"An intersectional perspective on university transitions among Aboriginal adult males and females."** The study will highlight Aboriginal males' and females' experiences of enablers and inhibitors to their coming to university, as well as how they navigated their way to make it to university. The purpose is to identify policies and practices that can improve the university participation of Aboriginal adults.

I plan to interview 10 Aboriginal male and female (i.e., First Nations, Métis and Inuit) students in TYP or who have graduated from TYP. Interview questions will focus on the following areas:

1. Career and educational aspirations.
2. Activities that learner was involved with prior to university.
3. Individual perceptions on gender, race and socio-economic status.
4. Barriers to attending university earlier.
5. How adult decided to come to university - what happened and who influenced decision?
6. How gender helped or hampered male's or female's university transitions.
7. How being Aboriginal helped or hampered male's or female's university transitions.
8. How socio-economic status helped or hampered university transitions.
9. How learner challenged their socio-cultural conditioning to make it to university.
10. Opportunities that facilitated their transition.
11. How adult would change his/her experience of coming to university, if he/she could.

TYP students or TYP graduates **who will fit this study are those who**:

- Self-identify as Aboriginal who are either in the TYP program or have gone on to take university studies after TYP; and
- Lived on a reserve or in a Métis Settlement during K-12 education for at least two years.

Each person will be asked to meet at *twice* for interviews at a quiet venue of their choice during October 2013 to April 2014. The first interview will be a general conversation about learners' education journey and the second will involve a follow-up to discuss further some of the stories already shared. The interviews will last for approximately 45 minutes to an hour for each interview. Interview will be recorded using audio equipment. Each person at the end of the first meeting will receive a gift of $ 50 in appreciation of participants' time and for any transportation and parking fees.

Participants will be able to look over the recordings. After the study report is completed, the recording will be stored in protected computer files. The files will be kept for not less than five years and will be safe. I do not expect any harm to you if you participate.
I would like your permission to interview your staff and students.

Sincerely,

Cynthia Arku

# APPENDIX C: STUDENT PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Name: ______________________ Place: _________________ Date: __________ Time: __________

| | |
|---|---|
| **Research Investigator:** | **Supervisor:** |
| Cynthia Arku | Dr. Alison Taylor |
| 7 – 167K Education North | 7- 142 Education North |
| Educational Policy Studies | Educational Policy Studies |
| University of Alberta | University of Alberta |
| Edmonton, AB, AB T6G 2G5 | Edmonton, AB, T6G 2G5 |
| **Email**: carku@ualberta.ca | **Email**: ataylor@ualberta.ca |
| **Phone**: 780 531-3189 | **Phone:** 780 492-7608 |

I am inviting you to participate in a research about your experiences making your way to university which is titled **"An intersectional perspective on university transitions among Aboriginal adult males and females."** My name is Cynthia Arku, and I am a student at the University of Alberta. I am researching into this topic out of inspiration from my life experiences and interest in understanding your journey as an Aboriginal learner. This is part of my PhD studies.

Your story together with others' will show the experiences of Aboriginal males and females and point any differences and similarities in how you decided to come to university. This research will not benefit you directly; however, your contribution will provide a better understanding of how Aboriginal males and females decide to attend university. Also, the knowledge will guide how to improve the paths to university for Aboriginal adults. I do not expect any harm to you if you participate.

If you agree to take part in this research study, your participation will involve being interviewed twice, at a venue of your choice during October 2013 to April 2014. The first interview will be a general conversation about your education journey and the second will involve a follow-up to talk about some of the stories you have already shared. The interview will last for not more than 45 minutes to an hour for each interview. The interview will be recorded (i.e., audio) and the information will be used in a research report, presentations or publications, however your identities will never become public. You will receive a gift of $ 50 for any transportation and parking fees for the interviews and for your time. The gift will be given to you at the end of the first interview.

Participation is completely voluntary. You are not obliged to answer any specific questions if participating in the study. Even if you agree to be in the study you can change your mind and withdraw at any time. You can opt out without penalty and can ask to have any collected data withdrawn from the data base and not included in the study. You can request withdrawal of data provided within four weeks after receiving typed recording of an interview.

You will be able to look over the typed recordings. After the study report is completed, the recording will be stored in a secured locked office for not less than five years. At the end of 5th year, the data will be securely destroyed. Data collected will be accessible only to researcher, supervisor and possibly the Research Ethics Board.

Should you agree to participate, you have the following rights. Please put a check mark (i.e. √) to show that you understand each point:

____ To participate out of will.
____ To withdraw at any time during the interview and to withdraw your information at any time.
____ To withdraw and have any collected information removed and not included in the project.

____ To not being identified and to have your information treated as private by using fake names instead.
____ To safeguard information (to be kept for 5 years after the research is completed).
____ To make data collected accessible only to researcher, supervisor and Research Ethics Board.
____ To copy of the recording to look over.

If you have any comments or questions, please contact any of the contacts above.

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. This office has no direct involvement with this project. The Research Ethics Committee always may have access to your information. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research and any concerns about the study, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

**Consent Statement**

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have additional questions, I have been told whom to contact. I agree to participate in the research study described above and will receive a copy of this consent form. I will receive a copy of this consent form after I sign it.

Participant Signature: ____________________________________ Date: _________________________

Researcher Signature: ____________________________________ Date: _________________________

THANK YOU!

# APPENDIX D: AN INTERSECTIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON UNIVERSITY TRANSITION FOR ABORIGINAL ADULT MALES AND FEMALES

## Interview Guide

### Pre-interview questions

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. Where do you live?
3. Are you Métis, First Nation or Inuit?
4. Where are you from?
5. Tell me about the community where you are from? Description.
6. Where did you do your K-12 education?
7. How old are you?
8. Marital status? Any children? How many?
9. Which year did you come to TYP?

### Main Questions

10. How did you decide to come to university—what happened, what/who influenced your decision? (This is the main question. As per biographical study, first, I ask to get general story of whatever participant wants to share about journey to university uninterrupted. The rest of the questions are follow-ups).
11. What were you doing before you eventually came to university?
12. Why did you choose to come to university?
13. What do you hope to get out of university? What would you do with what you get?
14. Would you have liked to come to university sooner? Why?
15. Would it have been easier for you to come to university if you were a different gender? How?
16. Would it have been easier for you to come to university if you were non-Aboriginal? How? Any challenges/opportunities for being Aboriginal?

17. Would it have been easier for you to come to university if your family income was different? How? What is your socio-economic status? Describe. How did money play a role in your decision to come to university?

18. How would you describe your journey to university? Would you consider it a smooth sailing? How?

19. If you had a brother (or sister), do you think his experiences would be different from yours? How?

20. What kind of supports helped you to make it to university?

21. Would you change your experience of how you made it to university if you could? How?

22. What would have helped you to make it to university sooner if you wished?

23. What ways can ease coming to university for Aboriginal peoples?