

EXAMINING THE INFLUENCE OF ABORIGINAL LITERATURE ON
ABORIGINAL STUDENTS' RESILIENCE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF
SASKATCHEWAN

A Thesis Submitted to the College of Graduate Studies and Research

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of Master of Education

In the Department of Educational Foundations

University of Saskatchewan

Saskatoon

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2014

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Abstract

There are many Aboriginal (First Nation, Métis and Inuit) students attending Canadian universities who remain resilient despite the multiple challenges that arise during their first year of studies. This thesis focused on six undergraduate Aboriginal students attending the University of Saskatchewan who learned about resilience as it was demonstrated in Aboriginal novels, plays, poetry and short stories, taught in their university courses. Aboriginal literature with a fictional or non-fictional autobiographical voice demonstrated characters and people who prevailed over hardships without giving up. A combination of Indigenous methodology and grounded theory methods were used in this qualitative study, to analyze how Aboriginal students were learning from Aboriginal literature about their own resilience. Resilience in this study is defined by the *Nehiyaw* (Cree) concept of *Miyo-Pimatisiwin* (The Good Life), which refers to relying on traditional Aboriginal concepts, values and perspectives in striving for a good life and being attentive to wholistic growth and balance of the four areas of self: physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual (Hart, 2002, p. 13). This study found that Aboriginal students' resilience is influenced by Aboriginal literature taught in undergraduate courses in three valuable ways: coping with personal and academic challenges, engagement in university learning with a sub-theme of approaches of professors validating Aboriginal literature and experiences, and personal growth and transformation. The University of Saskatchewan has recently announced initiatives aimed at increasing Aboriginal student retention and success, and this study lends support to the development of measures to increase the University of Saskatchewan's aspirations in this regard.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I extend my thanks to my supervisor Dr. Karla Jessen Williamson and committee member Dianne Miller for your guidance, patience and support in this lengthy and oftentimes frustrating process of writing a thesis.

I also acknowledge the support of my professors in the College of Education for offering your words of advice at what seemed to be the exact times I needed them: Marie Battiste, Verna St. Denis, Maggie Kovach, Alex Wilson, Howard Woodhouse, Robert Regnier and Michelle Prytula.

Thank you Karla, Yvette Arcand, Kristina Bidwell, Howard Woodhouse and Robert Innes for giving me the opportunity to teach your students. An extra thank you to Yvette and Kristina for continuously being available to share your experiences and knowledge related to my thesis topic.

I acknowledge the support I received from my colleagues and friends in the Department of Educational Foundations: Yolanda Palmer, Marlene Mckay, Ryan Jimmy and Curline Lindo who offered your perspectives, encouragement and support, sometimes by editing my work. Thank you Cody Dill for helping me to learn how to use NVivo.

Thank you to my children Achai and Dombek for sacrificing quality time with me so I could write my master's thesis. And thank you to my siblings Sheila, Noreen, Cheri, Faith, Lynam, Ableheza, Warner, Jamie, and Alisa (and Shaundell, Marlena and Joanne) for listening to my ideas and having discussions during our visits to help me make sense of my writing. *Kinanaskomitin* to my parents Armand J. and Cecilia and *kohkom* Emma for your spiritual support through prayer and ceremony.

I acknowledge the Waterhen Lake First Nation and the Department of Educational Foundations for your financial support as I pursued my master's degree.

And finally thank you to the participants of my study: *Nohkom Kanehkan Apit, Adjgaliaq*, Chris, Jimmy, Cindy and Raine for sharing your inspirational stories and making it possible to complete my thesis.

Kitatahiminawaw kahkiyaw (Thanks to all of you)!

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my children Achai and Dombek.

I also dedicate this thesis to my parents, Armand J. Fiddler (Red Spotted Wing) and Cecilia M. Fiddler (Walking Bearclaw Woman). You showed me what resilience truly means by retaining Nehiyaw traditions and overcoming struggles as survivors of residential school.

And to Nohkom (my grandmother) Emma Ernest, who continues to be resilient every day. Thank you for including me in your thoughts and prayers.

Prologue

I begin this thesis by locating myself, as this is necessary when using Indigenous research methodologies, in which positionality, storying, and re-storing ourselves comes first (Steinhauer, 2002; Wilson, 2003; Wilson, 2008; McIvor, 2010; Absolon, 2011).

I am a *Nehiyaw* (Plains Cree) woman from the Treaty Six Territory, Saskatchewan, Canada. My name is Christine Fiddler and my spiritual name is *Nanastewskwew*, a name that was given to me by my *chapan* (maternal great-grandmother) Florence Crookedneck. My *Nehiyaw* name does not translate well into the English language but the closest explanation to distinguish its meaning is the spiritual energies in the form of heat-waves that emanate from the sun.

I was born and raised on the Waterhen Lake First Nation in northwest Saskatchewan, the fourth of eleven children to Armand Joseph Fiddler and Cecilia Mary Madeline Fiddler. My father is *Nehiyaw* -Métis through his paternal lineage. My mother was raised with *Nehiyaw* values and customs by both her parents, Bruno and Emma Ernest and many times was sent to stay with my *chapan*, Florence. I feel very fortunate that my mother retained *Nehiyaw* beliefs, values, and practices from her mother and grandmother and taught me some of this knowledge as one her six daughters.

My parents are fluent *Nehiyaw* speakers of the y-dialect and all my grandparents spoke it fluently. My maternal grandmother, Emma, is the only one of my grandparents still living and she speaks only the *Nehiyaw* language because she did not go to residential school. Today, I attempt to speak it in our conversations with my parents and grandmother but struggle with understanding full sentences, pronunciation and the proper usage.

In their childhood, my parents attended the Beauval Indian Residential School in northern Saskatchewan. Two of my grandparents, Bruno Ernest and Cecile Bear were also sent to the residential schools at Delmas and Beauval. My childhood and educational learning were impacted by the struggles my parents and grandparents went through dealing with the trauma of witnessing and experiencing the various physical, sexual, emotional, and spiritual abuses in these schools. Growing up, I saw my parents cope with alcoholism, dysfunctional relationships, depression, internalized racism and shame, unresolved grief, and a shift in beliefs from Christianity to reclaiming traditional spiritual practices. Although they have been through the residential school system, they have shown resilience in retaining their *Nehiyaw* spiritual knowledge and language, educating themselves, their children and grandchildren, and taking action to heal from abuses.

In reflecting on how Aboriginal literature has been a source of resilience for me, I recollected my childhood memories, when I first came across books by Aboriginal authors. I was 9-years-old when I started to read the collection of books that my mother—who was an avid reader—kept around our house. When I was twelve, I found three autobiographical Aboriginal books: one by Métis author Maria Campbell called *Halfbreed* (1973) and two others which were the two-part series by Linda Davison Stafford called *Crying Wind* (1977) and *My Searching Heart* (1980). Stafford's book told of her experiences leaving the reservation and overcoming her struggles after marrying a Christian man, converting to Christianity and becoming an Evangelical motivational speaker. I found Stafford's books really interesting because at that time, in 1989, it was rare to see Aboriginal people represented in any book in our community.

However, I did not really gain any inspiration from her stories. I recently learned that Stafford fabricated her identity as a Kickapoo Native American Indian growing up in poverty and hardship on a reservation, when instead she was a white woman from Colorado.

When I read Campbell's book I remember I cried while reading about all the hardship she endured. I found it especially sad when her mother died and her large family was separated. I thought of my own family and some of the problems my parents were experiencing: my father with his alcoholism and my mother as she chose an alcohol-free lifestyle while striving to maintain their relationship. Campbell's book made me consider how my situation could change for the worse if something were to happen to my parents, especially my mother. So I felt fortunate to have my parents alive and everyone together. This was also the time I started to imagine the possibility of writing a book myself.

I remember talking to my mother afterward about how much I liked Campbell's book and expressed my admiration for Campbell as a writer. My mother told me the book was given to her at an Aboriginal women's gathering where Campbell was a guest speaker. She said that after meeting Campbell and hearing her speak, she was left with an unfavorable impression and voiced a common *Nehiyaw* term: "*e-imstimisooyit*" (he/she thinks a lot of him/herself, as higher than others). When I read the book for a second time in university I remembered my mother's words and found a reference Campbell made to *Nehiyawak* (Cree people), in which she compared them to the Métis:

Then there were our Indian relatives on the nearby reserves. There was never much love lost between Indians and Halfbreeds. They were completely different from us—

quiet when we were noisy, dignified even at dances and get-togethers. Indians were very passive—they would get angry at things done to them but would never fight back, whereas Halfbreeds were quick-tempered—quick to fight, but quick to forgive and forget (p. 25).

On the next page she commented further on her observations of *Nehiyawak* during her visits to her *Nehiyaw* grandparents on the reserve, particularly in her observations of *Nehiyaw* women:

They took me to pow-wows, Sundances and Treaty Days, and through them I learned the meanings of those special days. *Mushoom* would also take me with him to council meetings which were always the same: the Indian agent called the meeting to order, did all the talking, closed it and left. I remember telling *Mushoom*, “You’re the chief. How come you don’t talk?” When I expressed my opinion in these matters, *Kokum* would look at *Mushoom* and say, “It’s the white in her.” Treaty Indian women don’t express their opinions, Halfbreed women do. Even though I liked visiting them, I was always glad to get back to the noise and disorder of my own people’ (p. 26).

Through reading this and as a result of later interactions, I came to the realization that many *Nehiyaw* and Métis women seem to have these conflicting views of one another: most Métis women often seem to consider *Nehiyaw* women as timid and submissive while most *Nehiyaw* women often consider Métis women as obnoxious, arrogant and disrespectful. Despite Campbell’s negatives references to *Nehiyaw* people, I was glad to see a book about Aboriginal people and the familiar experiences as an Aboriginal person represented in the literature.

I met Campbell around twenty years later when I was a reporter covering a university graduation. She was a special guest speaker and I was placed at the same table as her. I sat beside her throughout the event and talked to her a bit, telling her how much I liked her book. She reminded a lot of my mom: she had white hair, she was kind, humble, and gentle, and nervous about speaking publicly. Once she gave her speech, she had a lot of wise words to share with the graduates, which demonstrated that she believed strongly in *Nehiyaw* traditions and the value of education for Aboriginal people. I interviewed a few of the graduates at the event and a student graduating in dentistry told me that she grew up in foster care. She told me that when she read Campbell's book, it inspired her to pursue education and make a good life for herself. I related my experience to what the newly graduated student shared about Campbell's book. As I framed my research topic during my Master's program, this led to my curiosity in examining how Aboriginal literature influences the resilience of Aboriginal students in university.

During my own childhood and teenage years, my parents both worked in a variety of capacities ranging from being leaders in chief and council, community development workers, and life skills coaches. My father was a hard worker who always provided well for his family. He made several efforts to overcome his alcoholism and has been sober since 1990. As my mother got older she entered the workforce herself, started a women's group in our community and continued to raise her eleven children along with some of our relatives' children. These children were our cousins from my father's side of the family, whom my parents offered to keep rather than see them go into foster homes. At one time, my mother was involved in an Aboriginal women's organization advocating for

women's rights and took me to some of her meetings. During my teenage years, I heard her voicing concerns for the government's actions and how it impacted our community.

I attended the on-reserve school until I graduated at 18 years old. I do not recall reading any Aboriginal literature in high school; however, I excelled in my English classes and easily comprehended the European and Euro-Canadian literature and poetry. When I graduated from high school, I made the choice to go on to university to gain more academic knowledge and independence, and get a good job.

In forming my study I reflected on my own experiences through post-secondary education as an undergraduate student, first at the First Nations University of Canada (formerly the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College), transferring in my second year to the University of Saskatchewan to major in English, and later as a graduate student in Educational Foundations.

Aboriginal and Native American literature became a source of my own resilience as a first-year university student when I read it for the first time in an academic environment. I enrolled at the First Nations University of Canada, where two university instructors assigned four books by Aboriginal and Native American authors as part of the reading list: Acoose's (1995) *Iskwewak Kah'-Ki Yaw Wakomakanak: Neither Indian Princesses Nor Easy Squaws*, Maria Campbell's (1973) *Halfbreed*, Tomson Highway's (1989) *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, and Leslie Marmon Silko's (1977) *Ceremony*. One of the greatest struggles I initially faced as a first-year university student was writing academic papers. The process was made much easier as I wrote responses to the "whiteman's palliative" in *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, "community consciousness" in *Ceremony*, and "stereotypes of Aboriginal Women in literature" as

presented in *Iskwewak Kah'-Ki Yaw Wakomakanak: Neither Indian Princesses Nor Easy Squaws*. Examining these literary works through from a First Nations' worldview was a pedagogical approach that appealed to me as stories revealed the implied Aboriginal concepts.

After reading this combination of literature I learned a lot about my identity and place as a First Nations person in Canada. I realize these literary works increased my self-esteem and made me feel proud about being a First Nations person. The stories presented in the literature helped me to draw similarities to my own experiences and the experiences of my parents and people in my community.

During my upbringing, my parents instilled in me some of this knowledge gained through their own education and experiences. My mother told me stories of being in residential school and the times her father had to get a pass to leave the community so he could travel to the nearest town. Reading this literature allowed me to build a clearer understanding of the author's—and my own perceptions—of similar social, political, cultural, and economic issues faced by all Aboriginal people. When I read about racism and the effects of colonization I became determined to succeed in university no matter what obstacles arose. My experiences with racism and the effects of colonization also made me more determined to succeed as I saw education as a source of empowerment. I hoped that attaining a university degree could give me the tools to hopefully do something to improve the circumstances for my family and community.

Learning came much more easily to me as I counted on my experiences and background knowledge as they related to Aboriginal literature. Had it not been for these opportunities to use Aboriginal literature as I learned how to write academic papers, I

believe I would have been more easily discouraged in my educational journey.

As I pursued an English degree at the University of Saskatchewan, I found that only a few courses were offered through the English department that focused solely on Aboriginal texts. Nonetheless, the inclusion of Aboriginal literary works built my own understanding of the topics addressed in the course. I was encouraged to do better, seek more knowledge through research, and eventually complete my undergraduate degree.

When I took the Honours English program in 2007, I noticed the continued lack of knowledge or references to Aboriginal perspectives in the professors' pedagogical approaches, although there were many opportunities to incorporate these into the course content. The few comparisons vocalized in classroom discussions were mired in stereotypical understandings about Aboriginal peoples. This stereotyping was discouraging to hear as an Aboriginal student, but being the only visible Aboriginal person in these classes often made me hesitant to correct these stereotypes. I thought about this situation as we read works including the Middle Welsh prose *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi*, the four French romances of Chretien de Troyes: Owein, Gereint and Peredur, and the 17th century tragicomedies of Elizabethan theatre. Afterward, many of the non-Aboriginal students (who comprised the majority of the class) made disparaging remarks about how situations in the stories compared to the lives of ancient Greeks, Irish or African American societies, rather than what could have been an opportunity to better understand these societies in a respectful manner as they resembled the oral traditions of Aboriginal people in Canada. The professor and my classmates seemed ignorant to the fact that they spoke about these references in a land that was originally that of Aboriginal peoples.

The class pedagogies challenged my own resilience to remain in these classrooms as I sensed this subtle form of racism and the colonial mindsets of some of my classmates and professors. As well, I felt the pressure to represent Aboriginal students in a positive manner by excelling in these classes when I barely understood the Euro-centric content. At the same time, a family crisis occurred when my younger sister experienced the onset of schizophrenia after she had an unsuccessful third year in university. I struggled to remain focused on my studies while offering support to my sister and parents. As an Aboriginal student it took a great amount of resilience for me to remain in these classes and get through my program of study.

Several factors helped me to foster my resilience in these circumstances. My cultural upbringing allowed me to be strong in my Aboriginal identity, beliefs, and perspectives, as well as the strength instilled in me by continuing to take part in ceremonies and spiritual practices. I remained hopeful about the future by focusing on my goals during difficulties, believing in my capabilities, seeking moral support from others, and continuing to be financially supported for university provisioned as a treaty right. I persisted through my undergraduate studies despite a variety of minimal difficult to extremely traumatic life experiences associated with the effects of colonization, discrimination based on my race and gender, Euro-centrism, and institutional and systemic racism.

Besides myself, two of my sisters and two brothers graduated from the Waterhen high school (the Waweyikisik Educational Centre) and enrolled in university, but they dropped out before getting their degrees. Three of them attended the University of Saskatchewan and one attended the First Nations University of Canada. All of them

returned to our home community afterward. My siblings have the intelligence to succeed in university: they are strong writers, diligent workers, and hold viewpoints influenced by the traditional knowledge and healing efforts taught by our parents. Despite this, they were unable to persevere in their studies although three of them attempted university a second time.

As the only family member who graduated with a university degree at this time of writing my thesis, I am frustrated to see my siblings unable to graduate from university. I wonder what allowed me to reach graduation and go on to graduate school and what was not, or is not, available to my siblings to help them through their educational journeys. Many people from my community, and as I have learned in all of Saskatchewan and Canada, face similar hardships in their attempts to complete their post-secondary studies. I am aware of the positive impact that reading Aboriginal literature had on me and how I was encouraged to succeed in education no matter what.

For the research framework of this thesis study, I use the metaphor of *mosahkina wihkaskwa* (gathering sweetgrass), a traditional *Nehiyaw* practice that involves self-preparation; gathering, sorting and combining *wihkaskwa* (sweetgrass); and using it for smudging. In a parallel comparison, the research process involves preparing, protocols, and permission to collect the data; gathering the data; organizing and grouping the data; writing up the results, and evaluating how the combined information may be valuable. Sections of this thesis are titled after the three sections of the *wihkask* (sweetgrass braid) which represent three *Nehiyaw* values: *kitimâkinakêwin* (compassion), *tapahtêyimisowin* (humility) and *sâkitowin* (love) (C. Fiddler, personal communication, February 12, 2014). I practiced *kitimâkinakêwin* during research preparation by choosing a topic area that

required attention, establishing protocols, and seeking permission to conduct the study. *Kitimâkinakêwin* was also heeded as I wrote the introduction, literature review, and methodology sections. I practiced *tapahtêyimisowin* as I met with participants, listened to their stories and presented these stories all with intentions of showing good relations, respect, and reciprocity. In the final stages I heeded the value *sâkitowin* as I sorted and grouped the pieces of participants' stories together, presented the results of my findings, and determined the usefulness of this research.

A large number of government and university reports, and academic studies mention high attrition rates of Aboriginal students at institutions of higher education and the growing achievement gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students (First Nations Education Council, 2009; Malatest, R. A. & Associates, 2002; Pidgeon, 2008-09; Redwing Saunders, 2007; University of Saskatchewan, 2012). I realize that the university is taking action to develop pedagogies that better support Aboriginal students' resilience and may be developing new pedagogical approaches in the years to come. Identifying this perpetual problem and possible solutions was a motivator in framing my research study and forming my research question: "How is the resilience of Aboriginal students at the University of Saskatchewan influenced by the Aboriginal literature currently taught in the post-secondary classroom?" The focus of this thesis is how students learn from Aboriginal stories of resilience by Canadian Aboriginal authors who have prevailed over difficult life circumstances and hardship without giving up. By interviewing a select group of Aboriginal students I uncovered some of the ways they have learned about their own resilience through Aboriginal literature and how they persisted through the challenges of attending university.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In several works of Indigenous¹ literature, authors often write down and tell their stories to a public audience in either a fictional or non-fictional autobiographical voice. The stories demonstrate the resilience of Indigenous people and how this resilience is manifested in difficult life circumstances. However, not every piece of Indigenous literature demonstrates resilience. As is the case with any genre of literary works, Indigenous authors have used writing as an artistic expression and medium in various ways not limited to their life stories.

For this thesis, I focus on Canadian Aboriginal² literature with a fictional or non-fictional autobiographical voice. Aboriginal literature with a fictional or non-fictional autobiographical voice serves as a public sphere and space for the voices of Aboriginal (First Nations, Métis, and Inuit³) people. This type of literature often has an emotional impact on Aboriginal readers and as a result, has a more profound resonance for them. As Episkenew (2009) stated, “reading literature by other Indigenous people who share

¹ Indigenous refers “a group of people defined by ancestral territory and common culture. Combined with the term *knowledge* it has come to signify a methodology, a social science perspective, and even philosophical and ideological positions... that rest on the recognition of the asymmetrical place of knowledge in the power relations historically constituted by the expansion of Europe” (Purcell, 1998, p.1).

² Aboriginal refers to “Status Indians, Non-Status Indians, Métis, and Inuit peoples of Canada” as defined in Section 35(2) of the Canadian Constitution (1982) but does not reflect the “distinctions among First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples who have their own histories, cultures and languages” From Ethical conduct for research involving humans (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2010, p. 105).

³ The Royal Commission of Aboriginal Peoples defined First Nations people as descendants of the first peoples in Canada. Many communities also use the term “First Nation” in the name of their community. Currently, there are 615 First Nations communities, which represent more than 50 nations or cultural groups and 50 Aboriginal languages. Métis are “one of three recognized Aboriginal peoples in Canada, along with the Indians (or First Nations) and Inuit”. Inuit are “the Aboriginal people of Arctic Canada. About 45,000 Inuit live in 53 communities in: Nunatsiavut [Nunavut and Nunavik]; and the Inuvialuit Settlement Region of the Northwest Territories.” (<http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1307458586498>).

the same experiences and who are able to articulate their feelings about those experiences can be a healing experience for both writers and readers” (p. 16). Indigenous autobiographical writing is an act of “reinventing” the colonizers’ language, manipulating the English language and its literary traditions to narrate Indigenous experiences in an effort to heal from colonial trauma (Episknew, 2009; Gold, 2001; Harjo & Bird, 1997; Pennebaker, 1997). Reading autobiographical Aboriginal literature with a fictional or non-fictional autobiographical voice may help Aboriginal students manifest resilience in new ways as they undergo the process of both healing and learning during their university studies.

Fleming & Ledogar (2008) outlined four main general meanings of resilience: good developmental outcomes despite high-risk status; sustained competence under stress, recovery from trauma, and positive adaptation despite adversity. This study looks specifically at the resilience of Aboriginal students in higher education. My research on Aboriginal students’ resilience is guided by the *Nehiyaw* (Cree) theoretical concept of *Miyo-Pimatisiwin* (The Good Life). I examined to what extent Aboriginal literature fosters the teachings of *Miyo-Pimatisiwin* for Aboriginal students and how factors of *Miyo-Pimatisiwin* influence Aboriginal students to remain in their university studies. For the purposes of this study, I rely on *Miyo-Pimatisiwin* (The Good Life) as a theoretical understanding of resilience, a theory clearly articulated by Hart (2002) in *Seeking Mino-Pimatisiwin*. While *Mino-Pimatisiwin* is the Swampy Cree n-dialect translation, for this study I altered it slightly to reflect my Plains Cree y-dialect, which translates to *Miyo-Pimatisiwin*.

I use *Miyo-Pimatisiwin* to demonstrate Aboriginal student resilience because the

Nehiyawak from the different linguistic and tribal groups share understandings of this concept. For many of the Swampy *Nehiyawak* of the Cumberland House area, *Miyo-Pimatisiwin* concerns a life of balance, whether it is with oneself and the environment, one seeks ways to contribute to the betterment of self and community. This *Nehiyaw* worldview is understood as operating under a paradigm of respect, responsibility, humility and reciprocity (M. Mckay, personal communication, November 4, 2014). Although *Miyo-Pimatisiwin* is understood a bit differently within each *Nehiyaw* territory, there are similarities in how *Nehiyaw* people understand its' inherent teachings.

The beliefs of other Indigenous groups such as the Dene, Saukteaux, Ojibway, Métis and Inuit are similar to the beliefs integral in the *Nehiyaw* concept of *Miyo-Pimatisiwin*. Although it is important to avoid pan-Indigenous generalizations about these similarities, there are enough similarities among Indigenous philosophies to apply concepts generally” (Kovach, 2009, p. 37; Little Bear, 2000, p. 29). Furthermore, Indigenous people “understand each other because we share a worldview that holds common, enduring beliefs about the world” (Kovach, 2009, p. 37). Weber-Pillwax (2004) described how Aboriginal people share common understandings when it concerns our connections with other human beings, the environment, the Creator, and the Creator’s agents, and relying on these connections to maintain us in life:

It is a connection to the specific localities, places, physical geographies, where we live and in which our ancestors have lived. The connection to people is not to people in general or to a collectivity, but to specific individuals, with real faces, personalities, histories, and identities, and no matter how we collectivize them, the connections are unique and individualized with each person (p. 89).

The Inuit people hold understandings similar to *Miyo-Pimatisiwin*, particularly when it comes to respecting the relationships between humans and the environment. However, also comparable to other Indigenous groups, Inuit beliefs differ substantially amongst linguistic groups and territories (K. Jessen-Williamson, personal communication, January 30, 2014).

Miyo-Pimatisiwin refers to the medicine wheel teachings, relying on traditional Aboriginal concepts, values and perspectives in striving for a good life. Hart (2002) described how balance is the aim of *Mino-Pimatisiwin* for *Nehiyawak*:

Balance occurs when a person is at peace and harmony within their physical, emotional, mental and spiritual humanness; with others in their family, community and the nation; and with all other living things, including the earth and natural world (Hart, 2002, p. 41).

Hart (2002) explained that Aboriginal people who strive to live according to the teachings of *Mino-Pimatisiwin*, pay attention to their own wholistic growth and balance of the four areas of self, relying on this concept to make better sense of the world. Aboriginal people seeking *Mino-Pimatisiwin* understand their role and responsibilities in helping themselves and others, always with good intentions.

In recent years, the University of Saskatchewan has made great strides in the direction of better accommodating Aboriginal student retention and graduation rates through Aboriginal-specific programming and services. Aboriginal programs such as the Aboriginal Student Achievement Program (ASAP), the Northern Teacher Education Program (NORTEP), the Indian Teacher Education Program (ITEP) and the Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program (SUNTEP) provide academic

and cultural supports that are relevant to the backgrounds of Aboriginal students.

In 2011, the Indigenous Voices: Staff and Faculty Development program was established at the University of Saskatchewan to provide resources that would educate faculty and staff about Aboriginal people. The aim of Indigenous Voices was to create a shared space for dialogue, learning, and collective action and to catalyze individual and systemic change at the University of Saskatchewan (usask.ca/indigenousvoices). At the same time two similar initiatives, the *Wâskamisiwin* (becoming more aware) series and “We Are All Treaty People” were created to foster better understanding of Aboriginal people at the university (Aboriginal Symposium: Taking Stock, 2013). As well, the university committed to expanding space for Aboriginal students with the Gordon Oakes-Red Bear Student Centre, which is expected to open sometime in 2015. Such initiatives are evidence that the university’s efforts have been moving in a positive direction.

Brant-Castenellano (2002) said that it is important for universities to create space for Aboriginal initiatives “in schools and colleges, work sites, and organizations so that Indigenous ways of knowing can flourish and intercultural sharing can be practiced in a spirit of coexistence and mutual respect” (p. 23). It is also important that this space be created with courses in which Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students can learn together and from one another.

As a graduate student at the University of Saskatchewan I had the valuable experience of teaching seminars and tutorials for undergraduate students. Through this experience I witnessed many Aboriginal students persisting in their studies despite the many difficulties they faced. The backgrounds, life circumstances, and ages of Aboriginal students ranged from the recent 18-year-old high school graduate to the 45-

year-old mature student with vast work and life experience. Some Aboriginal students have had to move from isolated Aboriginal communities or from Aboriginal communities that are close to urban areas. Other Aboriginal students grew up in a city or town.

