

**A CULTURAL METAMORPHOSIS:  
FROM INDIGENOUS SCHOOL DROPOUT TO EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP  
tâpwê-nitâcimowin (My True Story)**

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College of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies  
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University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation is my story of being a school dropout in the early 1960s and the journey I would travel toward achieving a successful career in the provincial education system as an educational assistant, an educator, and a school-based administrator, then as a director of education in a federal First Nation education system from which I retired in December 2020. After forty years of educational service, I took on a personal challenge to achieve the epitome in education attainment, a doctorate in educational administration at the University of Saskatchewan.

During my years of service, I developed an advocacy for equitable educational opportunities for marginalized students. In particular, I was concerned about the consistently lower graduation and higher dropout rates for First Nations students compared to non-First Nation students. As an Indigenous student, at age fifteen, I removed myself from the subjugation of a colonized educational system that I now perceive was fraught with systemic and epistemic injustices. As a Nêhiyaw Cree educator, I had the opportunity to serve hundreds of Indigenous students (and non-Indigenous) in provincial and federal schools, many who would also leave school before graduation, further causing the disparity gaps between the two groups of learners. As a Nêhiyaw administrator, my mission was to create learning environments that provided equitable education opportunities where Indigenous students (and of course, all students) were encouraged and supported to stay in school, graduate, and realize that their dreams were possible.

This autoethnography discusses the struggles, challenges, and perceived limitations I would encounter and overcome as I journeyed through life with a grade eight education to writing this dissertation for a doctorate degree in educational leadership. Guiding my research are the questions: 1) what underlying principle(s) is/are at the root of the alarmingly low graduation rates and the alarmingly high dropout rates for Indigenous students, 2) how can telling my story invoke systemic educational change to improve graduation rates for Indigenous students, and 3) how can telling my story provide inspiration and hope to others with similar backgrounds, Indigenous or non-Indigenous. My response to these questions lies within my autoethnography, where I reveal my lived experiences in search of my inherent identity, place,

purpose and path that subsequently led me to a leadership career in education. This is tâpwê-nitâcimowin (my true story).

Key Words:

autoethnography, colonization, injustices, identity, transformation, equitable education, leadership, and advocacy.

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## DEDICATION

*To my beloved husband, P. Edgar Harper, who journeyed into Spirit World on November 13, 2022, to celebrate eternal life with our Creator, our beloved son, and the grandmothers and grandfathers who went before us. Thank you for being my soulmate and my rock. Thank you for spiritually uplifting me throughout our fifty-six years of marriage on Mother Earth. Thank you for your unwavering encouragement throughout my career in education. And thank you for championing my decision to publicly share my very personal and professional educational journey. Forever yours, forever loved.*

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# **MANUSCRIPT ONE: RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT**

## **Introduction**

Manuscript One begins with a brief synopsis of my life as a young child growing up on the Fox Farm in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan in the 1950s and 60s to provide context and background to nitâcimowin (my story). The Fox Farm would be known as a suburb of a city today, but back then, it was a place north of the city mostly comprised of Indigenous (First Nations and Métis) peoples living in a community where poverty was common. Anyone who was of First Nation descent was called an Indian or a halfbreed, often the word ‘dirty’ was used as an adjective. My memory of the city was the rampant racism, discrimination, classism, and hatred the dominant society had toward Indigenous peoples. I felt these inflictions throughout my life living in Prince Albert. I also felt them in school, not only from students, but from teachers as well. I hated being an ‘Indian,’ so much so, I went through an identity crisis where I denied my Indigeneity. Foolish me, I could deny my Indianness, but I could not hide it. A key example of the preconceived prejudices about my being was when I passed on to high school and was counselled by my grade eight teacher and principal about what high school would entail. They told me I probably would only get a grade ten education and then suggested possible jobs I could do with that level of education. These perceived limitations discouraged me from going on to high school. When I turned fifteen that year, I refused to go to school, instead I dropped out and became a statistic.

My life’s path would lead me to marriage at seventeen, motherhood at eighteen, and many wonderful and challenging years of family responsibilities. Life has a way of switching gears on you, it never stays the same even though you are content with how it is playing out. I thought I would never go back to school however I would realize I needed more education to get better paying jobs. My first achievement was a GED which gave me more opportunities and would eventually lead me to a postal clerk position with Canada Post Calgary, a job I could retire at, yet two years later, in 1980, I was an Indigenous teacher associate at Princess Alexandra Community School which was the steppingstone to my forty-year career in educational service and accreditation.

In my years of educational service and educational leadership, it was a natural process for me to become an advocate for Indigenous education. I strived to engage students in their learning and to lift them up to be proud of their inherent identity. In many cases my story was their story as it was their parent's story. Though many students I served successfully went on to graduate or sought jobs through employment training programs, there were many more who dropped out of school and found the hard side of life, including death.

My autoethnography journeys through the struggles, challenges, perceived limitations, and accomplishments I overcame or achieved as an Indigenous student, adult, educator, and educational leader. My advocacy for equitable educational opportunities for Indigenous students was driven not only by my lived school experiences, but also through the lens of a practicing educator and administrator who witnessed and researched the inequities and disparities in Indigenous education. Much has been achieved in Indigenous education since the residential school era, but the struggle for equity is still a significant problem.

In Manuscript One, the purpose and significance of my autoethnography was to reveal some educational inequities and disparities I faced in Indigenous education compared to non-Indigenous education. Identifying Indigenous and non-Indigenous as two separate entities of education was not intentional, but rather than revising it, I thought this sentence might hold some truth or at the very least, raise question of, whether advertently or inadvertently, there were possibly two education-practices, one for Indigenous students and one for non-Indigenous students.

As for the concepts of inequities and disparities, I surmised they evolved from the colonization and destruction of Indigenous peoples' humanity and Indigeneity. History showed inequities were further enforced with the legislation of the Indian Act and residential school systems to eradicate Aboriginal social and cultural difference for the purpose of assimilation and civilization into Euro-Canadian culture (Lawrence, 2004 cited by Wilkins, 2017; Battiste, 2013; Indigenous Services Canada, Standing Committee Report by Minister Hajdu, 2023). The data generated today still shows significant gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners and warrants investigation (Saskatchewan Provincial Auditor Report, 2023; Salloum, 2023; Statistics Canada, 2023, Reported by Layton,). This chapter also provided the contextual

background, key understandings and questions, purpose, limitations and delimitations, stipulative definitions and Cree relational terminologies used throughout this paper, a conclusion, and preview of Manuscript Two.

## **Background**

To provide context to the gaps in Indigenous education, it is necessary to understand the historical colonization of First Nations peoples and the forced assimilation policies through regimented education systems First Nations children were legislated to attend. The residential school system forced parents to give up their children to white religious (I use religious because I personally question any allegiance to Christianity in this destructive action) strangers who took them far from their home fires. This happened to my mother who attended residential school in Birtle, Manitoba for eleven years. The impact of residential schools caused intergenerational trauma for Indigenous peoples as well as fear and distrust for education systems. The fear and distrust of schools was warranted. An example of this was when I was wrongfully strapped by my grade one teacher. My mother, *mama bear*, fiercely protected her daughter by confronting the teacher for mistaken me for another child and for wrongfully giving me the strap. She was my protector, and I assume that the wrongful punishment imposed on her daughter probably reminded her of the treatment students received at Birtle Residential School and she would have none of that with her children. Corporal punishment was common practice back when I went to school, and so was commonly mistaking one Indigenous girl for another.

My research on inequities and disparities in Indigenous education has confirmed that colonization and governmental policies were primary contributors to education disparities. In a 2023 report before the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs (INAN), Minister Hajdu affirmed European settlement and governmental policies displaced Indigenous peoples from their lands, traditions, and culture for generations and as a result, Indigenous youth have been robbed of their right to access education comparable to non-Indigenous youth (Indigenous Services Canada, 2023). Hajdu further added that mainstream schools have not served Indigenous students well, and the effects of racism and curriculum that whitewashed Indigenous perspectives and history have compounded the problem.

In the 2023 Provincial Auditor Report of Saskatchewan, the auditor reported that graduation rates for Indigenous students remained relatively unchanged between 2018-2021 at 44% compared to non-Indigenous students at 88.7% which contributed to higher rates of Indigenous unemployment at 18.6% compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts at 5.6% (Provincial Auditor of Saskatchewan, 2023). The auditor added the persistent disparity in graduation rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students makes it important for the Ministry to make more concerted efforts to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous students.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) Call to Action 7, called upon the federal government to develop, with Aboriginal groups, a joint strategy to eliminate educational and employment gaps between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians (People for Education Research Institute, 2023). This article referenced Yellowhead Institute who stated that none of the calls from six to twelve or sixty-two to sixty-six have yet been fully implemented. In November 2010, a movement was launched by Shannen Koostachin and community children from Attawapiskat First Nation to promote good education for First Nations children (Boileau, October 16, 2020). At the core of this education movement was building a new school on the reserve and equal opportunities for all children. This movement went all the way to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. Soon after, the House of Commons passed a motion that called on the federal government to close the funding gap faced by First Nations students and to establish quality First Nations education. This movement, now known as ‘Shannen’s Dream’ is her legacy for her efforts to improve Indigenous education across Canada.

The literature has shown the phenomenon of inequities in Indigenous education has been discussed at all levels of provincial, federal, and international governments. This phenomenon has also been discussed and researched locally and globally by researchers not only in the field of education but, by social science disciplines as well (Bombay, et al., 2009, 2011, 2014; Louie & Gereluk, 2021; Mendelson, 2006; Organization for Economics, Co-Operation, and Development 2017). The intergenerational trauma phenomenon as a result of cultural genocide and the residential schools horrifying trauma has been pathologized by medicine/health indicating the countless medical and social issues that have become coping mechanisms for survivors (Bombay, et al., 2009; Matè, 2003). The field of journalism then capitalizes on

Indigenous crises by showcasing the negative outcomes or symptoms of deeper problems the Indigenous peoples suffer from as a result of the infliction or subjugation of colonization, governmental policies, education inequities, racism and prejudices, and the epistemicide of Indigenous knowledge (Khalifa et al, 2018). What the general public knows about Indigenous peoples is then limited to what is only seen or heard in its current state rather than knowing the historical impact that colonization caused in the suffering and disruption of Indigenous peoples ways of knowing, being and doing.

Recent literature from scholarly articles on marginalization, pedagogies, and decolonizing school leadership has shown that current education systems maintain colonial pedagogies and agendas that have indoctrinated Western epistemologies and ‘othered’ all other ways (Halloran, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2018; Mullen, 2020; Pratt et al., 2018). Research also suggested there is an imbalance in equitable program delivery for First Nations students in public schools (Wilkins, 2017, p. 89). Wilkins stated it was imperative that provincial schools ensure academic success for all native (sic) students, that graduation rates are comparable to or exceed non-native students, that dropout rates are dramatically reduced, and that many more native (sic) students enter post-secondary institutions (p. 90). Other researchers wrote scholarly articles on structural oppressions (Harper & Thompson, 2017), characteristics of effective leadership (Gilley, Dixon, & Gilley, 2008), inferiorizing Indigenous peoples and intentional colonial poverty (Koptie, 2010), and insufficiencies of high school completion and educational inequities (Louie & Gereluk, 2021), all of which addressed educational inequities and the impact of colonization in Indigenous education. Their work remains relevant today as indicated by provincial, federal, and international data on graduation rate outcomes for Indigenous students compared to non-Indigenous students (Assembly of First Nations, 2012; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2017; Saskatchewan Provincial Auditor Report, 2023), while other researchers such as Battiste (2013) addressed the need for systemic change through the decolonizing of educational structures and colonized epistemologies and ontologies (pp. 28, 69). Battiste (2013) asserted the importance and need for education systems to consider decolonization and transformational change with this powerful statement, “Every school is either a site of reproduction or a site of change. In other words, education can be liberating, or it can

domesticate and maintain domination. It can sustain colonization in neo-colonial ways, or it can decolonize” (p. 175).

### **Problem of Practice(s): Inequities and Disparities**

This background clearly showed there are inequities and disparities in Indigenous education. An achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students has been significantly documented in research and reports in Saskatchewan and across Canada. Inequitable education and achievement gaps for Indigenous learners have been a problem since I went to school (and before) which suggests there are deeper underlying principles for this problem’s existence in 21<sup>st</sup> century education. My presumption is that the problem lies in the practice within classrooms, schools, and education systems.

### **Research Purpose, Significance, and Questions**

Disproportionate graduation rates for Indigenous students compared to non-Indigenous students is a serious systemic problem that demands investigation. I agree with Minister Hajdu when she rightfully blamed European settlement and government policies for the displacement of Indigenous peoples and for robbing Indigenous students of their right to access education comparable to non-Indigenous students (Indigenous Services Canada, 2023).

In my search for a qualitative methodology to tell my story, I learned about the autoethnographic approach. Dr. Cooper and Dr. Lilyea (2022), members of the editorial board for the Qualitative Report and instructors in the Qualitative Research Graduate Certificate Program at Nova Southeastern University, stated autoethnographies that draw upon the narrative tradition, emphasize story and pivotal experiences in one’s life, and that the base unit of analysis is you, the autoethnographer and researcher. The autoethnographic approach resonated with my traditional ways of understanding life, learning from lived experiences, and sharing acquired knowledge. In this study, I am the sole participant and researcher/author sharing my lived experiences and personal perspectives on Indigenous student dropout, achievement disparities, and education inequities. In their research, Cooper and Lilyea cited Creswell’s (2013) research on autoethnographic research which stated that an autoethnography not only contains the personal story of the author, but also that of the larger community (p. 73) affected by the

phenomenon of Indigenous students being pushed out of school. As an Indigenous high school dropout, I have a relational connection with other Indigenous students who for decades, were pushed out of high school and as a result, lost their privilege to graduate. Our stories are similar in that we are the Indigenous representatives in the disparity gap who through no fault of our learning abilities were contributors to the higher dropout and lower graduation statistics compared to the non-Indigenous student population. As the author of my autoethnography, I want to understand the cultural commonalities we share and the potential role they played in us becoming a dropout statistic. To solidify there was an ongoing problem of inequity and disparity issues in Indigenous education, I reviewed secondary data sources and found the phenomenon of disparity gaps and inequities in graduation and high dropout rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students was addressed by many researchers. The secondary data demonstrated alignment (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022) with my primary argument that disparity gaps in education is the result of colonial connotations.

The intent of this study was to reflect on my lived experiences as an Indigenous student and the forces that discouraged me from staying in school. Are these the same forces that are discouraging Indigenous students from staying in school today? My hope is that my story helps to unpack the underlying principles for Indigenous student dropout and the significant graduation disparity gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. It is also my hope that through sharing my lived and educational experiences, it can be another source that influences the decolonization of educational structures so Indigenous students can have an equitable opportunity in education, and that the achievement gap is decreased significantly (or eliminated completely).

A foundational purpose of my research was to influence transformation and paradigm shifts from colonial structured schools to schools that provide space and place for Indigenous students who have a right to equitable and quality education. It is my hope that my research will be referenced by school leadership and teachers who can effectively and efficiently influence immediate changes in their school settings for the purpose of improving the stark statistics of Indigenous students' achievement and graduation outcomes.



## Research Questions

Cooper and Lilyea (2021) stressed that research question(s) must reflect the focus of the autoethnography by exploring a cultural issue through one's personal story. The cultural issue in my study comes from my personal experience of being an Indigenous school dropout and whose lived experiences and life transformations would lead me back to education and a career as an educational leader. My autoethnographic research will be guided by the following key questions:

1. What underlying principle(s) is/are at the root of the alarmingly low graduation rates and the alarmingly high dropout rates for Indigenous students?
2. How can telling my story invoke systemic educational change to improve graduation rates for Indigenous students?
3. How can telling my story provide inspiration and hope to others with similar backgrounds, Indigenous or non-Indigenous?