As well, the cultural backgrounds of Aboriginal students varied. While some Aboriginal students had a strong cultural upbringing, others were raised by Christian parents, or were in foster care during childhood with no cultural ties to their First Nations ancestry or language. Additionally, Aboriginal students varied in the family and community supports that were available to them. Some students had parents supporting them personally and financially, while others were the main support person for their immediate and extended families as they strived to balance academics and family responsibilities. Meanwhile, some Aboriginal students were relying on a minimal financial income to get through their studies.

During my graduate studies, I have encountered many Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people who disagree with the practice of discussing the topics such as those brought up within Aboriginal literature—topics such as racism, colonization, and injustices that continue to oppress Aboriginal people in Canada. Many people say we must get past the anger, blame, and criticism to concentrate on a better future. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people clearly must move past these negative viewpoints and concentrate on building a better future. However, discussions about racism, colonization, and injustices that continue to oppress Aboriginal people in Canada are needed to build an understanding on why performance inequity continues to exist in educational systems and show the importance of developing a curriculum that promotes true academic parity (Singleton & Linton, 2006). Most importantly, these discussions are needed so that non-

Aboriginal people can begin to more clearly understand the ways that they perpetuate racism (D. Miller, personal communication, February 22, 2014).

It is only recently that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people have begun to realize the extent of the damage that colonization and racism have created for Aboriginal people and communities. These topics are only beginning to be discussed in society and need to occur not only to alleviate racism but also build an understanding of the effects of colonization on subsequent generations. It is an ugly truth that needs to be acknowledged, not for purposes of placing blame on others, but to begin to address the problems of racism and its history for Aboriginal people and Canadians. There is a lack of acknowledgement in this area that continues to affect societal perceptions and public policy today.

It is important that the challenges of Aboriginal students are addressed by the university so that Aboriginal students who are on the verge of giving up can thrive and excel in their learning instead of abandoning their studies altogether. The inclusion of Aboriginal literature in university courses is one way that resilience is addressed. The literature opens up discussions on Aboriginal students' realities and may be especially valuable when it is taught to non-Aboriginal students, although it does not automatically reduce the negative stereotypes many students hold about Aboriginal people, it does "provide an opening into a dialogue that must take place" (Gill, 2004, p. 137). In consideration of these circumstances, this study examines the ways that Aboriginal literature has contributed to the resilience of a select group of Aboriginal students and seeks to find out how Aboriginal literature helped Aboriginal students to persist through their studies.

Research Questions

In this qualitative study, I used semi-formal interviews to learn about the experiences of six First Nation, Métis and Inuit students who studied Aboriginal literature at the University of Saskatchewan. The research questions revealed how these specific students were influenced by Aboriginal literature taught in university courses. I approached this topic with my central positioning as a *Nehiyaw* person that forms the basis of my ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology (Wilson, 2008). As well, the *Nehiyaw* concept of *Miyo-Pimatisiwin* (The Good Life) helped me to substantiate a clearer understanding of resilience as it related to Aboriginal students in university.

Main research question:

How is the resilience of selected Aboriginal students at the University of Saskatchewan influenced by the Aboriginal literature currently taught in the post-secondary classroom?

Sub-questions:

- (a) What does the term 'resilience' mean to Aboriginal students?*
- (b) How does Aboriginal literature in a fictional or non-fictional autobiographical voice influence the resilience of Aboriginal students through their pursuit of education?*
- (c) How do Aboriginal students see their own life experiences affirmed in Aboriginal literature?*
- (d) What is the importance of nurturing the resilience of Aboriginal students through Aboriginal literature?*
- (e) In what ways can university initiatives strengthen the policies attached to supporting or promoting the use of Aboriginal literature in university?*

Forming these research questions helped me to attain responses from the six Aboriginal student participants that correlated to the context and purpose of my study. In the following section I present the context and purpose of my study in clarifying how Aboriginal literature is included at the University of Saskatchewan and why this is relevant to the problem of Aboriginal students' underachievement in university.

Context and purpose of study

In the past two decades the University of Saskatchewan has increasingly acted to include Aboriginal content in the form of Aboriginal literature, predominantly in English, Native Studies and Education courses. In 2012, the university advocated for courses that incorporate approaches to a wholistic educational experience that includes Aboriginal knowledge and content in teaching method and delivery (University of Saskatchewan, 2012).

Currently, Aboriginal literature is taught in university courses in the form of novels, poetry, and short stories. Aboriginal students at the University of Saskatchewan have the opportunity to read Aboriginal literature in courses that include English, Native Studies, Education, Anthropology, Political Studies, Science, and Sociology. First-year courses vary in their incorporation of Aboriginal literature.

The departments of English, Native Studies, the Indian Teacher Education Program (ITEP), and the Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program (SUNTEP) offer English courses to first-year Aboriginal students that include Aboriginal literature in course readings. In the College of Arts and Sciences, the Aboriginal Student Achievement Program (ASAP) gives Aboriginal students the option of taking classes composed entirely of Aboriginal students, sometimes with course content geared towards

Aboriginal worldviews (University of Saskatchewan, 2013). The university's website indicates that Arts and Sciences courses with a concentration on Aboriginal literature are offered to upper-year students (www.usask.ca). These include Native Studies 398: Métis Political and Poetic Writing, Native Studies 270: Literature of Native North America, English 242: Indigenous Storytelling of the Prairies, English 338: Contemporary North American Aboriginal Literature, English 382: Canadian Fiction from 1960 to the Present, and English 383: Literature and Colonialism.

Relevance

While I looked at several theories to better understand the concept of resilience in terms of Aboriginal students in higher education, I primarily focused on Hart's (2002) concept of *Miyo-Pimatisiwin* for the purposes of this study. He refers to *Miyo-Pimatisiwin* as the four states of self: emotion, mind, body, and spirit and the effort of maintaining a balance in the four areas to ensure the wellness of oneself. For many Aboriginal people, *Miyo-Pimatisiwin* translates into "the good life" and means "the overall goal of healing, learning, and life in general" (Hart, 2002, p. 44). Springing back from adversity and having a good life outcome is demonstrated in stories of resilience within Aboriginal literature.

In my thinking, the focus on Aboriginal literature that relates to the experiences of Aboriginal students is crucial. Aboriginal authors demonstrate how they have persisted through hardship without giving up hope. Aboriginal authors in recent published literature such as Joseph Boyden, Maria Campbell, Louise Halfe, Tomson Highway, Thomas King, and Beatrice Culleton Mosionier, often write down stories dealing with trauma and emotional turmoil. Their acts of writing down the stories of Aboriginal

experiences often demonstrate the importance of believing in the possibility that things will get better even at the bleakest times. And even in stories that present Aboriginal people defeated by trauma, these likely exemplify the realities in Aboriginal students' lives to which they relate. Facing similar circumstances requires that they remain hopeful about the future and make use of positive coping strategies to get through difficulties.

The meaning of resilience for Aboriginal university students is more clearly understood in their experiences of not giving up hope that their situations will improve. Aboriginal students must find positive ways to cope with the high stress during times in their studies when they experience challenges. This study seeks to determine if reading Aboriginal literature was a source of resilience for a select group of Aboriginal students at the University of Saskatchewan with an emphasis on their first year of university.

Historical and contemporary context

In recent years, the University of Saskatchewan administration, in aspiring to have the university become an innovator and leader in Aboriginal education, has expressed an ambition to increase Aboriginal student retention and graduation rates. Further to this ambition, the university has an aim to advance Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal ways of knowing and prepare “a new generation of Aboriginal youth for the global knowledge economy” (University of Saskatchewan, 2012, p. 7-8). Many scholarly and government-funded studies undertaken in recent years indicate that a high proportion of Aboriginal students continue to experience difficulty making it past their first year of post-secondary education (First Nations Education Council, 2009; Malatest, R. A. & Associates Ltd., 2002; Pidgeon, 2008-09; Redwing Saunders, 2007; University of Saskatchewan, 2012). These studies also indicate a critical need to promote measures for

retention and graduation of Aboriginal students in higher education.

At the University of Saskatchewan, the “rates of enrolment and success for Aboriginal students remain significantly below targets” (University of Saskatchewan, 2012, p. 8). The University of Saskatchewan’s Third Integrated Plan (2012) stated that the university is committed to improve efforts on the recruitment and success of Aboriginal students. Survey results undertaken with people who self-identified as First Nation, Métis, or Inuit, indicate that education is of top concern to the majority of urban Aboriginal peoples: “University education, including in professions, sciences, arts and at the graduate level, is critical to the future of First Nations and Métis people and communities in Saskatchewan and therefore to the future of the province itself” (University of Saskatchewan, 2012, p. 8).

Clearly, improving the educational success for Aboriginal people is important not only to Aboriginal people, but to all of Saskatchewan. The many education-focused studies and reports mention a substantial growth in the Aboriginal population in the province and a publicly recognized labor shortage. Aboriginal people must be encouraged to have greater participation in the workforce and in new developments taking place within the province of Saskatchewan while taking into consideration environmentally sustainable ways of doing so. It is important that Aboriginal people be active participants in the economy in ways that ensure the well-being of the environment. Increased graduation rates—even at the bachelor level—of Aboriginal students can ensure such participation is achieved (First Nations Education Council, 2009; Malatest, R. A. & Associates, 2002).

The underachievement among Aboriginal students attending secondary and post-

secondary schools and institutions has deep roots. Aboriginal students' experiences may be marked by steady streams of struggles attributed to colonization, Euro-centrism⁴, and institutional, systemic and societal racism⁵, resulting in the loss of a land base and high levels of poverty and alienation.

Aboriginal student underachievement can be largely attributed to the historical experiences and injustices experienced by Aboriginal people in Canada that are connected to issues of land possession and dispossession. In the past several centuries Aboriginal people in Canada have experienced great adversity in all areas of their lives as a result of the policies and practices developed and imposed by European settler groups in Canada through the processes of colonization and the work of political, religious and educational institutions. As non-Aboriginal newcomers settled in Canada during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to build new lives on the land, Aboriginal people were exiled to the margins of society (Dickason, 2002).

Canada's Aboriginal people were subjected to an imposed colonization process instituted by the government shortly after treaty signings. This process was enacted through assimilative measures and policies that systematically attacked the social, economic, political, cultural, education and health institutions of Aboriginal people (Castledon & Garvin, 2008). Some of these measures included ceremonial bans,

⁴ Battiste, M. & Henderson, J. S. (2011) define Euro-centrism as "the imaginative and institutional context that informs contemporary scholarship, opinion, and law. ... built on a set of assumptions and beliefs that educated and usually unprejudiced Europeans and North Americans habitually accept as true, supported by 'the facts', or as 'reality'" (p. 11).

⁵ Individual racism refers to the "outward and overt attitudes of intolerance or bigotry. Systemic racism refers to policies and practices that result in the exclusion of individuals, or that work to effect considerable disadvantages on a specific group" (Cannon & Sunseri, 2011, p. xiv). Henry & Tator (2006) stated that "systemic racism can be both institutional and structural; the former referring to 'racial discrimination that derives from individuals carrying out the dictates of others who are prejudiced or of a prejudiced society'" (p. 352). On the other hand, structural racism "refers to the inequalities rooted in the system-wide operation of a society" (Tator, 2006, p. 352) and "to practices that exclude substantial numbers... of particular groups from significant participation in major social institutions" (Cannon & Sunseri, 2011, p. xiv; Tator, 2006, p. 352).

imposition of externally-controlled governments, residential schools, out-of-culture adoptions, removal and destruction of sacred objects and sites, introduction of alcohol into Aboriginal communities and other externally imposed measures that continue to have an effect on subsequent generations of Aboriginal peoples (Castledon & Garvin, 2008; Redwing Saunders, 2007).

These actions reveal imbalanced power distribution on ultimately deciding who has title to land, as “Aboriginal people are left with little option but to accept the terms offered, or have no resolution at all” (Land & Townsend, 2002, p. 57). When the courts affirm Aboriginal rights to land and resources, the government often ignores the rulings (Land & Townsend, 2002, p. 57). Meanwhile, the lack of progress on Aboriginal rights is exacerbated by the social conditions for Aboriginal people, both on and off-reserve. Education has historically been used to control and subdue Aboriginal peoples and is a major factor that has created much of the subsequent social problems in Aboriginal communities. The Canadian government used education to assimilate Aboriginal children into European ways when they were taken away from their families and sent to residential and boarding schools across Canada (Stout & Kipling, 2003).

Many Aboriginal students at the University of Saskatchewan are descendants of residential school attendees and continue to experience traumatic effects and behavioural patterns associated with residential schools. Stout & Kipling (2003) described such traumatic effects and behavioural patterns including parental pathology, a high incidence of life stress, exposure to violence, low self-esteem, and “resorting to brittle or destructive coping strategies when faced with subsequent adversity” (p. 52).

The forms of discipline practiced in Canada’s residential and boarding schools

were “supported by paternalistic and racist policies and legislation... [and] designed to destroy every last remnant of alternative ways of knowing and living, to obliterate collective identities and memories and to impose a new order” (Smith, 1999, p. 69). Ermine (2007) stated that many Aboriginal people “have lost our most precious of all human rights, the freedom to be ourselves. Our existence is reduced to a meaningless and marginal part of broader Canadian life to be silent and ultimately controllable” (p. 200). This historical trauma is apparent in the large numbers of Aboriginal youth who remain uneducated and unemployed in First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities and urban areas. It is important that Canadian institutions such as the University of Saskatchewan address these factors by increasing their own awareness and understanding of Aboriginal people and in doing so, include Aboriginal people in discussions as equals so that strategies for greater Aboriginal participation can ensue.

The trauma of colonization continues to affect generations of Aboriginal people—including those who were in the foster care system, and their descendants— through “intergenerational impacts” or “historical trauma”. Intergenerational impacts “may include, and are not limited to, family violence; drug, alcohol and substance abuse; physical and sexual abuse; loss of parenting skills; and self-destructive behaviour” (Stout & Kipling, 2003, p. i.). These intergenerational impacts are described as ‘historical trauma’ by Wesley-Esquimaux and Smolewski (2004), in reference to the “generationally transmitted stress and grief that has resulted [not only from the residential school experience, but also] from repeated relocations from traditional lands and long-term policies of assimilation” (p. 51). ‘Historical trauma’ is also defined by McGuire (2013) in reference to the pain that Indigenous peoples struggle with today as a result of past and

present legislation, social policies and laws deliberately set up to annihilate them. Many Aboriginal people are now persisting through the historical trauma of residential schools, which has required resilience and not giving up hope that the situation will improve (Stout & Kipling, 2003).

Since treaties in Canada were signed, many Aboriginal people have viewed education as a tool for preparing oneself for the future and “as a tool of self-determination” (Brant-Castellano, Davis, & Lachance, 2000, p. 213). The purpose of education for many Aboriginal people today is to better the life of the individual—and the families and communities to which that person belongs—after decades of assimilation, colonization, racism and Euro-centrism. Education may also help Aboriginal people to recover from “the persistent results of long historical processes born of deliberate human actions and policies aimed at cultural suppression, oppression and marginalization” (McGuire, 2013, p. 63).

These conditions contribute to the low academic achievement rates of Aboriginal students and having them addressed in a university education is beneficial. Mordoch and Gaywish (2011) undertook a study that posed the question on the topic of the need for healing in the classroom and found that “a considerable number of mature students can potentially be experiencing complex post-traumatic syndrome that results in behaviours that interfere with achieving their academic goals” (p. 101). Furthermore, a barrier to addressing students’ trauma is the common view of education and therapy as two distinct entities:

Education needs to respond to the potential of effects of trauma, both historical and ongoing, within classroom settings. In light of the statistical evidence and

accounts of lived experience of Aboriginal mature students, it is reasonable to conclude that a percentage of Aboriginal students will be experiencing the effects of both historical trauma and ongoing traumatic events (Mordoch & Gaywish, 2011, p. 101).

For Aboriginal students, persisting through intergenerational effects and historical trauma requires resilience, and not giving up hope that their situation will improve. The educational system can play a larger role by helping to address these challenges in the classroom.

The continual impact of the colonization process on the worldviews and belief systems of Aboriginal people is compounded by an education premised by Euro-centric worldviews and values. Dei, Hall, & Rosenberg (2002) reasoned that to “a disturbing extent, patriarchal Eurocentrism continues to masquerade as universalism” (p. 8). This includes the way “institutions validate knowledge, recognize socialization within divergent cultures, regard first language influences, and accept different spiritual beliefs and world-views” (White, Peters, Beavon & Spence, 2009, p. 212). These factors remain prevalent in Canadian society and institutions, working against the retention and graduation rates of Aboriginal students.

In a study on white teachers teaching students-of-color, Pennington (2007) stressed the importance of integrating programs in university preparation measures, in which race, disability, sexual orientation, religion, and gender are infused through all content areas. As well, she reasoned that discussions on these topics are required when addressing reading comprehension and writing activities in literacy courses. Pennington (2007) acknowledged that such action “takes an excruciating amount of work and the

luxury of time many courses and programs do not afford. At times it seems as though creating awareness is all one course can accomplish” (p. 112). Nonetheless, such measures are important to addressing the way the dominant society continues to deny the effects of racism in education and thus, on the ability of “students of color” to succeed in education (Pennington, 2007). In such instances, Aboriginal literature can be included to facilitate these discussions.

Aboriginal people are truly resilient considering the achievements they are reaching today in beginning to work with non-Aboriginal people to reconstruct political, economic, and educational institutions to better reflect Aboriginal worldviews and realities. Such instances are seen in education in the construction of the First Nations University of Canada and the creation of Aboriginal Teacher Education Programs at the University of Saskatchewan. Politically, there is an emergence of Aboriginal people who are becoming elected officials in government such as Buckley Belanger and Jennifer Campeau. In Aboriginal organizations a number of elected leaders are leading change, such as Assembly of First Nations chief Shawn A-in-chut Atleo, who graduated from university while maintaining his Aboriginal knowledge and worldview. Within the economy, the Saskatchewan Native Theatre Company in Saskatoon has been created as a venue in which Aboriginal actors perform the work of Aboriginal playwrights.

While some of these instances are more decolonizing than others, they exemplify that Aboriginal individuals and Aboriginal people collectively have overcome various obstacles to make positive contributions to society. My thesis presents how a select group of Aboriginal students are reading about such instances of resilience in Aboriginal literature and how this may have contributed to their own resilience in university.

Aim of research

Aboriginal people are beginning to take action to address the negative patterns occurring in their communities and the effects that colonization has had on the well-being and lifestyles of subsequent generations (Stout & Kipling, 2003). In this case, Aboriginal people must strive for wholistic learning approaches that empower Aboriginal identities and that are a part of decolonization⁶.

Many Aboriginal people are pursuing a university education for many common reasons. Two reasons are to better their socioeconomic conditions and future opportunities or to fulfill the aspirations of their communities for self-empowerment (Stonechild, 2006, p. 2). The latter reason is “connected to empowerment of self and community, decolonization and self-determination” (Pidgeon, 2008-09, p. 340) with the view that learning is a lifelong process that ensures the respect for the natural environment and that instills in Aboriginal people the wisdom and capacity to carry their responsibilities in the circle of all life (Brant-Castellano, Davis, & Lachance, 2000).

In support of my claim, Stout & Kipling (2003) stated that in the past 20 years, there has been a revival of strength and determination in Aboriginal people across Canada. This determination has taken the form of restoring traditional belief systems and practices, reclaiming languages, building a sense of national identity by drawing on commonalities amongst tribal groups while recognizing diversity, and reconstructing and deconstructing Aboriginal peoples’ history (p. 2). Aboriginal people are looking to higher education as a major avenue to invest in a solution for a better future. Castellano,

⁶ Smith (1999) referred to decolonization as Aboriginal “attempts to escape the penetration and surveillance of that gaze [of Western imperialism and Western science] whilst simultaneously reordering and reconstituting ourselves as indigenous human beings in a state of ongoing crisis” (p. 39).

Davis, and Lachance (2000) stated that “education is at the heart of the struggle of Aboriginal peoples to regain control over their lives as communities and nations” (p. xi). Although they “face considerably more social and economic barriers to educational success than other Canadians” (White-Kaulaity Bitays, 2006, p. 71), there are increasing numbers of young Aboriginal people who, like the majority of young Canadians, pursue and complete university studies for a competitive edge in the global market “with the expectation of an increased standard of living or well-being” (White-Kaulaity Bitays, 2006, p. 102). A high number of Aboriginal students enroll at the University of Saskatchewan each year, and upon arrival, hold these great aspirations and potential.

As evidenced within the Third Integrated Plan (University of Saskatchewan, 2012), the strategic planners of the University of Saskatchewan want to increase retention and graduation rates of Aboriginal students by improving upon what is already in place and encouraging the development of new measures. The university has committed support for new teaching methods, content, and transition and retention programs where required (University of Saskatchewan, 2012). This particular commitment lends support to university course content that is more attuned with the reality and lives of Aboriginal students.

University of Saskatchewan English professor, Len Findley (2000), urged the academy to expedite its efforts to “begin anew to decolonize its traditional presumptions, curricula, faculty complement and student body, and research and teaching practices” (p. 311). Certainly, this research suggests ways that Aboriginal literature contributes to the existing efforts of decolonization currently taking place at the University of Saskatchewan.

Significance to knowledge

Part of my incentive for focusing on this study area was influenced by my work experiences as a writer/journalist, as a life-skills coach supporting Aboriginal students at the post-secondary level, and teaching seminars and tutorials at the University of Saskatchewan. I taught life skills in a transition program for Aboriginal postsecondary students at the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Sciences and Technologies (SIAST). Life skills workshops focused on teaching students strategies that would be useful to help them manage their personal, academic, and social situations. I realize now that the life skills and academic skills components were not enough to empower students to finish their college diploma or certificate. Many of the Aboriginal students left their academic programs before completion, and this affected their ability to gain the qualifications for employment. I realized through speaking to some of the students that the academic programs at SIAST lacked an appropriate acknowledgement of Aboriginal experiences in Canada throughout the institution.

The transition program itself seemed to be developed from the ‘deficit thinking’ paradigm, which posits that certain students fail in school, due to alleged internal deficiencies or shortcomings such as familial deficits and dysfunctions, with systemic factors not considered when explaining failure (Valencia, 1997). Although the transition program had a significant purpose, a real problem was situated within the institution as it failed to address the incongruity of Euro-centric ideologies and societal, systemic, and institutional racism that affect the viewpoints of all students, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike.

For example, some Aboriginal students in the Child and Youth Care Program were upset when their instructor showed a film about Aboriginal women in the sex trade who suffered from drug and alcohol addictions. There was no additional information provided to explain the circumstances that led to the state of the Aboriginal women in the film and no references to the strength and resilience shown by many other Aboriginal people in similar circumstances. This was one of the only references to Aboriginal people in the whole course and the Aboriginal students, needless to say, were upset.

Another incentive for focusing on this study area was drawn from my experience as a writer/journalist in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal media, I interviewed a variety of Aboriginal people, ranging from social and political activists, environmentalists, educators, youth, musicians, actors, politicians, war veterans, and elders. I found that for myself as a writer, there is empowerment in hearing about the experiences of Aboriginal people from all walks of life. This medium also empowers Aboriginal people who tell their stories to a public audience and by doing so, are given access to the public sphere.

Maslin (2002) stated that “the media is widely acknowledged as a powerful tool with the ability to educate, entertain, and influence attitudes and beliefs, to mould social norms, and to disseminate information” (p. 5). This was evident to me through the Aboriginal newspaper for which I was a writer and editor. In addition, Aboriginal media provides space for Aboriginal voice and public opinion, and contributes to a national Aboriginal public sphere by enabling the circulation of information on common experiences and issues (Avison & Meadows, 2000). My experience as an Aboriginal journalist was relevant to telling Aboriginal stories from an Aboriginal perspective as

opposed to telling Aboriginal stories from a non-Aboriginal perspective. Avison & Meadows (2000) stated that the telling of stories from Aboriginal perspectives combats stereotypes, addresses information gaps in non-Aboriginal society, and reinforces community cultures.

A third incentive for this study resulted from a teaching opportunity in my first-year of graduate studies leading a Native Studies seminar for two groups of largely non-Aboriginal students. Through this experience, I realized that non-Aboriginal students seem to have very little understanding of Aboriginal peoples' experiences because they are so far removed from their own. Although the non-Aboriginal students were taking the class to learn, and were oftentimes open to learning, most of these students did not take into consideration the validity of Aboriginal experiences from the viewpoint of Aboriginal people. Such non-Aboriginal students seemed more ready to accept the non-Aboriginal viewpoint of Aboriginal peoples' experiences. I noticed that the majority of the students continued attending the tutorials regularly throughout the semester and exerted great effort into getting high marks.

I also had the opportunity during my graduate studies to teach seminars and tutorials for three separate first-year courses focused on Aboriginal students: one in English literature for the Aboriginal Student Achievement program in the College of Arts and Sciences, another seminar for an Educational Foundations class followed by a History class seminar for Aboriginal students in ITEP. In these tutorials and seminars, my role was to support the students to strengthen their academic reading and writing capabilities. These experiences taught me that the reading and writing abilities of Aboriginal students vary from very weak to very strong. Weak reading and writing

abilities seemed to lead to decreased attendance and participation in class. Many of the students who did continue attending the tutorials were those who were already excelling in the class and had a good grasp on writing academic papers.

Although I had no understanding of what some of these students were facing outside of the classroom, many of them appeared to experience a high level of stress because of the academic demands of their first-year university course load along with personal struggles. For many of the students, their investment and focus on developing their academic skills diminished as the semester progressed. Although some students were persistent in attending and developing their academic abilities, many of them stopped showing up for the seminars and did not follow up with extra support.

As I took note of my experiences in these teaching opportunities, I initially believed that the success of Aboriginal students that I taught depended largely on the efforts they made themselves to be in class, to ask for help when they needed it, and to complete assignments. Sometimes, it seemed to me, that all an instructor can do is continue to teach the student and ultimately, the student chooses to access the support that may help him or her to persist through challenges. This in turn, determines if the student fails or drops out of the course. I did not fully recognize that the situations of Aboriginal students were more complex.

Mackay & Myles (1995) noted the differences between Euro-centric and Aboriginal worldviews and languages, which lead to a tendency for Aboriginal students to experience discomfort with writing in English classes. Aboriginal students often enter the learning environment speaking English as a second language or English as a second dialect, characterized by Sterzuk (2010) as Indigenous English. The resultant discomfort

with writing, language difference, and academic English often leads to avoidance behavior (Mackay & Myles, 1995). Students with weak English language skills often remain silent in class, avoid submitting homework for fear that it will be graded poorly or even rejected outright, or they may stop attending class altogether (Mackay & Myles, 1995). Although this may have been the case for only some of the Aboriginal students I taught, there are a variety of possibilities for their poor attendance.

A common reason that Aboriginal students may react to academic demands by not exerting enough effort into assignments or not attending class, was described by Mordoch and Gaywish (2011):

students who are living with trauma may use a considerable amount of energy to conceal their situations and have less energy to engage in the classroom, needing all of their energy to get through the day (Sitler, 2008). Students may have problems with trust, often in an “all or nothing” type attitude where they will trust inappropriately or react with hostility (Horseman, 2004). Trauma, as stated by Herman (1997), robs people of control, connection, and meaning— concepts that help to motivate people to set and attain goals. Students may be sensitive to feelings of incompetence and devalue themselves and their efforts (p. 101-102).

This situation may also have been the case for the some of the students, as sometimes I sensed their anger and hostility when they became frustrated with understanding class assignments. I realized that little content on Aboriginal topics was being taught to the Aboriginal students, who enrolled at the university with some or no prior learning experiences of Aboriginal history or topics that could teach them about their own place at the university and in society. As well, courses rarely acknowledged the valuable

contributions of Aboriginal people to Canadian society nor did they present Aboriginal people favourably.

One might argue that the effects similar to those created for Aboriginal people by the colonization process are also seen in the population of non-Aboriginal people, both descendants of Euro-Canadian settlers and newcomers to Canada, and thus Aboriginal people do not deserve special consideration. However, Aboriginal groups are distinct from other visible minorities as descendants of the first peoples with “profoundly different relationship to local place, as well as different historical and economic relationships to non-Aboriginal settlers” (Marker, 2000, p. 179).

Furthermore, unlike a large majority of Euro-Canadians, Aboriginal relationships do not stop at the nuclear family but branch out to a wide network of immediate family, marital connections, and extended family relations. For many Aboriginal people, home has a special meaning connected to “place” (Waterman, 2012, p. 196) and is based on relationships that go beyond a community of people and traditions. The emphasis placed on relationships, according to traditional Aboriginal ways, includes a responsibility to the land, animals, and the natural forces permeating every aspect of culture (Waterman, 2012, p. 196).

Many Aboriginal groups who follow traditional belief systems also share the Sacred Circle ideals, which are described in the context of the Plains Cree cosmology by Regnier (1995). These ideals are associated with the views of human beings and nature as connected and unified, time as cyclical rather than linear, and a sense of ultimate meaning and purpose within a heritage open to cross-cultural possibilities” (p. 314). Aboriginal worldviews and values continue to exist today despite an era of colonization.

Many Aboriginal students attending the University of Saskatchewan are still taught aspects of these worldviews in their families and communities.

This study has helped me to determine how a selected group of Aboriginal students found a source of resilience in studying Aboriginal literature at the University of Saskatchewan. Academic institutions are finding new ways of presenting academic content about Aboriginal people that are empowering students. Aboriginal literature acknowledges Aboriginal history, worldviews, experiences, and the colonial circumstances that have led to current situations for Aboriginal people in Canada. In the following section, I provide an overview of my thesis by presenting the topics that will be discussed in each of the chapters.

Overview of Thesis

Chapter one introduces the research question guiding my study and explains the significant context and purpose of a study on Aboriginal literature. The chapter clarifies the meaning of resilience, specifically a *Nehiyaw* (Cree) term, *Miyo-Pimatisiwin* (The Good Life) that I use in relation to Aboriginal students' resilience at the University of Saskatchewan. As well, the chapter presents the problem of the educational underachievement of Aboriginal students and highlights the aim of this research study: to demonstrate how Aboriginal literature is used in university courses to manifest the resilience of Aboriginal students.

Chapter two provides an overview of the advent of Aboriginal literature in Canada and the existing literature defining resilience as conceptualized by Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars. The chapter considers cultural revitalization and anti-racist approaches supporting Indigenous education and reviews studies that have focused on the

inclusion of Aboriginal literature in education.

Chapter three explains the Indigenous paradigm that frames this research study, *mosahkina wihkaskwa* (sweetgrass gathering), as well as the use of a combination of Indigenous Methodology and data management methods. In addition, I present the *Nehiyaw* epistemological positioning used to conduct this study, and the participant sampling, recruitment strategies, and ethical considerations that I considered.

Chapter four presents the participants' stories, organized by participants' backgrounds, their challenges in university and understandings of resilience.

Chapter five discusses the themes that resulted from my data analysis on Aboriginal students' university learning experiences as it involved Aboriginal literature. The three themes I identified were as follows: coping with personal and academic challenges, engagement in university learning, and personal growth and transformation.

Chapter six interprets the data and presents the findings that emerged after interpretation of this data.

Chapter seven presents the theoretical implications of this research study, highlights the study's contributions to resilience literature and the value of Aboriginal literature in university courses. The section includes a discussion on the usefulness of employing an Indigenous methodology and the research framework of *mosahkina wihkaskwa* (sweetgrass gathering) as a metaphor to the research process. The chapter closes by clarifying the value of this research study to current scholarship at the University of Saskatchewan.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Throughout this literature review I describe the beginnings of Aboriginal literature being recognized in Canada and how it has functioned to empower Aboriginal people. I define resilience as conceptualized by Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars, consider cultural revitalization and anti-racist approaches to support Indigenous education, and review studies that have focused on the inclusion of Aboriginal literature in education.

Aboriginal literature in Canada began to be published more and more in the early 1970s, the same time that cultural revitalization efforts of Aboriginal communities were occurring. Cultural revitalization efforts meant that Aboriginal people were seeking to revitalize cultural traditions and languages to deal with the many effects and legacies of colonization and racialization and to “resist the deeply entrenched assumptions about the inferiority of Indigenous people (St. Denis, 2007, p. 1075).

In the early days of Aboriginal literature, the most common books being published by Aboriginal authors were autobiographical works, mainly because this genre was the most assessable to Aboriginal writers and their communities (Episkenew, 2009). Earlier seminal texts included Henry George Pennier’s (1972) *Chiefly Indian*, Edward Aheneke’s (1973) *Voices of the Plains Cree*, and Maria Campbell’s *Halfbreed* (1973), all of which are autobiographical texts. These particular texts are still being taught in university courses in this decade, demonstrating their valuable contribution to academia or that academics are not keeping up with developments in literature.

In Canada, Aboriginal literature started to be more widely recognized soon after a

Native in Literature: Canadian and Comparative Perspectives conference in Lethbridge, Alberta in March 1985. Coleman (2013) explained how the conference welcomed many prominent authors and scholars who were researching the Native archetype in Canadian literature: “After the *Native in Literature* conference and publication, contemporary Native literature grew to one of the most recognizable Canadian literary genres” (p. 3). This was likely the time Aboriginal literature began to be incorporated more and more into the course readings of first-year university classrooms across Canada.

The functions of Aboriginal literature

Aboriginal literature serves various functions for both those who are writing these literary works and those who are reading them. *Writing back* is a literary concept described as being at the core of literature written by Aboriginal writers:

Writing back... allows previously colonized or otherwise inferior groups to reposition themselves socio-politically into an undominated role.... This is because, in order to re-place the Native archetype into the perspective of the Native author, the old colonial vantage point must be targeted, revealed, and indicted for its false teachings on the public mind. The Aboriginal writer, symbolically and literally, takes back the pen and paper from the colonizer (Coleman, 2013, p. 2-3).

In this sense, *Writing back* was practiced by the early Aboriginal authors who wrote their autobiographies in a fictional or non-fictional autobiographical voice. These earlier writings responded and critiqued the policies of the Government of Canada while also acting as a “medicine” to cure “the colonial contagion by healing communities that those policies have injured” (Episkenew, 2009, p. 2).

Soon after experiencing and witnessing the downfalls of publishing autobiographies, Aboriginal writers started to experiment with other literacy forms including fiction and theatre: “Over the last two decades, Indigenous people have witnessed the healing power of stories as they have begun to reassert their individual and collective narratives” (Episkenew, 2009, p. 11). Episkenew’s study was the one academic study I found in conducting this literature review, which was very similar to my research topic. She examined eight contemporary Indigenous literary works to demonstrate how they critique the policies of the settler government of Canada and their capacity to support individual and community healing from those policies. The eight literary works Episkenew examined were Campbell’s (1973) *Halfbreed*, Basil Johnston’s (2003) *Indian School Days*, Beatrice Monsionier Culleton’s (1983) *In Search of April Raintree*, Shirley Sterling’s (1992) *My Name is Seepeetza*, Richard Wagamese’s (1994) *Keeper’n Me*. Episkenew (2009) also looked at the theatre dramas Vera Manuel’s *Strength of Indian Women*, Daniel David Moses’ *Almighty Voice and His Wife*, and Ian Ross’ *fareWel*.

Episkenew stated that all forms of Indigenous literature—whether autobiographical, fiction, drama, film scripts, screenplays, and song lyrics—are aesthetically beautiful creations and compelling works that depict Indigenous reality. The literary works draw attention to the Indigenous experience and have the power to better the situations of Indigenous people, particularly through the processes of storying traumatic events and sharing an alternative collective myth in response to the settlers’ authorized collective myth (Episkenew, 2009).

Aboriginal literature is also a powerful medium when it is taught to non-Aboriginal students for purposes of anti-racist education. Gill (2004) undertook a study in an effort to describe “the effect of teaching literature written by and about Canadian Aboriginal people on student attitudes about Canadian Aboriginal people” (iv.). She hoped to reduce the prejudiced and stereotyped views held by a group of non-Aboriginal high school students’ of Aboriginal people and to find out if there were age and gender differences in students’ attitudes toward Aboriginal people before and after reading Aboriginal literature. Gill discovered that “while reading [Aboriginal literature] may change attitudes, the changes may be of short duration” (vii.). Her study also showed that “it is not enough to simply expose students to stories with the expectation that they will identify and align themselves with the main character whose experiences will shift their assumptions about another race or culture” (p. vii.). Gill (2004) reasoned that unless the discussion of Aboriginal literature “helps students identify the White European perspective from which they view the world the literature may only serve to reinforce differences, not increase understanding” (p. viii).

Gill (2004) also referred to the work of Tatum (1992), who taught undergraduate courses on the psychology of racism and maintained that discussions on racism and oppression cause students to emotionally react by feeling either guilt, shame, anger, and despair. Students also tend to withdraw and avoid contact with the topic of racism as a strategy for dealing with discomfort (Tatum, 1992). Gill (2004) described the results of her own experiences introducing Aboriginal literature to her non-Aboriginal students in an effort to build their awareness and understanding of Aboriginal people. She stated that both male and female students were capable of reducing prejudiced attitudes and viewing

the world from a more moral perspective, but not all students were receptive as others. Establishing these functions of Aboriginal literature contributes to this research that examines how Aboriginal literature in a fictional and non-fictional autobiographical voice is fostering the resilience of Aboriginal students in university.

Meanings of resilience

Many Indigenous scholars have capitalized on the meaning of resilience for Aboriginal students and Aboriginal people as a whole. The meaning of resilience I rely on for this study is the *Nehiyaw* (Cree) theory of *Miyo-Pimatisiwin* (The Good Life) as described by Hart (2002) in *Seeking Mino-Pimatisiwin*. This concept encourages the incorporation of traditional Aboriginal concepts, values and perspectives in the everyday lives of Aboriginal people. “The Good Life” refers to the efforts of an individual to live for the Creator and to make use of ones’ innate abilities that can be used for the betterment, wellness and self-determination of individuals and their families, communities and nations (Hart, 2002). Hart described the need for an Aboriginal approach such as *Mino/Miyo-Pimatisiwin* to be “effectively incorporated by helpers trained in disciplines which involve counseling, supporting and teaching” (p. 12). He discusses colonization from an Aboriginal perspective, ontological imperialism, social work’s role in colonial oppression, the dynamic of resistance, and the role of *Mino/Miyo-Pimatisiwin* “in resisting the forms of colonial oppression” (p. 12).

As I comprehended the meanings of resilience concerning Aboriginal students in university, I looked at several studies, articles, and reports highlighting the resilience of Aboriginal/Native American⁷ students. Aboriginal students desiring an education that

⁷ Native American, American Indian, and Alaska Native refer to people whose ancestors were any of the original inhabitants of North, Central and South America who maintain tribal affiliation or community

corresponds to their Aboriginal worldviews, perspectives and cultural beliefs can choose to attend Aboriginal post-secondary institutions such as the First Nations University of Canada, the Gabriel Dumont Institute, or any of the tribal colleges in the United States (US). In a study on the persistence of Native American/American Indian students at Native American/American tribal institutions, HeavyRunner & Marshall (2003) found that the success rate of Native American/American Indian students at these institutions is often higher than at mainstream universities. The success of students rests on the fact that the institutions are built from an Indigenous framework that promotes Native American student resilience. Similar to Native American tribal institutions, Aboriginal academic institutions are more likely to provide the necessary cultural supports and offer courses that consider Aboriginal worldviews and experiences which contribute to academic success.

The factors associated with the resilience of Aboriginal students at the First Nations University of Canada, were identified in a qualitative study undertaken by Weenie (2002). Her study intended to contribute to the understanding of resilience processes that enable Aboriginal students who persevere and succeed despite great adversity. She identified common factors in academically successful Aboriginal students; these include self-efficacy, vision, faith, stability, compassion and resourcefulness (Weenie, 2002).

In another qualitative study, HeavyRunner (2009) explored the ways that students

attachment by reporting their enrolled or principal tribe; such as Navajo, Blackfeet, Inupiat, Yup'ik, or Central or South American Indian groups (US Census Bureau, <http://www.census.gov/>; US Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, 2011). Brunner (2010) stated that individuals of this group prefer to use either Native American or American Indian based on their beliefs about the generic implications implied by the terminology. Meanwhile others of this group prefer to identify themselves by their particular tribal affiliation.

cope and manage their responsibilities in the US tribal college educational system using a phenomenological perspective in her dissertation. Her two-pronged qualitative study asked two central questions: “(a) What is it like for tribal college students to manage the integration of academic, social, and cultural responsibilities, and (b), how do community and college memberships influence educational persistence for tribal college students?” (p. 48). HeavyRunner’s findings indicated that family plays a central role in influencing the level of persistence of Native American/American Indian students. As well, students’ specific social, academic, and cultural backgrounds helped them deal with challenges faced during their post-secondary studies.

In a similar study, Gokavi (2011) used a combined quantitative/qualitative method to explore factors associated with adjustment and anticipated persistence of first-year Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students at the University of Saskatchewan. Her findings highlighted that “Aboriginal students do not have poorer adjustment or fit compared to their non-Aboriginal peers but they do have lower levels of anticipated persistence” (p. 115). Reading the two studies on persistence and resilience of Aboriginal students led me to question what would be the leading factor that causes Aboriginal and Native American/American Indian students to be less persistent than non-Aboriginal and non-Native American/American Indian students and those of other ethnic minority backgrounds.

Willet (2007) researched the barriers Aboriginal university students face for his doctoral dissertation *Ahkameyimo (Persevere): The Experience of Aboriginal Undergraduates*. He found that universities often lack culturally relevant curriculum, culturally relevant teaching methods, and minority faculty. On the other hand,

Aboriginal students often lack a peer network, family support structures, self-esteem and self-confidence, social skills, home-school communication, academic preparation and have a perceived difficulty with English language skills. Additionally, Aboriginal students may face overt discrimination and prejudice, covert discrimination and prejudice, a lower standard of income, culture shock, and intergenerational trauma and grief (p. 45).

In the case of my study, I am looking at how Aboriginal literature has influenced Aboriginal students to find new ways of coping with struggles arising from these kinds of barriers that may prevent them from persisting in their university studies.

The three studies by HeavyRunner & Marshall (2003), HeavyRunner (2009) and Gokavi (2011) led me to reflect on how Aboriginal (and Native American/American Indian) students adjust to the university environment. Gokavi (2011) explicitly stated that “Aboriginal students do not have poorer adjustment or fit compared to their non-Aboriginal peers but do have lower levels of anticipated persistence” (p. 115). Therefore, the problems with Aboriginal students adjusting and fitting to the post-secondary institution do not influence their success. On the other hand, HeavyRunner asserts that the cultural fit of tribal colleges makes the transition to university easier for Native American/American Indian students in these institutions. The authors of the two studies contradict one another in their findings of adjustment and fit as an important factor to Aboriginal, Native American/American Indian student retention.

Willet (2007) described the topic of adjustment and fit to university explicitly in his research, stating that when Aboriginal students make efforts to fit into the university culture this often means assimilating into the dominant norms of Euro-Canadian culture.

He referred to Dehyle's (1995) finding that Native Americans/American Indians who resist assimilation into Euro-Canadian society by maintaining their culture and establishing lives on the reservations are often labeled as failures:

On the other hand, minority students who remain in their programs of studies also may experience a certain level of rejection or disassociation from friends, family and acquaintances from their own community. As they grow in their level of Western knowledge, they may find themselves distanced somewhat from their connections with the community that are more traditional. In this sense, education is a two-edged sword for minority students (Willet, 2007, p. 50).

This tension creates further conflict for many students when the educational institution they attend values western knowledge and by doing so, discredits students' original ways of knowing.

Persistence, resilience, adjustment and fit influence how Indigenous students transition into the university environment and deal with challenges. Indigenous students often have low levels of persistence or resilience when the academic institution does not instill in them a desire to succeed by shaping their educational journey in ways that are relevant to their cultural backgrounds. Many research studies indicated the need for universities to be targeting areas for improvement that can better support the participation, persistence and completion rates of Aboriginal students (Gokavi, 2011; Huffman, 2011; HeavyRunner, 2009; Richard, 2011; and Weenie, 2002).

Similar to my study's approach, Richard (2012) used the Indigenous theories of *Mino-Pimatisiwin* (The Good Life) along with Circle Teaching, Teacher as Guide, and Indigenous Wholism to undertake her research study on the experiences of seven

Aboriginal students and graduates. She explored why some Aboriginal students succeed in higher learning despite the challenges they face and to what extent, if any, their wholistic success is impacted by the efficacy of wholistic learner supports.

She found that challenges affecting Aboriginal student wholistic success involved three levels of influences: systemic and structural factors, social and cultural factors, and personal factors. More specifically, the challenges students faced related to colonial relationships, financial barriers, fear of failure, disempowerment, sense of belonging, and identity. Malatest & Associates Ltd. (2002) identified the challenges of Aboriginal students in post-secondary as ranging from “socio-economic factors, subtle barriers (such as discrimination, institutional insensitivity to Aboriginal cultures, low self-concept), inadequate high school preparation, struggle to balance education with family responsibilities, and a history of forced assimilation through educational institutions.

The inclusion of Aboriginal literature in first-year courses is only one small piece of the whole solution to improve the university success rate for Aboriginal students.

Aboriginal students need to be recognizing the resilience of other Aboriginal people and most importantly, the resilience that they can manifest in times of difficulty.

HeavyRunner and Marshall (2003) strove to create a theory of resilience for Native American/American Indian students, as they examined how these students at US tribal colleges foster resilience in extreme cases of adversity. Heavy Runner & Marshall defined resilience for Indigenous students as the natural human capacity to navigate life well, resilience means “coming to know how you think, who you are spiritually, where you come from, and where you are going... It involves finding your inner spirit and finding a sense of direction” (para. 5). The authors maintained that educational

institutions serve Indigenous students best by fostering students' cultural resilience in ways that increase "the collective ability of individuals, families, communities, and tribes to realize the best in themselves—and to assist others" (HeavyRunner & Marshall, 2003, para. 10). Along these same lines, Kirkness & Barndhart (1991) stated that 'First Nations students and communities are seeking an education that will address their communal need for "capacity-building" to advance themselves as a distinct and self-determining society, not just as individuals' (p. 6).

For academic institutions to adequately support Aboriginal students they must find ways that will address the collective needs of Aboriginal communities. Oftentimes, Aboriginal students place high expectations on themselves because they are often some of the few people from within their communities to pursue a university education: "A university degree may not be just an individual achievement but one with implications for the whole community. This may put extra pressure on students and be perceived as an extra challenge" (D. Miller, personal communication, January 29, 2014). Examining the manner in which Aboriginal students manifest resilience in university is important. This indicates how they are able to show inner strength not only during their university studies but also how they manifest resilience in healthy ways when they graduate and utilize their education to Aboriginal community development efforts.

There are many positive impacts of an Aboriginal student showing resilience through the challenges that arise while attending university, both for the student and his or her community. However, there remains a need for Aboriginal students' success in university to be normalized in Aboriginal communities (J. Episkenew, personal communication, April 4, 2014). The resilience of an individual may extend to others in

one's family or community as "a dynamic process of social and psychological adaptation and transformation... manifested as positive outcomes in the face of historical and current stresses" (Kirmayer, Dandeneau, Marshall, Phillips, & Jessen Williamson, 2011, p. 85).

A common meaning of resilience as it relates to Aboriginal people is associated with surviving the assimilative measures of residential schools in Canada. In this case, resilience means a person's "capacity to spring back from adversity and have a good life outcome despite emotional, mental, or physical distress" (Stout & Kipling, 2003, p. iii). Clearly, resilience was required for Aboriginal people to get through the residential school experience. Stout & Kipling defined resilience as the having to do with the coping strategies individuals developed that allowed them to survive in the institutional environment. Some residential school attendees managed to bounce back quickly from the trauma as a result of a series of protective factors including "a happy and nurturing early childhood, high intelligence, a life-long interest in education, cooperative values, long-term marriage and strong spiritual beliefs" (Stout & Kipling, 2003, p. 47).

The meaning of resilience as it relates to residential school students is relevant to this study because within Aboriginal literature, authors often present experiences in residential schools and the foster care system. Oftentimes, the individual presented in Aboriginal literature demonstrate resilience through ongoing trauma by responding with humour and focusing on the wellbeing of others around them. Such is the case with autobiographical literature in which Aboriginal authors such as Maria Campbell and Beatrice Culleton Monsionier experienced and overcame difficult life circumstances as Aboriginal people in Canada, which impacted their emotional, mental, physical, and

spiritual states of being. Learning about these circumstances not only fosters an understanding of their histories, but asks students how they exert positive coping strategies themselves and show resilience through similar situations.

Autobiographical literature offers Aboriginal students an understanding of the meaning of resilience, particularly for Aboriginal people, as “resilience might reside in the ways we have of narrating our lives [and] follows from a substantial literature on the narrative basis of self” (Kirmayer et al., 2011, p. 85). This tells me that Aboriginal people manifest their resilience in sharing stories about their life journeys. As well, Aboriginal people’s resilience and writing narratives are connected and have the capacity to contribute to the self-determination of Aboriginal students, their families, and communities.

Aboriginal content in university

HeavyRunner & Marshall (2003) state that the tension between traditional knowledge and western knowledge faced by Aboriginal and Native American students at the onset of their university studies, contributes to student and family stress.

HeavyRunner & Marshall (2003) questioned how Native American students foster resilience in extreme cases of adversity. Their study highlighted existing resilience research and identified cultural factors that nurtured, encouraged and supported Native American students, their families and communities.

HeavyRunner and Marshall then looked at how these factors helped the students to tap into their natural common sense and wisdom and show resilience through challenges. The authors concluded in their study that colleges and universities must provide the customary protective factors (caring, support, opportunities for participation,

and encouraging high expectations) to help students recognize the crucial role their own thinking plays and to recognize Aboriginal culture as an important protective factor that fosters natural resilience (HeavyRunner & Marshall, 2003). The study demonstrates that when an educational institution provides useful strategies that accept the worldviews of Aboriginal students—rather than attempting to mold Aboriginal students’ thinking into the western way of knowing—this is very beneficial for Aboriginal students.

Universities may be contributing to the success of Aboriginal students in this manner by including Aboriginal literature.

Spires, Huffman, Honeycutt, & Barrow (1995) stated that it is important that universities help Aboriginal students begin to “develop the language of the university, use their knowledge in the construction of meaning and take ownership in the learning process” (p. 340). Huffman’s (2011) transculturation theory illustrated that universities can achieve much by affirming the Aboriginal identities of Aboriginal students:

Transculturation theory asserts that American Indian students engage in the process of learning the cultural nuances found in mainstream higher education while retaining and relying upon their cultural heritage to forge a strong identity and sense of purpose. . . . By forging a strong cultural identity, many Native students develop the confidence to explore a new culture and not be intimi[ate]ed. (p. 2)

The ability of universities to affirm Aboriginal identities would be crucial to supporting Aboriginal students’ resilience. It is notable that transcultural theory also supports the idea that culturally-oriented Aboriginal/Native American students have it in their plans to return to their home communities to serve their people as compared to the less culturally-

oriented students (Huffman, 2011). Home communities have a special meaning to many Aboriginal students attending university, as it is “the site of traditionalism, language revitalization, and stubborn adherence to culture” (Waterman, 2012, p. 127).

In my understanding, when teaching Aboriginal literature, university instructors would do best to affirm the traditional Aboriginal values of Aboriginal students and keep in mind that despite the destruction to Aboriginal worldviews, beliefs, and practices, these values are still passed down to children in most families. According to Gaywish (2000) the key supporting values of Aboriginal communities include (1) vision/wholeness, spirit-centered, (2) respect/harmony, (3) kindness, (4) honesty/integrity, (5) sharing (6) strength, (7) bravery/courage, (8) wisdom, and (9) respect/humility. University instructors would serve Aboriginal students best by legitimizing student knowledge according to what they may have been taught about these values and assisting them in vocalizing these traditional teachings of values within the classroom (Spires, Huffman, Honeycutt & Barrow, 1995).

Some scholars argue that an emphasis on Aboriginal culture and content in dominant educational discourse is problematic (St. Denis, 2007; Vanhouwe, 2007). Using critical race theory, Vanhouwe examined the popular belief that inclusion of Aboriginal content in schools will ensure Aboriginal student success. She argued that it is insufficient for multiculturalism to be perceived as a solution to Aboriginal student success, as this misnames the problem, trivializes the effects of racism, and fails to address equity, justice or oppression (Gorski, 2006; Vanhouwe, 2007). Instead, she advocated for anti-racist pedagogy (along with critical race theory) to provide

professional development for white teachers, so that the needs of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students can be met.

As well, St. Denis (2007) highlighted the history of cultural revitalization efforts by Aboriginal people beginning in the 1970's and the unanticipated effects of this movement on Aboriginal people today. The cultural revitalization movement resulted in the development of fundamentalist views such as the production of categories of Aboriginal people as real, traditional or assimilated:

one's participation in cultural practices does not alleviate the social, political, and economic alienation experienced by too many Aboriginal peoples, both now and in the past. Although participating in cultural revitalization has helped many to withstand discrimination, it will not challenge or end the injustice... One's level of cultural authenticity can be seen as the problem rather than the devastating effects of systemic inequality and discrimination faced by Aboriginal people (p. 1076-77).

St. Denis (2007) considers it problematic to focus on celebrating culture, which is not enough to disrupt ideologies of racial superiority and inferiority. Instead, she argued, anti-racist education has the power to achieve this disruption. Clearly, anti-racist education is a powerful measure to address racism and it can be highly effective. It seems that it is required in all of Canadian institutions, not just education. It is my view that anti-racist education, cultural programming and efforts to affirm Aboriginal cultural values and identities are equally important.

Clearly Aboriginal cultural programming and content is not the sole solution to the underachievement of Aboriginal students. Nonetheless, it is crucial for educators to

recognize Aboriginal culture and content as an important protective factor for Aboriginal student resilience along with anti-racist education for white teachers. In historical circumstances, the government's main purpose for employing assimilation tactics on Aboriginal people was to destroy Aboriginal cultural ways, traditional beliefs and practices (Hart, 2002). The government's strategic reasoning was that "if Aboriginal peoples' cultures keep them tied to the land, then this connection needs to be severed so that the colonizers' claim over the land and its resources can be confirmed" (Hart, 2002, p. 25). The specific value of Aboriginal cultural content in education is that it affirms a place within educational institutions for Aboriginal people in Canada. This is especially important for Aboriginal students learning about their peoples' history and current status in Canada, matters which often resonate with their personal experiences.