## Stipulative Definitions and Plains Cree Relational Terminology

Terminology	Stipulative Definitions
Aboriginal	Section 35.2 of the Constitution Act states that Aboriginal people of Canada include the Indian, Inuit, and Métis peoples of Canada
First Nations	Term commonly accepted and used instead of Indian as per Section 35.2 of 1985 Constitution Act (used interchangeably with Indigenous throughout dissertation)
Indian	Title applied to First Nations of Canada in the Constitution Act (I use this term in writing about my early life as this is what we were called)
Indigenous	People indigenous to Turtle Island

<b>Plains Cree</b>	<b>Relational Terminology</b>
âcimowin	story
câpân	great grandchild or great grandparent
iyiniw	First Nations person
iskwêw	woman
iskwêwsis	girl
miyô	Goodness, beautiful, valued
nêhiyaw	Cree person
nêhiyawak	Cree people
nitâcimowin	my story
nitâpwêwina	my truths
nikâwiwiy	my mother
nimosôm	my grandfather
nitisiyihkâson	my name is
niyâ	I, me, mine
nôhkum	my grandmother
nôhtâwiwiy	my father
ochi niyâ	I am from
ohkomimâw	grandmother
ohkomimâwak	grandmothers
okâwimâw	mother
omosômimâwak	grandfathers
oyôsisimimâw	grandchild
tâniskocâpân	great, great grandchild or grandparent
tâpân	short for great, great grandchild or grandparent
tâpwê	truly, really, for sure
tâpwêwin	the truth
tâpwêmaking	it speaks the truth
wîcêwâkan	wife, spouse

## **Limitations and Delimitations**

In writing my autoethnography, I realized that the privacy of my world would become an open book of rich data as stated by Pavlenko (2007), a research professor for multilingualism. I also realized that as the primary data holder, there are limitations and delimitations that will apply to my research. One limitation is precisely that I am the sole researcher and participant, and that my research is primarily evidenced by nitâpwêwina (my truths) and my lived experiences. Another limitation is that the context of my lived experiences in school and as a young dropout is dated back to the 1950s and 60s which may or may not reflect the same lived experiences of Indigenous school dropouts today or in the secondary sources I am using in my research. Another limitation is the terminology used to identify peoples Indigenous to this land. I use the terms Indigenous, and First Nations interchangeably throughout my research to identify status nations and peoples indigenous to this land. I prefer not to use the constitutional term Aboriginal because it is a limitation used to define three distinct groups of peoples rather than honouring their distinct individuality and nationhood assigned to them by the federal government (Government of Canada, 2021). I also use the term Indian, identified in the 1985 Constitution Act, when citing work of authors, or when I wrote about my younger self and other Indigenous peoples as this was the common term commonly used to describe us.

Throughout my research, I used my lived experiences and knowledge as either an introduction or a reflective commentary to add personal credibility to the information being presented. This could be perceived as a limitation in my research. The last limitation is that educational systems are governed by rigid policies and funding mechanisms making it difficult for my research to influence change. Instead, my hope relies on school autonomy and leadership who are in the trenches of education and who can make a positive and immediate difference for Indigenous student learning and graduation.

The delimitations of my research are bound within my personal experiences as a school dropout and later as a practicing educator and administrator. My lived experiences are centralized from the perspective of an iskwêwsis (girl) born and raised in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan and an iskwêw (woman) who would grow into education and achieve a successful career in both the provincial and federal education systems in Saskatchewan. Most importantly,

my perspectives are connected to my Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing, and they are tâpwêwin (the truth).

## **Conclusion**

Chapter One provided the contextual framework for my dissertation. The background and key concepts illustrated the disparities in Indigenous education in both provincial and federal education systems. nitâpwêwina (my truths) showed how education failed me as a young Indigenous student. It also showed how an Indigenous student can overcome preconceived prejudices and limitations to achieve greatness in the field of education. A preview of the literature review showed there is a problem of disparity in education for Indigenous students compared to non-Indigenous students. The disparities and inequities not only lie in the achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous graduation rates, but they also lie in funding Indigenous education. And sadly, it seems the greatest disparity lies in the lack of understanding and knowledge of Indigenous history, worldviews, languages, and traditional cultures and teachings. Another substantive point in Chapter One identified colonial leadership practices as a key repressor for Indigenous students' inclination for learning. Chapter One also indicated that much has been accomplished in Indigenous education since the inception of residential schools, but the problem of equitable education for Indigenous students when I went to school, still remains a problem in 21<sup>st</sup> century education.

In Manuscript Two, I referred to the research by Khalifa et al. (2018) who identified a host of concerns needing attention in Indigenous education including colonial leadership practices found in colonial schools including a single, authoritative top/down leader, prioritization of school-based perspectives, practices, and policies over community-based perspectives and practices, understanding knowledge and how it is conveyed but not experienced, demeaning and displacing Elders knowledge and oral traditions, and the use of schools and curriculum as a means to monitor and control Indigenous and marginalized peoples. These practices are more common than expected and are major contributors to the disparities in Indigenous education.

To impede these practices and eliminate the disparities in Indigenous education, the OECD (2017) recommended promising practices including staffing schools with an inspirational leader and capable and committed staff, building strong relationships between students, parents, the school and the community, ensuring insurmountable efforts are made to engage and support students to be successful. The literature review is mostly comprised of primary data, nitâcimowin (my story) and nitâpwêwina (my truths), and secondary data that affirmed, informed, reinforced or opposed my argument that schools, and school leadership are failing Indigenous students.

## **MANUSCRIPT TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Abstract**

The intent of using an autoethnographic approach was to share my journey in education from a school dropout to a career in educational administration and currently, toward a doctorate in educational administration. It is essential that nitâcimowin (my story) and nitâpwêwina (my truths) about my lived experiences and the struggles of my ancestral grandmothers and grandfathers are shared to understand who I am and where I come from. The words I speak in this literature review are primary evidence in my autoethnographic research. I used secondary sources to provide a global landscape of evidence on colonization, systemic barriers, educational structures and practices, and educational leadership that impacted not only my learning and opportunities in education, but those of many Indigenous students in 21<sup>st</sup> century education. I also used secondary data to affirm the need for decolonizing education.

### **Remember Who You Are and Where You Come From**

Who am I? I would not have been able to answer this question truthfully as a child or youth. But I would come face to face or, more importantly, soul to soul with my inherent being when I was a teacher in the provincial system. It was cultural day and to help us celebrate the day, a drum group and dancers were invited to perform at the assembly. The lead drummer struck the drum so powerfully it startled me, and when the other drummers joined in and began to sing, I was overcome with profound emotion and spiritual yearning. I would learn that the cry from within my being were the spirits of my ancestral grandmothers and grandfathers awakening my Indigenous spirit and letting me know that their blood flows through my veins carrying memories from generations past as concurred by researchers of intergenerational trauma and blood memory (Bombay et al., 2009; Hackett et al., 2016). My ancestral relations reminded me that I am inherently and spiritually Indigenous, and that they are always with me giving me strength, courage, resiliency, and wisdom as a Nêhiyaw iskwêw (woman) in pursuit of quality and equitable education for Indigenous students. Kovach (2009), a specialist on Indigenous methodologies, defined ‘self-location’ as a method used by Indigenous researchers to self-

identify their Indigeneity and experience which is a common cultural practice among First Nations. Today, like my Indigenous relations, I always stand and state proudly my cultural identity beginning with “niyâ nêhiyaw iskwêw Mistawasis Nêhiyawak ochi niyâ (I am a Cree woman from Mistawasis Nêhiyawak), followed by my ancestral homage, kinship relationships, and career positionality.

### **Colonization: Impact on Indigenous Education**

I do not claim to be a storyteller, but I do have a first-generation story to tell about historical education and its intergenerational impact on First Nations peoples. This section provides the backdrop of the intergenerational impact colonization had on Indigenous people, particularly, my mother, a residential school survivor. In their book on the history of Aboriginal education in Canada, White and Peters (2009) provided a detailed education timeline that involved a series of assimilation, segregation, and integration policies and practices by reigning governments through educational regimes meant to civilize the Indigenous peoples.

Industrial Schools in the mid-1840's were implemented to train Indigenous boys for trades such as carpentry, shoemaking, and blacksmithing, and to train girls in domestic skills such as sewing, kitchen duties, and knitting to eliminate their Indigenousness (White & Peters, 2009). Nimosôm (my grandfather) and nôhkum (my grandmother) were forced to give up their children to residential school systems that emotionally, physically, mentally, and spiritually abused and stripped Indigenous children of their identity, provided them minimal educational skills, and forced them into manual labour (Battiste, 2013; White & Peters, 2009).

Residential school survivors shared their stories of trauma at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) gatherings held between 2007 and 2015 (TRC, 2015). In their article on intergenerational trauma, Bombay et al., (2009) confirmed that traumatic memories were forever embedded in the psyche of trauma survivors and its effects would cause emotional and psychological wounding for their lifespan and across generations. The Right Honourable Hajdu, Minister of Indigenous Services Canada, affirmed that European settlement and governmental policy displaced Indigenous peoples from their lands, traditions, and culture for generations, and robbed Indigenous right to thrive in home communities with family and their

right to access educational services comparable to non-Indigenous children and youth (Indigenous Services Canada, 2023).

The impact of colonization and residential schools did its damage on both Indigenous men and women. From a social work perspective and a report by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP), Dr. Menzies (2020) and the RCAP (1996) reported that residential school survivors experienced grave psychological, spiritual, physical, and sexual abuse while under the regime of government policies to kill the Indian from the child through the regime of residential schools. In their studies on First Nations children, families, and communities, and the shameful history of Canada, Gamez et al., (2020), Koptie (2010), and Voce et al., (2021) asserted that tearing residential school survivors away from their homes for ten months of the year, year after year, was a cultural genocide that deprived Indigenous children of traditional teachings on roles of men and women, familial relationships, child-rearing, historical and cultural knowledge, and language and identity. The repercussions of cultural genocide were many including findings that children of Indian Residential School (IRS) adults living off-reserve relative to non-IRS adults, experienced cumulative childhood abuse including parental substance abuse and domestic violence (Bombay et al., (2011). My mother's existence at residential school chipped away at the core of her spiritual understanding of relationality and as a result she put up with the spousal abuse from both my dad and stepdad because healthy relationality was not taught or exemplified in residential schools. Bombay et al., (2011) further stated there is considerable evidence to indicate that traumatic experiences can be transmitted across generations affecting the victims' children, grandchildren, great grandchildren, and so forth. While Dr. Maté (2003), world renown author and expert on trauma, stated in a presentation on parenting style that whatever affected one generation, but has not been fully resolved, will be passed on to the next generation. Maté supported this statement with the work of Dr. Siegel who argued intergenerational transmission can be predicted before a child is born. The cultural genocide of Indigenous peoples runs deep still affecting lives generations later.

### **Inequities and Disparities in Indigenous Education**

Indigenous education has made significant advancements since the residential school era or from when I went to school. We now have Indigenous teacher education programs such as



the Indian Teacher Education Program (ITEP), Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program (SUNTEP), Northern Teacher Education Program (NORTEP), and First Nations University of Canada (FNUC), (University of Saskatchewan, Nd). The Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation mandate of Inclusion, Diversity and Human Rights, and Policy 1.12 on Indigenous Education offers an in-depth collection of teaching resources on all facets of Indigenous education from colonization through to the present that can support teachers in and outside the classrooms (Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation, 2023). The Government of Saskatchewan has partnered with First Nations and Métis peoples and organizations to improve education outcomes for First Nations and Métis students and better outcomes for all students (Government of Saskatchewan, Nd). Dr. Carr-Stewart, a professor at the University of Alberta, asserted that the 2007 Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples adopted by the United Nations had a framework to ensure Indigenous students worldwide would have access to all levels of education comparable to that of other citizens (Carr-Stewart, 2009). Though these agencies have made significant ground on recognizing the need to improve learning outcomes for Indigenous students, the data still shows there remains inequity and disparity issues in education for Indigenous students.

My lived experiences as a student were witness to the colonial subjugation of white perspectives on Indigenous students where racism, discrimination, indifference, marginalization, and achievement limitations remained the status quo. Education was still controlling the minds of Indigenous students by placing limitations on their ability to learn forcing them to end school life before graduation and forcing them into limited vocations in labour or domestic skills. The marginalization, racism, discrimination, and limitations on my capacity to learn forced me to drop out of school at age fifteen. Sadly, these may be the same colonial reasons that force Indigenous students today to drop out of school and not graduate.

Graduation rates for Indigenous students have historically been dismally lower than other students in Saskatchewan. Since the 1940s, graduation statistics have also been a grave concern in provincial systems (Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan, 1964). An education report given at the sixth session of the fourteenth legislature in 1964, stated that poor graduation rates was everyone's problem. Klein (an elected member of the legislature) blamed the problem on the delivery of education stating children naturally come to school full of curiosity and a thirst

for knowledge, yet by the time they get to high school, they are bored with school life because educators have repressed their inclination for learning (p. 437). He went on to state that in 1944, forty-four thousand students were enrolled in grade one, and twelve years later in 1956, approximately four thousand graduated from grade twelve which meant that 90% of the students fell by the wayside (Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan, 1964). Seven years after this data was presented, I became one of those statistics for the same reasons but, in addition to the practice of teachers forcing students repressed inclination for learning, there were also systemic barriers of marginalization I faced that forced me out because I was Indigenous. Klein questioned the education system in the 1940s and 50s. I question why sixty years after I chose to leave school and why our current education systems still report data gaps in achievement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners.

The Regina Leader-Post reported that as of the 2020-2021 school year, there were thirty-four thousand Indigenous students enrolled in provincial schools representing 19% of the total students in Saskatchewan schools (Salloum, 2023). Both provincial and federal statistics affirmed there were disproportionately lower graduation rates for Indigenous students compared to non-Indigenous students. In the 2023 Provincial Auditor Report of Saskatchewan, the auditor reported that graduation rates for Indigenous students remained relatively unchanged between 2018-2021 at 44% compared to non-Indigenous students at 88.7% which contributed to higher rates of Indigenous unemployment at 18.6% compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts at 5.6% (Provincial Auditor of Saskatchewan, 2023). The figures used in the 2023 Provincial Auditor Report are an inclusive representation of First Nations and Métis data under the term Indigenous. Statistics Canada reported that under two-thirds (63%) of all First Nations youth had completed high school, compared with 91% of the non-Indigenous population (reported by Layton, Statistics Canada, 2023). The article further stated that differences in educational attainment between First Nations and non-Indigenous youth were the largest in the Prairie provinces. The disparity gap for Saskatchewan was 44.7 % while across Canada, it was 28%. The average disparity rate of the two sources is 36.4% which is still a significant graduation gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners and demands further investigation.

The literature also identified other indicators that have led to inequities and disparities in Indigenous education. In Mendelson's (2008) article for the Caledon Institute of Social Policy,

he blamed the phenomenon of low graduation rates for Indigenous students to years of colonization and oppression by the federal government through control policies such as the Indian Act and the legislation of residential schools. Louie and Prince (2023) found in their article on achieving equity in graduation rates and indicators of success that First Nations students do not feel they have a safe space or place in schools because of expressed or hidden oppressive behaviours of racism, discrimination, and cultural indifference.

In their research on decolonizing school leadership, Khalifa et al., (2018) listed colonial practices of top/down, single authoritative leadership and a narrow understanding of First Nations cultural knowledge and identity. In the article by Koptie (2010), he suggested that the status quo is too focused on the order of ‘fixing or doing for’ Indigenous peoples rather than working alongside Indigenous peoples to resolve educational issues. As I reflect on my experience as an educator and administrator, I would add that there is a lack of Indigenous parental engagement as a result of distrust in school systems, a lack of Indigenous input in school decisions, a lack of Indigenous representation at executive levels in education, and a definite lack of knowledge on the history of colonization and its ongoing impact on Indigenous education.