Castagno & Brayboy (2008) stated that university administrators, faculty, and staff would do best to recognize the different kinds of knowledge and experiences that Aboriginal youth bring with them from Aboriginal-run school systems. They argued that these Aboriginal youth should not be faulted for being unfamiliar with the dominant norms and expectations associated with curriculum nor their Aboriginal-run schools blamed for not better equipping these students in high school. Therefore, universities can better support Aboriginal students by improving how they are integrating Indigenous epistemologies within their own pedagogies, curricula, and educational policies (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008).

Of course, it is overgeneralizing to state that all Aboriginal students attended Aboriginal-run schools or all have perilous life situations that inhibit their academic success in university. Aboriginal students who attend the University of Saskatchewan

have moved to attend university from surrounding First Nations' communities ranging from the isolated north to Saskatchewan's towns and cities. Aboriginal students who are schooled in urban communities experience immense challenges and are often exposed more or less, to similar difficult life circumstances as Aboriginal students from rural areas. Oftentimes, their situations may be more difficult because of the day-to-day pressure to assimilate into dominant norms, whether this pressure is overt or subtle (J. Episkenew, personal communication, April 4, 2014).

Many Aboriginal students schooled in rural and urban areas vary in their situations of being supported both in elementary and secondary education due the existence of adequate educational resources and parental involvement. Although Aboriginal students vary in their life situations, there are common variables to their challenges related to effects of colonization, Euro-centrism, and all forms of racism. In this case, Aboriginal literature may be positively influencing Aboriginal students from all walks of life.

Aboriginal literature in university pedagogies

Ghosh (2010) stated that education leads to knowledge, requires respect for others and otherness, and is the gateway for opening ourselves to a larger reality. Therefore, it is problematic when Euro-centric educational systems across Canada use textbooks that do not recognize and mis-recognize the contribution of groups of people. In contrast, including Aboriginal literature in educational learning often helps students reading it to begin to recognize the contribution of Aboriginal groups to society.

Contemporary media, including films and literature used in education “have the ability to influence the construction of personal identities, self-esteem, and ideas about

the world around us” (Maslin, 2002, p. 6). Maslin (2002) further maintained that media continues to perpetuate stereotypes to a large extent, by racializing behaviors along with phenotypic traits. In this way “the dominant group is able to justify the unequal treatment of racialized groups... based on what is viewed as the shortcomings of those members” (p. 13).

Learning through Aboriginal literature may help educators to support Aboriginal students so that they can begin to heal from historical trauma. Episkenew (2009) described how “Indigenous life writing helps Indigenous readers heal from postcolonial trauma by helping them recraft their personal and collective myths” (p. 70). In particular, autobiographical literature and testimonial literature address present situations and look “for future solutions, to revolutionary solutions, and to a transformed society as envisioned by the witness telling [his or] her story” (Beard, 2000, p. 65). Stories also work for Aboriginal people to describe the way of healing, health, and wholeness (Hart, 2002). Through the lens of an Aboriginal worldview, stories are comprehended in three ways: the sharing of general stories, the use of humour, and role modeling. The sharing of general stories allows individuals to personally discover whatever meaning in the story relates to them. The use of humor supports the release of tension, energy and knowledge development since much can be learned from the laughter stemming from particular situations. Meanwhile, role modeling through the telling of stories is “indirect, non-confrontational and supportive” (Hart, 2002, p. 57). Aboriginal literature has the power to help Aboriginal students to begin to heal or to simply learn new ways of dealing with difficult circumstances, ways that may help them throughout their lifetime.

At this point, I draw into discussion the commonly used term ‘at-risk’, which is

often used in education to refer to the challenges met by Aboriginal students. The commonly used term 'at-risk' implies Aboriginal students and their families are a problem rather than that colonization and racism placing some Aboriginal people in perilous situations (HeavyRunner & Marshall, 2003; Johnson, 2003). Johnson (2003) pointed out that "at-risk" implies some Aboriginal students come from problematic homes or cultural environments, thus labeling Aboriginal children and their families unfairly. She argued that there is an implicit assumption "that the child is in danger and must be provided with support systems *away from* the family or social structure that is viewed as negligent or abusive... the responsibility for how well or less-than-well a group is functioning in society is also shifted from the larger society to the individual or single-family unit" (p. 186).

Applying the label of "at-risk" to Aboriginal students denies them as the owners of valuable skills, qualities, or knowledge that are hidden and latent and that may be useful to others in classroom learning. This positions Aboriginal students as "individuals in need," with deficits that others will fill, and "denies the effects of white supremacy and other oppressive systems that structure Canadian society" (Schick, 2010, p. 52-56). The label sets up Aboriginal student as destined to fail in the education system because of his or her background. Aboriginal students who are labeled "at-risk" have often practiced sustained resilience throughout adversity and have great potential in education. These students need to be supported in a way that allows their strengths to be recognized.

Aboriginal literature, as a form of Aboriginal learning materials, correspond to the Aboriginal knowledge that Aboriginal students are taught within their own families and communities (Chief, 2011, Clancy, 1995). Aboriginal literature and content in

classroom learning clearly influences not only Aboriginal students, but also teachers' identities and self-concepts (Chief, 2011; O'Reilly-Scanlon, Crowe, & Weenie, 2004; and Clancy, 1995). Aboriginal literature serves as a powerful tool to influence the identity and self-esteem of Aboriginal students and teachers when included in curriculum (Clancy, 1995).

The pedagogical approaches of professors when teaching Aboriginal literature are important to engaging Aboriginal students in what they are learning. This was evident in a study that compared memories of learning to read and write between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students at the University of Regina. O'Reilly-Scanlon, Crowe, & Weenie (2004) applied the research methodology *wahkotowin* and "research as story", integrated with the Western theory of memory work (Haug et al., 1992). Their findings indicated that when it comes to all students, it is important for professors to value the knowledge that students bring with them into the classroom, to create a feeling of belonging for optimal learning, and to acknowledge their own power in shaping students' attitudes towards themselves as learners.

Aboriginal students often draw inspiration from the stories of others, and reading Aboriginal literature may work in the same way. Aboriginal literature has the capacity to teach Aboriginal students how someone of their background was able to persevere over tragedy and hardship. They may be empowered to make use of their talents, abilities, and knowledge that may be useful to realizing their purpose in life and to helping others (Quigley, 2006).

Conclusion of literature review

Several scholarly studies have assessed the diversity of problems that inhibit

Aboriginal student success in university studies, the wide array of influences on Aboriginal students' success in university and possible solutions.

My study looks at one of these possible solutions: how increasing Aboriginal content in the form of Aboriginal literature may serve as a valuable option for Aboriginal students as they understand and foster their resilience to persist through struggles in academia. I have attempted to locate studies, articles and reports that highlight the influence of Aboriginal literature on the resilience of Aboriginal students and how these influences can be recognized by university instructors and administration as a strategy to empower Aboriginal students to persist through education and into meaningful employment. As a whole, the specific topic of this study has not been considered collectively by any scholarly study by anyone other than Episkenew (2009).

This literature review indicates that there is great value and significance to study the influences of Aboriginal literature on Aboriginal students in university. Aboriginal literature responds to and critiques the policies of the Canadian government, supports healing from trauma and contributes to anti-racist education. This literature review also provided information on the progression of Aboriginal literature in Canada as well as the importance of understanding meaning of resilience for Aboriginal students. However, little is known about the individual experiences of Aboriginal literature as a source of inspiration and resilience for Aboriginal students in university. My study contributes to a richer understanding of the value of Aboriginal literature in supporting Aboriginal peoples' resilience through the voices of selected participants who share their experiences.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

Introduction

As a *Nehiyaw* person who is grounded in cultural teachings, I framed my study with a combination of Indigenous methodology and grounded theory methods. The conceptual research framework is a metaphor to the *Nehiyaw* practice of *mosahkina wihkaskwa* (sweetgrass gathering), which outlines my study's research preparation, methods, and procedure. I compared the practice of *mosahkina wihkaskwa* to the practice of doing academic research. *Mosahkina wihkaskwa* involves the steps of preparation, gathering, sorting, combining, storing, and using for well-being by smudging. Undertaking research similarly involves preparing, protocols, and permission; data collection; organizing and grouping; writing up research; and using for a contribution to society. At this point of the thesis, I finalized the preparation stage by choosing a methodology and methods that helped me to adequately gather the data, granted me permission to go ahead with the research, and ensured the protocols are being properly followed. Similarly, *mosahkina wihkaskwa* consists of a preparation stage: a person must be prepared to partake in the practice, follow the cultural protocols of offering tobacco and seeking permission, and securing the guidance of an Elder to gain an understanding of the correct way to collect *wihkaskwa*.

Grounded theory methods provided a way of doing analysis that was compatible with an Indigenous methodology as it broke down and fragmented data and allowed me to build it back up with my own interpretation. In addition, using grounded theory methods were compatible with Indigenous methodology as each story was “available for interpretative analysis by others... and allowed for story and self-in-relation

interpretations and integrated thematic groupings” (Kovach, 2009, p. 132).

Indigenous methodology

This qualitative study was guided by Indigenous methodology and grounded theory methods to analyze data, using a conceptual framework with a metaphor to the *Nehiyaw* practice of *mosahkina wihkaskwa* to outline the research preparation, methods, and procedure in order to demonstrate the theoretical and practical underpinnings of the research (Kovach, 2009). This research was also guided by *Miyo-Pimatisiwin* to examine the resilience of Aboriginal students.

Wihkaskwa is a type of grass that is picked in the summer for use in prayer and ceremony. The similarity between *mosahkina wihkaskwa* and Indigenous research is that each involves the following steps: preparing oneself for the process, seeking proper guidance and permission, adhering to ethics and protocol, gathering only what is needed, sorting according to size, ensuring everything fits together, taking care in storage and sharing with others, and guaranteeing that it is used for the well-being of self and others.

Mosahkina wihkaskwa is a *Nehiyaw* cultural tradition that carries aspects of *Nehiyaw* knowledge and worldviews. My experience growing up in a First Nations community was spent picking *wihkaskwa* with my mother. As an adult, I rarely picked *wihkaskwa*. The few *wihkask* (sweetgrass braids) that I occasionally used to smudge came from my mother or grandmother. Two years ago, as a newly single parent and graduate student, I began smudging with *wihkask* every morning and night to help me with my emotional, mental and spiritual well-being. I ran out of *wihkask* quickly and wanted to pick some during the summer. I realized I had no idea where to begin. I forgot the process involved for *mosahkina wihkaskwa* and needed help.

I prepared myself by making sure it was a time I was prepared to pick medicines in the traditional sense of waiting four days after menstruation or without consuming any kind of alcohol or drugs. While visiting my parents, I asked my mother for help and waited until she was unoccupied. I had some tobacco ready and we went out to a sacred area in our community called Seven Hills. My mother said a prayer and placed the cigarette I gave her on the ground to give thanks to the Creator for providing the medicines we picked and that they would grow back.

My mother started the process of *mosahkina wihkaskwa* and I became frustrated as I tried to distinguish the *wihkaskwa* from regular grass. I had to show patience as I stood by my mother and watched her pick. She showed me the purple stem, the particular scent of the *wihkaskwa* and the way it glistened in the sun. She told me not to pull it out by the root but by the stem. So I took my time and slowly I started to find each one. I noticed how it made a certain sound when I pulled it out from the stem. I kept picking until I had a handful.

I came back to the city the same day and placed my *wihkaskwa* on my coffee table ready to sort it out as I saw my mother do before. As I watched television, I sorted each strand of grass according to size. Once this was done I took a bunch and tied it at the end and started braiding it with the help of first my daughter who quickly got bored of it, and then my son. I realized that I needed to give my full attention to the *wihkaskwa* when I had to undo the first braid because it was too thick. So, I redid them and slowly braided each one until I had finished 13 braids of *wihkaskwa*. I was proud of having gathered, sorted, and prepared all the *wihkaskwa* I needed for the winter until I could do it all again next summer. I found that smudging with the *wihkask* gives me positive energy, strength,

protection, and guidance from the spiritual entity. Along with prayer it cleanses my mind, body, emotions, and spirit so I am able to get through the day with inner strength.

An Indigenous research paradigm, as with all paradigms, consists of a researcher's ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology (Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2003). The ontology is the belief of what is real in the world, epistemology is about self as it relates to one's knowledge and how knowledge itself is understood, methodology is the way knowledge is re-produced (or discovered), and axiology is the ethics or morals that guide the research and researcher for knowledge (Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2001).

Preparing myself for this research involved determining my epistemological positioning through self-location, as well as the ontology, methodology, and axiology of this research which all rely on the tribal knowledge I hold as a *Nehiyaw* woman raised on a Saskatchewan First Nations community. As a researcher reveals his or her epistemological positioning, this shows the interpretative lens through which the researcher will be conducting and making meaning of the research (Kovach, 2009).

As a *Nehiyaw* researcher, I delineated the origin of my worldview and was specific when applying the *Nehiyaw* methodology according to my cultural values. I expected the research would be culturally safe and respectful to others (Martin, 2003, p. 4). To achieve this, I carried out the research according to the protocols and worldview I learned in my upbringing as a *Nehiyaw* person so that hopefully Aboriginal participants felt their worldviews and beliefs were being respected and that I was responsible for protecting any kind of Indigenous knowledge that was shared. McIvor (2010) highlighted a list of principles created by Aboriginal scholars, as necessary in guiding good Indigenous research:

respecting all life forms; conducting oneself with kindness, honesty, and compassion; bringing benefit to the community; understanding the research question lies within the Indigenous experience; knowing transformation will be one of the outcomes; never compromising the integrity of the researcher and others involved; and committing to being advised by an Elder(s) or knowledge keeper(s) (p. 139).

Certainly, I endeavored, as a researcher, to be guided by these principles and to ponder the important questions McIver (2010) stipulated as critical in doing Indigenous research:

(1) What brought me here? (2) What do I feel I have/need to contribute to my people/community/nation? (3) From what “place” do I speak? (p. 140).

Writing a section on self-location helped me to make sense of these questions and to clarify the origin of my worldview and cultural values. As Kovach (2009) stated, “self-location anchors knowledge within experiences, and these experiences greatly influence interpretations” (p. 111). Seeking guidance, adhering to ethics and protocol, and applying the methods involved in relying on traditional knowledge to guide me on how I conduct myself with the people I encountered during my research.

I relied on the guidance of my supervisor, committee member, and other professors who had expertise in doing academic research. In working with study participants, I referred to Wilson(2001) and his three Rs: being respectful, reciprocal, and relational of Indigenous research and learning (p. 177). The three Rs imply accountability to relationships, as a researcher being inseparable from the research subject, respectfully interpreting knowledge and using that knowledge to help build relationships that have been established through the research process.

As I shaped my research plan I followed Wilson's (2008) definition of axiology, adhering to the *Nehiyaw* protocol I was shown by my Elders and in my traditional upbringing, keeping in mind the spiritual entity that holds importance to my well-being that can be relied on for guidance and direction, along with the Elders. The Elders and the oral traditions provide Aboriginal people "with the codes of conduct as human beings within our communities. Additionally, there are those ethical boundaries established by collective principles, such as our knowledge systems, the autonomy of our human communities or our treaties" (Ermine, 2007, p. 196).

By using this research framework, I expected that the research study would comply with the broad ethical considerations required for research involving Aboriginal people:

- (a) that the research methodology be in line with Indigenous values; (b) that there is some form of community accountability; (c) that the research gives back to and benefits the community in some manner; and (d) that the researcher is an ally and will not do harm (Kovach, 2009, p. 48).

I formed a *Nehiyaw* methodology based on information mainly recommended by Ermine (2007), Kovach (2009), and Wilson (2001, 2003, and 2008), which gave me the opportunity to produce a more authentic approach and "to produce a product that is returned to the community for their benefit" (Redwing Saunders, 2007, p. 1020). I hope to give back to the Aboriginal community by sharing what I have learned from this study. This may be done by speaking on this topic when the opportunity arises, and by writing articles and reports that may be informative to organizations and institutions that may benefit from this information.

In doing my study using an Indigenous methodology, I aimed to have the research produce a source of enrichment to the lives of the Aboriginal participants, rather than one of depletion or denigration (Weber-Pillwax, 1999). I used a methodology that placed respect and regard for participants' willingness to share their stories through interviews as the foremost factors. I also acted in respectful manner as I handled the participants' information afterward during data analysis and interpretation by keeping the stories as close as possible to what participants shared. Furthermore, my aim was to benefit Aboriginal students and communities by sharing the knowledge I gained from this research to contribute to measures dealing with Aboriginal student retention in post-secondary.

Doing research well meant having a vested interest as a *Nehiyaw* researcher in the integrity of the methodology and the usefulness of the results to the Aboriginal community (Wilson, 2008). A *Nehiyaw* epistemology, ontology, methodology, and axiology meant relational accountability to get the details right so that as a researcher I was accountable not only to the scholarly community but to Elders, wisdom-keepers, leaders, family, and fellow community members (McIvor, 2010, p. 141). I did this by using the Indigenous theory *Miyo-Pimatisiwin* to clarify my understanding of Aboriginal students' resilience and by doing so, regarding *Nehiyaw* worldviews and values as integral to my study's progression and outcome.

Most importantly, as a *Nehiyaw* researcher it was my intention to "be seriously engaged in grounded critical and political work for transformation and write from a particular cultural, community or tribal particular position" (Redwing Saunders, 2007, p. 1020). My *Nehiyaw* epistemological position ensured that my research methods

“flow[ed] from tribal epistemologies” (Kovach, 2009, p. 39) and that I centered my methodology on the tribal knowledge of the *Nehiyaw* people. In doing so, I avoided the pan-Indigenous approach that would arise in assuming that all tribal groups share the same practices and beliefs (Kovach, 2009, p. 46). I handled the diversity within specific tribal groups by revealing my tribal epistemic positioning to participants who belonged to other tribal groups prior to the interviews. I acknowledged that my some of my beliefs as a *Nehiyaw* person may be different and similar in some ways from other tribal groups. As my study included participants who were Inuit, I was mindful of the concepts that bridge most Indigenous people including respect for each other and nature, understandings of community, the oral storytelling practices of Indigenous groups, and the need for these stories to be told (Redwing Saunders, 2007, p. 1019).

***Nehiyaw* epistemological positioning**

I framed the way I look at this research topic with a *Nehiyaw* epistemological positioning. I was raised with traditional *Nehiyaw* teachings, and draw on this knowledge to conduct my research in a way that is compatible with using an Indigenous methodology. *Nehiyaw* protocols and customs guide my ways of conducting research with Aboriginal participants, and using this specific tribal epistemology avoided a pan-Indigenous approach (Kovach, 2009). I understand *Nehiyaw* epistemology to be the way of conducting myself that regards the well-being of others and myself in good relations. This involved taking care of participants and treating them with respect and considering the stories they shared with high regard. I employed the conversational method in the interviews, which meant that I shared some of my own experiences as they related to some of the participants’ stories. I carefully considered aspects of the Aboriginal

knowledge and worldviews that some of the participants' mentioned in my self-reflective journaling to determine how these factors were important to them. As well, showing respect and regard to participants' stories meant keeping in mind the values of reciprocity and relations, and to remember the spiritual entity that is an important part of our lives as *Nehiyaw* people and is often acknowledged for guidance and direction. I gave gifts to the participants to thank them for sharing their personal stories and met after the interviews for debriefing, which was meant to give participants a chance to further share in a private setting and to develop closer relations and trust with the researcher.

Making sense of my *Nehiyaw* epistemology or worldviews is very difficult. My life experiences have been impacted by what my parents went through in residential school as an assimilative process, by patriarchy, colonial worldviews and other government tactics of stringent assimilation. This has impacted the behaviors of people in our community (including my family) in their views and practice of traditional beliefs and values, and sometimes how they conduct ceremonies. Nonetheless, in doing this research I kept the basis of these beliefs, values, ceremonies and traditional knowledge in mind and followed the *Nehiyaw* protocol I was shown by my parents and Elders such as my grandmother and great-grandmother.

I approached this research with knowledge I have acquired through a *Nehiyaw* traditional upbringing and with a perspective that is not based solely on Euro-centric worldviews. I was taught to always consider the *Nehiyaw* worldview as the truth, as my truth, and have always done so during my educational journey. I have continued to do this in the duration of my academic research by bringing in practices that fit with my worldview. Such practices include using the *wihkaskwa* metaphor as a research paradigm

and considering the theory of *Miyo-Pimatisiwin* to define Aboriginal participants' resilience. Furthermore, this included incorporating Aboriginal practices such as organizing a meal and a debriefing opportunity for participants as well as offering cloth, tobacco, and prayers to guarantee the research process went well.

Data collection methods

In my study, I used semi-structured interviews in a conversational style along with self-reflection notes written after the interviews. As I used these specific methods, I was aware that they carried, for both the researcher and participants, a “decolonizing agenda that involves healing and transformation” (Kovach, 2009, p. 125). The interviews relate to using an Indigenous methodology by the intention to hear the personal stories of participants. Kovach (2009) stated that using a conversational method as a data collection method is congruent with the fluidity and regulation of the storyteller's role in the oral traditions of Aboriginal peoples. The conversational method “involves an open-ended structure that is flexible enough to accommodate principles of native oral traditions, and is thus differentiated from a more traditional interview process” (p. 124). This kind of interview process has the power held by the storyteller, who is the research participant (Kovach, 2009, p. 125).

Through the interviews I sought to hear participants' stories to discover the influences of reading Aboriginal literature on their resilience. As well, I was interested in finding out how Aboriginal students are learning from and responding to Aboriginal literature taught in the classroom. The conversational method consisted of one-to-one conversations between the participants and the researcher. The conversations were informal and took place in a setting chosen by the participant, where he or she was

comfortable and privacy was afforded. Once each interview was completed I conducted self-reflection in the form of journaling responses to reflect on what I observed and heard. Personal reflections helped me to make clearer sense of the data and use it as a means of tapping into my personal, internal knowledge as an Indigenous researcher. This was a chance for me to reflect on the *Nehiyaw* wholistic knowledge that informed my research (Kovach, 2009). An example of a reflection that speaks to my knowledge as a *Nehiyaw* person is paying attention to the importance of dreams and what my dreams were telling me during the entire time frame of my research. Sometimes I questioned if my research would be beneficial; however, my dreams were telling me that I was doing something worthwhile and this motivated me to keep on during the strenuous times. As well, I related my own experiences to those of the participants through personal reflections. This method increased my understanding of their experiences and allowed me to pay closer attention to my responses to the research.

Participants

Purposive sampling allowed me to focus on six undergraduate Aboriginal students at the University of Saskatchewan. This participatory group was currently enrolled at the University of Saskatchewan and completed a first-year course that incorporated some aspect of Aboriginal literature. This was an important selection criterion as the interview questions asked respondents to reflect on their experiences of learning from Aboriginal literature.

I recruited participants through a Call for Participants poster and a bulletin on the PAWS website. I sent the poster to the Aboriginal Student Centre, to Aboriginal student advisors, and to instructors in the English and Native Studies departments, in addition to

the Aboriginal Teacher Education Programs (ATEPS) affiliated with the University of Saskatchewan.

Thereafter, I contacted staff at the University of Saskatchewan's Aboriginal Student Centre, the ATEP's, and instructors in the English Department and Native Studies department for potential participants who met the inclusion criteria of the study. I also inquired with staff in these departments to announce and display the Call for Participants poster to students who qualified as participants.

Methods of analysis

Managing, organizing, and interpreting the data using grounded theory methods was consistent with a *Nehiyaw* methodology because using these methods allowed me to retain my initial perspectives as an Indigenous researcher and integrate these perspectives with the information that emerged from data analysis. Comparable to the practice of sorting and braiding *wihkaskwa*, grounded theory methods served to cut and analyze the data; an analytical tool that broke down and fragmented data with the goal of building it back up with my own interpretation. In this case, combining the interpretation of the results along with my self-reflections was comparable to braiding the sorted piles of *wihkaskwa* into sections that fit well together.

I used the grounded theory method of NVivo to sort interview data into codes. As the researcher, my task was to identify categories and their properties. This was comparable to sorting each strand of *wihkaskwa* into piles based on similarities. Coding with NVivo made visible some of the components of similarities and differences of the data. The information I was coding was valuable to the outcome of the research study and I carried this out with great care, just as handling *wihkaskwa* is done with great care.

Coffey & Atkinson (1996) describe coding as “as process that enables the researcher to identify meaningful data and set the stage for interpreting and drawing conclusions” (p. 27). Coding allowed me to identify patterns, events, and actions that were of interest and functioned to organize data sets or categories (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Using NVivo allowed me to more easily code the data and manage, shape and make sense of structured information, develop a much denser set of themes and categories, use such categorizations to build systematic comparisons and contrasts with the views expressed by other students, and provided a workspace and tools that allowed me to work through the information (QSR, 2014, Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). This process involved sorting and re-sorting the data into codes and once these codes were established, creating categories from those codes.

Meanwhile, I continued to journal in parallel with data collection, note-taking, and coding (Dick, 2000-2005). I wrote down my personal reflections in response to what the participants shared in the interviews and how it related to *Miyo-Pimatisiwin* as a theory of resilience. Just as re-sorting of *wihkaskwa* into piles sometimes needs to occur to ensure bundles properly fit together, I repeated the categorization of data three times before some noticeable themes started to emerge. While initially five themes emerged from data analysis, I narrowed these five themes down further to three themes with one sub-theme. In the end, the three themes became comparable to the three sections in the *wihkask*. I discuss these themes in my data analysis.

Ethical considerations

I adhered to the ethics involved in conducting interviews with students attending the University of Saskatchewan and working with an Aboriginal population. The study

proceeded with the approval of an ethics proposal by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board to guide how my interviews would be conducted. Individual student participants signed consent forms that detailed the methods and procedure of participation; storage of data; dissemination of results; possible risks and benefits of participation; measures of confidentiality; data and transcription release; and steps for debriefing and feedback.

I carefully considered and adhered to the ethics involved in working with an Aboriginal population, especially since I was using an Indigenous methodology. As a researcher of *Nehiyaw* descent, I followed my understanding of *Nehiyaw* ethics and protocol as they associated with working amongst Aboriginal people. This meant being respectful, reciprocal, and relational throughout interaction and recognizing the spiritual entity that is integral to *Nehiyaw* cultural ways. As part of the research process, an offering of cloth and tobacco along with prayers were made to ensure the research was conducted in a way that was respectful to participants. As a form of reciprocity and respect, I also offered thank you cards, gift cards, and a free Subway lunch during final exams to students once the data collection was completed. The lunch and reciprocal sharing was meant to bring the participants and researcher together to share experiences and provide closure to the interview process.

CHAPTER FOUR: STORIES OF PARTICIPANTS

Introduction

In this chapter, I present the stories of the six Aboriginal students who participated in my study by describing their backgrounds, the challenges they faced in their first-year of university, and their understandings of resilience. Selecting participants and hearing their stories was similar to gathering *wihkaskwa* from a field of grass. Just as the *wihkaskwa* is hidden in a field of various strands of regular grass and must be carefully selected, I carefully selected participants whose individual stories would properly fit with my topic. Furthermore, I was required to show *Tapah̄t̄yimisowin* (humility)—a second value representing one of the three strands of the *wihkask*—as I met with participants and listened to their stories, and sorted pieces of their stories in such a way that respected their voices.

My search for current Aboriginal (First Nation, Métis, and Inuit) students studying Aboriginal literature at the university resulted in six students coming forward for my interviews. In this section, I tell the participants' stories to establish a clearer understanding of their identities and the diverse individual experiences of these Aboriginal participants. This diversity of experiences demonstrates the multiplicity and similarities apparent amongst Aboriginal students attending the University of Saskatchewan. Each participant chose a pseudonym, which are as follows: *Nohkom Kanehkan Apit* (Cree for 'Grandmother who sits at the front'), *Adjgaliaq* (Inuvialuktun for 'Created by Hands'), *Chris, Jimmy, Cindy, and Raine*⁸.

⁸ The descriptions in the following sections may contain identifying information of some of the participants. In adherence to ethical research protocol, the researcher has obtained permission from

Stories of participants

The participants' stories are presented using the following categories:

Background

Challenges in university

Understanding of resilience

NOHKOM KANEHKAN APIT

Background

Nohkom Kanehkan Apit is a *Nehiyaw* (Plains Cree) mature student in her first-year of Arts and Sciences at the time of the interview. As a student in the Aboriginal Student Achievement Program (ASAP) her aspirations are to eventually transfer into a nursing program. Nohkom Kanehkan Apit is a registered band member of a Saskatchewan First Nations community and was raised in a foster home in another First Nation community. She is a fluent *Nehiyaw* speaker and participates in *Nehiyaw* ceremonies.

Nohkom Kanehkan Apit began the interview by sharing that she dropped out of high school when she was 15-years-old. While living in Saskatoon she took the Adult Education program at the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Sciences and Technologies (SIAST) and completed her high school diploma. She applied to university after graduating from SIAST as a mature student and parent. She said that attending university was her goal throughout her young adult years: "I guess I always had it in my head that I

participants Adjgaliaq, Jimmy, and Cindy so that the researcher may include information that may identify these specific participants.

wanted to go to school, [to be] in university, at the U of S here. That has always been my dream for the past ten years.”

Challenges in university

Nohkom Kanehkan Apit admitted that her decision to apply at the University of Saskatchewan, rather than the First Nations University of Canada, was based on the negative public perception of Aboriginal people and the limitations that extend to Aboriginal-focused university programs and organizations. I interpreted this as the common perception of Aboriginal academic institutions as simply certifying Aboriginal people without giving them the same rigour of education as mainstream education programs, and which are often viewed as ‘watered down’ programs that do not meet university standards (Grant, 1995, p. 210). Nohkom Kanehkan Apit stated that she may be discriminating against her own people by evaluating Aboriginal institutions this way but acknowledged, “that’s just how I believe society works.”

Nohkom Kanehkan Apit’s greatest challenges once she began university were managing her time and dealing with personal difficulties. She was faced with the challenge of taking her child to daycare early in the morning and arriving for an 8:30 class, when the only free time she had to study was late at night. She left her home very early in the morning, which usually resulted in a late arrival to her class. When she completed her first term she saw the rewards of her efforts and was very proud of herself for the initial accomplishment of getting through these challenges.

As she adjusted to university, Nohkom Kanehkan Apit was also experiencing spousal abuse: “I’ll share this because I know there’s a lot of woman out there that are living through this and don’t know how to cope with it. I was in a domestic violence

relationship.” She wanted to get out of the relationship and looked for some resources that could help her.

After an initial failed bid for help at the Aboriginal Student Centre, she turned to an Aboriginal worker in ASAP who was helpful in terms of advising her on the steps she could take and referring her to counselors if she chose that route. She explained that the ASAP worker she spoke with regularly was very helpful: “Whatever problems or issues I had I always felt comfortable talking to her so I would always approach her... she was there to talk to me on how to fix stuff.” Nohkom Kanehkan Apit then took the necessary steps to leave her relationship and demonstrated resilience by keeping negative thoughts away with personal coping strategies:

I kept the negative thoughts away. I kept focused on school. And when I did feel down I listened to happy music. No sad music. Or I would comedy, just to keep my spirits up. And I’d watch videos on Youtube. A lot of comedy stuff to keep my spirits up because I really don’t have supports, no family in the city. [And I] kept smudging.

Employing these coping strategies helped her to remain focused on her schooling and to get through her struggles.

Understanding of Resilience

Nohkom Kanehkan Apit understood resilience as it related to resistance: to reactions of fighting and opposition for one’s survival. She admitted that it was difficult for her to precisely define the term resilience; however, she immediately began to relate her understanding of the term through her own difficult experiences in university. These difficult experiences were marked largely by her personal challenges.

ADJGALIAQ

Background

Adjgaliaq is an Inuit male in his first-year of an Aboriginal Teacher Education Program⁹. He is in his mid-twenties and speaks fluently in the *Inuvialuktun* dialect. His career aspiration is to complete his teacher education and gain employment as a teacher. Adjgaliaq was born in the Northwest Territories and his family moved to a community in another area of the Northwest Territories where he was raised for the majority of his childhood. He moved around a lot as his parents pursued degrees first in colleges located in the Northwest Territories and later at the University of Saskatchewan. His father graduated as a teacher while his mother pursued a degree in Business Management. Adjgaliaq's parents later moved back to the Northwest Territories to work.

After graduating from high school, Adjgaliaq enrolled in Arts and Sciences at the University of Saskatchewan and withdrew after completing two years.

I used to come here to the University of Saskatchewan. But I was in the Arts and Sciences program. I took it for two years and back then I used to drink, I used to smoke weed, and that really affected me academically. And now that I don't do any of that stuff I find that my memory is a lot better. I'm a lot more motivated. Adjgaliaq returned home to the Northwest Territories and in 2012, he enrolled once again at the university to pursue a teaching degree. This was his long-time goal: "I knew that I wanted to become a teacher. That's always been something that's stuck with me, mainly because my father graduated here. I kind of wanted to follow in his footsteps the same

⁹ The participant has willingly provided this information and given permission that potentially identifying information may be used in this thesis study.

way” (p. 1). Adjgaliaq was married shortly after completing his first term of university, and at the time of the interview he had no children.

Challenges in university

Adjgaliaq said his challenges in university included struggling to keep up with class readings and getting stressed out and frustrated quite often. He also faced financial challenges as a student on a limited budget each month: “I catch myself eating Ichiban noodles pretty much every day for a week or two or just macaroni. Just having to set aside all those wants and only dealing with what I need. Focusing on those has really helped me.” In his earlier years of university, Adjgaliaq said he struggled with motivation and receiving low marks. He admitted that this was a result of how he chose to cope with challenges by drinking and using drugs. However, he said as a mature student he has changed his attitude and behavior so that he copes with his challenges in what he sees as a more healthy way:

I try to set aside at least two hours a day. I even break it up in chunks and just try to do a minimum of two hours a day of reading and throw in a bit of writing if I could too. I noticed I do get stressed out and frustrated quite often. And I usually go to gym and that helps me to relieve some stress. And also there’s just talking to my wife. We’re very open to each other so we tend to talk a lot.

Adjgaliaq said he also feels supported by taking his teacher education program with other Aboriginal students and from the moral support he receives from his parents.

Understanding of resilience

Adjgaliaq related his understanding of resilience to a person who is able to persevere with whatever comes his or her way:

You're able to work around it. It's those obstacles that pile and you just go through, go over, go around them. And you just carry on and you become stronger. ... Just being able to carry on through everyday struggles.

He referred to his own resilience as a first-year education student, when his success in school was impacted largely by his attitude and behavior. He said his attitude and behaviour changed for the better as he reached his mid-20s and decided on some goals for himself:

I would say a huge factor would be my attitude and behavior, it's drastically changed. I no longer feel that I'm that little teenager, that boy. I feel as if I'm a grown man and I know what my goals are. I'm achieving them, I can see them in my grades. I could see it in the way people interact with me.

CHRIS

Background

Chris is a *Nehiyaw* (Plains Cree) male student in his 30s who is a registered band member of a First Nations community in Saskatchewan. Chris was raised in a single parent household and lived in his home community until he was five-years-old, a time he was fully immersed in the *Nehiyaw* language. After his family moved to the city he struggled in school and failed two grades because of language difficulties and low attendance. Chris said that as he was growing up, his home situation was sometimes rough and going to school and reading were a means of escape for him. When he reached high school he became better able to read and write, which improved his grades. In high school, Chris demonstrated academic intelligence and his teachers and family members encouraged him to enroll in university. He followed their advice but struggled in his

first-year of Arts and Sciences. Before he completed the year, he withdrew and entered the workforce.

Over the years, Chris worked in various labour jobs and as an addictions worker. As a husband and a father he decided to return to university after realizing that he needed a better income to support his family. He also wanted a career in which he felt more fulfilled. At the time of the interview, Chris was in year three in an Aboriginal Teacher Education program connected to the University of Saskatchewan and planned to become a high school English teacher once he graduated.

Challenges in university

Chris' most challenging experiences in university occurred after he enrolled in Arts and Sciences as a young high school graduate. He said he dropped out as a result of being unable to work independently without a teacher supervising his work. He did not feel motivated to learn in university and attributed this to having enrolled immediately after completing high school. As a mature student, his second attempt at university was challenging as he reacquainted himself with academic reading and writing after being out of school for close to a decade: "I would say my biggest challenge was getting back into the classroom after being out of school for 8 years. ... Because I guess the mind was a little rusty, the reading skills were below and so were the writing skills."

Through self-motivation and relying on outside supports, Chris was able to overcome challenges and persevere through university the second time around.

You have to put aside other things. You have to make sacrifices as far as friends, spending time with friends. So yeah, I guess the time management, also making those personal sacrifices was... a big factor in my success the second time. So the

time management, making the sacrifices, and also I was a little more motivated the second time because I realized this was what I wanted to do.

Chris found solace in taking classes through one of the Aboriginal Teachers Education Programs with other Aboriginal students with whom he found common ground. He also credited his strong traditional *Nehiyaw* identity and involvement in ceremonies and prayer as helping him through his struggles:

As a university student the greatest support for me is my culture. I do spend time going to ceremonies. And for me, that's my inspiration for raising a family and getting this education. So it's my culture, the people, the prayers that have been said for me. And the people around those ceremonies who support me too, for me, they're kind of the foundation for my support system along with my partner, and my kids, my mom.

Understanding of resilience

Chris's understanding of resilience was summed up in his references to his own educational experiences. "I don't think the smart kids or the advanced kids technically succeed at university. ... I've talked to some students and they've said they were horrible in high school but yet they've went on to be successful in university." He referred to his personal growth as a student, particularly as an independent learner, which fostered his resilience through university the second time around. He described resilience in terms of a student being able to motivate himself or herself to manage time and as one who takes initiative, which were skills he had to learn in the workforce. He said a large part of enacting his own resilience involved prioritizing time, making sacrifices to spend time

studying, and broadening his thinking. As well, he took comfort in the rewarding experiences he had during his university learning.

JIMMY

Background

Jimmy is a 23-year-old *Nehiyaw* (Plains Cree) male whose major is Political Studies. He was born in Saskatoon and has family ties to three different First Nations communities in Saskatchewan. His childhood was spent in Saskatoon where his parents attended university and his father pursued a career in Law. I met Jimmy for the first time during the interview for my study. Prior to this, he sent me an email indicating he was willing to be interviewed. In his childhood, Jimmy attended a Saskatoon public school and said he was not an academically inclined student. He dropped out of school to play Junior A Hockey then shortly afterward returned to high school. He graduated and enrolled at the University of Saskatchewan in Arts and Sciences. Jimmy was determined to do something more with his life and to fulfill his dream of going into law. He was inspired to become a lawyer as a teenager when his father took him along to conferences, court cases, and meetings with other lawyers.

Challenges in university

Shortly after beginning his first year in university Jimmy was motivated to do well, but was forced to deal with the grief of two deaths in his family:

I was originally going to take my time with it. And then, well my father passed away four and a half years ago just at the time when I enrolled. So I tried going to... I tried coming here through the transition program. I ended up withdrawing because my dad passing away and my grandma passed away too in the same

month. My family all had to move away... and I was living here on my own and everything.

Jimmy was left on his own in Saskatoon. Without family support and experiencing a newfound loneliness, he withdrew from his studies to be closer to his mother and siblings. Soon after he withdrew from university and moved home, he worked for a few years in labour jobs until he decided to return to the University of Saskatchewan.

During his break from university, Jimmy worked in labour jobs around Saskatchewan, British Columbia, and Alberta. He was offered a job as an equipment operator in Alberta but he could not envision himself working in that profession for the rest of his life: "I felt like I had to come back to school and actually give myself a chance and have a fair shot at it. So I think that's mostly what made me want to come back the most, was to prove myself that I could do it." Jimmy enrolled for a second time at the University of Saskatchewan, taking on the challenge of university once again. At the time of the interview, he was in his final year of Arts and Sciences with plans to enroll in law school upon graduation.

Jimmy began his studies and experienced minor challenges with academic reading and with re-transitioning to university life. Once again, he felt isolated and alone:

All my family from the city was all gone so I didn't really know anybody, I didn't really talk to any of my friends... I didn't stay in really good touch with a lot of my friends here in Saskatoon who... I went to school with and stuff. Coming back was a little bit tough because it didn't feel like home anymore. It lost that sense of being home with all of my family and everything. I guess the first year was pretty lonely... I had a few friends who came here before, I had one of my

friends, we were friends since we were little kids. He was in university so I kind of just tagged along with him and we hung out and stuff. And one of my other cousins also came too so we didn't get to see each other that much but we tried to stay in touch as much as we could.

Jimmy also faced pressures in his home life and financial burdens as a university student. He mentioned the prejudice and racism he experienced at the university, and he seen the same treatment exhibited to other students:

Dealing with prejudice and racism here at the university. A lot of it... some of it's overt, like you know, it's right there in your face. But some of it's really subtle. I noticed that and I have experienced it a few times here, for sure, definitely, from other students. I have seen it done to other students too and stuff like that. Growing up in the city, I've had to deal with racism all my life. But it doesn't seem to get [easier]... it still affects you. It still hurts.

To deal with some of these challenges, Jimmy sought support and friendships at the Aboriginal Student Center and found personal support from family and other Aboriginal student support staff. He initiated his own studying strategies to better understand academic terminology and made the personal sacrifice of selling his truck to cope with financial difficulties.

In his second year, Jimmy volunteered to mentor other first-year Aboriginal students, which led to a job as an Aboriginal student advisor. In his third year, Jimmy resigned from this advising position because he needed to devote more time to his studies. Although loneliness was a major factor that challenged his ability to make it

through his first year of university, he started going to the Aboriginal Student Center and was able to form new friendships with other Aboriginal students.

Understanding of resilience

Jimmy understood resilience as the ability to overcome challenges. He said several people expected him to fail in university, which drove him to find any means necessary to overcome whatever challenges he faced. He recalled his own experiences as he started university and showed resilience through whatever came his way; whether it was financial difficulties, the deaths of loved ones, or facing racism and prejudice. He said his understanding of resilience is exemplified in his ability to overcome personal and academic challenges. He overcame these challenges by relying on supports around him both at home and at the university and through finding his own healthy ways of coping with challenges.

CINDY

Background

Cindy is a 27-year-old female of *Nehiyaw* (Plains Cree) heritage. She is in her final year of Arts and Sciences, majoring in toxicology and the only Aboriginal student taking the program. Cindy was born in Saskatoon and is an only child of a single parent. At five-years-old she moved with her mother to her grandparent's home in northern Saskatchewan. She attended the reserve school from grades 1-12 and learned about First Nations culture through attending sweats, ceremonies, round dances, sun dances, and powwows. Cindy danced powwow during her youth and was involved in sports. Throughout high school she maintained good grades in all subjects and knew that she

wanted to go into the sciences. At this time, she was considering a career in medicine with an aspiration to break the trend of Aboriginal people not enrolling in the sciences.

After high school graduation, Cindy moved to Saskatoon to live with her aunt where she upgraded some high school science classes that were not offered in her home community. She worked for a year in a city youth program and enrolled in university after taking a one-year break from school, deciding on the University of Saskatchewan because it offered the program she was interested in. As well, her decision to enroll at the university was influenced by her mother, aunts, and father choosing this university. She said although she never knew her father, she learned that he attended the University of Saskatchewan. Cindy took the Aboriginal student transition route in university which allowed her to take classes with other Aboriginal students, most of whom she met previously through her involvement in high school sports. Halfway through her university studies she took a short break from school to care for her newborn son. At the time of the interview she was a single parent in her final year of university with plans after graduation to work in the field of sciences and environmentalism.

Challenges in university

Cindy said her transition into her first year of university was relatively easy for her. She did not experience much challenges because she was familiar with the city after living in Saskatoon for a year prior to starting university. She had family support in Saskatoon and financial support from her band's post-secondary program. Her family provided her with extra financial support when she became a mother, which she admits a lot of her friends were not so lucky to have. She was also supported through the

Aboriginal student transition program as she started her first-year, which she said helped her to feel comfort in being vocal in her first-year classes.

Unfortunately, her avid involvement in class discussions changed in her second year when she started taking classes with non-Aboriginal students.

Being the only Aboriginal or non-white person, it's intimidating to ask questions sometimes and I'm finally now, when I'm in my final year, I'm a little more comfortable to ask questions. Because now I'm just like "whatever I need to know, otherwise I'm not going to do good". But I guess asking for help was one of the most challenging things for me.

In the classes composed largely of non-Aboriginal students, Cindy had difficulty feeling comfortable and confident and overcoming the intimidation of asking questions in class. She described asking for help during this time as one of the most challenging experiences she has had, fearing that other students would get the wrong impression of her. She overcame these challenges when she became more familiar with the students and professors, began to ask questions in class, and ask for help when she needed it.

Understanding of resilience

Cindy related her understanding of resilience to residential school survivors, because her mother is a social worker and speaks about resilience quite often. Cindy said resilience is seen in the strength shown by Aboriginal adults despite the trauma suffered as children in residential school. She said most of them were able to deal with the trauma and move on: "I would think [resilience is] how you deal with the struggles that you're facing and how you overcome it." In reference to her own resilience during her first year of university, Cindy said she had an easier time than most Aboriginal students.

RAINE

Background

Raine is a 20-year-old student of mixed *Nehiyaw* (Plains Cree) and Métis heritage in his third year of Arts and Sciences. He is majoring in Political Studies and wants to work someday in the area of Indigenous Governance. Raine grew up in a town in Saskatchewan. He is a registered band member of a First Nation through his mother and has roots to a Métis community through his father. He is the middle child of five siblings. Raine identified himself as two-spirited and as having found an increased understanding of this combination of Aboriginal and two-spirited identities in university.

Challenges in university

Raine's challenges began in high school when he struggled academically in the subject of English and found a lack of support from his teachers. His attendance was also impacted by his personal health problems. Teachers gave him a difficult time, which he attributed to discrimination and his weak writing abilities. When Raine entered university he continued having difficulty grasping the content in his English courses and with grammar, which was his greatest challenge: "I struggled in writing and grammar. And you need to take initiative for yourself to find that support. But I was young, I was 19-years-old and I still struggled with writing essays and I still struggle today." Raine was familiar with living in an urban environment so he did not experience culture shock and the difficulty transitioning that he sees in a lot of his Aboriginal peers face as they come from First Nations communities. Raine became involved in activities at the Aboriginal Student Centre. He said shortly afterward he started noticing that there were Aboriginal cliques associated with the Aboriginal Student Centre: some Aboriginal

students were accepted and included while others were outcast and excluded. At this time, he began to distance himself from the Centre.

In his first-year English classes he struggled with learning under the teaching approaches of some of his professors, which he felt was discouraging. This caused him to be unsuccessful in the English classes he took. He admitted that if he had initially went to the university writing center for help he may have passed the classes.

Understanding of resilience

Raine understands the meaning of resilience in reference to an individual who is able to prosper and succeed despite the struggles he or she faces and learn life lessons from struggles. Raine said he was resilient in his first year of university in that he did not give up by not dropping out of his studies despite the struggles that came up with being both Aboriginal and a gay male.

I am a strong Indigenous two-spirited youth, aged 20-years-old. [I showed resilience] through my first year of post-secondary studies by not giving up, not becoming that statistic of dropping out after my first year because I felt that the world was against me or that there was no support on campus. ... I guess my experience was a lot different than other peoples' experience. Because I grew up in a larger town and I was facing the struggles everyday growing up, that a lot of people in my reserve don't face.

Although Raine said sometimes he had feelings that the world was against him and that there was no support on campus, he found the support he needed within himself and in other places outside of the university community.

CHAPTER FIVE: PARTICIPANTS' EXPERIENCES READING ABORIGINAL LITERATURE

Introduction

In this chapter, I present and interpret the experiences of the select group of Aboriginal students that I interviewed as they learned from Aboriginal literature. The conversational style of interviewing placed the participants in the role of storyteller and the researcher in the role of listener. Conversational style of interviewing served as a method of uninterrupted listening in which the participants shared their experiences about reading Aboriginal literature in university and their voices were heard in a manner that closely resembled Aboriginal oral tradition. The information in this section was derived directly from interview transcript data. I distinguished how participants' learning experiences reading Aboriginal literature influenced their resilience in their first-year of university studies.

Participants' experiences

NOHKOM KANEHKAN APIT

Nohkom Kanehkan Apit said she recognized that the Aboriginal literature she read in her course readings influenced her ability to continue in her studies. In her first-term, Nohkom Kanehkan Apit enrolled in an introductory Sociology class that included Mosionier Culleton's (1983) book *In Search of April Raintree* in the course's reading list. Reading this literary work was the first time she encountered Aboriginal literature at the university. The book is a fictional story of a young Métis woman, April Raintree, who grew up in the foster care system along with her sister.

As Nohkom Kanehkan Apit read the novel, she emphasized with the main character's experiences and was reminded of her own experiences in foster care. Strong emotions were tied to what she was reading and releasing these emotions through tears was her way of coping with her memories of trauma: "I'd cry at home behind closed doors while I'm reading. And then dry my tears and read over that harsh part again. Then keep going then I'm ok. That's how I deal with it, I release my emotions."

Nohkom Kanehkan Apit saw how the character in the story April Raintree, faced so many struggles in her young life and remained resilient through it all. Reading this literary work allowed her to see the possibilities within herself:

It influenced me in a positive way, because although it has a sad ending for one of the girls... and cause one of the girls lost their lives and one of the sister(s) continued living. She kept going with her education and she kept following her goals no matter how much racism she endured. She kept going. So I kept that... with me just to help me pursue. [To] help myself, I give myself a lot of self-talk and motivate myself to keep going because I don't get that anywhere else.

Similar to April Raintree, Nohkom Kanehkan Apit learned to give herself encouragement when experiencing challenges. She took inspiration from the character in the novel to cope in healthy ways with difficult life circumstances so she could remain in her studies.

Nohkom Kanehkan Apit said in her view, the university classroom is not a place to get into too deep and personal matters. She commented on what she considers appropriate to speak about in university class discussions:

I just say, 'yeah I feel racism and prejudices and the common stereotypes that go around.' We talk about that but I wouldn't talk about anything that was deep and

personal. Like some of the stuff that happened in that novel. I guess that's how I cope with myself. It helped me cope with myself I guess and to keep going.

Aboriginal literature allowed her to cope with the inner turmoil that resulted when she was reminded of her own difficult life circumstances. The Aboriginal literature Nohkom Kanehkan Apit studied other than Culleton's novel was "The Round House" by Louise Erdrich. Nohkom Kanehkan Apit said that these two pieces of Aboriginal literature were valuable because they presented the struggles that Aboriginal people commonly go through and the strength shown by the Aboriginal people in the stories. The inclusion of these books in her courses also gave her the positive impression that the university was acknowledging Aboriginal people and their contributions to society:

I was actually really surprised that there was actually Aboriginal literature in this university. That was something I thought I wouldn't see and read here. But it just surprised me that I was reading about Aboriginals, I was like "right on, university is not so close-minded after all"... It is great that Aboriginal literature is included because I feel more welcomed in the U of S.

Nohkom Kanehkan Apit was encouraged to reach her goals after reading about the resilience demonstrated by the characters in Aboriginal literature: "they showed that they were really strong individuals. And no matter what struggle they go through they keep going until they succeed and reach that goal that they have." Thus, Aboriginal literature influenced her outlook by demonstrating to her that despite the challenges that she faced in life, it was possible to persevere by focusing on her goals. Whether those goals were to attain an education or to keep striving to live a happier and healthier life,

Nohkom Kanehkan Apit learned that it was possible to get through challenges and reach her goals by believing in herself and manifesting her inner strength.

Nohkom Kanehkan Apit said her professors' approaches to teaching Aboriginal literature influenced her ability to engage in what she was learning. In one instance, Nohkom Kanehkan Apit's sense of comfort was reduced when her perspective clashed with the perspective of her non-Aboriginal professor during a discussion about two people in a relationship. In the story, a white couple had a baby who was born black and the husband disowned the wife because he believed the baby was not his own. Nohkom Kanehkan Apit disagreed with what the non-Aboriginal professor believed was the appropriate way to cope with this sort of difficulty in a relationship and shared her view of how she believed one should conduct him or herself in family relationships:

[The professor] was trying to... make the students see her point of view. That it was a right decision what [the husband] did, by letting [his wife] go and that it was ok that she left and committed suicide. ... I don't know how to explain it, it's just plain wrong for somebody to treat someone like that. And that's what we were basically trying to point out and she argued with us, and kept saying that the white guy made the right choice. And so I finally agreed with her so we could end that topic.

Nohkom Kanehkan Apit reacted strongly to the character's situation in the story. The professor's inability to accept her perspective decreased her comfort level in the classroom. Remaining in the class was difficult for Nohkom Kanehkan Apit when she felt that her perspective was not accepted. Nohkom Kanehkan Apit reacted by withdrawing from the class discussion and eventually the classroom, as she stopped

attending but returned for the last few classes to complete the course. The next term, she enrolled in another English class with a different professor.

Nohkom Kanehkan Apit said that she was struck by the differences in her first-term English professor and her second-term English professor. She said that she was more comfortable taking the second English course in which she and other students could talk freely about being an Aboriginal person in Canada:

I really got into that [second English] class, I really connected with it. I felt comfortable. I always made sure I was there for class because I really enjoyed that class. It was very interesting to talk about Aboriginals and what we go through, the good and the bad.

She mentioned that discussing both the positive and negative factors about being an Aboriginal person was engaging. Furthermore, positive interactions with her professor regarding discussions about the Aboriginal literature allowed led to good marks: “it’s so open. Like our opinions and views matter to this instructor. And she’s definitely different, she’s very open-minded”. When her perspectives were respected and acknowledged, Nohkom Kanehkan Apit said she felt comfortable and enjoyed what she was learning.

ADJGALIAQ

Adjgaliq recalled reading only one specific piece of Aboriginal literature in his first-year English class, which was Richard Van Camp’s (1996) *The Lesser Blessed*. Adjgaliq was fairly engaged in the reading mainly because he identified with the northern community presented in the novel:

He's one of the authors coming out of Fort Smith, my place of birth. I got to know him quite well, growing up. I read all of his children's books and now I'm reading his novels in university. And I just can't get over it. They're now making a movie of one of his novels.

Adjgالياق said that having the novel *The Lesser Blessed* in his course's reading list piqued his interest immediately.

As he read the novel he saw that it acknowledged the realities of Aboriginal communities that are evident in his own community:

With Aboriginal authors, in reading their works, it is like they are telling stories based on true events. Going back to Richard Van Camp's novel, reading his book reminded me of real life [problems]. He does not beat around the bush, he talks about racism, discrimination, abuse of all levels, consequences of peoples' actions: FASD [Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder], PTSD [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder], and substance abuse. His book is revolved around the realities of the lives of Aboriginals in this modern day and age, but focused towards those who are hurt and suffer from the things like poverty.