### **Decolonizing Education**

Research by scholars on decolonizing education showed that education has failed Indigenous students. Battiste (2018) described traditional Mi'kmaw education systems, both formal and informal learning, as communal participation, observation, pragmatic and experiential learning which was highly dependent on oral language and active engagement in the everyday lives of the peoples. This traditional education system, common to First Nations, taught and modeled the skills, knowledges, customs and traditional teachings that affirmed and strengthened First Nations identity, inherent place, spirituality, survival, and governance structures. In the research of Aquash (2013) on decolonizing geo-political and policy relationships between First Nations and Canada; Battiste (2013) on decolonizing education; and Koptie (2010) on inferiorization and intentional colonial poverty; each asserted that with the arrival of Europeans and their imposition of colonial governance and Eurocentric educational structures, the pragmatic education system of Indigenous peoples was deeply marred and replaced by European ideologies to assimilate Indigenous peoples. Since the inception of formal

education for First Nations, education has failed Indigenous students which is still evidenced in the disparity data between Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners.

Why do First Nations students drop out of school at alarmingly higher rates and graduate at alarmingly lower rates than non-First Nations? To have to ask this question is a problem in itself especially when Saskatchewan education is mandated to advance equitable access to quality education for all Saskatchewan learners through pre-kindergarten to grade 12 (Government of Saskatchewan, 1995). If this was so, then one must ask, so why are there inequities and disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners? Wilkins (2017) argued that learning environments needed to be responsible for meeting the academic needs of all students however, she further added that there is a problematic imbalance in program delivery for First Nations students. Wilkins' research also confirmed that it was imperative for school systems to, 1) address disparity issues to ensure academic success for First Nations students, 2) ensure First Nations graduation rates are in parity with non-First Nations students, and 3) to ensure that dropout rates for Indigenous students are dramatically reduced.

Louie and Gereluk (2021) argued that policy makers and educational leaders should refrain from considering data regarding Indigenous student success in isolation, and instead consider the shifts in disparity compared to non-Indigenous learners. They further argued that when analysis is shifted from the school system to the overall well-being of a population, it reveals serious concerns regarding the indicators of success within school systems. Their arguments clearly emphasized that education systems must view disparities in educational success not as a deficiency of Indigenous learners but instead, as a deficiency in the education system. Louie and Gereluk (2021) firmly stated there is a need to transform a system that harms Indigenous people, and that the graduation data suggested inequalities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students is widening, not lessening. Louie and Gereluk referenced the research of Pratt et al., (2018) who argued that scholars contended current Canadian education systems maintain a colonial agenda that, like residential schools, forced indoctrination into Western systems and knowledge, oppressed Indigenous students through racism, and created little to no space for Indigenous content, pedagogy, or Indigenous educators and administrators.

In the research of Harper and Thompson (2017), they found four large-scale oppressions to Indigenous student success as being, 1) poverty, 2) suppression of identities, 3) racism, and 4) gender violence. They added that these structural oppressions are a result of deliberate processes that normalize and legitimize institutional, political, cultural, historical, and interpersonal dynamics to keep the dominant group at the top of the status ladder. They articulated that it would take the next seven generations for Indigenous teaching and learning to be re-conceptualized and re-imagined. Though these oppressions appear broader than the scope of education responsibility, they exist because of the lack of knowledge about these oppressions not only by educators and the dominant society, but as well, the ignorance of parents, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, who were not taught the truths about their own history thus were unable to transmit historical truths of colonization and its detrimental impact on the lives of the Indigenous peoples of this land.

The literature on decolonizing education by Mendelson (2008), Louie and Prince (2023), Khalifa et al. (2018), and Koptie (2010) has clearly shown the impact of colonization on Indigenous peoples and its effect on Indigenous education both past and present. Indigenous social issues in Canadian society are a direct result of colonial education structures whether consciously or unconsciously exercised including poverty, racism, suppression of Indigenous identity, and the marginalization of Indigenous peoples. Time passes us by so quickly. My newborn tâniskotâpân (great, great grandchild) is the fifth generation of my mom's living lineage. And here I am, still writing about the same problems that have oppressed us since forced assimilation through education was introduced over one hundred-fifty years ago.

In Mullen's (2020) decolonizing education research, she affirmed that more researchers, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, are protesting racial education policies and practices which has incited an increased shift in decolonizing colonial pedagogies to ones rooted in Indigeneity, but too few share their interventions and outcomes. In a You Tube documentary titled Colonization Road (2017), a theorist stated that colonization is not an event, it is a structure (St. John. 2016). In other words, colonization did not just happen in the past, its residual effects, and mentalities continue today in society, in organizations, and in education systems. The colonial treatment towards First Nations peoples has not only marginalized them from mainstream society, but has

also weakened their Indigenous realm of place, space, and voice in mainstream society (Khalifa et al., 2018). Indigenous peoples are recognized as an ‘invisibilized’ community that is oppressed by dominate narratives and theories; and to rid these injustices, Mullen (2020) argued that visibilizing colonialism by unmasking, exposing, and confronting the behaviours in all life systems, reveals overt and covert perpetrators who promote colonization. This action, in turn, may bring about greater decolonizing efforts across systems, especially in education. Though Canada is recognized as culturally tolerant, its ongoing societal subjugation and impoverished discriminatory, and racist education systems toward Indigenous peoples is proof education needs system-wide decolonization (Fullen, 2020).

Mendelson (2006) asserted, “Where once it may have been possible to get and keep a reasonable job with less than a high school education, failing to get through high school makes a lifetime of poverty increasingly probable” (p. 24). Sir Ken Robinson (2010), a renowned author, speaker, and advisor on education in the arts to government, avowed that education systems are rooted in linear learning which has a starting point and a predetermined track one must follow to the finish line, and “if you accomplish everything along the way, you are set for life (TED, 2010).” He described education systems as spaces where every system on earth has the same hierarchy of subjects beginning with mathematics, languages, then humanities. Khalifa et al (2018) stated that Western epistemologies became normalized, and all other ways became ‘othered’, thus Indigenous students have been forced to shelve their Indigenousness to fit into a westernized box for a linear education. If systems are failing to meet the learning needs of a demographically large group of Indigenous students in the province, then why do provincial schools continue to operate the same old way yet expect greater achievement results from their Indigenous students? Decolonizing education is a priority and must be on the agenda of every education system in Saskatchewan.

### **Leadership Impact on Decolonizing Education**

For centuries, Indigenous students were forced into assimilation where their core being, Indigenous identity, and Indigenous knowledge were suppressed and rejected by education systems (Battiste, 2013). The 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) called for a renewed relationship between Aboriginal nations and Canada, one that provides Aboriginal

children who attend provincial schools a space free of ignorance, hatred, racism, and marginalization; and one that has mechanisms of accountability to Aboriginal people, especially parents, to ensure all aspects of their children's education is in parity with non-Aboriginal learners (RCAP, 1996). Five years ago, the Inspiring Success Education Policy Framework (Saskatchewan Government, 2018) stated that to affect positive change, the responsibility exists for all teachers and administrators to transform teaching practices, "individually and collectively, through continuous learning and professional development" (p. 9). Ermine (2007) argued it was essential that educators create ethical spaces of engagement and partnership where Indigenous knowledges and peoples are honoured and are active contributors to decolonizing the historical damage done by colonial education systems (pp. 202-203). Kovach (2009) cited the research of Brandt-Castellano (2004) who suggested that Indigenous ethics can never be limited to a defined set of rules, instead, they are about knowing who you are, the values you hold, and your understanding of how you fit into the spiritual world. Kovach (2009) added that trusting relationships are essentially interconnected when ethics and values are grounded in miyô (goodness) ethics.

When the international Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2017) argued that the key figure in decolonizing education was the role of the school leadership, their argument was based on findings in schools where Indigenous students were doing well. They found there was generally a highly effective and committed principal who has done whatever it took to ensure Indigenous students are at school, engaged in learning, and making sound progress, and who also set high expectations for teachers and took responsibility for monitoring student progress. Louie and Prince (2023), Dakelh scholars, identified three indicators of Indigenous student success as 1) seeing themselves in their learning, 2) feeling safe and welcomed in school, and 3) improving graduation rates. It seems the aforementioned research has provided substantial arguments for creating ethical spaces and ethical behaviours to significantly change the learning outcomes for Indigenous students. As educators, we need to actualize these research arguments by being more ethically responsible in creating ethical spaces for Indigenous learners to thrive in education.

Khalifa et al. (2018) found that the purpose and practice of current school leadership in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous spaces closely align with education practices of

colonization and referenced the research of Adjei (2010) to argue how colonization not only attempts to make one inferior, but also attempts to pathologize Indigenous knowledge. The research of Khalifa et al. (2018) described Eurocentric leadership as institutional, bureaucratic, and top-down leadership, whereas Indigenous leadership was a shared leadership model where leading is less about self and more about inclusive community-based leadership which Anuik's (2013) book review closely defined as servant and selfless leadership. Anuik, an assistant professor in the Theoretical, Cultural, and International Studies in Education, referenced Paquette and Fallen's (2010) research on leadership and ethics, argued that effective, efficient, and appropriate Aboriginal education requires moral leadership, not colonial-based leadership. Khalifa, et al. (2018) argued that a first step to transforming leadership is to acknowledge that they inherited some form of colonizing schools. They maintained, "When a leader resists colonizing education, any school leader, regardless of ethnicity, race, religion, sexual orientation, language, ability, citizenships, or gender can lead in ways that are decolonizing and promote students' indigeneity" (pp. 33, 34).

Louie and Gereluk (2023) acknowledged leadership in the Dakelh district who increased Indigenous graduation rates to the comparable rates of non-Indigenous students by focusing on equity, professional development, a shift in curriculum, and enhanced relationships between the provincial government and the First Nations communities. As a result, Louie and Gereluk suggested two key principles toward improving successful outcomes for Indigenous students, 1) curriculum and pedagogy ought to reflect and represent Indigenous ways of knowing and being, and 2) the systemic barriers of racism and colonization impeding the success of Indigenous student participation and success in education must be addressed.

Khalifa et al., (2018) referenced the work of Hallinger and Leithwood (1998) on educational leadership who suggested that Western frameworks have ignored alternative epistemologies in the study and practice of educational leadership which is another tactic to marginalize First Nations ways of knowing, being, and doing. Koptie (2009) concluded his research with, "Instead of maintaining inferiorized communities across Canada, the journey to collaboration, sustainability, self-determination, and the making of a Canada that does **with** Indigenous peoples rather than **for or to** must be our first order of business as Indigenous scholars" (p. 105), and I would add as educational leaders.



The research of Leithwood et al., (2019) on successful school leadership concluded that leadership has significant effects on the quality of school organization and on student learning. Their research identified seven strong claims of successful leadership, three of which I chose, that speak directly to leadership influence, 1) leadership is second only to classroom teaching on influencing student learning, 2) leadership improves teaching and learning indirectly and most powerfully through their influence on staff motivation, commitment, and working conditions, and 3) leadership has greater influence on schools and students when it is widely distributed.

Learning about leadership and leadership styles helped me to understand the former leaders I worked under and the leadership styles I would choose or not choose to emulate in my educational leadership journey. I was particularly drawn to the concept of servant leader introduced by Robert Greenleaf in 1970 and cited by Ingram (2016) in his scholarly article on servant leadership as a leadership model, who described a great leader as someone who is seen as servant first, one who made a conscious choice to serve others, to do so above their own interests, and to do so as a primary motivation before trying to be a leader. My leadership positionality has always been to serve students and their parents, for without them, there would be no need for schools. As an Indigenous educational leader, I realized the influential power that comes with the position and what can be achieved when you lead from a relationality and shared leadership perspective. In Pastor Mark Hughes' message on CTY-T, Channel 331, October 29<sup>th</sup>, 2023, he shared this anonymous quote, "If serving is below you, then leadership is beyond you." Though this quote is likely a paraphrase of Robert Greenleaf's work on servant leadership (as referenced by Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002), it certainly speaks to the style of leadership I perceive is needed in Indigenous education.

In the research of Gilley et al., (2008) on characteristics of effective leadership and implementing change, they cited research that indicated leadership in an organization is key to enabling and driving change efforts. They added a primary reason for an organization's inability to change and innovate is the result of the leader's lack of skill or will which impede successful implementation. Daly and Chrispeels (2008) identified two types of leadership in their research on predictive conditions for leadership – technical leadership, and adaptive leadership. They described technical leadership as leaders who focus on first-order changes for problem solving within existing structures and paradigms, otherwise, maintaining the status quo. Whereas

adaptive leaders focus on deep or second-order changes that create conditions for individuals to challenge existing values and norms and desire to create new norms built on trust, the overall construct for motivating employee engagement. They further argued that adaptive leadership involves learning and is most effective for change and innovation when leaders are willing to build relationships, take risks, be vulnerable, and establish trust in the workplace. When the construct of trust is firmly in place, it exemplifies the qualities of benevolence, reliability, competence, integrity, openness, respect, and risk.

Decolonizing education is a lifelong commitment and responsibility to transformation efforts that require whole school participation. Kotter (1995), an internationally renowned writer on organizational change and leadership, identified eight steps necessary for transformational change – 1) establish a sense of urgency, 2) form a powerful coalition, 3) create a vision, 4) communicate the vision, 5) empower others to act, 6) plan and create short-term wins, 7) consolidate improvements and produce more change, and 8) institutionalize new approaches. Decolonizing education requires educational leaders who first acknowledge and understand there are disparities in Indigenous education, who are brave enough to challenge the status quo by openly addressing the inequities and disparities, who carry significant influence to make effective change built on trust, relationships, risk-taking, vulnerability, benevolence competence, integrity, openness, and respect (Daly & Chrispeels, 2008), and most importantly, who have the heart and passion to promote equitable education for all learners.

This literature review has identified many barriers preventing Indigenous students from graduating at more comparable rates to non-Indigenous students. It is important to acknowledge that there are studies undertaken to move toward improving education outcomes for Indigenous students and eliminating the gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners in education.

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2017), an international organization that works to build better policies for better lives, focused their research on addressing the global problem of inadequate education supports for Indigenous students, and the development of promising practices that will reverse negative education outcomes for Indigenous students. They found pockets of promising practices used in schools which formed the basis of a common formula for Indigenous student success. Their formula

included, 1) an inspirational leader, 2) capable and committed staff, 3) strong relationships with students, parents, and local communities, 4) surmountable efforts to engage and support students to be successful, and 5) sustained commitment to achieve improvements. In addition, they found four promising practices for Indigenous student success, 1) student well-being, 2) participation, 3) engagement, and 4) achievement, all of which also benefit non-Indigenous students. Their research affirmed my argument that education does not need new innovative promising practices to serve Indigenous students, it needs promising practices that are equitably administered to engage all students socially, spiritually, emotionally, and physically toward parity in academic achievement, graduation, and promising futures.

More local studies under The Saskatchewan Plan for Growth: Vision 2020 and Beyond included the Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP) which was committed to reducing the disparity gap in graduation rates between First Nations and non-First Nations students by 50 percent by 2020, and to lead the country in Grade 12 graduation rates by 2020. The Inspiring Success: First Nations and Métis PreK-12 Education Policy Framework (Government of Saskatchewan, 2018) builds upon the 2009 Inspiring Success framework to guide the development of First Nations and Métis education plans throughout the provincial school systems to improve outcomes for First Nations and Métis learners. Both initiatives provided a comprehensive approach to improve student engagement and achievement through policy, programs, curriculum renewal, partnership development, shared decision-making and accountability measures to support the weaving of Indigenous content and perspectives into curricula for all learners; teaching Indigenous cultures, languages, and histories in the classroom; building positive relationships, reconciliation; and mandatory treaty education (Government of Saskatchewan, 2018).