For Adjgالياق, having those realities presented in the Aboriginal literature increased his engagement in his university English course, as he wanted to be reading Aboriginal literature. Aboriginal literature related to his own life and the lives of people in his community; therefore, the literature was relevant to him.

After reading Van Camp's novel, Adjgالياق attempted to find other Inuit books in the university and found very few. Adjgالياق also took an Anthropology class that recognized the importance of Aboriginal narratives in the form of oral storytelling.

Although specific Aboriginal literature was not taught, he was urged to form his own stories by interviewing Aboriginal people in the community:

I just finished an Anthropology class around oral history and storytelling and that was the only class I really wanted to get into. And it happened to be the hardest class. But it wasn't necessarily reading Aboriginal narratives, it was going out and doing the qualitative research. Interviewing Native people, and I got to meet some pretty brilliant Aboriginal men.

This sort of Aboriginal literature had some influence on Adjgaliaq's resilience by helping him to cope with the common loneliness, isolation, and culture shock of transitioning to city life after moving from a northern community.

When Adjgaliaq read about the hardship of others he compared their situations to his own situation:

Just knowing that these individuals are just like me. They came from a small town or rural community. Or they came to this big city... And having that cultural shock, that change in the environment. And being able to excel and carry on in my goals.

Adjgaliaq coped with the challenge of transitioning to living in an unfamiliar city and away from his home community by focusing on his goals. He also reminded himself that other people whom he considered role models experienced similar circumstances and persevered. He knew that he needed to persist through these kinds of difficult life circumstances to achieve his goals.

The ability of Adjgaliaq's English professor to establish a high comfort level in the class was also instrumental to his learning. The way the professor taught increased Adjgaliaq's engagement in the class:

He's such an awesome professor. I always thought English was very boring. All through elementary and high school, I didn't have that good of an English mark at all. And I tried to take English here in university back when I was a young man, I guess you could say. And it was the same thing, it was just really dull, very monotone. And I don't know if it was my attitude or behavior back then, because of substance abuse or if it's the changes just in my new professor right now. He's very enthusiastic, he's very helpful, he's open. If I have any questions I can see him anytime, I can email him. He's very inspirational.

Adjgaliaq was really appreciative of his professor's attitude towards him and this had a positive outcome on his learning. When the professor interacted positively with Adjgaliaq and did not show judgment, Adjgaliaq felt more inspired, as this told him that his perspectives were accepted. This ultimately allowed him to feel more comfortable in class and encouraged him to attend more regularly.

Adjgaliaq said that it is his belief that Aboriginal perspectives need to be increasingly incorporated at the University of Saskatchewan. In his experiences this is not happening to the extent that it should, even in classes that utilize Aboriginal literature:

More needs to be included. I remember being asked to scale Native Studies out of 1-10 and a classmate said 1, in that we mostly touched on Europeans'

perspectives and literally some to none Aboriginal perspectives. So there is much to be done.

Adjgaliaq said that including Aboriginal perspectives to a larger extent would increase awareness and understanding of Aboriginal people. He considered Aboriginal literature as valuable when it was used in such a way as to create awareness of Aboriginal experiences. He said Aboriginal literature may be giving other Aboriginal students such as himself a sense of commonality as they relate to the experiences presented. As well, his opinion was that reading Aboriginal literature would help increase the awareness of non-Aboriginals in the Canadian public to better understand “a certain Aboriginal person’s point of view”.

CHRIS

Chris said that reading courses he took at the university included books by Thomas King and Tomson Highway. He said the professor focused predominantly on the political themes inherent in the literature. Chris was aware of the prevalence of patriarchal perspectives within the Aboriginal literature and wanted to see literature that presented a female perspective.

There’s this book by Thomas King. And it’s called *The Red Power Murders* (2006). I actually just finished reading it, that’s the main one that comes to mind. But it kinda makes the male characters to be the big characters and the women play minimal characters within the book. And I mean, it’s from a male perspective, if we can get more female Aboriginal writers, to publish, I think it would be a bonus to our youth. So basically that book, I found, created characters

who were... weren't as developed. They were kinda dull and not as big characters as the male characters. But I still... I read the book.

Despite this discrepancy, the two pieces of literature motivated Chris in his learning and allowed him to think differently about specific political issues.

Chris' engagement in his university learning increased when he read Aboriginal literature. He said that in his first attempt at university in the College of Arts and Sciences, he was bored and unmotivated, which immediately resulted in a diminished lack of engagement in what he was learning, "I was getting so bored with the education at that time. ... I mean, you were basically just given your assignments and were responsible for your own, so for me that was a struggle." Chris admitted the fact that he was not engaged in learning at the time was his own responsibility.

When he enrolled a second time in university as an ATEP student, he was more focused on school. However, he believed that Aboriginal literature could have been included more in his first years of university that may have encouraged him to excel in school. The two books by King and Highway included in his ATEP courses encouraged him to search for more Aboriginal literature:

[Reading Aboriginal literature] made me think about becoming an English teacher. It made me want to find books that relate to something I think children would like. It motivated me to wanna do more research in the materials I'm bringing into the classroom.

As an aspiring teacher he wanted to find Aboriginal literature that would engage his own Aboriginal students once he started teaching in schools. Thus, Aboriginal literature helped to engage Chris in university learning and to planning his future teaching career.

Similar to other Aboriginal students interviewed for this study, Aboriginal literature gave Chris a sense of hope through difficult times. Chris said he took great inspiration from Aboriginal literature and knew it would serve the same purpose when he became a teacher: “For me, I find a lot of books give hope, the stories, you know. And like I said, if we could get more Aboriginal writers I think it would be good to give those social perspectives that kids could relate to for hope.” Chris said that as a young Aboriginal male in high school, reading books was an escape for him and at times provided him with a positive feeling that he did not often feel home. As a pre-service teacher he realized that books could be used as a teaching tool for students who may face the same circumstances he once did.

The literature that inspired hope in Chris in his youth was not all written by Aboriginal authors. He said he related to other literature that was written from a non-European perspective that dealt with some of his own life circumstances, circumstances he now sees other Aboriginal youth dealing with:

One of my most memorable books is... and I've been trying to find this book, I read it in grade 6. But it was about this African-American boy... [who] grew up without a father. And that's one of the stories I could relate to that was from a non-Aboriginal perspective. But it was the life situation of that particular character in that book that motivated me. So it doesn't always have to be related to the race, like I seen this book about short stories from the perspective of two-spirited people too. And I thought that was something that could be brought into classroom.

When Chris attended high school he began to read Aboriginal literature in the classroom and he was familiar with the experiences represented in the stories. He wants to see more Aboriginal writers who can publish quality Aboriginal literature that can be used in high schools and universities to teach Aboriginal youth.

As Chris became more engaged in university learning in ATEP, he saw the value of contributing his perspectives through classroom discussions. He gained this valuable lesson in his class on anti-racism when his ATEP class got together with a mainstream class in Education for group discussions on racism. Chris was placed in a group in which a white female told him that he was the first Aboriginal person she had ever talked with personally. She said that growing up in a small Saskatchewan town, she was taught to fear the stereotypical “criminal Indian”. When Chris shared personal details about himself, the female student said she was surprised that Chris did not fit into a stereotype that she held of Aboriginals.

She had told me that she has never met an Indian before and she said “I grew up in an all-white community”. I never asked her what community that was but she said there were only white people there. She said “my whole family is white, all of my friends are white.” And she said “the only time I ever heard about an Indian person was in the news and in the newspaper,” and she said “it was all bad. Growing up in school all I learned about was all the bad things Indians did historically.” And she said... she said when she was in high school these police had come to her school and did a presentation of gangs within communities. And all they did was show images of Indian men as gang members, what they do. And she said “when I first seen you, she said “I was afraid of you.” She said, “you

scared me”. And then she said “but after I sat at this table and talked with you and I got to meet you and understand who you were, that you’re not a bad person, you’re not a criminal.” And she said, “that you’re not the way they perceive Indian people in the media.” She said, “you showed that you’re a real human being with feelings.” She said, “you shared about how you feel, how you feel pain, how you suffered.” And she said, “my perspective on Indian people changed dramatically.” And I was just overwhelmed, that made me feel so good.

The female student not only learned something valuable from Chris, but Chris learned a valuable lesson himself on the need to increase understanding of Aboriginal people: “We gained two very valuable perspectives through that experience. And that experience gave me the motivation to see that there’s hope within this education system and also within literature, Aboriginal literature to be a little more specific.”

This experience was rewarding as it helped Chris in his own personal growth and that of his classmate by building relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. Reading Aboriginal literature helped him to recognize the importance of voicing the experiences of Aboriginal people in a similar way, when otherwise that voice would not be heard.

Chris stated that including Aboriginal literature is useful to building the understanding of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. On this topic of whether or not the classroom is an appropriate place to deal with the emotional reactions that accompany discussions to Aboriginal literature, Chris said that using teaching approaches that are composed of Aboriginal worldviews and values would invite such discussions.

On the other hand, most Euro-centric approaches would discourage discussions dealing with emotions:

That's a European value, that's something that's not Aboriginal. [An Aboriginal value] is truth, it's dealing with it, facing it. And in schools if we don't look at these issues of poverty, of addictions, of abuses, all we're doing is trying to hide it. And I know the education systems doesn't want to deal with it because they believe, 'oh that's a home problem, leave that over there. Let's hide it and pretend this world is a good place'. ... If we continue to in the education system, to hide or deny that these issues are there, then we're just following European thinking.

We're just following European values that make us more colonized.

Chris said that educational institutions such as the University of Saskatchewan could be doing more to value Aboriginal perspectives and worldviews.

Chris said Aboriginal literature presented to him the Aboriginal perspectives and worldviews that he would like to see more in university courses. His first experience reading Aboriginal literature occurred in high school:

When I first read literature about Aboriginal people would've been Maria Campbell's "Halfbreed" and I was just like "wow". You know, like to get that perspective on Aboriginal people was... brought up my values. It made me believe that we need more of this, you know. After you read this you wanted more because you were just bored of other books.

He also said that he appreciated that Aboriginal literature presented the realities of Aboriginal people.

The literature had the capacity to help Chris recognize his experiences as real, he finally saw his own realities reflected and acknowledged. “I’m hoping within this generation or the generation to come, we can have a lot more Native literature to expose our children to the Aboriginal point of view, Aboriginal themes, and Aboriginal characters that can motivate youth into getting into reading.” He said when Aboriginal literature is increasingly utilized in school learning it may motivate other Aboriginal students to read, write, think and share their perspectives, stories, and ideas.

JIMMY

In Jimmy’s experiences taking English courses in university he read Highway’s (2000) *The Rez Sisters*, Drew Hayden Taylor’s *Pretty Like A White Boy*, and Joseph Boyden’s (2005) *Three Day Road*. When Jimmy read about the historical experiences of Aboriginal people in Aboriginal literature, he began to recognize the similarities to accounts told to him by his family members. He was empowered hearing about the realities of Aboriginal people in Canada and this determined how he chose to look at his own challenges as a student.

In addition, reading Aboriginal literature allowed him to learn about what he referred to as the “raw truth”, the harsh circumstances and realities faced by Aboriginal people that are not presented in European literature. He said these are rarely acknowledged in European literature in the same way as they are presented first-hand in Aboriginal literature.

Jimmy admitted that reading about these experiences was difficult for him, but necessary as it helped him to get through challenges he faced as a student:

It was kinda hard for me, I guess to read that stuff 'cause my grandparents and great grandparents went to residential school too and endured abuse and stuff like that. So it's kinda, you know, pretty graphic. Graphic, but like it's the truth, right. So... if you're gonna turn a deaf ear and a blind eye to it then you're never gonna get the full picture that's going on. And, I don't know, the resilience of the people in those books, and the resilience of people in a lot of these stories, is empowering to students. Because you realize all these people went through this and look where they made it or they're still here. Or they accomplished so much even through so many hard times.

Jimmy was empowered knowing that he was a descendent of those who went through extreme hardship as the colonized in Canada. He said he was empowered to get through his own challenges when he saw the extreme hardship that his ancestors overcame and the resilience that resilience was required to do so.

Jimmy also found it helpful to learn from Aboriginal literature that he related to on a personal level. He said he reacted to the stories about Christian missionaries who were driven by the motivations of religious conversion to help those less fortunate:

I felt kind of conflicted inside because like my family, you know. I come from two different kinds of backgrounds. And my personal life... I kinda know who I am, what I believe and I'm pretty well grounded. But all that stuff is really relevant to a Native person's life, you know. Because right there, in your face, are the stuff that you pretty well had to deal with... learning from your parents or your grandparents if you've had the privilege... if you've been able to. So all that kind of stuff was really relevant to my life.

Jimmy said he was conflicted because his maternal and paternal family relations follow different religious beliefs: one side of his family follows Christianity and the other side of his family follows Aboriginal traditional spirituality. As he reflected on his own beliefs and how this impacted his personal identity, he became increasingly engaged in the course. He said he experienced an inner conflict in his beliefs as he read about these kinds of situations, but he knew that this was valuable knowledge that made him more engaged in university learning.

Jimmy oftentimes found himself increasingly engaged in learning as he read post or anti-colonial literature centered on African-American and African people or the Holocaust:

When I was reading the literature, a lot of... and some of the stuff was also not just about Natives, it was also about other people who were colonized like African slaves, ghetto-ized Jews. Or else I remember another one, in the ghetto in New York, in like the 60's or something. And stories of that, like similarities... it helped me to relate to the literature a lot more. It helped me understand what's going on.

The situations presented in the literature reminded Jimmy of his experiences as an Aboriginal person. He began to draw similarities between the colonial literature to the experiences of Aboriginal people in Canada, which increased his understanding of the topics put forth by his professor. In this case, Aboriginal perspectives were incorporated when they could have easily been disregarded. This proved to be a valuable learning experience for Jimmy as he was allowed to think about the topics based on his own experiences.

Jimmy described his reactions to the Aboriginal literature he read in his English courses and how they helped him to become more aware of colonialism. He found that the Aboriginal literature he read contradicted much of what he was taught in his prior schooling.

When you're talking about colonialism in literature, and you never heard about that before. And you don't know what it is, you don't know anything about it, like all the elements in colonialism. Then it helps you realize that everything that you've been told, or everything you've thought before is, you know, it's not true. Like all the negative things.

Jimmy's reaction to Aboriginal literature transformed his prior beliefs about being an Aboriginal person. He reacted to the topic of colonialism by positioning himself as one who is colonized when previously he was ignorant to this fact.

Jimmy's engagement in university learning was also influenced by how Aboriginal literature helped him to more easily express his thoughts in writing assignments. Jimmy pointed out that Aboriginal literature helped him to write down his ideas, perspectives, and opinions on class topics:

When you're in an English class... And you're learning about stuff like this and you have to write about it, it makes it easier to learn how to write. Because that was the biggest thing that helped me. [The professor] said the goal at the end of the year was to make us better writers. And at the end of the year I was a better writer. And one of the reasons was because of stuff we took.

Clearly, Jimmy's English class was meant to develop the academic writing skills of students. When Jimmy was given the opportunity to read and respond to Aboriginal literature, this objective was achieved.

The professor's understanding of Aboriginal perspectives and worldviews also influenced the way Jimmy became engaged in Aboriginal literature. Jimmy indicated that the professor effectively engaged him when the professor shared his or her own perspectives while respecting those of the student.

The Rez Sisters is a play, so we went through it together. Like we had to read it before but we'd go through and in case,... sometimes in plays you miss things... So the professor would go through it with us and then just like, explain what's going on. Or just ask us if we know what's going on.

Jimmy was fully engaged in understanding the Aboriginal literature he was reading. The professor engaged him further by making class discussions relevant to his experiences.

Jimmy gained a valuable learning experience from reading autobiographies and biographies and said although he enjoyed learning from them he did not come across them until his upper years of university:

In the first year of studies, I think it would be a little bit better... But the books I'm taking right now in my Native Studies class, it would've been really nice to read that, read some things like that. More biographies. Maybe not all biographies but maybe at least fit one in there or something like that. Something that gives... that hits home like that.

These works of literature were instrumental in connecting him to what he was learning, as they told the stories of Aboriginal people who have experienced many forms of the

hardship that many Aboriginal people in Canada face. He realized that as an Aboriginal student in his first-year, literary works based on authors' life narratives would have been especially valuable.

As Jimmy reflected back to his first experiences reading Aboriginal literature in his English course he realized that his thinking changed after he took a first-year English course. He read *Three Day Road* about two Aboriginal soldiers and it really made him think about the differences in Aboriginal and colonial worldviews:

Through the book, *Three Day Road* that was like a full novel and that had to do with... it had to do with traditional Native spirituality. The soldiers, they would pray before they go into battle. And one of them was using medicine to try to help him kill the Germans more efficiently. But the other one wasn't. And it had to do with... it had to do with a certain... like Aboriginal stories like the *Windigo*. One of the soldiers dies, but the other one, his best friend, [prior to his friend's death] was afraid that his friend was turning into a windigo because he thought that he was eating Germans. Eating their hearts after he killed them to try to gain their strength. And I remember a question in the final exam, and it was 'which one of these boys was the more traditional one?' And it kind of made you think in your mind like... then it begs the question, 'what is traditional?' You know, critical thinking. Like that kind of thing. ... It makes you start to think about stuff like that, critical thinking.

The instructor included Aboriginal literature in course readings to encourage students to think about Aboriginal topics and write their responses in essays. Learning from Aboriginal literature this way gave Jimmy a new awareness of the realities of Aboriginal

people in Canada: “It helped me to continue my learning... to question things. So ideologies don’t become naturalized to me. ... I don’t become automatically accepting of a certain Euro-centric way of thinking.” Jimmy described this way of learning from Aboriginal literature as what can be deemed transformational, as it led to his awareness of the realities told from an Aboriginal point of view as opposed to a non-Aboriginal point of view.

Aboriginal literature was valuable to Jimmy when it instilled a sense of hope in him to persist in his university studies, which was needed to help him get through his personal and academic challenges. Jimmy shared his own understanding of the inner struggle he witnessed his Aboriginal peers experience through challenges and the hope that is required to get through this:

I think that’s where a lot of people fail. They get overwhelmed or they think that it’s too much for them. They start to believe... that they can’t do it. When really all they need is just a little bit motivation or a little bit of help.

Aboriginal literature was enough to simply inspire hope and a hopeful outlook for him at times when he was on the verge of giving up.

Jimmy said Aboriginal and colonial literature allowed him to relate more to what he was learning and to better understand university course themes and topics. These readings were also crucial to his critical thinking and to recognizing bias and stereotypes of Aboriginal people. Jimmy’s academic writing improved considerably by responding to Aboriginal literature in this way. Class discussions and sharing perspectives allowed him to consider different point-of-views. He said the literature gave him the extra push

he needed to keep on in university and continuously reminded him of why he was pursuing an education: to better the life circumstances of other Aboriginal people.

CINDY

The Aboriginal literature Cindy read in her first-year English class included Thomas King's (1990) *Medicine River*, Wagamese's (1994) *Keeper n' Me*, Highway's (2000) *The Rez Sisters*, and an unspecified poem by Louise Halfe.

Cindy said that reading the Aboriginal literature that was included in her first-year English class reminded her own experiences, particularly the close relationships represented by the characters. This was most apparent when she read *Medicine River*:

I just thought it was interesting because probably the way my parents and grandparents grew up, you know. But I liked that in *Medicine River* the relationships that they have with each other because that's how Native people are right? You're close to your cousins, your friends are your brothers and sisters and that's just the way we are.

She reflected on the stories and saw the familiar kinship ties that bind relationships in Aboriginal communities. This allowed her to relate to what was happening in the stories and become more engaged in what she was learning.

Cindy became further engaged in university learning when her English professor helped her to understand the metaphors and symbolism within the stories. She said the professor taught the literature in way that she deemed suitable, compared to the unsuitable ways she has seen Aboriginal literature translated by others: "They don't really take the full meaning out of it, you know. But I think she was good in that she made us understand it, in a way. And not like, over your head flashy." Cindy was able to

learn about literary devices through the Aboriginal literature. She was also impressed with the fact that a non-Aboriginal professor made the effort to include Aboriginal literature in the course readings: “I just thought it was really interesting that this *moniyaw-iskwew* (white woman) went out of her way to get us interested in Aboriginal literature because I never really had that experience before in other ways.”

Cindy said that based on her own learning experience, she thinks Aboriginal literature has the capacity to teach non-Aboriginal students about Aboriginal contributions to society and diminish misunderstandings non-Aboriginal may have about Aboriginal people. She said that if Aboriginal literature is used more in classes for non-Aboriginal students, this may build the understanding of non-Aboriginal people about Aboriginal people:

First of all, to see a Native person being published, it proves that you know, that we're smart people, first of all. We're valuable, we can teach other religions, I shouldn't say religions... but races. Also it may also sensitize them to the challenges Aboriginal people have, you know, and be able to understand us in a different way.

Cindy also said that Aboriginal literature may give Aboriginal students like her the inspiration and empowerment to realize they can make valuable contributions to society as Aboriginal people.

Cindy said that her experiences in university classes composed largely of non-Aboriginal students represent how stereotypes of Aboriginal people make it difficult for Aboriginal students in university. Stereotypes about Aboriginal people led to Cindy's hesitation to ask questions in a class composed largely of non-Aboriginal students:

Being the only Aboriginal or non-white person, it's intimidating to ask questions... Sometimes you just think "oh, they'll think I'm stupid" or you know kinda question, like "why doesn't she know this, she should know this."

By referring to a common stereotype of Aboriginal people as inferior, Cindy indicated that she understood that stereotypes have a huge impact on Aboriginal students because Aboriginal people are seen to encompass the commonly held stereotypes.

Cindy more easily shared her perspectives when Aboriginal literature was included in an English class she took through a first-year Aboriginal transition program. Cindy said that class discussions showed her that Aboriginal students were relating to the Aboriginal literature that was included in course readings. "You get to see their points of view and how they interpreted it and what it meant to them." This learning experience allowed her to hear other students' experiences about being an Aboriginal person in Canada:

I noticed when I was in class, one of the students was actually from Northwest Territories, and I noticed she was able to open up with some of the experiences that she's had there. But I think just because it was an Aboriginal class we're more open to sharing that stuff right because we're not scared to be laughed at, plus you have common experiences with other people in the class.

The use of Aboriginal literature in her university classes allowed Cindy to see that Aboriginal experiences and perspectives mattered and were important. When the class was composed entirely of Aboriginal students it was easier to share these perspectives.

In Cindy's view, delving into emotional responses to Aboriginal literature depends on the composition of the class.

I think it would be a good place if it was a small group and if you know each other. It wouldn't be good for "hey on the first day we're going to do this." Right? And get into deep discussion. But my class was a six-credit class and we're together all year so we get comfortable with each other. In that situation I think it would be good. At the same time, depending on the issue, it might be a little too deep. So, I guess it's beneficial but up to a point.

She said her hesitation in discussing sensitive topics is the fear that she would offend someone with her own responses and would feel pressured to console them in a way that she was unable to.

RAINE

The Aboriginal literature that Raine studied in university were mostly incorporated in his Native Studies courses. Raine could not remember the specific authors and literature that he read but recalled reading one of Rita Bouvier's poems in an English class and Maria Campbell's (1973) *Halfbreed* in a Native Studies class. His experiences studying the literature gave him some empowerment and he liked seeing the stories of Aboriginal people incorporated in university courses.

Aboriginal literature empowered Raine to develop his writing abilities: to work on his long-time challenge of writing and developing an adequate grasp of grammar. Raine coped with the challenge of learning academic writing after he saw that Aboriginal authors wrote about their personal experiences to educate others about the hardship they went through and overcame. He explained how Aboriginal literature helped him to pay attention to the content of his writing and to the importance of developing his academic writing skills: "Aboriginal literature, it empowers me to do better in my writing because

that's what it's going to take to do your masters or to go further in your education. Or have your stuff published, have your stories published.”

Aboriginal literature helped Raine to persist in writing academic papers: a task that was difficult for him but was required to pass his university classes. He thought of some long-term goals in which having the ability to write adequately is a necessity. Aboriginal literature helped him recognize his difficulties with academic writing as he started to acknowledge that he needed to apply more effort to attain his degree.

Although Raine was not highly successful in his English classes, he maintained good standing in other courses related to his degree program. To a larger extent, Aboriginal literature proved to be more helpful in influencing his ability to foster resilience through academic challenges and initiate his personal growth and transformation. Raine became more involved in his university learning when he read Aboriginal literature and related his own experiences to the authors. His professor encouraged him to share his perspectives on the Aboriginal literature that was discussed in his class:

Some of the stories I believe, they contain the truth definitely. If you really looked at it as an Aboriginal person, some of the stories are the truth and it wasn't new to me but it definitely was new to some people in the class. They didn't really understand where this author was coming from, but I did. And I was able to speak up on it. The prof asked [me] to talk about it.

Raine recognized that there is a valuable opportunity to share Aboriginal perspectives that come from reflecting on Aboriginal literature. Raine said he was grateful when his

professor invited him to share his perspectives in class discussions as he felt that he was contributing to the learning of others.

Through reading about the experiences of Aboriginal people in Aboriginal literature, Raine began to value his Aboriginal identity. He learned about Aboriginal perspectives and worldviews for the first time through the Aboriginal literature that was included in his first year courses:

Growing up in an urban community I didn't really know who I was and [Aboriginal literature] helped me find myself as a Cree person, a Cree individual and my gender roles. Basically because I've read stories that empower me to find who I am and truly who I am as a two-spirited Indigenous youth.

Raine entered university with a vague understanding of the distinct identity of Aboriginal people and Aboriginal literature was instrumental to teaching him this history to better understand aspects of his Aboriginal and two-spirited identities. Raine saw the importance of this understanding of Aboriginal identity as he began to pursue this learning through other avenues.

The empowerment Raine gained allowed him, in turn, to offer help to others around him, including his family and peers. He explained how this contributed to understanding his Aboriginal identity and self-esteem: "I see myself with a lot more self-worth and self-confidence than I did let's say three years ago. The Aboriginal literature really influenced how I view myself as an Aboriginal person." Raine said for this reason, Aboriginal literature would be especially beneficial to have in high school.

CHAPTER SIX: THEMES AND INTERPRETATION

In this section, I discuss and interpret the collective experiences of the Aboriginal students I interviewed according to the three broad themes that emerged during data analysis. These themes were coping with personal and academic challenges; engagement in learning with a sub-theme of approaches of professors in validating Aboriginal literature and experiences; and personal growth and transformation. I conclude this chapter by presenting the findings of my research, which emerged after the presentation of the data.

This stage of the research was comparable to sorting the *wihkaskwa* in the practice of *Mosahkina Wikaskwa*. This stage consisted of organizing and grouping the data by going through the participants' stories and sorting pieces of these stories into codes, categories and themes, which compared to sorting *wihkaskwa* strands according to similarities in dimension and size. As I went through the stories I continued to demonstrate *tapahtêyimisowin* (humility) as I carefully sorted pieces of participants' stories based on their similarities and differences.

I arrived at the themes by using grounded theory methods to code the interview transcript data. Using NVivo, I then sorted these codes into categories according to how the coded information related to the main research question: How is the resilience of selected Aboriginal students at the University of Saskatchewan influenced by the Aboriginal literature currently taught in the post-secondary classroom? As the themes emerged and I began writing the results of my research, I integrated my self-reflection notes that were recorded throughout my research and used *Miyo-Pimatisiwin* (The Good

Life) as a theory guiding the meaning of resilience. Initially, I narrowed down the categories to create five broad themes. Once I began writing the results of my data I realized that these five thematic groups could be condensed further into the above three themes with one sub-theme.