Considerable work has been done in these areas in pockets of schools in Saskatchewan particularly those with higher Indigenous enrolments. Yet, the 2023 Provincial Auditor Report of Saskatchewan reporting on graduation rates for Indigenous students, remained unchanged between 2018-2021 at 44% compared to non-Indigenous students at 88.7% (Provincial Auditor of Saskatchewan, 2023). The intentions of these initiatives were great; however, the outcomes were not as expected leaving one to question where the breakdown was in the delivery of the

initiatives and what accountability measures were actualized to ensure the initiatives would be achieved.

## **Conclusion**

The literature review focused on Indigenous education and the inequities in education and the disparities that exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in educational outcomes. Secondary data was accessed to evidence the history of colonization and its intergenerational impact on Indigenous education. The primary data was used to evidence the grave issues of inequities and disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in Saskatchewan. The literature data signified the importance of leadership and leadership influence in critically addressing colonial manifestations in their school structures through a whole school process that is committed and accountable to decolonizing education to improve educational outcomes for all students, especially for Indigenous students. There was much research that evidenced education failing Indigenous students. The literature review captured this evidence under five predetermined themes:

- Remember Who You Are and Where You Come From
- Colonization: Impact on Indigenous Education
- Inequities and Disparities in Indigenous Education
- Decolonizing Education
- Leadership Impact on Decolonizing Education

Louie and Gereluk (2023) best summarized this chapter with their quote, “School systems are one of the basic foundations of society and play a leading role in providing the conditions for all students to have greater life prospects and to flourish in them” (p. 55). Manuscript Three will present the research design, methodology, and methods used to tell my story and my experiences as an Indigenous student dropout at fifteen who went on to have a career in education as a teacher, as a school-based administrator, director of education, and achieve a doctorate in educational administration.

## MANUSCRIPT THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

### Abstract

As this research is nitâcimowin (my story), the autoethnography approach allows me to narrate my lived experiences as an Indigenous person attending school as a child, dropping out at age fifteen, growing into adulthood, and returning to education which would eventually lead me into a full educational career from teacher associate to classroom teacher, to school-based administrator, and to a director of education. Dr. Chang (2008), an accomplished associate professor and ethnographic anthropologist, argued that autoethnography should be ethnographic in its methodological orientation, cultural in its interpretive orientation, and autobiographical in its content and orientation. Ellis et al., (2011) cited the research of Ellis and Bochner (2000) who found that many scholars turned to autoethnography to concentrate on ways of producing meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience that would sensitize readers to experiences otherwise concealed in silence. Kovach (2009) described stories as a platform where truths are held within the life context of the storyteller, and while other stories may be similar, truth cannot be abstracted from life. The intention of my autoethnography is to precisely share nitâpwêwina (my truths) of being an Indigenous dropout to evoke awareness and understanding of some of the historical and social pressures Indigenous students learn to live with in life and in schools.

As I journeyed through my life in this study, I reflected on the struggles and challenges in my life and career and how these experiences not only strengthened the core of my being but also provided me the space to culturally interpret my autobiographical position in life and in my role as an educational leader. This chapter framed the inequity and disparity problem(s) of practice connected to my story. It also provided an in-depth overview of the autoethnographic methodology I used in this study. The process of determining a research focus and related research questions, and the data collection and analysis were also detailed. A preview of pivotal stages in my life's personal, social, cultural, and professional development was included in this chapter and presented in Manuscript Four.

## **Framing Nitâcimowin (My Story)**

Descriptive chronological narratives depict people, places, experiences, and events as accurately as possible with minimal judgement and evaluation (Chang, 2008). In this section, I use descriptive narrative excerpts to chronologically frame my story to provide context to who I am and to the world as I knew it.

People are placed in your path for purpose whether it is to impart guidance, teachings, knowledge, support, loyalty, or kindness. I was gifted a beautiful double-ringed dreamcatcher by traditional Elder and Knowledge Keeper, deceased Albert Scott, in recognition of my existence within two-worldviews. It was an honour to be bestowed this gift because his gift acknowledged who I was and where I came from, and the space I occupied in both Western and Indigenous worldviews. As a result of the Indian Act, I was forced to live in a western world where I struggled with not being Indigenous enough to be accepted by my mom's First Nations homeland and being too Indigenous to be accepted by Western white society. The following excerpts are a glimpse into my realities as an Indigenous person.

### ***Excerpt One***

Growing up in a city where racism, discrimination, and prejudice was prevalent, did a lot of damage to my spirit, self-worth, and dignity as a child. I was the second oldest of thirteen children and the oldest girl growing up in mostly a single-parent home. I didn't understand what it was like to be poor because my mother was a provider and a protector. How she managed to raise us on welfare, I don't know, but she did. I don't remember mom always saying she loved us, but I do remember the loving things she did for us. Home was my safe place. As the eldest girl, I held a place of honour as 'sissy' to my younger siblings. A term my deceased sister still addressed me with until her passing.

### ***Excerpt Two***

Outside my home, I was a shy timid girl who was subjected to name callings that demoralized my Indigenous spirit so much so, I lived with it as my normal. School

would become much the same. I tried to recall the simple things about school like recesses, but I could only recall the morning assemblies where we (seniors students) got to sit on the grand stairs. I remember a show-and-tell day when a boy in my grade four class pretended he was Elvis and sang and played the guitar (my children called this air band in the 80s). I also remember getting the strap in grade one and failing grade four and being ridiculed about that. Mostly, I remember the school counselling I received when I passed into grade nine. I was told grade ten would be the best I could do followed by suggested work possibilities I could do with that education. Long story short, I refused to go to school that fall and finalized it when I turned fifteen a month later.

### ***Excerpt Three***

After a couple of years of teen life in limbo, I met my soulmate, a dashing sailor dressed in his white uniform. We were married in May when I was seventeen (turning eighteen in October that year). In April the next year, we had our first child, a girl, followed by two boys and another girl. Suddenly, I was twenty-three with a husband and a mother of four. Thank goodness I had some innate mentoring on motherhood and raising children from my beloved mother. However, we had struggles from time to time trying to raise a family on one income and seasonal work. Though I loved being a ‘housewife’ and mothering our children, I knew I needed to find some work to help out with household expenses, so I did what I thought I would never do again. I went back to school to get a Grade Equivalent Diploma (GED). The dynamics of the school environment was so different from what I remembered as a student. Of course, we were also all adults who wanted a better education, but the best was that we had wonderful instructors who were respectful, caring, and supportive.

### ***Excerpt Four***

Four years later, in 1980, that GED helped me get my first job in education as a community school teacher associate with the Saskatoon Public School Division. I was one of the first Indigenous teacher associates to be hired in Saskatchewan’s newly

incorporated community schools in Saskatoon. However, old fears of negative self-worth were at the forefront of my psyche. My homeroom teacher was a great mentor making me feel valued and that I was a good teacher associate. Being a mother helped me to support student learning and build relations with the students and many of their parents. Soon I became confident in my role. In the spring of 1981, Ms. Langley suggested I enroll as a mature student in the Indian Teacher Education Program. I did and was accepted for the fall. I would achieve a Bachelor of Education degree and years later a Master of Educational Administration degree all of which led to a twenty-two-year career as an educator and the second Indigenous administrator with Saskatoon Public Schools (SPS). It also led to a thirteen-year career as the director of education with Saskatoon Tribal Council (STC).

Each of these vignettes were not only a glimpse into the realities of my life as an Indigenous person, but they also show that no matter where you come from or what you have been told you could not accomplish in life, your path is destined with greater purpose in life that far outweighs others' perceptions of you or the preconceived limitations they placed on you. Within each of these excerpts are cultural, relational, and spiritual interconnections that instrumentally grounded me and paved my life's path and journey. Understanding who I was and where I came from became a life-changing lesson for me which is presented further in Manuscript Four. Today, I proudly say, "*niyâ nêhiyaw iskwêw, Mistawasis Nêhiyawak ochi niyâ* (I am a Cree woman from *Mistawasis Nêhiyawak*)."

### **Methodology and Methods**

Chang (2008) asserted that a self-study must begin with a plan on why, how, and what you want to explore in your own life. In my exploration of self, the why and what questions were grounded in why I thought my story was worthy enough to share with others. My theoretical assumption was that I am an anomaly who, as an Indigenous school dropout, broke away from the barriers that constrained me and became an educational leader in both provincial and federal school systems. Now, at seventy-five, I have successfully defended my dissertation, a story of my personal and professional growth, development, and achievement as an Indigenous iskwêw



(woman) and leader in education who through personal lived experiences became passionate about reconciling the disparities in Indigenous education.

However, when writing my dissertation, I needed to research how I was going to tell my story within the academic expectations of the doctorate program. In doing so, I finally landed on the autoethnographic approach that Cooper and Lilyea (2021), scholarly editorial board members for the *Qualitative Report*, described as a narrative self-study story that highlights pivotal experiences in one's life. Since my life story spanned across seven decades, it was essential for me to self-examine what it was about my life that I wanted as the primary focus. The primary data clearly revealed that accomplishing the role of educational leadership after dropping out of school at age fifteen was my story. There are pivotal experiences and milestones that lie within the aforementioned excerpts which will be elaborated on in Manuscript Four. Cooper and Lilyea (2021) also confirmed that one of the first things to do with any qualitative research is to develop the research question which reflects your study focus (p. 198). After much deliberation, I arrived at the following key questions to guide my self-study:

1. What underlying principle(s) is/are at the root of the alarmingly low graduation rates and alarmingly high dropout rates for Indigenous students?
2. How can telling my story evoke educational change to reduce student dropout and improve graduation rates for Indigenous students?
3. How can telling my story provide inspiration and hope to others with similar backgrounds, Indigenous or non-Indigenous?

### **Autoethnography**

My intention for being in the doctorate program was two-fold. The first reason was to tell my story of being a school dropout who went on to climb the education career ladder to a director of education position with Saskatoon Tribal Council. The second was to accomplish the epitome in educational attainment which was a doctorate degree. My dissertation would be my story of an educational journey that spanned over seven decades of my life. Story has always been a part of my life without me initially realizing its importance in manifesting the spirit of interconnections, relationships, history, identity, and purpose in life. Story is honoured in our

Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing, and it is also the vehicle for passing on knowledge to the generations that follow. When I write and how I live comes from a place of tâpwewin (truth) and heart. This study was a descriptive/self-affirmation or descriptive-realistic autoethnographic (Chang, 2008) sharing of my lived and cultural experiences that changed the course of my path from school dropout to educational leadership.

Growing up I would listen to the old people talk in Cree never understanding what was being said unless they used English from time to time (usually your name or someone else's). I would sense whether their stories were happy, sad, serious, or funny by the facial expressions or sounds of laughter or sadness they made. My mosôm would talk about the 'old days' but sadly, I usually didn't pay much attention. I remember on one of our home visits from Calgary when he asked me if Calgary still had the road Shaganappi Trail. I told him yes they did, it was one of the main freeways. He told me a story about driving his team of horses and wagon on that trail when he was young man. I could not fathom how that was possible, but it sure taught me how to pay attention to my surroundings as we drove that highway thereafter. I would see the lands and trees and waters as markings that were probably used by my ancestors to get from one place to another. My perspective of travelling no longer was all about the highway and mileage between destinations, instead travelling awakened the essence of my imagination as I now imagined and noted the land markers that probably guided my mosôm and câpân on roads or paths far away from their homelands.

I would learn that the autoethnographic approach described by Cohen et al., (2018), scholarly authors of the long-running bestseller *Research Methods in Education*, opened the door for me to subjectively draw on my personal experiences and meanings of the world I grew up in as an Indigenous person surrounded by racism, hatred, and prejudices yet, unbeknownst to me, I would learn, later in life, there was a dormant spirit within me hungry for an awakening that would lead me to greater things in life. Wilson (2008) described the research that we do as Indigenous people was a ceremony that allows us a raised level of consciousness and insight into our world. If not for my mother and our close-knit family where love and relationality were key to our survival among the tiny world we lived in, I probably would have fallen to the wayside and got lost in the system. Instead, here I am completing my dissertation which is nitâcimowin (my story). In sharing my story, I had much to think about and to decide on how I could tell my

story in a respectful yet truthful way. Like everything else I do, I began my research with prayer and smudging asking Creator to bless my body, mind, and spirit, to help me remember both good and not so good memories, and to guide my words and truths in a good way as I tell nitâcimowin. I must agree with Wilson in that my research is ceremony. It starts with prayer and comes from the core of my Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing and flows from the depths of my being led by Creator and the blood memory of my ancestors.

As qualitative researchers, it is our lived experiences that influence our choice of epistemological framework and theoretical lens, which thus influences the methods we choose to apply (Kovach, 2009). Through the use of the traditional narrative dialogue, my self-autobiographical memory was a construction of experiential and pivotal experiences (Lilyea & Cooper, 2021) that would lead me through life and to leadership positions in education. Chang (2008) pointed out that since self is a carrier of culture, intimately connected to others in society, then verbal and non-verbal behaviours of self should be interpreted in their cultural context. My autoethnography is a cultural journey that takes me from a place of denying my inherent birthright to a spiritual reclamation of my ancestral identity and rightful place in and among the diverse cultures in society, education, and in leadership. I shared my story using the first-person voice as it honours the experiential while engaging the abstract and theoretical (Kovach, 2009) and it allows me to speak from the heart rather than using the intellectual jargon most often used in research. A self-cultural affirmation and its emergent place in my life, throughout my life, and my social surroundings is interpreted on the premise of how the world around me fits into (or that I choose to have fit into) my Indigenous ways of knowing and being.

### **Epistemology and Ontology**

The Department of Philosophy at the University of Sheffield defined epistemology as the theory of knowledge based on the mind's relation to reality ((n.d.)). Since European contact, the Western worldview has been a dominant force in the assimilation and epistemicide of Indigenous peoples' cultural knowledge (Gadacz, 2006; White & Peters, 2013). Kovach (2009) defined ontology as the nature of being and reality. My reality as an Indigenous person was theoretically grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing and being. However, my cultural reality was also grounded in my living in poverty, being one of thirteen children, a single parent household, as a

denied status Indian, and as a victim of the subjugation of racism, hatred, and prejudice. Throughout this reality in my life, my upbringing still taught me the importance of sharing, helping others, reciprocity, respect, and family, community, and interrelationships. My epistemology and ontology has grown to hold high these values and has moved from a theoretical perspective to an applied perspective that also holds high my Indigenous ways of knowing and being.

Throughout my life's journey, my epistemology and ontology adapted, evolved, and developed to my surroundings and space in time. My research incorporated lived cultural experiences that not only exemplified my Indigenous ways of knowing and being but also my growth and development of self, career, and most importantly, the reclamation of my inherent identity. As well, throughout this study, I used Indigenous kinship terms to explicitly honour my ancestors and as a reclamation of the language that lives within my spiritual core and hopefully, in my natural communication, to identify my Indigenous place with the past, present, and future, to align my personal self with kinship groups, and to differentiate self from settler societies including both the privileged and marginalized (Kovach, 2009). The kinship terms used are listed in the definitions section of my research for the purpose of providing the readers with context, meaning, and understanding. Kovach (2009) argued that language is a central component of Indigenous relational epistemologies that differentiates us from other nations and is transmitted through kinship relationships. As a first generation residential school survivor, I was not taught my language. Before my mother passed on to Spirit World, I promised her I would learn my nêhiyaw language which is why I have chosen to use kinship terminologies throughout my autoethnography as my first lessons. My autoethnography is an Indigenous methodology that is not solely an intellectual construct, but rather, a holistic approach that manifests relationality and my connection to life around me (Kovach, 2009).

In sharing my story, my research honours a principle found in nêhiyaw epistemology 'giving back to community' (Kovach, 2009, p. 11) as a means to possibly assist others, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, in their pursuit of education, career, or in their professional roles in education.

## Data Collection

This study is an inquiry close to my heart. I am a school dropout therefore, I am the phenomenon (Ellis et al., 2011). Thus, my research centrally places me in the world and of the world of research (Cohen et al., 2018) as I unpack my journey to becoming an Indigenous iskwêw educator and leader in both provincial and federal education systems. I have chosen to use a narrative (story) approach to share my very personal experiences as an Indigenous student who dropped out of school, and who would later learn about the inequities and disparities phenomenon in education (Méndez, 2013) between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Therefore, as the sole participant and researcher, I am the primary contributor to my story and data collection. I used my internal knowledge and lived experiences as an introduction and as reflective experiential commentary (Kovach, 2009) throughout my study as it related to research content and external data sources.

Chang (2008) asserted that autoethnographers must dig deeper into their memories, excavate rich details, sort, label and interconnect them, and contextualize them into the sociocultural environment. All autoethnography research was telling me to gather experiential data from personal memories, field notes, journal writing, self-observations, interviews, and/or artifacts to provide contextual information in my autoethnography (Chang, 2008; Cooper & Lilyea, 2021; Ellis et al., 2010).

When I first began my writing, I relied on memory and the collections of personal primary data collected or stored on my personal laptop or archived as hard copies in mounds of education material and resources I accumulated over the years. Initially, I gathered previous writings I did for other EdD classes and other leadership presentations I made as sources of information to begin my writing. I then created information spreadsheets as a bank of references I would rely on for external data on qualitative research and the autoethnographic approach which expanded my researcher bibliography. This was helpful in tracking the vast amount of external scholarly and peer reviewed articles, media reports, governmental documentation/reports, statistics, and theses/dissertations on autoethnography, leadership and Indigenous education, sources I gathered for my dissertation and literature review. I was

acquiring a solid base of external data and needed to focus my attention more on the primary data collection.

I knew some of the suggested data collection strategies did not apply in my research such as interviews. I also thought the same about field notes until I realized that I did have field notes. Those were the years of archived personal and professional notes (dozens of notebooks) that logged my daily schedules, calendars, and notes. I used chronicling and inventory methods (Chang, 2008) to list important moments, people, artifacts, and pivotal experiences and epiphanies in my life (Chang, 2008; Cooper & Lilyea, 2021; Ellis et al., 2010), all of which further stimulated my memory and writing and kept me focused.

There was considerable provincial and federal documentation as well as, scholarly data documented by researchers, reporters, presenters, and advocates for equity in Indigenous education. My research drew on self as primary data. I used secondary data that is empirical qualitative documentary, however, I also drew on quantitative research and sources for statistical information. An autoethnography, using secondary data adds another layer of credibility and trustworthiness to primary data (Cooper & Lilyea, 2021). I used secondary data to demonstrate the global problem of systemic colonization and systemic barriers in Indigenous education. More importantly, I used secondary data to affirm educational structures and practices are deeply rooted in colonial mentalities which require decolonization to ensure equitable education for all learners, especially Indigenous learners.

The sources of secondary data I focused on were related to Indigenous education, Indigenous student dropout and graduation rates, impact of colonization on education, the impact of leadership in education, and equities and disparities in Indigenous education. The secondary sources reviewed were scholarly articles and books, peer reviewed articles, journals, theses/dissertations, social media (TED Talk & You Tube), provincial, federal, and international sources on Indigenous education, statistical resources, Truth and Reconciliation records of my mother's Residential School experiences, and historical stories shared with me by my family and relations. The secondary sources were authored by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers or governments.

Most of the resources are 21<sup>st</sup> century education materials, however, I have also included historical sources dating back to 1950s, 1960s, and mid-1990s to present a perspective of Indigenous education in those eras. Since the beginning of the EdD program two years ago, I wrote pieces of my story in coursework assignments which I also used as research data.

### **Data Analysis**

Cooper and Lilyea (2021) referenced the research of Butler-Kisber (2010) who stated that autoethnographers use a narrative dialogue, self-study/biographical and memory work to construct stories of their own experience. I used forms of these constructs in story throughout Manuscripts One, Two, and Three by using reflections to generate and collect data from my lived experiences and drawing on defining moments in my life to interpret personal connections to the context, the literature, the methodology, and the self-affirmation analysis (Chang, 2008) in my autoethnography. This style of writing honours my primary data and provides another layer of credibility to my research.

My analysis was a process of reviewing, selecting, and organizing the data based on important milestones in my life. I used Kovach's (2009) Indigenous methodology of bundling the primary data into themes that aligned with my purpose for writing my story. From this process I created data sheets one of which was a time-lapse from my childhood experiences to adulthood. I also created a timeline of my professional life in education and in educational leadership. Another bundle listed notable people/mentors, life-transforming experiences, interests, and memorable artifacts that were instrumental in my personal, social, and cultural development. My family and ancestral grandmothers and grandfathers ground my whole being culturally, spiritually, and traditionally. It is important for me to always acknowledge who I am and where I come from as is depicted in my family tree of four generations on both my maternal and paternal sides which will be included as an artifact. As I began to analyze the primary data, my thoughts were drawn to the metamorphosis of a butterfly. Like a butterfly and all living organisms, I saw my life morphing through four stages of life and development with each stage crystallizing memories so deep within my psyche that I knew they were the pivotal epiphanies that would shape my story. To arrive at what those pivotal moments or experiences would be, I dug deep into my memory bank (Chang, 2008) and the first things that popped into my head

were related to fears and insecurities. I remember as a child hiding under my bed violently trembling in fear of the fighting I could hear. It wasn't until my mom rid herself of her abusive life that my fears somewhat subsided, but it stuck with me throughout my life. Fear and insecurity lived in my mental, emotional, and physical state; in my not being smart enough; and in being an Indian subjected to the racism, hatred, and fear mongering treatment that came with it. In later years, my fears and insecurities were related to failure and lack of confidence that grew out from my childhood and being a school dropout. Though I would go on to higher learning, graduate education, and worthy educational accomplishments, I still have remnants of imposter syndrome where I doubt my ability and capability when among accomplished educators or in the professional world.

In the bundling process, four emergent themes and life lessons evolved. Within each of these themes are poignant moments, pivotal milestones and epiphanies that have been influential in my life, supported my growth and development, and led me to a career in education. Chapter Four is a reflection of those memorable experiences (both good and bad).

1. Marriage, Motherhood, and Family – unconditional love, purpose, responsibility, and future
2. Employment and Education – self-worth, caregiving, ability, knowledge, and confidence
3. Identity – spiritual, affirmation, blessed, ancestral, and life everlasting
4. Leadership – learning, excellence, equity, relational, shared, humbleness, integrity, respect, and honesty

Woven throughout each of these themes is my educational journey highlighting my life challenges and accomplishments and lessons learned along the way, each composing and scaffolding my development and growth as an Indigenous iskwêw (woman), as well as my growth and development in education, and in my personal Indigenous educational leadership playbook.

My research recounted parts of my very private life to hopefully evoke the minds of others on what it was like to be an Indigenous learner in schools that are grounded in colonial



ways of knowing and being. Ellis et al., (2011) defined autoethnography research as a means to describe and analyze personal experiences in order to understand cultural experiences. Battiste (2013) described Indigenous epistemology as holistic, acknowledging the interconnectedness of one's physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual relationship with all living things of the world and beyond. Sadly, epistemicide damaged Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing, but fortunately, the resiliency of our ancestors ensured the transcendence of traditional knowledge was protected by blood memory (Bombay et al., 2009) and Indigenous Knowledge Keepers. It is because of the teachings of Elders and Knowledge Keepers that I have embraced my cultural identity as a nêhiyaw iskwew (woman). Hopefully, my Indigenous perspective and experiences will provide a clearer view of what it was like to be an Indigenous student in the classroom. It is also my hope that my story will provide a deeper understanding and knowledge of Indigenous peoples, and that schools, administrators, and teachers will begin to constructively create equitable spaces of acceptance and opportunities for Indigenous students.

### **Rigour and Reliability/Trustworthiness**

I have reiterated throughout my research, that this undertaking would be about my story (nitâcimowin) and my truths (nitâpwêwina). Every day for me begins with prayer, and every task or event I take on begins with prayer. I believe in the power of prayer and know that I am where I am today only by the Grace of God and the Love of Jesus Christ. It is by Their Grace and Love and the power of the Holy Spirit that I am guided to always speak my truths and tell my story with rigour, reliability, and integrity. Kovach (2009) argued that attempting to validate Indigenous knowledges according to Western terms and assumptions creates an ethical problem, in that it does not keep within the Cree teachings of tâpwê (truth) which is bound within the integrity of the person sharing the knowledge.

My authenticity and tâpwêwina (truths) informs the depth of rigour, reliability, and integrity applied in this study. In keeping with my traditional understandings, I chose to use story to pass on my knowledge and lived experiences of being a school dropout to address the alarming statistics today for Indigenous student dropout and low graduation rates compared to non-Indigenous students. My story narrative was from a confessional-emotive writing approach that exposed my most vulnerable self (Chang, 2009) which initially caused me angst, but I knew

I had to dig deep within me to learn to trust myself and that it was okay to share nitâpwêwina (my truths) if I wanted to truly shed light on what it was like for me as an Indigenous student in the 1950s and 60s.

Considerable effort was made in the collection of primary data to ensure I captured the full essence of my lived experiences. Chang (2008) and Kovach (2009) stated we must look inward and dig deep into our memory banks and lived experiences to create primary data sheets of pivotal milestones. I created autoethnography data sheets depicting a timeline from my birth to date, an ancestral family tree, personal interests, momentous periods of my life, transformational periods of my life, and educational experiences as a student, as an educator, and as an educational leader. I then culturally and thematically bundled tâpwêwina (truths) sheets for presentation in Manuscript Four.

I also did comprehensive research on secondary data to help me understand what the depth of the dropout and low graduation problem was for Indigenous students locally, nationally, and globally. To assist me, I researched a variety of scholarly articles and books, theses/dissertations, diverse perspectives, statistical and legal sources, provincial, national, and international databases, historical/current contexts, and Indigenous/non-Indigenous sources to ascertain what they argued as reasons for this phenomenon and what recommendations were made as a response to this problem.

## Conclusion

The abstract in Chapter Three provided a brief positioning of how my life moved from a school dropout to a career in education and currently, to successfully defending my thesis. My reflections on my life's journey kept me humbly grounded and have reminded me that the road to success, whatever that means, is often a struggle for Indigenous people. Why is it such a struggle for Indigenous students to have equity and parity in life and especially in education? That question is the crux of my story. It is the intention of my research to use my story to reveal some of the struggles Indigenous students/peoples face as they seek place and justice in 21<sup>st</sup> century society and education.

I chose a qualitative inquiry using descriptive/self-affirmative autoethnography to share my lived experiences and truths as an Indigenous student and in later life, as an Indigenous educator. The data collection was my primary data, my story, along with secondary data from reputable and scholarly sources who studied high dropout and low graduation rates in Indigenous education. The rigour, reliability and trustworthiness research language initially provided me some angst because what I know (epistemology) and who I am (ontology) comes from a place of truth, and this segment of the research criteria, seemed to imply untrustworthiness to nitâpwêwina (my truths). As a result, I was compelled to stand up and speak out about my faith which guides my thoughts, my words, and my heart on a daily basis.

Denzin and Lincoln (2008) referenced Semali and Kincheloe's 1995 research which defined Indigenous knowledge as a rich social resource for any justice related attempt to bring about social change. The fact that Indigenous students' achievement, engagement and graduation rates continue to be alarmingly lower than non-Indigenous students is a social injustice problem that requires a critical Indigenous pedagogy to critically analyze the social problem from Indigenous perspectives. Hopefully, my story of growth and development as an Indigenous iskwêw (woman) who transitioned from school dropout status to educational leadership and who through personal lived experiences became passionate about reconciling the disparities in Indigenous education will demonstrate that quality and equitable educational services and opportunities is essential and must be a priority for Indigenous learners in education.

The road to social change will have its challenges but overcoming the challenges will reap great rewards. When education systems fully embrace and actualize the calls for Truth and Reconciliation, school systems will strengthen and heighten their responsibility to serve all students with the respect, dignity, and the generosity they rightfully deserve. As education becomes fairer and more impartial, and relationality becomes a priority and the norm, the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students will begin to close.

Chapter One revealed my early life and memories as an Indigenous person. It also paid homage to my ancestral lineage because nikâwiy (my mother), nôhtâwiy (my father), and the ohkomimâwak (grandmothers), and omosômimâwak (grandfathers) walked this path before me and continue to guide me in all that I do. This chapter narrated how the intergenerational traumas

of colonization, residential school and the Indian Act affected my identity and lifestyle, and the important role of educational leadership in reducing inequities and disparities in education.

In Chapter Two, I recalled defining moments in my young life as an Indigenous student that led me to choose or that forced my decision to drop out of school. This chapter also included reflections of spaces (times) in my life living, learning, and growing into the responsibilities of being a loving wife and mother, and the will to make a difference for my family.

Chapter Three narrated my return to education to upgrade my skills and qualifications for employment to help support our growing family. It is in this chapter that my educational journey into an accidental (or was it) career in education begins. I come full circle from the limitations placed on me at fifteen which forced me to become a statistic to achieving a GED, Bachelor of Education, Post-Graduate Diploma, and Master of Education.

Manuscript Four presented the data on my educational journey as an educational leader and a summation of how an insecure Indigenous girl grew into herself and reclaimed her inherent and spiritual Indigenous identity as an *iskwêwsis* (girl), *iskwêw* (woman), *wîcêwâkan* (wife), *okâwimâw* (mother), *ohkomimâw* (grandmother), *kôhkum* (grandmother), *câpân* (great grandmother), and *tâniskotâpân* (great, great grandmother). In this chapter, I presented the four bundles of poignant moments, and pivotal milestones that grounded my growth and development throughout my life and in/throughout my educational career, 1) Marriage, Motherhood, and Family – unconditional love, purpose, responsibility, and future; 2) Education and Career – self-worth, caregiving, ability, knowledge, and confidence; 3) Identity – spiritual, affirmation, blessed, ancestral, and life everlasting; and 4) Leadership – learning excellence, equity, relational, shared, humbleness, integrity, respect, and honesty

Throughout this chapter are reflections of problems of practice in Indigenous education that I experienced as a student in the 1950s and 60s, that I dealt with as a mother, and that I would see, hear, and feel throughout my career in education. Chapter Four also unpacked how education is failing Indigenous students and forcing large numbers of Indigenous students to walk away or drop out of school and not graduate. This chapter incorporated photos, timelines, and family tree artifacts to provide context to my story. Throughout, I reflected on the pivotal

milestones that impacted my life and have guided my journey in education as an Indigenous student who dropped out of school at fifteen and years later, how education became my buffalo and led me to a successful educational career in leadership.

## MANUSCRIPT FOUR: SHARING NITÂCIMOWIN (MY STORY)

### Abstract

*Tanisi, Valerie Harper, nitisiyihkâson, Mistawasis Nêhiyawak ochi niya* (hello, my name is Valerie Harper from Mistawasis Nêhiyawak). I was taught to always remember who you are and where you come from. My spiritual and ancestral relations would come to remind me that I am inherently and spiritually Indigenous, and that whatever difficulties I would encounter along my path in life, their strength, courage, guidance, wisdom, knowledge, and resiliency would always be with me through blood memory.

Though the concept of storytelling has always been in my life, it would not be until later in life that I would realize its value in manifesting the spirit of interconnections, relationships, history, identity, knowledge, and purpose. Telling stories is a resilient Indigenous methodology used since time immemorial (Kovach, 2009) to pass on knowledge and our traditional Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing, through generations to date and those yet to come.

The platform I used for my dissertation was a qualitative methodology, more specifically, a descriptive/self-affirmative autoethnography that aligned well with the Indigenous methodology of storytelling. Both the descriptive/self-affirmative methodology and Indigenous storytelling is anchored on the narration of lived experiences, knowledge, and pivotal milestones of the storyteller or researcher (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022; Kovach, 2009;). Though my lived experiences and historical past may align with those of my collective Indigenous relations, this dissertation is nitâcimowin (my story) and tâpwêmakân (it speaks the truth) from a place of my innermost thoughts, memories, feelings, and experiences.