Coping with personal and academic challenges

Personal and academic challenges inevitably arose in the first-year of university for the majority of Aboriginal students participating in my study. These participants coped with their challenges in various ways and showed their resilience.

Aboriginal literature proved valuable when it instilled a sense of hope for the majority of participants to effectively deal with challenges they encountered during their university studies. For example, Adjgaliaq spoke of how the personal narratives demonstrating the hardship of other Aboriginal people helped him to cope with his own struggles. These struggles included the loneliness, isolation, and culture shock of transitioning to city life and the university environment. In his class assignment for an Anthropology class dealing with oral history and storytelling, the professor asked students to interview Aboriginal people in the community. Adjgaliaq interviewed several Aboriginal men and gained inspiration from one particular man who experienced being homeless:

He was living homeless for most of his life. And now he has children and grandchildren who are high academics that have totally changed even his course of his life. And he's just, how would you say it, he's so outgoing. And whatever problems he's faced, ... his problems are ten times worst then what I've been

facing. And here I catch myself struggling on these issues and stuff. And I just keep on thinking, what would David do and what would my parents do. And I've come through it.

Similarly, other participants mentioned how they came to initiate positive self-talk after reading Aboriginal literature. This action served to instill in them the belief that they were capable of persisting through their challenges to reach their goals. For Jimmy, when he felt like giving up reading Aboriginal literature in his English classes gave him hope that he could reach his goals:

Reading all that literature—and all that literature I'm talking about collectively—makes me think of who I am and what I'm doing here. And reminds me of why I'm here actually. It just reminds me of why I'm here. Because I know I want to be here to make a difference in my profession somehow. If I make it there and [Aboriginal literature] gives me hope that I'm gonna make it. But it just reminds you if you start to question yourself, it just reminds you why you're here. You can do it.

Reading Aboriginal literature contributed to Jimmy developing a more positive mindset that reminded him of his purpose of being in university, which in turn allowed him to manifest resilience.

Reading Aboriginal literature inspired the majority of participants in my study. Chris reflected on the times that Aboriginal literature inspired him and referred back to his childhood when he first came across Aboriginal literature with Campbell's (1973) book *Halfbreed*. Reading this particular literary work and other forms of literature gave him a sense of hope during difficult times:

Reading and books and education were an escape for me because my home situation wasn't always great. I grew up in a rough situation and it wasn't always good. And for me, school was an escape. It was, I would rather be at school than at my current home situation. And yeah, books... for me books became an escape and it wasn't just Aboriginal books, it was other books.

In this case, the opportunities to read in school were a source of fulfillment for Chris and helped him to be resilient to get through difficult times that would have otherwise led him down a negative path.

Aboriginal literature validated the majority of the participants' experiences and observations. The majority of the participants in my study experienced challenges in university that at times were discouraging. Nonetheless, the majority of participants were empowered to get through these kinds of situations when they read Aboriginal literature. This literature allowed them to learn about the extreme hardship that their ancestors overcame and the resilience that was required to do so.

Jimmy and Raine both described how reading about the hardship experienced by their ancestors in Aboriginal literature validated their own experiences as Aboriginal students in university. Jimmy saw university as a great opportunity that was determining his future. The circumstances of the people in the literature made him realize that he needed to be resilient in a similar manner:

It makes me think I can do the same thing. Or why can't I do the same thing. Or my grandparents went through the same thing. So I should not have any excuse to be able to make something out of what I have. Because now I have the

opportunity out of university, I should make the most out of it. That's what I thought anyways, when I was reading stuff like that.

Aboriginal literature allowed Jimmy to reflect on the hardships of Aboriginal people and to realize that his own thinking would determine his future. He looked to the long-term result of being in university and realized that it was not as difficult as he made it out to be. He wanted to persist and by doing so, follow in the footsteps of his ancestors who overcome more dire circumstances.

Similarly, Raine's experiences were validated when he read Aboriginal literature and he was able to manifest resilience through challenges:

How did it influence my resilience? A lot of the stories read were people facing struggles and doing something today. They were empowered by their mentors and life and that's exactly how I look at it. Every story, throughout my studies, in Native Studies, those people also empower me to do better and to never give up.

Having his experiences validated in Aboriginal literature empowered Raine to do better so that he could serve as a positive example to other people. He saw the positive representations of Aboriginal people in the Aboriginal literature he was reading and was empowered to achieve the same things they did. In this way, Aboriginal literature helped him to manifest his resilience to get through his challenges and work towards attaining his university degree.

Aboriginal literature also empowered the majority of participants to cope with the academic challenge of developing adequate skills in academic writing. The majority of participants took inspiration from seeing other Aboriginal people write about their experiences and encouraged them to develop their writing skills so that they could

achieve their goals. Jimmy described how he initially faced academic challenges, but took action to overcome them:

I tried to do everything that I could. So right off the bat I went and found the university learning center, I went found the writing help center, right off the bat for my first assignments I was like right in there. Asking what I could do, how to format an essay, all that kind of stuff. I was asking my professors questions, on what was expected of me, what's expected of the assignments... I would make sure I read my stuff before I did any other stuff.

Jimmy took the extra initiative to develop his writing abilities so he could write better papers. Although it is unclear if Aboriginal literature had any direct influence on Jimmy's actions, these actions demonstrate his determination to get through challenges in writing. Similarly, Raine struggled immensely with grammar and after reading Aboriginal literature he saw the possibilities that came with learning to be a better writer:

Reading the Aboriginal literature that I've read, the grammar was way... was a lot better than I have. Throughout my university education I struggled with grammar and I struggled with writing. But throughout the years, reading this literature it's helped me, going back and looking at the way they said it was.... It's helped me learn. I took it upon myself to really look at the way they write their stories. And so it's helped me grammatically.

Raine saw how Aboriginal authors were using literature to tell their stories and became motivated to improve his literacy skills.

The majority of participants were able to relate emotionally to Aboriginal literature. In the interviews, the majority of participants indicated that after reading

Aboriginal literature, they reacted emotionally as they related their struggles to the circumstances presented in the literature. Nohkom Kanehkan Apit said that although reading Aboriginal literature brought about strong emotions, she decided to only share certain things in class discussions. When asked how much of her reactions to literature she shared, she responded: “Not into great detail, like how I have been abused. And stuff like that.” She mentioned that she dealt with strong emotions in private, as she read the literature and cried in response to the experiences resembling her own life. Emotionally relating to Aboriginal literature is common, as Aboriginal authors are more likely to “write honestly about their experiences. Their voices evoke emotion while they express anger for being misunderstood, disrespected, oppressed, and colonized” (White-Kaulaity Bitays, 2006, p. 12). Aboriginal literature seemed to contribute to the personal growth of the majority of participants when it helped them to cope with strong emotions. These strong emotions were tied to memories brought up by reading Aboriginal literature.

Adjgالياق said he reacted emotionally as he read Aboriginal literature. He indicated that his belief was that there are healthy and unhealthy ways of coping with strong emotions, “I recognized those emotions, where they came from and remembered the ways I coped with them before, if they were healthy ways I did the same, or if they were not, I found a healthy way to cope with them.” Adjgالياق recognized how reading Aboriginal literature was bringing about strong emotions for him and there was a possibility for him to grow from that experience. Coping in healthy ways with those emotions that resulted from reading about experiences similar to his own, revealed that Aboriginal literature was contributing to his resilience.

Chris spoke about his experiences working with youth at a treatment center and how Aboriginal literature helped the youth he worked with to get in touch with their emotions as they read about hardship presented in a novel:

By speaking out about these issues through literature, you know, through like... I know at the treatment center I worked at, some of the girls, they read the literature or the book, *[In Search of] April Raintree*, which brings out a lot of their own issues. And if you bring out somebody... a student, a young person to talk about their addictions, their abuses, that's a good thing, that's a real good thing, because the only way you're going to deal with it is to talk about it, to deal with it.

Chris' work experiences in the field of addictions allowed him to see the advantages of recognizing emotions to manifesting ones' resilience through hardship. He witnessed how Aboriginal literature functioned to help Aboriginal youth cope with strong emotions by beginning to talk about them. As the youth spoke about how they felt, they became more resilient as they acknowledged their own experiences and the emotions tied to those experiences.

Discussing topics in Aboriginal literature that related closely to the lives of the majority of participants resulted in the participants, and others they encountered, reacting emotionally to what they were reading. In this sense, healing came "about through emotional expression, discharging turmoil and through cleansing and purifying oneself" (Hart, 2002, p. 102). The majority of the participants experienced personal growth as they related emotionally to the text and were able to grieve about experiences that had a continual effect on them.

Engagement in university learning

Aboriginal literature proved to be a major factor that engaged the majority of participants in university learning. According to Clancy (1995) studying Aboriginal literature begins to redress stereotypes created by mainstream North American culture, provides teachers with greater understandings and empathy for Aboriginal students, and assists teachers in understanding Aboriginal cultures and worldviews. Culturally—and historically—authentic Aboriginal literature shows Aboriginal students in university that their culture, their ideas, and their people are recognized and respected (Clancy, 1995).

The majority of participants in my study indicated that Aboriginal literature allowed them to talk about their personal experiences and to share their perspectives in class discussions. The majority of participants said that having Aboriginal literature included in their courses captured their interest and engaged them in their university learning. This was especially apparent when the literature reached them on an emotional level, whether this meant the Aboriginal literature made them cry, laugh, or feel angry.

Cindy said Aboriginal literature captured her interest when she saw circumstances of characters that were familiar in her upbringing as an Aboriginal person. “I remember *Medicine River*, I think, kind of made me feel... makes you think a bit more about Aboriginal relations and how you treat each other. Whereas the poetry was more like, it makes you feel more empowered and more stronger.” The familiar experiences she saw presented in the Aboriginal literature engaged her in what she was learning:

Usually we would just talk about them [reactions to literature] in class because then it would help to... it would help us learn more about how we understand the book. It heightened our learning about the book. A lot of the describing part of it

went good with the symbolism stuff she had been talking about, you know. But because we also, for *Keeper N Me* and *Medicine River*, we had to do book reviews so that was another outlet where we could discuss our opinions and how it made us feel.

Aboriginal literature engaged Cindy to a great extent in the class. By becoming more engaged she was able to talk about her personal experiences in class and share her perspectives.

For the majority of participants, when Aboriginal literature related to their own lives and the lives of people in their communities, this engaged them because the content was relevant to their experiences. Jimmy described his experiences reading about the juxtaposition of traditional and religious beliefs in Aboriginal literature:

In all of these pieces of literature, it's all people trying to tell the discourse between the Native spirituality and the Christians is like the Christians trying to tell these people who they are. Well, I shouldn't say the Christians but the colonizers, right? The colonizers are trying to tell the colonized group who they are, right? And try to naturalize like their ideology onto these people so they know that it becomes accepted by them, so they're "ok that's what I am" right? So to me it's like, I don't want people to tell me who I am because yes I come from two different backgrounds. But I'm not going to let either side to try to force me into being something that, you know, that I'm not.

Jimmy became more engaged in the course as he clearly understood the conflict between people who follow Christianity and those who follow Aboriginal spirituality that is oftentimes existent in Aboriginal communities. The representation in literature of this

conflict caused him to ask questions about his beliefs and how they differed from those of his family.

Two of the participants engaged in learning even when a university course did not have any Aboriginal literature but included post-colonial themes such as African American, African or Holocaust literature. In these cases, the participants became more engaged in their learning and were more inclined to express themselves through writing by referring to their own experiences as Aboriginal people. Leavitt (1995) stated “writing creates distinctions between facts and beliefs, between ideas and feelings” (p. 127). When participants were encouraged to write on topics about Aboriginal people academic writing became much easier.

In addition, Aboriginal autobiographies and biographies connected the majority of participants in my study to what they were learning. These literary genres were instrumental to engaging the participants as the literature presented the real-life stories of Aboriginal people who experienced many forms of the hardship. Raine spoke of what he believed is one the purposes of Aboriginal literature:

The struggles that these Aboriginal face today... the reason why it's published is because it needs to empower those individuals who are struggling today to do better for themselves. To go... move forward instead of ten steps backward. And throughout my university education I've moved... went forward significant times and I've stepped backward significant times but there are times where I related definitely to Aboriginal literature and that's why it's there, it's there to empower individuals like myself to better my own life.

Aboriginal literature was essential to engaging Raine and other participants in their educational learning, whether this reading occurred in high school or university studies.

The majority of participants said that Aboriginal literature engaged their interest when authors presented the graphic truth, the real-life experiences of Aboriginal people presented by Aboriginal authors. When Aboriginal authors presented their life experiences through the literature, the majority of participants were influenced in a positive way. Nohkom Kanehkan Apit explained how reading *In Search of April Raintree* engaged her interest as it made her feel that it was important to show strength through adversity:

I can relate to the literature and the literature reminds me that anything is possible when you overcome the negatives and stereotypes that I face. It taught me to be stronger and to be a fighter in a positive manner.

Seeing characters overcome hardships in Aboriginal literature allowed Nohkom Kanehkan Apit to engage in readings and learn from the experiences to manifest her resilience in the same way.

Some of the participants mentioned that the Aboriginal authors are more likely to capture the depth of experiences of Aboriginal people, and are less likely to fabricate historical events. The majority of participants wanted to see Aboriginal perspectives and worldviews incorporated within their classroom learning through Aboriginal literature. When Aboriginal literature was used as a teaching tool that valued Aboriginal perspectives, the majority of participants stated that their worldviews and perspectives were affirmed and valued. The majority of participants became more engaged in their

university learning when they were invited to share their perspectives and made to feel they were contributing to the learning of others.

Approaches of professors validating Aboriginal literature and experiences

The majority of participants said that when they shared their responses to Aboriginal literature in class discussions, they got the sense that professors determined the direction of these discussions. The majority of participants indicated that the professor's approach largely influenced how they engaged in learning about topics brought up in Aboriginal literature. They said they felt more engaged—and their learning was more valuable—when the professor was open-minded, approachable, and enthusiastic about what he or she taught.

Raine stated that his professor chose to teach non-Aboriginal texts in an English class and this served to disengage him from learning:

[It] really made me think, "I'm learning a culture that's not really who I am, an identity I'm not who I am". I'm not a settler that's for sure. My people have been here long before settlers were. And being exposed to that literature wasn't really helping me, so it discouraged me.

The decision of his professor to assign texts that were solely by non-Aboriginal authors indicated to Raine that the professor did not value Aboriginal experiences. He could not relate to this type of literature when it was assigned for course reading, it was unfamiliar to him and he did not desire to read and learn from it.

The manner in which Aboriginal literature was taught to the majority of participants often determined whether they became interested or bored with the course. The pedagogical approach used by the professor, the professor's open-mindedness, and

the professor's interaction with the student determined the extent to which the majority of participants became invested in their university learning. The majority of participants engaged in university when professors demonstrated open-mindedness. Professors' showed open-mindedness when they accepted students' diverse perspectives, whether or not the professor agreed with what students said. On the other hand, professors appropriately handled the situations when they did not agree with what Aboriginal students stated by allowing them to voice these perspectives, which was a form of accepting these perspectives. In particular, professors' open-mindedness was demonstrated in accepting that Euro-centric worldviews, perspectives, and values were not the norm by acknowledging the relevance of Aboriginal worldviews, perspectives, and values. The ability of the professor to show open-mindedness seemed to be the most critical factor to helping the participants become more engaged.

Cindy recalled that her English professor's open-mindedness and interaction allowed her to feel more comfortable in the classroom:

I felt comfortable. That was probably one of the only classes where I was actually really vocal. You know, because in Bio it's like "I don't know." Whereas in English it's just all about interpretation and how you interpret it and whatnot. She also, our prof, like you know when you read a book you interpret it your way. But I never really thought about the metaphors before. And what this might mean and so it was really interesting.

The professor's approach to teaching Aboriginal literature resonated with Cindy. She learned quickly and was comfortable being vocal in the class. The manner in which professors interacted with the majority of participants was important to how they engaged

in the Aboriginal literature they were learning. The majority of participants recalled their memories of certain professors who had an impact on their learning. These professors were more willing to interact with students on a personal level whether in one-to-one conversations or in class discussions.

Raine indicated that he sensed the attitudes of his high school teachers and university professors towards Aboriginal people, and himself in particular, based on how they interacted with him. “Yeah I was weak in English. But you should have support from teachers, or people outside of teachers when you ask for it. And if you don’t get it and they give up on you, just because you’re Aboriginal.” The ways his professors interacted with him influenced how he engaged in his English classes, whether or not Aboriginal literature was included.

The majority of participants explained that the extent of a professors’ understanding of Aboriginal worldviews and perspectives also impacted their engagement in Aboriginal literature. For instance, when Nohkom Kanehkan Apit shared her perspective on family relationships and what was acceptable or unacceptable, she found this perspective rejected by her non-Aboriginal professor. On the other hand, her second-term English professor allowed her to voice her perspectives freely and welcomed discussions about Aboriginal people. The majority of participants said that professors effectively engaged them when the professors shared their own perspectives while respecting those of the student. Certainly, incorporating these aspects into university teaching as it involves teaching Aboriginal literature can only increase the engagement of Aboriginal students.

Personal growth and transformation

The majority of participants indicated that reading Aboriginal literature led to their personal growth or transformation in the form of a newfound awareness and understanding, an increased capacity for critical thinking, recognizing a silenced voice that needed to be heard, and learning about the realities of other Aboriginal people through real-life stories.

Jimmy said reading Aboriginal literature led him to question exactly what was his own identity as an Aboriginal person: “It definitely made me think like... well it made me think about my identity. Kind of in the sense that I don’t want to let other people tell me who I am, kind of thing.” He came to understand his own Aboriginal identity better, which contributed to his resilience by helping to recognize he did not need to be defined by his family’s beliefs and their expectations of what he should believe when it came to a higher power. Reading Aboriginal literature in university allowed him to personally grow as an individual and to understand that he had his own beliefs about being an Aboriginal person, even though these beliefs were different from those his family held. Clearly, a university education is extremely valuable when it contributes to an individual’s personal growth and transformation and it helps one “to cultivate sensitivity toward exercising one’s freedom... [and] to learn about oneself while dealing with others. It is about learning from them, learning to understand and to share the concerns of the other” (Fairfield, 2011, p. 107). Jimmy seemed to experience a sort of freedom in the way he began to understand his own Aboriginal identity.

Similarly, Raine read Aboriginal literature that taught him about the value of making sense of ones’ Aboriginal identity, to decolonize ones’ thinking:

Growing up in [a small town] I learned who I wasn’t, coming to university and

being exposed to Aboriginal literature, made me find who I really am and to continue finding who I am as a Cree person. And it's helped me and my family, to be honest, exposing myself and exposing the truths to my brothers and sisters, it's helped my family. We didn't do spiritual ceremonies, we didn't do any traditional, ... I've exposed them to who I am as an Indigenous youth and now I'm exposed to the culture and I'm exposed to ... the traditions, the beliefs, values and it's helped. And I'm bringing it back to the community and bringing it back to my home and bringing it back to the work I do with ... youth.

Reading Aboriginal literature, along with some other learning opportunities in university, allowed Raine to experience a personal transformation. This personal transformation was in the form of a greater understanding of his identity and learning to be proud of being an Aboriginal person. He recognized the value this carried for his personal transformation, and with that new understanding he could teach others in his family and community, especially once he graduated and entered the workforce.

Aboriginal literature contributed to the personal growth and transformation of the majority of participants. Reading novels, plays, poetry, and short stories by Aboriginal authors had the power to affirm their identities and free the majority of participants from feeling isolated and disconnected as they attended university. "When human beings are faced with life challenges, they often manage, adapt, and move on" (Brown, 2004, p. 90). No matter how one chooses to cope with the emotions brought on by difficult experiences, it is a positive step when a person is able to effectively cope and learn how to deal with hardship in a healthy way as it occurs throughout life.

Reading Aboriginal literature in university helped Raine to connect more to what

he was learning and freed him from feeling isolated and disconnected as an Aboriginal student at the university. Although he could not recall specific pieces of literature, he did mention Métis writers Maria Campbell and Rita Bouvier. By reflecting on his reading experiences, he noted that Aboriginal literature has the capacity to transform one's thinking. When Raine saw Aboriginal literature included in his university course readings he felt that he belonged at the institution and that Aboriginal contributions were valued. He began to value his experiences as an Aboriginal person and the literature that gave him a new understanding of these experiences.

The majority of participants related to the experiences of characters and people presented in Aboriginal literature. Nohkom Kanehkan Apit, Adjgaliaq, and Chris said they began to look for other literature at the university that would further acknowledge their Aboriginal worldviews and perspectives. The inclusion of Aboriginal literature in university courses indicated to the majority of Aboriginal students that recognizing Aboriginal perspectives was valuable to society. This allowed them to see their contributions to society as valuable, and this new understanding was in itself a sense of personal transformation.

Aboriginal authors often write about emotionally laden experiences and use the “narrative basis of self” as a form of praxis or “*mamatawisowin*” (Sinclair, Hart, & Bruyere, 2009, p. 157). Praxis refers to “the reflection and action which truly transform reality [and the world]... the source of knowledge and creation” (Freire, 1970, p. 101). Similarly, *mamatawisowin* is a *Nehiyaw* concept that refers to inward exploration, “where creative forces that run through life are tapped into, [and] individuals come to subjectively experience a sense of wholeness” (Sinclair, Hart, & Bruyere, 2009, p. 157).

All of Aboriginal students I interviewed seemed to experience this sort of personal growth and transformation when they read Aboriginal literature and thereafter began to recognize the value of sharing their perspectives as Aboriginal people.

Aboriginal authors who write Aboriginal literature in a fictional or non-fictional autobiographical voice, provide a voice for other Aboriginal people when otherwise it would be silenced. The literature demonstrated to the majority of participants that being a voice for other Aboriginal people is important to build understanding and dismantle stereotypes. Cindy read Aboriginal literature that addressed the challenges Aboriginal women experience. “The Louise Halfe stuff I remember because I think she does a lot [on] feminism right? And womanhood. So it kind of makes you feel a little bit more valued, that you can be a strong person.” Reading Halfe’s poetry increased Cindy’s awareness when it came to the difficulties Aboriginal women face in Canada and the strength they demonstrate by overcoming these difficulties.

All of participants mentioned that reading Aboriginal literature in their first-year classes built their awareness of Aboriginal experiences. Reading about the difficult life situations of Aboriginal authors allowed all of the participants to reflect on their own beliefs and how this impacted their understanding of Aboriginal identity. Although reading some of the literature was difficult for the majority of participants, these readings proved to build their awareness. The Aboriginal literature allowed all the participants to question the situations of Aboriginal people as they were presented in the literature and their relevance in past and present times.

Raine reiterated the formation of Aboriginal cliques throughout his interview so I was under the impression that this really affected him. He said many on-reserve students

moving to the city to attend university seem to be excluded by Aboriginal cliques that are formed in the university environment. His view is that those who form these cliques—Aboriginal students as well as some staff—seem to be struggling with understanding their identity and are ignorant to the hardships faced by many Aboriginal people:

We have people in this university that work here and they're Aboriginal and they're supposed to support and guide Aboriginal students in their studies, Aboriginal students. But when they believe in this divide and conquer and clique way of life, at the university, maybe I'm playing the victim role but I doubt that because I've heard this from many other Aboriginal students. They have like an apple identity, they're not truly who they are. They're not being true to who they are and their way of life. And it's just how it is in the urban community that a lot of people act like who they are, but they truly don't know who they are. And that... I'm not going to say I truly know who I am as an Aboriginal person, as a Cree individual, but I'm definitely taking the steps that they're not taking, that they should be taking, to find who they really are as their identity.

Raine stated that Aboriginal literature has a lot to offer to Aboriginal students to learn about the adversity that other Aboriginal people experience and perhaps come to understand their own Aboriginal identities better. He said that he learned from Aboriginal literature in this same way:

It heightens my learning, I believe it heightens also the peers that I'm taking classes with, because when you're taking these classes you're taking them with future social workers, future teachers, and future analysts. And that's what they need to... they need to be exposed to the Aboriginal literature because it exposes

the truth, it exposes the realities that some of us... Aboriginals face today. And they [university students] need to have that open mind and reality when working in the future because I don't think Aboriginal literature 20 years ago is as important as it is today at the university level. And it definitely needs to improve at the secondary level. Because I wasn't exposed to Aboriginal literature at the secondary level, that's for sure.

Learning from Aboriginal literature proved to be transformational for Raine, as was the case with the majority of participants. Reading Aboriginal literature increased his awareness of the historical realities of Aboriginal people, particularly when the experiences were told from the Aboriginal point-of-view of Aboriginal authors. Overall, Aboriginal literature made it possible for all of participants to more easily distinguish the differences in Aboriginal and colonial worldviews.

The personal growth and transformation of all of participants was also marked by an increased awareness of how racism functions in Canadian society and how it affects Aboriginal students. Aboriginal literature helped all six participants to more clearly articulate the stereotypes and misunderstandings of Aboriginal people formed by other groups in Canada. All of the participants indicated that common bias, racism, inaccurate perceptions, and stereotypes were evident to them through their experiences at the university. All six of the participants recalled that their experiences reading Aboriginal literature reaffirmed their own experiences with racism and stereotypes and that this increased their engagement in university learning. Cindy said that simply having Aboriginal literature included in university courses indicated that Aboriginal voices need to be increasingly heard:

When I started university, it was starting that I would see more Aboriginal literature and it would just made me realize that Aboriginal people are starting to be heard. Hopefully, slowly more respected but it made me think that the U of S is more of a welcoming place now to Aboriginal people so, that we could feel more comfortable in school.

Cindy's belief was that when Aboriginal experiences are presented in places such as the university, it indicates that Aboriginal people are being welcomed and respected by the dominant society.

All of the participants acknowledged how Aboriginal literature may be helpful to bringing about discussions on racism and how it could be used to educate non-Aboriginal people at the university about Aboriginal experiences, including professors. Riley & Ungerleider (2012) stated how "white, middle-class students may be at an advantage since they are more likely to be perceived by their teachers as the 'norm' and familiar with the normative behaviours and values perpetuated by schools and expected by many of their teachers" (p. 317). Many works of Aboriginal literature present experiences outside this norm and hopefully would indicate to non-Aboriginal people that there are Aboriginal norms much different from their own.

Such inclusion of Aboriginal literature may contribute to building relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. Four of the participants pointed out that many non-Aboriginal students could benefit from reading Aboriginal literature by learning more about Aboriginal people. These participants said this would hopefully dismantle some of the stereotypes and racist assumptions that non-Aboriginal students hold which may prevent them from interacting with Aboriginal students on campus. One

might argue that it would be up to Aboriginal students to overcome the fears of being stereotyped by racist non-Aboriginals. However, it is not their responsibility to eradicate some of the racist assumptions held about Aboriginal people. This responsibility lies with society at large, and more specifically the university. Although it is only one of the solutions, the inclusion of Aboriginal literature in university courses is a way stereotypes and racist assumptions are being addressed.