The purpose of sharing my story of being a school dropout is to hopefully enlighten others, be they students, educators, principals, or directors, that being a dropout does not define you, and that you can achieve whatever dreams or goals you have your mind set on, no matter what others think your capacity is for learning or achieving. My story is a transformational

journey that took me from humble, uneducated beginnings to a significant career in education and educational leadership. In manuscripts one, two, and three of my dissertation, I provided snippets of my lived experiences as I introduced my rationale for choosing to write about being a school dropout and my accidental career in education. Manuscript Four is a presentation of the data I alluded to in manuscript three and the unconventional path that led me to writing this dissertation. Throughout my writings, are weaved a compilation of memories that were instrumental forces to finding my purpose.

### **Sîpi-Kiskisiw (She Remembers far Back)**

#### **Always Remember Who You Are and Where You Come From**

I was raised by my beloved mother, Elder Helen (Johnston) Isbister, whose warrior lineage, strength, resiliency, and blood memory flows through my veins. My câpân was Chief “Broken Jaw” Johnston who was a respected warrior, shot in the jaw by a Tsuu T’ina warrior when he was fifteen years old. He lived to serve as the Chief of Mistawasis First Nation from 1904 to 1915 and would also serve as an Elder in the Presbyterian Church.



My nôhkom and mosôm are Mary and Solomon Johnston. nôhkum was a kind, soft-spoken, hard-working, gentle soul who loved to tease and who always spoke Cree. My mosôm was a very tall man who always dressed well and loved to tell stories of years past. He raised chickens, pigs, and cattle and always took care of his family and extended families. He also served as an Elder in the Presbyterian Church.



My spiritual and ancestral relations would come to remind me that I am inherently and spiritually Indigenous, and that whatever difficulties I would encounter along my path in life, their strength, courage guidance wisdom, knowledge, and resiliency would always be with me through blood memory. I did not have this knowledge as a child or a young person growing up in a city where racism and hatred against Indigenous peoples was rampant and where Indigenous peoples were vehemently subjugated to extreme marginalization. It would take me years before I would fully understand the gift of my inherent identity as an iyiniw (First Nations person) and my inherent place on Mother Earth. Today, I always honour my place and space in my introductions of who I am and where I come from. This teaching has been passed on to my children and the generations of grandchildren whom I have been blessed to call family and who also need to always remember who they are and where they come from.

### **Forever My Heart and Soul**

#### **Mysteries of Life**

In every story there are significant moments that alter the path you walk throughout each stage of your circle of life. My story begins with the most life-changing moment in my life, the moment my heart awakened and my real purpose in life began. I am so thankful that our future is a mystery rooted in heart and with worthy people placed along your destined journey. The most significant person in my life was my soulmate Edgar, who introduced me to life outside of my tiny circle, who held my hand as we parented our precious babies, and who uplifted me in everything I strived to accomplish. nitâcimowin (my story) is my heart and soul and rightfully so, begins from the heart.

#### ***Love Everlasting***

I was sixteen, the summer of 1965, hanging out with friends sipping on Coca Cola and listening to jukebox music in the Club Café when this handsome sailor dressed in his white uniform entered with his friends. He cruised the café, then came purposely to our table and introduced himself to me. Our eyes locked. He was the most handsome guy I had ever met; it took my breathe away that he chose me to hit on. I was hooked. Ten months later we would marry when I was seventeen and he turned twenty-one.





Samuel Butler, a 19<sup>th</sup> century English author, quoted, “*Life was like playing a violin solo in public and learning the instrument as one goes on*” (BrainyQuote, 2001-2024). This was definitely my life as I transitioned from the freedoms of a teenager to the freedoms of a newly married couple to the responsibilities of parenthood and family. The summer we married, we lived like hippies. We hitchhiked across Western Canada for our honeymoon, first to Vancouver then to Winnipeg to join up with the Royal American Shows (RAS). We travelled the RAS circuit from Winnipeg to Brandon, Manitoba on to Calgary and Edmonton, Alberta, then hitchhiked home to Prince Albert. That summer was the first time I had ever left home. He introduced me to the world, and I was amazed at what I saw.

We would grow in love and age until one day we realized we were now the ‘old people’ in our families, sitting around reminiscing about time past and the rich life we shared together. Our children, grandchildren, families, relations, and our adventures together were always at the heart of our conversations. He was my rock, my advisor, my confidant, and my greatest advocate. He was also my sounding board and sometimes, he was my memory bank because his memory was more astute than mine. These precious memories are momentous. They exemplified how Spirit brought us together in love and through love, we would never have to walk alone through life’s joys, heartaches, or challenges. We spent the rest of our years growing up and growing old together. We were married fifty-six and a half years before he went ahead to Spirit World. I miss him dearly but, I know he is always with me.

Never did I think I would be sitting alone in his room (now my office) pounding away at the keyboard trying to meet graduation deadlines. I can still feel his hands on my shoulders, the kiss on my cheek, and hear him saying, “Are you working today?” That was his gentle way of telling me to stay on task and get the job done. Yes Edgar, as you can see, this old girl is diligently struggling or struggling to diligently write her story.

## **How Education Became My Buffalo**

### **Are You Kidding Me?**

It still amazes me that here I am in the sunset years of my life, and I am writing my dissertation for a doctorate in educational leadership. How did that happen? This certainly was not how I envisioned my future or spending my retirement years. When I was a young person, education became a disconnect for me after I dropped out of school. I never wanted anything to do with school ever again in my lifetime. However, I learned that one should never say never because the mystery of our life's path may have different plans for you. This was certainly true in my case because my path led me on an unconventional journey of educational attainment then on to educational positions in both provincial and federal education systems that were way beyond my imagination as a young girl or adult.

When I was accepted into the Educational Doctoral Degree program at the University of Saskatchewan, it was always my intention to share nitâcimowin (my story). My intentions were two-fold. The first reason was to tell my story of being a school dropout who went on to climb the educational career ladder from an educational assistant to school-based leadership and subsequently, to the top leadership role in education, a director of education with the Saskatoon Tribal Council (STC). The second reason was to achieve the epitome of educational accreditation, a doctorate in educational administration. Both amazing feats for a high school dropout. This is a story of how education became my buffalo and how I journeyed into a career in educational leadership, and to completing my dissertation for a doctorate degree.

### **Educational Leadership**

So here I am, a retired Indigenous educational leader, writing about my lived experiences and the path I took to reach a doctorate degree in educational administration. How I got here was an unconventional educational journey of lived experiences that were filed into my playbook of lessons to unpack as needed. My accreditation and career in education spanned over a course of forty-four years. nitâcimowin (my story) in education begins with my leadership accomplishments, well, actually, my story begins with my entry into this world which sets the landscape of unconventionality in my life.

*ninihtâwikiwin (My Birth). I came into this world feet first. My breech birth nearly took my mother's life but, through the Grace of God and the will He instilled within my mother to live, she survived and would live on to mother thirteen children. I was curious about breech born babies, so I researched websites to find the significance of being born feet first. On one website. I found that breech babies were more likely to be well-grounded, down to earth and practical, and since I was not born in a conventional way, that I would probably not lead a conventional life (Retrieved from Unrevealed Journal Website, 2023). I thought that these traits identified me quite well. However, I also came across a YouTube video, The Spiritual Significance of Being Born Breech (Chervinski, 2022) which spiritually resonated with me when it said that breech-born babies would be more focused on their spiritual side, work towards inner growth, and that I would experience increased productivity later in life.*

These forecasts would reign some truths in my life. It seemed that no matter what I did in life, I went into it full speed ahead, mostly landing on my feet, but always gaining knowledge, skills, and heart to become more. I was like a butterfly that morphed through stages of life learning lessons along the way that would inadvertently become the tools I relied on to shape every phase of my life's journey. Though I can relate to the aforementioned forecasts for breech births and see some similarities in my life story, I can definitely say that the path my life took was not a conventional one, but it was my conventional path to walk and my story to tell.

### ***Finding My Niche in Leadership***

I was fortunate to have had two places whereas an educational leader I felt a sense of homecoming. One was as the Director of Education at Saskatoon Tribal Council (STC) and the other was as Principal at Mayfair Community School. In both these work environments, I had the perfect space to embrace my role as an Indigenous educational leader serving those with similar backgrounds as me and championing my advocacy with colleagues who also wanted to improve education outcomes for Indigenous and disadvantaged students. Relationality and building community were foundational in the missions of both organizations.

In December 2020, I retired from educational service after thirteen years with the Saskatoon Tribal Council (STC). When I started the director position and toured the facility, I was overwhelmed with a sense of belonging. Relationality is a value that has always grounded my professionalism whether as a classroom teacher or as an educational leader. This was not necessarily the norm (or it was more contrived) in some of the provincial schools where I served but, at the Saskatoon Tribal Council, the power of relationality naturally emanated through humorous interactions, interconnectedness, familial connections, and renowned respect for Elders and Indigeneity. I did not have to keep my guard up. Instead, I felt like I found my niche. This space was where I belonged, and it was a great feeling to know that I was now working for my people and with my people. I esteemed the governance structure of chief and council, a governance body that I thought was more grassroots than a provincial school board governance, in that it was a governance body led by First Nations that made decisions in the best interest of First Nations peoples inclusively. It seemed the niche that I had longed to know, or experience was now at my doorstep.

**Spiritual Awakening.** *For much of my childhood, I grew up not knowing what my inherent identity was. I was mostly called dirty Indian or halfbreed which I hated, so I tried to hide my Indigeneity. I could deny being Indian, but it was impossible to hide it. As a young parent, I began the search for identity and spiritual knowledge. I would come soul to soul with my inherent being when I was a teacher in the provincial system. At the end of a Cultural Week of activities, the school celebrated by inviting traditional drummers, singers, and dancers to perform. When the lead drummer first struck the drum so powerfully, it startled me, and when the other drummers and singers joined in, I was so overcome with profound emotion and spiritual yearning. I would learn from Elders (with whom I shared this story) that the cry from within my being were the spirits of my ancestral grandmothers and grandfathers awakening my Indigenous spirit and letting me know that their blood flows through my veins carrying memories from generations past. Years later (in doctoral research), I would also learn that this transmission carries all forms of memories through what Scott Momaday first articulated as blood memory in his Pulitzer Prize novel *House Made of Dawn*,*

*and which medical researchers have concurred in their research on the transmission of intergenerational trauma through epigenetics and blood memory (Bombay et al.,; Hackett et al., 2016). My search for Indigenous knowledge and histories remain a passion as does my advocacy for space, equity, and excellence in Indigenous education, both on-reserve and off-reserve.*

### ***Keeping Up with the Joneses***

The primary purpose for my service in educational leadership, in both provincial and federal education systems, was to use my influence, knowledge, and skills to improve educational outcomes in achievement, graduation, and student and parental engagement. My passion has always been to enhance these outcomes for Indigenous and underprivileged children and youth, and to reduce the significant disparity gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners. What better place to achieve this, I thought, than within a First Nations organization that provided second level education services to their member First Nations communities. When I joined STC, I presumed this objective would be more doable because the students in STC schools were First Nations, the staffs were predominately of Indigenous backgrounds, and the learning environments were culturally enhanced, all of which I thought as ideal settings to facilitate learning, engagement, and achievement.

However, unlike my leadership at Mayfair Community School or in other provincial schools where I served as vice-principal, my oversight of personnel ranged from twenty-five to fifty staff; my staff at STC only comprised of four full-time equivalent (FTE) second level service employees including a superintendent, special education coordinator, Youth Sports Culture & Recreation (YSCR) Coordinator, a 0.5 Super Saturday Coordinator, and 0.5 Administrative Assistant to serve seven member First Nations schools and about one thousand students. As well, through a well-established education partnership and a shared services initiative, our staff increased to include two shared partnership consultants for literacy/numeracy and partnership resources. I would learn really quickly about the funding disparity that existed between federal and provincial schools. I found that what I took for granted in the provincial system, I would now need to write proposals to equate some of the resources and support services that provincial school students received.

A team comprised of principals, second level service personnel, and education advisory members completed a needs assessment and diligently began proposal writing. We reached out far and wide to access additional funding to provide additional supports and resources to member First Nation schools. Within five years, we attained substantial additional funding agreements from multiple sources including Indigenous Services Canada (ISC) and the Ministry of Education, as well as from numerous education, business, and industry partnerships, the Dakota Dunes Community Development Corporation (DDCDC), and the national Pathways to Education Canada program.

### *Services Second to None*

With the new funding, we increased school-based learning resources across K-12 curricular in literacy, numeracy, social/sciences, assessment, technology, and language and culture. We also provided an additional thirty-six school-based personnel (six per school) to support academic achievement, student/parent/community engagement, credit attainment and increased graduation outcomes, and the reclamation of language and identity. We provided a host of technology resources including Smartboards for every classroom, laptops for all professional staff, and laptops to support class-sized computer labs in each school as an extension for computer science and curricular-based learning programs. An STC Pathways to Education program was implemented in partnership with Saskatoon Public Schools and Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools to support urban Indigenous high school students in completing requirements for graduation. The STC Second Level Educational Services increased its educational personnel from 4 FTE to 25 FTE consisting of a team of educational experts to provide more specialized in-depth training/in-service for curricular supports, specialized education, program delivery, administration, and professional growth. In the last years of my service as director of education, my responsibility grew to also include second level services to the Early Learning Programs of Pre-Kindergarten and Early Childcare Centres in member First Nations communities and in urban Saskatoon which also increased second level services personnel.

The second level educational services at STC were second to none in Indigenous or provincial education and were often recipients of high acknowledgement by provincial school

boards and the provincial Ministry. Sadly, the students were still not graduating at the rate we projected. Most of the problem lied within high absenteeism and school closures, transportation issues, high turnover of teachers and principals, inability to retain teachers who were at the high end of the salary grid or who after receiving exceptional training and inservice to improve their repertoire of knowledge and skills chose positions elsewhere, and the political pressure in staffing teachers and school-based administration.

Saskatoon Tribal Council Education would be the first tribal council in Saskatchewan to initiate the concept of an educational governance and education authority entity. Considerable discussion, planning, work, commitment, phases of governance implementation, personnel, leadership, and funding were devoted to this undertaking. When I retired from STC, this important work was still ongoing, however, I have since learned that their educational governance initiative is on hold. I remain a firm believer in First Nations Control of First Nations Education. The voice of our First Nations peoples need to be at education tables when decisions are being made on how our children and youth should be educated, both on and off-reserve. Education policies, standards, and accountability measures must be at the heart of the discussions to ensure the education delivered to First Nations children and youth is proficient, advanced, and meets the spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical needs of Indigenous students. Our First Nations students have a right to quality education and equitable educational services.

### ***Education is Teamwork***

I am especially proud of the work accomplished by STC Second Level Services under my leadership. Upon my retirement, there were 45 FTE education personnel plus contractual services in governance and special education. We had a team of passionate educational experts who believed in the work they did to support student learning, and teacher professionalism and efficacy. However, like many other organizations and educational institutions, politics can become a hindrance to morale and services (Paquette & Fallon, 2010) especially when there is a lack of understanding of the educational profession, its ethical position, and its essential qualifications and experience required to maintain quality services. A major hindrance is when leadership in organizations is influenced by the colonial Eurocentric model which is institutionalized, bureaucratic, and top-down (Khalifa et al., 2018) which is not effective in team

building. I was impressed in both the provincial and federal organizations where I worked when leadership was more holistic or like the Indigenous leadership that Anuik (2013) described as shared leadership where leading is less about self and more about inclusivity, or more closely defined as servant and selfless leadership.

My passion for education flourished at Mayfair Community School where we established a professional learning community to stay abreast of current teaching strategies, assessment approaches, curricular innovations, and shared leadership and decision making. Community School Councils were implemented to support parental and community voice in school-wide decisions. Building community in schools, between school and home, and between school and the larger community was essential in helping to keep students engaged in learning and in school life. I built a career inclusive of community relationality, exceptional professionalism, respectful teaching and learning environments, team approaches, quality educational services, respect and honour for diversity, and full engagement of students. These were leadership traits I embraced, internalized, and practiced as an Indigenous educational leader. They were at the core of my beliefs and standards and could not be fractured or minimized no matter the political pressures of control one may encounter.

If anything, working in a First Nations organization and in community education in the provincial education system has affirmed my advocacy and need for others to advocate for equitable services for Indigenous education and for an essential reduction and/or elimination of the disparity gap in graduation between First Nation and non-First Nation students. The only way to accomplish this is to truly put students and families first in collaborative processes across service agencies, as an essential requirement at all levels of organizations (political or educational). Indigenous students, both on and off-reserve, deserve an equitable education with equitable services and resources, as well as learning spaces that believe in students and honour their Indigeneity and inherent place in history and education.

Throughout my career, I have been fortunate to have worked in organizations that have valued educational partnerships. To me, there is not an education system that can manage all educational needs from a learner's first breath to their last breath on Mother Earth. It is essential to embrace strategic partnerships to create a network of knowledgeable external stakeholders



(Jongbloed, et al., 2008) who can supply critical resources (Austin & Jones, 2016) to educational organizations to effectively function and enhance educational programming and curriculum specializations. This was evident in my community school experience as an educator and administrator in the provincial system and as a director of education in a federal Indigenous education system.

### **Shaping My Journey Toward Education**

To illustrate how my lived experiences shaped me into the person I am, I thought of the butterfly and its four stages of metamorphosis. It was important for me to share with you my lived experiences from childhood through to adulthood and how each stage impacted my growth and development into educational leadership. For that, I return to my humble beginnings and the lessons I learned from my beloved family, my lived experiences and the teachings I learned along the way whether intentionally or inadvertently, all of which were very much a part of my unconventional journey.

#### **Warrior nikâwiy (my mother)**

My mother epitomized survivor. She is the reason I am here. She survived being torn away from her loving parents by a government that forced First Nations children to attend residential schools far away from their homelands. This traumatic experience wounded my mother emotionally, spiritually, physically, and mentally, causing intergenerational trauma over her lifespan, and across generations. She would obediently follow the regiments of the residential school system from season to season, year after year, and would count down the days when she could go home to be with her beloved family and home community.

The residential school negated my mother's inherent Indigenous lifestyle and language, and her familial teachings, connections, and interrelationships but, it could not break her inherent warrior spirit. My mother's escape from residential school was to meet a 'chap' (term used in Birtle Residential School records), a much older man (my dad), and marry him. However, in



**Parents Gilbert and Helen Isbister**

reading the fall report from her residential school records in 1945, not only did it report that mom had met a chap, but it also stated that my mosôm had fallen off the barn and was killed in November. This made me laugh so hard because I am sure it was a white lie to solidify her reason for not returning to school. My mosôm actually lived until he passed away in 1980 when he was 92 years old. Marrying my dad, an enfranchised First Nation for joining the army, would cost her dearly as Section 12(1)(b) of the 1876 Indian Act now legally stripped her of her inherent Treaty rights (Hanson, 2009) and her homeland, Mistawasis First Nation where she was born and raised. She would learn to survive as a displaced First Nation woman in a city rife with racism, sexism, discrimination, and spousal abuse.

Both my dad and my step-dad were army veterans who had served in World War II. Both were also abusive alcoholics who battled their personal demons by abusing my mother and mistreating my brother and me. As the second oldest child, I witnessed the abuse my mother tolerated from my step-dad. The fear I felt when he would hit her traumatized me for years. I have little recollection of my dad except for seeing him from time to time in later years, but I would learn about the horrible abuse he also inflicted on my mother. After eighteen years of mistreatment, my warrior mother took back her life to begin her healing journey and the reclamation of her Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing.

Though my mother knew we witnessed the violence inflicted on her, she never talked about it until her children were grown or were adults. She protected us from reliving those horrible experiences, and in some odd way, she pitied her abusers who were also raised with violence in their lives. The sad part is that trauma runs deep within the psyche and parents can transmit trauma to their children for generations through blood memory, post-memory and collective memory (Bombay et al., 2009). The resiliency and strength that flowed through my mother's veins to survive residential school and two abusive relationships astounds me. Though

this violence was my normalcy growing up, my heart still aches as I remember the violence mom lived through, and the fear I felt as a child, still exists deep within my being.

As a newbie teacher, I remember the expectations we had of students. We expected them to be on time, to attend school every day, to concentrate on their learning, to complete their assignments, to be well-behaved, and to follow the rules. We do not know the baggage students carry with them to school, yet we expect so much from them. No thought was given to intergenerational trauma and its effect on the lives of students in the schools where I served. Sadly, we now know that trauma runs deep within the psyche which can be transmitted from parents to their children for generations through blood memory, post-memory, and collective memory (Bombay, et al., 2009) affecting children, ‘our students’, emotionally, spiritually, mentally, and physically. My lived experiences as an Indigenous person and mother gave me insight into some of the trauma they may have experienced in their own lives which touched my heart and taught me how to love and respect each child. I have learned that how we engage students, and how we care for students can make a difference in how they learn and achieve. Imagine the difference that could be made in improving graduation outcomes for Indigenous students if we learned to equitably teach and lead from the heart.

## Homefires

Growing up on the Fox Farm in Prince Albert in the 1950s and 60s, my Indigenous worldview was narrow and bordered within the constructs of poverty, racism, and prejudices. The Fox Farm would be known as a suburb of a city today, but back then, it was a place north of the city mostly comprised of Indigenous (First Nations and Métis) and non-Indigenous peoples



living in a community where poverty was a common factor. Anyone who was of Indigenous descent was called an ‘Indian’ or ‘halfbreed’ and usually with the adjective ‘dirty’ preceding it. I was the second oldest child surrounded by an older brother and two younger brothers before my first sister was born. I grew up a tomboy and a helper and a protector of my younger siblings. We were a big family of thirteen children being

raised in the city by a single-parent mother on social assistance. I did not realize what poverty was when I was growing up. We were fed, bathed, and clothed like all the other children around us. I loved going to the thrift shop or rummage sales with my mom to pick out our new clothes or going to the grocery store every month where mom had a charge account. When Christmas came, every one of her children received presents that mom paid for on lay-away plans that began each year in January, and our stockings were always filled with candy, nuts, and fruit. We would want for nothing because Mom was our fierce protector and provider. How she managed to raise us on social assistance, I do not know, but she did. I cannot remember Mom always telling us she loved us but, I do remember the loving things she did for us and the sacrifices she made. Home was my safe place.

As a young child, I wanted to be just like my mom. I would imagine myself being a mom who made extra money cleaning homes for 'rich' people. When I was eleven or twelve, I was suffering from severe pains in my abdomen and mom needed to get me to the doctor. We had to walk to the bus stop which only stopped at the store two long blocks away, with me doubled over in pain, then a bumpy ride into the city. I was checked over then placed in an ambulance and rushed to Victoria Hospital for emergency surgery for a ruptured appendix. I was in hospital for quite a few days healing from this painful near-death experience. While there, I watched the nurses in admiration of their crisp white uniforms and how they cared for patients. They were so kind and gentle when caring for me and I was hooked, I began to imagine myself being a nurse like them, someday.

I would not realize that I was a marginalized person or that we were poor until much later in life. I thought my life was the norm, it was normal. Little did I know my identity was determined by the government, and that I rated among health, justice, social, economic, and Indigenous statistics before I would even set foot in a school. Looking back, I would come to realize how much my mother overcame and how blessed we were to have a resilient and devoted mother. She was our rock and staunch symbol of determination, resiliency, strength, and courage each ingrained in my psyche and which I would call upon many times throughout my life.

## Who's That Girl with Bangs



My memories of Prince Albert was the rampant racism, discrimination, classism, and hatred the dominant white society had toward Indigenous peoples. I felt these inflictions throughout my life living in Prince Albert. I also felt them in school, not only from students who teased and bullied me, but from teachers as well. I entered school when I was five years old

turning six in early October. I was a shy, timid, and reserved little girl who was subjected to name callings that demoralized my Indigenous spirit, so much so, I lived with it as my normal. I do not remember anything about my school start-up, but I assume I was looking forward to going to the place my big brother went to every day. This alone probably excited me into thinking school was going to be great. I know my hair would have been cut into a box cut (bangs straight across and hair cut across below the ears). I am sure I was wearing a dress or skirt with a sweater and new shoes. I know this because any school pictures I saw of myself as a little girl like this one gifted to me years later by a former classmate of mine when I was a principal, and his grandchildren went to my school.

### *School Memories*

I tried to recall the simple things about school like recesses but, I could only recall where we (senior students) got to sit on the grand stairs for assemblies. Other recollections of school are few and far between but what I do know now is that school was not a relational place, especially, if you were Indigenous. I suspect my lack of school memories was a protection mechanism in my brain to blot out the unwanted memories. However, I do remember wrongfully getting the strap in grade one. I say wrongfully because when my mother confronted the teacher, she denied giving me the strip and named another little girl who she did strap. Obviously, I had the markings proving it was actually me who was the victim. My mother bear had a few harsh words for the teacher who had no right to hurt her six-year-old child. When I think about this situation,

it is difficult for me to imagine how teachers could relish using corporal punishment as a means to discipline their young students. It most saddens me to think I lacked individuality in this teacher's eyes, and that as a little Indian girl, I could be dehumanized and so easily mistaken for any other little Indian girl. That experience has been forever embedded in my memory bank. I also remember failing grade four and being teased by other students. I remember the shame I felt when my classmates moved on to grade five and I was left behind. My one happy memory of school was being in grade seven. The teacher was my first male teacher. He made schoolwork interesting and praised us when we did well. I strived to do well in all my subjects especially, in science where I was learning about plants and their importance to our survival.

### ***Preconceived Prejudices***

I hated being an 'Indian,' so much so, I went through an identity crisis where I denied my Indigeneity. Foolish me, I could deny my Indianness, but I could not hide it. Growing up, my life was open territory for preconceived prejudices, dehumanization of my Indigeneity, placement of limitations on my abilities, and an exorbitant infliction of racism. It seemed that every Tom, Dick, and Harry (Merriam Webster Dictionary, (n.d.)) knew what was best for Indians and knew how to fix them. This was the colonial and prejudicious mentality of the general public and the education system where I went to school (and most likely of all schools at the time).

As was, and still is traditional for students passing on to high school, the principal, teacher, and school counselor meet with each student to prep them for high school by providing students with wisdom and encouragement to succeed. In my case, my counselling was determined by preconceived prejudices of the principal and grade eight teacher who told me I only had the capacity to achieve a grade ten education then followed up with a list of work possibilities available with that level of education. Their perception of constructive counselling had arbitrarily placed a ceiling on my learning and crushed my desire to be a nurse. I was fifteen years old when I was told my future was extremely limited. I refused to go to high school that fall, and when I turned sixteen in October, I dropped out of school believing I was a failure. Why would I believe anything else? Too often teachers make preconceived assumptions about their students' learning. Students know when their teacher(s) do not believe in them. Instead, like me, they probably feel hopeless, so why try. Inferiorizing Indigenoussness is a White Western

oppressive practice that has been sanitized and normalized so much so that educational structures privilege certain students, certain knowledge, certain ways of being, all at the expense of othered students (Khalifa et al., 2018). I consciously presume it is these colonial practices that continue to be unconsciously or consciously carried out forcing Indigenous students to drop out of school and not graduate.

### **Finding My Groove**

I am sure my mom had hoped I would go back to school but, I am also sure she saw herself in me when I chose not to and saw how much I hated school. I was put to work helping my mom with household duties and taking care of my siblings. There wasn't much else I could do except babysit for my aunties, nor did I have the confidence to do much else. My few friends (I use this term loosely) were still going to school which left me on the outside looking in and with the realization that we no longer had a common bond to keep our friendship intact. Soon, I began to hang out with older teenagers whom I thought were cool and did fun things. It was not hard to influence me at the time. I would make some naive choices and associations in my young life as I had no filters for self-worth. Just tell me that you thought I was pretty, that I was a great dancer, that I was fun to hang around with, and before you know it, I was cool and accepted by my new friends (a very loose term). Dancing was popular in my teen years. I learned how to dance watching American Bandstand with Dick Clark and The Hop on CKBI TV. The two most popular social activities to do were going to dances and hanging out in the café listening to jukebox music. If you recall, that was how I met Ed who became my forever dance partner.

### **Parenthood and Responsibilities**

In 1966, after a summer of adventures, my husband and I settled into married life. He worked as a salesman at Eaton's in the Men's Department, so I decided I wanted to work, too. I knew my choice of work was limited but, I managed to find a waitress job where I worked for about six weeks. It was not a job I enjoyed, so I quit. Soon after, working was no longer my priority because motherhood was knocking at my door announcing a spring arrival. Before long, we would have three more children completing our family of six. I had a full-time job as a stay-at-home mom, and I loved it. Caring for four children was easy but providing for their needs and

wants as they grew older became quite a challenge. When the youngest started kindergarten, I decided it was time for me to help support our family. This time, I realized that I needed to upgrade my education to hopefully find employment with more promising wages. I went back to school to earn a Grade Ten Equivalent Diploma (GED). The dynamics of the school environment was different from what I remembered as a young student. Of course, we were all adults who wanted a better education, but the best was that we had wonderful instructors who were respectful, caring, and supportive. The GED would prove to be my ticket to steady employment in some good-paying jobs in work that I enjoyed. GED programs have been a Godsend to high school dropouts like me. It not only provided me with opportunity for better employment, but it also helped me believe in myself, and that I could achieve in education. Most importantly, the GED led to my acceptance in education at the University of Saskatchewan as a mature student. It may seem like I took a short cut to attain a degree in education, but in reality it was a long unconventional path of lived experiences and challenges.

We mostly raised our young family in Calgary where the cost of living was much higher than in my hometown of Prince Albert. Fortunately, I found employment in hospital service positions, in one I was a dietary aide and in another, I was a housekeeping aide. I loved both these positions but due to transportation issues and cost of childcare, it was not feasible for me to continue so I had to quit. I realized I needed a job that was shift work where I could work in the evenings and my husband could be home taking care of the kids after school. Finally, I landed a full-time postal clerk position at Calgary Post. I worked the evening shift from three to 11 P.M. five days a week. The pay was excellent, and it was a long-term service position with retirement benefits. This was going to be my forever job and I loved the idea of working one job until someday retiring. Needless to say, I worked there for almost two years before my husband received a contract for employment in Saskatoon which meant we would be moving to Saskatchewan at the end of the school year. Fortunately, I was able to submit a transfer request for Saskatoon Canada Post.

### **Blowing Past Preconceived Limitations**

We arrived in Saskatoon on July 1<sup>st</sup>, 1980. Luckily, my sister-in-law allowed us to stay in their home until we found our own place which was soon after our arrival. I anxiously waited for



my transfer to Saskatoon Post to come through. Then one day, my sister-in-law who worked at Canada Manpower called to let me know there was a posting for teacher associates in Saskatoon schools. I immediately rejected this idea saying I would never work in a school. Still, I waited for my transfer until I anxiously realized that I should find some work. About two weeks later, my sister-in-law called me again saying the post was still active and suggesting that I should apply. I bit the bullet and applied. I was shortlisted for an interview and soon after, I received a call saying I was a successful candidate. I was hired as a teacher associate for the Saskatoon Public School Division with a fall assignment in a grade five classroom at Princess Alexandra Community School. Community schools were newly incorporated in Saskatchewan and implemented in the fall of 1980. The criteria for designation of community schools was they needed to be located in core neighborhoods where there was a high demographic of Aboriginal peoples and a high enrolment of Aboriginal students in schools, and they must adhere to the philosophies and practices of community education as a means to address the growing issues of urban Aboriginal poverty (Government of Saskatchewan, 2012). I would be one of the first four Indigenous teacher associates hired to work in a community school in Saskatoon. I jumped in feet first however, old fears of negative self-worth and thoughts of being told I would not achieve beyond grade ten began creeping in and sat at the forefront of my psyche.