All six of the participants indicated that valuing Aboriginal perspectives is achieved through including Aboriginal literature in university course readings. When university courses include Aboriginal literature this values Aboriginal perspectives and challenges the perpetuating of stereotypes. Gilman (1985) described the function of stereotypes in his compilation of essays that examined the progression of stereotypes from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century: “stereotypes can assume a life of their own, rooted not in reality but in the myth-making made necessary by our own need to control our world” (p. 12). As well, Gilman (1985) believed that “education and study can expose the ideologies with which we structure our world, and perhaps help put us in the habit of self-reflection” (p. 12). As indicated in this study, reading Aboriginal literature builds ones’ awareness and understanding and may have the power to reduce stereotypes and racist assumptions.

Sâkitowin (Love): Braiding wihkaskwa

Summary of findings

In this section, I present the findings of my research and follow with the theoretical implications in terms of how this study contributes to resilience literature. Combining the findings of the sorted data, self-reflection notes, and theoretical analysis

and writing up the results was similar to combining and braiding the three sections of *wihkaskwa* into a whole braid. Braiding the *wihkaskwa* together is carried out with *sâkitowin* (love)—a third value representing one of the three sections of *wihkaskwa*. Braiding *wihkaskwa* is a process described by Kimmerer (2013) as braiding the hair of Mother Earth, “showing her our loving attention, our care for her beauty and well-being, in gratitude for all she has given us” (p. 5). Similarly, I regarded *sâkitowin* as I combined the pieces of participants’ stories together and prepared to write up the results of my thesis. At this point, I reflected back on my main research question, ‘How is the resilience of selected Aboriginal students at the University of Saskatchewan influenced by the Aboriginal literature currently taught in the post-secondary classroom?’

In seeking to answer the main research question, I also reflected back on the sub-questions, which asked:

(a) What does the term ‘resilience’ mean to Aboriginal students?

(b) How do the narratives influence the resilience of Aboriginal students through their pursuit of education?

(c) How do Aboriginal students see their own life experiences affirmed in Aboriginal literature?

(d) What is the importance of nurturing the resilience of Aboriginal students through Aboriginal literature?

(e) In what ways can university initiatives and policies strengthen the value attached to teaching Aboriginal literature to first year post-secondary students?

One finding that emerged from the data is that five of participants related their understandings of the term ‘resilience’ to the resilience they have demonstrated in their

university studies. Resilience to Aboriginal students had a variety of meanings including fighting for one's survival, working through obstacles to become stronger, finding ways to overcome challenges, carrying on through everyday struggles, having the attitude and behavior to be successful, growing as a student and independent learner, being self-motivated, managing time effectively, taking initiative for oneself, and taking comfort in rewarding experiences. Collectively, participants' responses identified resilient individuals as those who are able to prosper and succeed despite struggles, learn life lessons through struggles, and find strength within oneself through helping others. These meanings of resilience relate to the concept of *Miyo-Pimatisiwin* as "the overall goal of healing, learning, and life in general" (Hart, 2002, p. 44). As the majority of Aboriginal students strove to complete their university education, part of their resilience was attributed to ensuring their own health, happiness, and well-being along with those around them. The majority of Aboriginal participants faced a variety of struggles and therefore, their resilience is demonstrated in various ways depending on the specific challenges they faced.

Reading Aboriginal literature in first-year courses had the greatest influence on the resilience of Aboriginal students in this study when they are already invested in their academic learning. All of the participants indicated that their resilience was largely influenced by other factors that impact their ability to remain in school; such as home and personal life situations, motivation, time management, financial situations, and academic difficulties. In this case, there was often minimal influence of Aboriginal literature on the majority of the Aboriginal students who were experiencing these specific situations, as the Aboriginal students needed to have a clear mindset to be focused on their studies.

The resilience of all the participants was evident in the fact that they remained in their studies despite the various struggles that arose, wanted to be successful in university, and found ways to navigate their way through challenges. All six of the participants indicated a great amount of strength to persevere in university. The challenges faced by all of Aboriginal participants posed an opportunity for each individual to experience personal growth. Facing these challenges head-on meant that next time another challenge arose, each of the participants got through it in a similar way. Being resilient in such circumstances also had to do with knowing healthy versus unhealthy ways of coping with the negative emotions that arise when one faces any challenge.

I form a new understanding of Aboriginal students' resilience through the lens of *Miyo-Pimatisiwin (The Good Life)* combined with the individual experiences of this particular group of Aboriginal university students. I understand resilience in this context as meaning an Aboriginal student who is persistent through challenges, who remains engaged in higher educational learning, and continuously experiences personal and transformational growth. This sort of resilience has led all of Aboriginal participants to want to eventually help themselves and others through the knowledge and certification they gain through a university education.

A second finding is that Aboriginal literature contributed to the personal growth of five Aboriginal students when there was strong emotion tied with reading this literature. Interview participants ranged in their responses as to how they chose to deal with these emotional reactions, whether it was their own reaction or those of their classmates. The two female participants indicated that they prefer that emotional

reactions not be shared in class, as they felt that the university classroom is not an appropriate environment for this kind of sharing. Meanwhile, two male participants indicated that it is important to deal with those emotional reactions in the moment because Aboriginal students run the risk of dealing with their emotions in a destructive manner outside the classroom. This finding presents much possibility on how the university classroom may better support Aboriginal students to cope with personal challenges that inhibit their ability to focus on and remain in their studies, especially the personal challenges that are exacerbating Aboriginal students' stress levels and affecting them emotionally. The university classroom has this potential to help students to cope with their challenges by addressing these strong emotions and may serve as a place of personal transformation for Aboriginal students.

Thirdly, I have concluded that there is value in having Aboriginal students' life experiences affirmed in Aboriginal literature. The identities of all the Aboriginal students was affirmed by the Aboriginal literature brought into the university classroom, reflecting some of their own experiences or those of their family members. The literature provided a sense of familiarity for all Aboriginal participants in this study by affirming the distinct existence of Aboriginal experiences in Canada. Aboriginal literature touched on the experiences of these Aboriginal students and their families whether they were First Nations, Métis, or Inuit.

Aboriginal people living in Canada's dominant non-Aboriginal society cannot help but be influenced by non-Aboriginal values, beliefs, language, and social norms. Three of the participants developed a clearer understanding of Aboriginal identity through reading Aboriginal literature, which affirmed their identities and helped them to

manifest resilience. One of the Aboriginal students grew up in an urban non-Aboriginal community and through reading Aboriginal literature, learned the importance of having a connection to Aboriginal worldviews and perspectives.

All of the Aboriginal participants more clearly understood the academic material told from an Aboriginal perspective through Aboriginal literature. When the Aboriginal students personally related to what they were learning, this corresponded to Aboriginal worldviews, as they connected to the stories represented in Aboriginal literature. All of the participants were more likely to ask questions and think more critically about situations in society that dealt closely with their experiences.

Aboriginal literature in the form of books, short stories, poetry and drama revealed the strength and resilience of Aboriginal people to all of Aboriginal participants. Five of the participants indicated that when they read about other Aboriginal people who overcame dire circumstances to live happier and healthier lives, they were inspired to do well and believed that in the same way, they could overcome their struggles.

A fourth and final finding is that all of the participants indicated that they would like to see more Aboriginal literature included in first-year courses at the University of Saskatchewan. When there was Aboriginal literature included in their first-year courses they wanted to be reading more Aboriginal literature. All of the six participants stated that they would have liked to see more Aboriginal literature both in their first-year and upper-year courses. Three stated that when they saw Aboriginal literature included in their courses they saw that their professors and the university as a whole, were making an effort to validate the existence of Aboriginal people at the university and in Canadian society. These participants, in turn, had an improved perception of the university.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

This chapter discusses the theoretical implications of this study's contributions to resilience literature and highlights the value of including Aboriginal literature in university courses. I refer to the metaphor of *Mosahkina Wihkaskwa* in concluding my thesis and reflecting on the purpose of this research. When one carries out the practice of *Mosahkina Wihkaskwa* and combines the *wihkask* (sweetgrass braids) into a bundle, these bundles are stored and each braid is used for smudging oneself for the purification of mind, body and spirit. Kimmerer (2013) specified the purpose of *Mosahkina Wihkaskwa*, as those who gather it must ensure that they collect it properly and respectfully, using it for their own needs and those of their community: "the braids are given as gifts, to honor, to say thank you, to heal and strengthen" (p. 27). The final stage of this research is evaluating the value of this research to the Aboriginal community and to the university. Thus, this chapter concludes the thesis with a summary of the relevance of this research based on the University of Saskatchewan's aspirations to increase the enrollment, retention, and graduation rates of Aboriginal students.

Theoretical Implications: Contributions to resilience

This research contributes to resilience literature with the specific focus of Aboriginal students in a mainstream university. I have maintained that resilience of the Aboriginal students participating in my study was evaluated through the lens of *Miyo-Pimatisiwin* (The Good Life) and interpreted using a combination of Indigenous methodology and grounded theory methods. Through this study, I have found out that all

six of the students participating in my study looked to their traditional beliefs, values, and perspectives to guide them through their post-secondary journey. This was demonstrated in their hopes of one day contributing to their Aboriginal families, communities, and nations through their planned careers. They knew that their education would eventually help them in their own lives to somehow contribute in bettering the lives of other Aboriginal people.

One pressing question that has pervaded my thinking throughout the study is whether or not Aboriginal culture and more specifically, traditional spirituality, holds a great importance in the way an Aboriginal student navigates through the challenges of post-secondary education. This is important because Aboriginal literature relays important teachings of Aboriginal cultural practices, beliefs, and traditional values. As I read HeavyRunner's (2009) study on resilience and North American students, I became thoroughly convinced that Aboriginal cultural practices and beliefs are fundamental to the resilience of Aboriginal students in post-secondary studies. I related this to my own experience as someone who has relied on spiritual ceremonies to give me the strength to get through my own challenges in university.

I also thought of the students whom I have helped to teach, a large majority of whom are Christian, and who excel in post-secondary studies despite a few difficulties. I thought of St. Denis' (2007) argument that historically, "many Aboriginal parents and grandparents did their best to learn the norms and practices that would increase the success and acceptance of their children in dominant society" (p. 1078). In some cases, St. Denis (2007) maintained, cultural revitalization is liberating. But a sole focus on cultural revitalization can also falsely suggest that social problems occur because

Aboriginal people have lost their culture, have failed to get it back, and are not practicing it properly, rather than viewing these social problems as an effect of systemic racism.

Nonetheless, I do believe that for some Aboriginal students, their connection to culture plays a large role in their ability to remain resilient in university. It remains important that the university respects and acknowledges the importance of Aboriginal cultural practices and worldviews so that Aboriginal students feel they are accepted and belong at the institution. The participants varied in how they remained rooted in their cultural beliefs, traditions, and practices. Four of the participants in my study followed the Aboriginal cultural practices or began to find meaning in following traditional Aboriginal cultural practices after learning about them in university.

The stories contained in Aboriginal literature taught all of the participants some meanings of resilience as they gained inspiration in their own lives from the characters in the stories. Whether it meant overcoming obstacles, challenging racism and stereotypes, or teaching others the truth about Aboriginal people and experiences, all six of Aboriginal participants became inspired after reading Aboriginal literature which had a positive outcome on their lives. Five of the participants indicated that when they read about other Aboriginal people who overcame dire circumstances to live happier and healthier lifestyles, they became inspired and had a feeling of hope to do better in their own lives.

The value of including Aboriginal literature in university courses

The core issue that created difficulties for all of the participants as they pursued a university education was to find ways to get through the challenges they faced. When all six of the participants employed healthy coping strategies to get through these challenges

this helped them to be successful through their university studies. While five participants acknowledged the role of Aboriginal literature to help them recognize the common struggles of Aboriginal people, one participant could not clearly determine where Aboriginal literature impacted on her ability to foster resilience through major struggles.

Five participants indicated that they experienced personal growth and transformation during their university studies. Four of the participants attributed this personal growth and transformation to new understandings acquired after reading Aboriginal literature. When Aboriginal literature was incorporated into their learning it had a great impact on their ability to engage in what they are learning. The readings really touched the core of what they needed to understand to help them start to think differently about Aboriginal topics and issues. When universities value the personal knowledge that Aboriginal students bring to the learning situation, students become more invested in the academic task and develop a sense of ownership in the learning process (Spires, Huffman, Honeycutt, and Barrow, 1995).

Collectively, the Aboriginal students I interviewed believe that Aboriginal literature has many positive benefits, including:

- Aboriginal literature instilled hope in the Aboriginal students that their situations would improve.
- Aboriginal authors and characters in Aboriginal literature served as exemplary role models to Aboriginal students struggling with similar situations.
- Aboriginal literature educated Aboriginal students about the common realities of Aboriginal people that their prior educational experiences did not acknowledge.

- Aboriginal students connected to the experiences represented in Aboriginal literature.
- Aboriginal literature changed the Aboriginal students' perceptions and long-held assumptions about Aboriginal people, serving as a form of decolonization.
- Aboriginal students experienced strong emotional reactions when reading Aboriginal literature.
- Aboriginal literature helped Aboriginal students more easily able to learn the skills of academic reading and writing when they understood the background of the topics presented, contributing to their ability to fulfill the academic requirements of university writing.

CONCLUSION

The overall significance of my study was to examine the specific influences of Aboriginal literature on Aboriginal students' resilience at the University of Saskatchewan. In addition, I wanted to determine whether Aboriginal literature is being taught in ways that are valuable to Aboriginal students' resilience. Using the metaphor of *mosahkina wihkaskwa* was helpful in organizing and writing my overall thesis. At each step of my writing it was useful to compare the *Nehiyaw* practice to the research process I was undertaking. First, the stage of preparing, protocols, and permission compared to preparing for *mosahkina wihkaskwa*. Second, collecting data by hearing the individual stories of Aboriginal student participants was similar to selecting *wihkaskwa* from a field of grass. Third, organizing and grouping the data by going through the transcripts to sort

the information into codes, categories and themes was comparable to sorting the strands of *wihkaskwa* according to similarities in dimension and size. Fourth, combining the findings of the sorted data, self-reflection notes, and theoretical analysis and writing up the results was similar to combining and braiding the three sections of *wihkaskwa* into a whole braid. Finally, evaluating how this information would be valuable to the community was like using the *wihkask* for purification of ones' mind, body and spirit.

As stated at the beginning of this study, the three sections of the *wihkask* represent three *Nehiyaw* values: *kitimâkinakêwin* (compassion), *tapahâtêyimisowin* (humility) and *sâkitowin* (love) (C. Fiddler, personal communication, February 12, 2014). Accordingly, I have marked the sections of my thesis at times in which I needed to demonstrate these specific values to ensure that I was conducting my research congruent to the Indigenous framework of *mosahkina wikaskwa*. The value of *kitimâkinakêwin* (compassion) was designated to the beginning of my study, as I prepared for the research by choosing a topic area that required attention, established protocols, and sought permission to do my study. Throughout the writing of the introduction, literature review, and methodology sections I was required to practice the value of *kitimâkinakêwin* (compassion) as I determined the required areas of focus when it concerned Aboriginal students attending university.

The value of *tapahâtêyimisowin* (humility) was required of me as I met with participants, listened to their stories and presented these stories in such a way that respected their voices. As well, I heeded the value *sâkitowin* (love) as I combined the pieces of participants' stories together to write up the results of my thesis and reflected on the outcome of my study. I considered the *sâkitowin* as I thought of how this study may

be useful to informing the university on the challenges Aboriginal students encounter and how alleviating the circumstances that lead to these challenges would be using this study for the well-being of other Aboriginal students. The study may be useful to target other useful strategies related to using Aboriginal content to remedy the problems of low enrollment, retention and completion rates of Aboriginal students.

Educators in Canadian schools and universities today may have a better chance of retaining Aboriginal students in classrooms by including Aboriginal content. This study proposes that Aboriginal content is increased in the form of Aboriginal literature and by ensuring that this literature is delivered in a way that is consistent with Aboriginal worldviews, perspectives, and practices. Recognizing the resilience of Aboriginal students is crucial at this time in which Aboriginal people are recognizing the need to recover from past injustices related to colonization, racism, and Euro-centrism. This study has demonstrated that the topics of Aboriginal literature, Aboriginal university students, and resilience are interconnected and have value in today's society as the university strives to include Aboriginal worldviews in university curriculum and content. These are certainly noteworthy influences that are crucial to build on as the university moves forward in better supporting Aboriginal students. Just as *wihkask* serves to heal and strengthen individuals and communities, hopefully this research may serve the same purpose by taking care of the needs of Aboriginal students.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS

RESEARCHER: Christine Fiddler, Masters candidate
Department of Educational Foundations, College of Education
University of Saskatchewan
28 Campus Drive, Saskatoon, SK S7N 0X1
Tel.: (306) 966-7514

Calling all Aboriginal students!

Are you an Aboriginal student (First Nation, Metis, Inuit)?

Have you completed or at near completion of your first year of post-secondary studies?

Have you taken a first year English course that included Aboriginal literature?
(*ex. Maria Campbell, Tomson Highway, Beatrice Culleton*)

I am seeking participants who meet this criteria for my study on Aboriginal student resilience.

The purpose of this study is to discover how some Aboriginal literature influences Aboriginal students and whether this might influence Aboriginal student resilience in university.

You'll be asked to do a one-to-one interview and asked about your experiences studying literature by Aboriginal authors during your university studies. The interview will last approximately 30-60 minutes (with the option of adding an additional interview if necessary) at a mutually convenient time. Measures will be taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

Your participation in this research study is much appreciated! Thank you!

For more information, contact:

Christine Fiddler, Masters candidate
Educational Foundations, College of Education
University of Saskatchewan
cmf794@mail.usask.ca

Tel: 306-966-7514 Please leave a message with your name and phone number.

APPENDIX B

LETTER OF INVITATION FOR STUDENT PARTICIPANTS

CHRISTINE FIDDLER

Department of Educational Foundations, College of Education

University of Saskatchewan

28 Campus Drive, Saskatoon, SK S7N 0X1

EMAIL: cmf794@mail.usask.ca

Supervisor's EMAIL: karla.jwilliamson@usask.ca

Supervisor's Tel.: (306) 966-5262

January, 2013

Dear University of Saskatchewan student:

My name is Christine Fiddler and I am currently a Master's student at the University of Saskatchewan in the Department of Educational Foundations. I am conducting research for my thesis that will be titled *Miyo-Pimatisiwin (The Good Life) in Aboriginal Literature and Aboriginal Student Resilience*. I will be collecting data for the study between January and February 2013. The study will provide you with an opportunity to share your experiences in university with a focus on your first year English or Native Studies courses. This study is a chance to give you a voice within this academic setting and may motivate positive changes in the delivery of Aboriginal content in the education of Aboriginal students at the University of Saskatchewan. Adding voice to this study is one way that you can impact the lives of other Aboriginal students who are beginning their first year of university learning and aspire to graduate with a degree.

I am interested in interviewing you to hear about your experiences during your first year of university learning, the Aboriginal literature that you were taught during your first year of studies, and how this impacted your learning. I realize that you may have a busy schedule but would be grateful if you can provide your time for the interview at a place, time and date that is most convenient to you. The interview will consist of one interview session lasting one hour, with the option of an additional interview if necessary.

You can be assured of your anonymity in the study, you will be identified by a letter identifier in data collection and analysis documents (Ex. Participant A, Participant B, etc.). As well, any information you supply will be treated with the strictest confidence. Once the interview has been transcribed, you will be asked to review the transcript and to add, delete, or alter information as you see fit. Talking circles will be an option for debriefing, in which all participants will be asked to meet at a time, date and place that is convenient. Participation in the talking circle will be considered your consent to disclose your identity to other participants. The researcher will take appropriate measures to stress confidentiality in the talking circle. For those who decline to participate in the talking circle, an individual meeting for debriefing will be arranged. A brief written report that summarizes the findings will be made available to you and any other person or agency interested in the study. This report will group the findings so individual participants are not identified.

A copy of the interview questions is included for your perusal. Providing that you consent to participate in the study, a consent form is provided for your signature. To confirm you are willing to participate, please contact me through email. Please be aware that signing the consent form does not mean that you are bound to participate in the

study, as you are free to withdraw your consent at any time with no repercussions or negative consequences.

If you require further information you can contact me at any time at the email provided. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Christine Fiddler, Masters student

APPENDIX C

Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a research project titled *Miyo-Pimatisiwin (The Good Life) in Aboriginal Literature and Aboriginal Student Resilience*. Please read this form carefully, and feel free to ask any questions you might have.

RESEARCHER: Christine Fiddler, Masters candidate
Department of Educational Foundations, College of Education
University of Saskatchewan
28 Campus Drive, Saskatoon, SK S7N 0X1
Tel.: (306) 966-7514

Purpose and Procedure: You will be asked to describe your experiences in university learning as you studied Aboriginal literature and how this influenced your future outlook in post-secondary learning. The goal is to discover the contributing factors of the Aboriginal literature to your own resilience in university. Additionally, you will be asked to reflect on what value this carries to you as an Aboriginal student in a **Canadian** university. Interviews will last approximately 30-60 minutes at a date (between January

and February 2013), time, and place convenient to you. The interviews will be audio-taped and transcribed. After your interview, and prior to data analysis, you will be given an opportunity to review the transcript of your interviews. You are given the opportunity to add, alter, or delete information from the transcript as you see fit. After the transcript release form has been signed and data analysis has occurred, withdrawal from the study will not be possible.

The findings of this study will form the basis for my master's thesis, a requirement for the completion of my degree. In addition, the information may be used as the basis for conference papers and journal articles.

Potential Benefits: While there is no guarantee that you will receive personal benefits from participation in the study, you may experience greater awareness of your journey through post-secondary learning. Some might say there is value in reflecting on your successes and challenges. Additionally, as role models, your experiences could inform and support other Aboriginal students as those students seek to follow your example and pursue a post-secondary education at the University of Saskatchewan.

Potential Risk: There are minimal risks associated with your participation in this study. You will not be asked to recall or talk about experiences that you may find uncomfortable. You will be free to not answer questions without penalty or negative consequences. There is a remote chance that reflecting back on your educational history may remind you of experiences that may be perceived as being negative or having strong emotions associated with those experiences. In those cases, you may choose to omit this information from your interview during debriefing or in more extreme cases, ask for the interview to be stopped. To address the risk that you feel your perceptions and

experiences are misrepresented, you will be given a transcript of the interviews and you can alter, add, or delete information as you see fit.

Confidentiality: To protect your confidentiality, letter identifiers such as Participant A, Participant B, etc. will be used in place of your name. Nowhere in my notes or in any other record will your name appear. Talking circles will be an option for debriefing, in which all participants will be asked to meet at a time, date and place that is convenient. Participation in the talking circle will be considered consent to disclose information to other participants with the risk of your identity, as it relates to the data collected, being disclosed to others. Measures will be taken to stress confidentiality of identities of participants and information shared. For those who decline to participate in the talking circle, an individual meeting for debriefing will be arranged.

Right to Withdraw: Your participation is voluntary, and you can answer only those questions that you are comfortable with. There is no guarantee that you will personally benefit from your involvement. The information that is shared will be held in strict confidence and discussed only with the research team. You may withdraw from the research project for any reason without penalty of any sort. Your right to withdraw data from the study will apply until the data has been combined with other participant data in the final report. At this time, it is possible that some form of research dissemination will have already occurred and it may not be possible to withdraw your data.

Questions: If you have any questions concerning the research project, please feel free to ask at any point; you are also free to contact the researcher at the email and number provided if you have other questions. This research project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Board. Any questions

regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the **Research Ethics Office** ethics.office@usask.ca (306) 966-2975. Out of town participants may call toll free 1(866) 966-2975.

Follow-Up and Debriefing: A brief written summary of the results will be available to participants and others interested in the experiences of participants. You will also be offered an electronic copy of the final research project.

Consent to Participate:

I have read and understood the description provided; I have had the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project, understanding that I may withdraw this consent at any time up to the point that data is combined. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

Name of Participant

Date

Signature of Participant

Signature of Researcher

APPENDIX D

Interview Questions

Questions on resilience

1. What is your understanding of resilience?
2. Describe how you have demonstrated resilience through your first year of post-secondary studies?

General experiences in university

3. What motivated you to enroll at the University of Saskatchewan?
4. What do you find most challenging? How do you deal with these challenges?
5. What are some of the experiences that you find rewarding in being a university student?
6. Where have you found the most support during your time as a university student?

Experiences of Aboriginal students studying Aboriginal literature during first years of post-secondary, and influence on resilience

7. During your university learning, what has been your exposure to literature by Aboriginal people (either First Nation, Métis, or Inuit authors)?
8. Please explain which narratives by Aboriginal people you were taught. Describe your experiences learning from these texts.
9. How did the instructor teach these narratives? Did his/her approach heighten or diminish your learning from them?
10. How did the literature impact your view of a university education?

Significance of Aboriginal literature to learning

11. What significance or relation did the Aboriginal literature have to your own life?
12. Did the Aboriginal literature help you to connect more to what you were learning? Why or why not?
13. How did the Aboriginal literature influence how you see yourself within society, your community, your family?
14. Did reading the Aboriginal literature allow you to feel hopeful about your educational journey and where it could take you? Please explain.
15. Did hearing these stories allow you to share your own related stories with others?

In what ways can university initiatives and policies strengthen the value attached to teaching Aboriginal literature to first year post-secondary students?

16. Based on your own experience, what is the value of including Aboriginal literature in university learning?

APPENDIX E

Transcript Release Form

I, _____, have reviewed the complete transcript of my personal interview in this study, and have been provided with the opportunity to add, alter, and delete information from the transcript as appropriate. I acknowledge that the transcript accurately reflects what I said in my personal interview with Christine Fiddler. I hereby authorize the release of this transcript to Christine Fiddler to be used in the manner described in the Consent Form. I have received a copy of this Data/Transcript Release Form for my own records.

Participant

Date

Signature of Participant

Signature of Researcher

APPENDIX F

Ethics Approval



Behavioural Research Ethics Board (B-REB)

Certificate of Re-Approval

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR	DEPARTMENT	Beh #
Karla JessenWilliamson	Educational Foundations	12-172
INSTITUTION (S) WHERE RESEARCH WILL BE CARRIED OUT		
University of Saskatchewan Saskatoon SK		
STUDENT RESEARCHER(S)		
Christine Fiddler		
FUNDER(S)		
INTERNALLY FUNDED		
TITLE:		
Examining How the Study of Aboriginal Literature may Contribute to the Resilience of Aboriginal Students at the University of Saskatchewan		
RE-APPROVED ON	EXPIRY DATE	
30-Jul-2013	29-Jul-2014	

Full Board Meeting

Delegated Review

CERTIFICATION

The University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above-named research project. The proposal was found to be acceptable on ethical grounds. The principal investigator has the responsibility for any other administrative or regulatory approvals that may pertain to this research project, and for ensuring that the authorized research is carried out according to the conditions outlined in the original protocol submitted for ethics review. This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above time period provided there is no change in experimental protocol or consent process or documents.

Any significant changes to your proposed method, or your consent and recruitment procedures should be reported to the Chair for Research Ethics Board consideration in advance of its implementation.

ONGOING REVIEW REQUIREMENTS

In order to receive annual renewal, a status report must be submitted to the REB Chair for Board consideration within one month of the current expiry date each year the study remains open, and upon study completion. Please refer to the following website for further instructions: http://www.usask.ca/research/ethics_review/

Beth Bilson, Chair
University of Saskatchewan
Behavioural Research Ethics Board

Please send all correspondence to:

Research Ethics Office
University of Saskatchewan
Box 5000 RPO University, 1607 - 110 Gymnasium Place
Saskatoon, SK S7N 4J8
Phone: (306) 966-2975 Fax: (306) 966-2069