My homeroom teacher was a great mentor. She guided me, had faith in me, and helped me gain confidence in my supportive role. She made me feel I was valued when she told me I was a natural in the classroom working with students. I watched as she taught children, praised them, and respectfully interacted with each student. Being an Indigenous *iskwêw* (woman) and mother who embraced relationality also helped me in building healthy relationships with students and their parents. Ms. Langley saw value and potential in me. Most importantly, she believed in me. She was placed in my path, or I was placed in hers, to encourage me and point me in the direction of education as a career. I applied as a mature student to the Indian Teacher Education Program (ITEP) at the University of Saskatchewan and was accepted for the 1981 fall intake.

It took a while for me to learn how to study, write papers, and complete final exams. Looking back, I am not satisfied with some of my marks and wished I would have been a better student. I completed my internship in December 1984. In January 1985, I received a call from the director of education at Saskatoon Public School Division (SPSD) offering me a teaching

position for that fall. I jumped for joy then remembered I had not yet applied. She told me I would need to formally apply and that if I chose to accept, I had a permanent position with SPSD and that I would receive my assignment before June. I achieved a Bachelor of Education degree in the spring of 1985. We, my husband, children, and me, were so ecstatic about my accomplishment and what this position meant for our future. I would be the first person in my family to receive a university degree. This was a proud moment for us all. I was especially proud because I blew past that grade ten stigma I lived with for so long. Who said I would not make it past grade ten?

### **Impressions Make a Difference**

As an educator, you never know what effect you have on students. You hope you have done your job and that you have made some difference in their lives. I was assigned a grade three classroom at Princess Alexandra Community School (PACS), the school where I had been a teacher associate four years earlier. Shortly after school started, a former student, who was now in high school, came to visit me. He said he just had to come back to see if this was the same Mrs. Harper who was his grade five teacher. I was so impressed that he remembered me and was happy to see me. That was when I knew I had the capacity to make a difference in students' lives especially, when this non-Indigenous student came to see if I was the Mrs. Harper he knew. I would meet him much later in life when I was the director of education with Saskatoon Tribal Council. He grew to be a well-established business owner in Saskatoon. He wanted to show me a writing he did for the capsule that was buried where the first Princess Alexandra School was built. It was amazing to see his drawings and to read about the things he liked then, and to now see how they were rooted in his successful business.

As a newbie teacher, I was filled with awe and knew that I was on the right path. I looked forward to my teaching career especially after knowing I could make an impression in a student's life. This interaction affirmed my belief that relationality between student and teacher is important and can make a difference.

## **From Heartache to Leadership**

I taught at Princess Alexandra Community School for twelve years. The first year of my teaching was difficult. I was unsure of where to start and what to teach. My room was a former whole language classroom which left me with zero start-up materials to use for teaching. Thank goodness for Central Office consultants who provided me the curriculum resources I needed to teach grade three. Thanks also to the grade two teacher, who was First Nations, who mentored me and provided teaching materials and posters for classroom displays. The first year of teaching was a difficult one for me spiritually, emotionally, mentally, and physically. My new friend and mentor unexpectedly passed away that December and on January 16, 1986, our beloved son was killed in a car accident. Losing my son broke me. Our grief was so immense, I had no desire to work or see anyone. After a month away from school, my husband convinced me that it was time for me to return to work. He said my students needed me and I needed to let our son go. As difficult as this was, it was the best thing for me. I delved deep into my teaching and became even more devoted to serving my students and their families.

My teaching experience at Princess Alexandra Community School (PACS), was essential in shaping my commitment and advocacy for working with Indigenous and underprivileged students, and for inadvertently, shaping my leadership style. Community schools were built on the principles of collaborative learning processes; joint partnerships between school, home, and community; building strong relationships with students and their families; and providing school programs that met the cultural and socioeconomic experiences and academic needs of the students (Amendt, n.d.). Initially, I did not feel like these principles were always at the forefront of school administration. Then in the early 1990s, a new principal was assigned to PACS who embraced the philosophy and principles of community education by building community connections, bridging the school and the community, and most importantly, building community within the school between teachers, students, and parents. The teaching and learning environment was cohesive and inclusive, collaborative, student-centered, highly professional, and collegial. There was a sense of family and a lot of trust among teachers and students at PACS. Teachers were empowered to be leaders in their specializations and in school-wide operations.

Soon the school became the hub of the community with before and after-school programs for students, parents, and the community at large who partnered with the school to provide funding and in-kind services for extra-curricular programs and activities, learning resources, nutrition programs, and cultural programs. One of the cultural initiatives was the formation of a cultural hoop dance troupe which I was asked to coordinate. This dance troupe grew to include drummers and singers and would become known for their exceptional performances locally, provincially, and nationally. The troupe not only performed, but they also taught students in the schools where we visited the traditional teachings of cultural dances including jingle dance, fancy dance, traditional, and the hoop dance, as well, they taught students how to drum and sing. Most importantly, they shared their cultural stories and teachings with students and teachers throughout Saskatchewan, and from Victoria, British Columbia to Toronto, Ontario. In each school we visited, we would select students to perform as the opening act to celebrate what they learned. Our dance troupe were great ambassadors for Princess Alexandra Community School and for their province. Their parents were immensely proud of them as was the school and community. I still run into some of these young people who are now adults with their own children. Some went on to higher learning and careers in education, nursing, social work, trades, business, and politics. Sadly, the influence of drugs, alcohol, gangs, and peer pressure would lead some into a life of violence and addictions and inevitably, succumbed to death. I learned a lot of lessons from my experience at PACS. I internalized the power of community education and its principles and philosophy. I learned that I can be a vehicle to open doors and windows for students showing them the endless possibilities and opportunities their futures could hold. I learned that love for students was essential and was rewarded tenfold as they embraced learning, participation in school life, and belief in self. I learned that empowering others effectively promotes their talents and abilities whether they be students or colleagues.

### **Finding My Voice**

A common practice of public-school divisions was to transfer teachers and administrators every few years to broaden their experience with the intention of strengthening their professional knowledge, experience, and practice. In my twelfth year of teaching, the newly assigned principal told me that I would be getting an administrative transfer in the fall of the following year. I must say that while at PACS, professional development was integral to keep abreast of

current educational practices but more importantly, to facilitate effective community education and best practices. There were several changes made at PACS to accommodate the needs of students, families, and community. Some of those changes included an alternate school day, home visits for progress reports, after-school learning supports, and multi-graded classrooms (three grades in one classroom). Working in this setting where educational changes were ongoing to support student learning fueled our professionalism, knowledge, best practices, and commitment to education. To my knowledge, this was not necessarily happening across the division. My teaching and engagement in school-wide activities grew exponentially. However, rather than allowing someone else to make decisions on my professional career path, I decided to take my career into my own hands. I applied for education leave and to graduate studies for my master's in educational administration. I was accepted into the graduate program and received a one-year education leave. I was now in control of my destiny with education leadership as my goal.

### ***The Echelon Ladder in Education***

In the fall of 1997, I began the master's program at the University of Saskatchewan. I completed my coursework in one year. That spring, Saskatoon Public Schools (SPS) posted a call for administrators for the fall of 1998. I submitted my resume, was interviewed and was successful in getting a vice-principalship at Caswell Community School. Throughout that summer and during my first year as an administrator, I was completing my project on Perceived Barriers and Facilitators of Aboriginal Parental Engagement in a Community School. In the spring of 1999, I convoked with a Master of Education degree in Educational Administration. Once again, this was a proud moment for my family and for me. It was an extra special celebration because in that same ceremony, my youngest child (daughter) walked the same stage to receive her Bachelor of Education degree. I achieved another rung on the ladder of education attainment. I was immensely proud of my accomplishments and for a second, I wished my grade eight counsellors could see me now. A Master of Education in Educational Administration was not common in my circle of friends and family. No one could take this away from me or deflate my confidence in this achievement.

I was vice-principal at Caswell Community School for two years. In my second year, I ambitiously applied for a principalship but was told I needed another administrative experience outside of community schools. I was assigned to Dundonald School which at the time was the second largest school in the school division. Again, in my second year at Dundonald School, I applied for a principalship. This time I was successful and was assigned to Mayfair Community School where I served as principal for five years.

***The Buck Stops Here***

During my career as an educator and administrator, I had the opportunity to work with some fantastic people. The administrators whom I had the utmost respect for exemplified qualities that resonated with my own principles of relationality, community building, familial connections, belief in students, high expectations, equity and fairness all of which would imprint and shape my leadership style. I felt fortunate that I would return to a community school, a space and place where my heart was most rooted. I arrived at a position where the cliché, ‘the buck stops here’ meant all final decisions and the responsibility for those decisions must pass my desk.

I walked into Mayfair Community School and the first thing I noticed were the light green painted walls, its lack of artwork, and the signage on doors and entrances saying, ‘Report To Office.’ I immediately thought institutional and knew I needed to do something about that. The first thing I did was remove the uninviting messages and replaced them with welcome messages. I communicated with central office informing them that Mayfair students have a right to attend a school that had a pleasing, attractive, and welcoming

<b>Edd in Educational Leadership</b>	<b>2021 - 2024</b>	<b>University of Saskatchewan</b>
<b>Retirement</b>	<b>2020</b>	
<b>Director of Education</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>Saskatoon Tribal Council</b>
<b>Principal</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>Mayfair Community School</b>
<b>Vice-Principal</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>Dundonald School</b>
<b>Master of Education</b>	<b>1999</b>	<b>Educational Administration</b>
<b>Vice-Principal</b>	<b>1998</b>	<b>Caswell Community School</b>
<b>Graduate Studies in Educational Administration</b>	<b>1997</b>	<b>University of Saskatchewan</b>
<b>Bachelor of Education</b>	<b>1985</b>	<b>Teacher Princess Alexandra Community School</b>
<b>Indian Teacher Education Program</b>	<b>1981</b>	<b>University of Saskatchewan</b>
	<b>1980</b>	<b>Community School Teacher Associate</b>

atmosphere like most other SPS schools. The school was painted that year, and I commissioned an Indigenous artist to paint a beautiful mural in the school.

Meaningful parental engagement has always been a focus of mine as a teacher and as an administrator. Renihan and Renihan (1994) argued that parents have a basic right to be engaged in their child's education, and that increased parental engagement can significantly impact improvement in achievement, absenteeism, and perceptions in school. The only time my mother was called when we went to school was for punitive reasons. When my children went to school, my husband and I would both go to the parent/teacher interviews, however, it was not until I was in the field of education and had some years of knowledge and experience that I would challenge a teacher's or administrator's academic or social decisions made about my child.

At Mayfair, we strived for increased parental and community engagement and saw how this priority resulted in increased interest and participation in their child's learning, decreased absenteeism, and increased volunteerism. A Mayfair Community School Council was implemented to facilitate engagement of parents and community members in decision making. The 1972 Indian Control of Indian Education Policy (ICIE) was established and enacted giving First Nations the right to reclaim their educational responsibilities, to set a philosophy of education, and to implement it in their schools (Anuik, 2013; Assembly of First Nations, 2010). Though this was not and was never intended to be Mayfair's direct response to the ICEC policy, I could inadvertently use Mayfair Community School Council as an example where many Indigenous parents and community members reclaimed space and place in making collective decisions for their children in education.

As educators and administrators, we have a responsibility to ensure that the education we are providing students is exceptional and accountable. We must always be current in our knowledge and practices. A Professional Learning Community (PLC) model, a concept of learning for all (DuFour, 2004), was implemented at Mayfair Community School to meet the needs of all learners, teachers included. We strived for accountability and professional growth in areas of literacy, math, character education, community education, and Indigenous education. As we shared research, best practices, and attended teacher conferences or in-services in these areas, the knowledge was presented back to our PLC where ideas were shared, discussed, and put into

practice. We held weekly staff meetings and once a month, one of those meetings would be devoted to staff sharing the strategy they applied in their classrooms along with a critique on what worked or did not work. Some felt it was like being at university again but overall, they were building an innovative repertoire of strategies and practices for them to use in future, but more importantly, that were strengthening teacher capacity and improving student outcomes at Mayfair Community School. When I left Mayfair, I was so moved with the farewells, thank yous, and best wishes I received from parents, community members, and staff and students. It will always be a place I hold dearly in my heart. Mayfair Community School was the place where I first fully exercised my leadership style and realized that leadership can make a difference when leading is done with the heart first, is student-focused, inclusive, collaborate, and accountable; and when leaders exercise their responsibility to ensure the learning program represents quality standards, is equitable, and essentially supported by staff, parents, and community.

As I reflected back on Indigenous education from when I went to school in the 1960s to today, education has made considerable headway in effecting change and innovation. At the heartbeat of any innovative change has been the presence of First Nations students. White and Peters (2009) indicated that by 1960, about one quarter of Aboriginal students were attending provincial schools. They also indicated that 94% of Aboriginal students compared to 12% of non-Aboriginal students dropped out of school. How to address this phenomenon in the 60s was at the forefront of provincial schools as it was with First Nations leadership. In 1972, First Nations introduced Indian Control of Indian Education (ICEC), a position paper that demanded local control of Aboriginal education (White & Peters, 2009), and later Tradition and Education: Towards a Vision of the Future to solidify inherent jurisdiction over First Nations education (Assembly of First Nations, 2016). In provincial education, the Ministry recognized the disparity issues of low graduation outcomes, and higher dropout rates for Indigenous students. In the last twenty years, they have introduced comprehensive policies and strategic plans to improve Indigenous student engagement, achievement, and graduation rates by 2020 to reduce the disparity gap by 50% by 2020 through programs, curriculum renewal, partnership development, shared decision-making and accountability measures to support the weaving of Indigenous content, perspectives into curricula for all learners, teaching Indigenous cultures, languages, and



histories in the classroom, building positive relationships, reconciliation and mandatory treaty education (Government of Saskatchewan, 2018). Some of the policies implemented were from the Saskatchewan Plan for Growth: Vision 2020; the Inspiring Success: First Nations and Métis PreK-12 Education Policy Framework; and the 2009 Inspiring Success Framework: First Nations and Métis Education.

Needless to say, First Nations have been a driving force behind all the innovative initiatives to improve education outcomes for Indigenous students since the 1960s. Sadly, they are still grappling with the same issues, sixty-four years later. Given that considerable effort has been made to improve education outcomes for Indigenous students, the problem still exists. I reiterate my presumption to this problem is the subjugated colonialism and colonial educational structures, overt or covert, that continue as Khalifa et al, (2018) have argued, to privilege certain students, certain knowledge, and certain ways of knowing at the expense of othered students. In addition, I question that if educational systems are failing to meet a significant ratio of Indigenous students' learning needs, then why do they continue to operate the same old way yet expect greater achievement results from Indigenous students?

### **Unconventional Path to Butterfly Wings**

The transformational change in my life from being born feet first to dropping out of school to parenthood to educational leadership was like the metamorphosis of a butterfly and its four stages of life. With each stage, though I did not realize it at the time, there was purpose for me being born into this life and living the experiences that I did. This realization came head-on when I was struck with cancer in 2008 and again, in 2010. After numerous bounds of chemo and radiation treatment, I was left with one kidney and one breast. As a cancer survivor, twice over, my purpose in life became clearer in that there was a greater power protecting me and guiding me to continue the work I started. I revered life and the responsibility I was given to serve children and their families in education. I became more vocal in my advocacy for better education for marginalized students, especially for Indigenous students like myself. It became easier for me to put myself out there by sharing the hardships I experienced and the fact that I did not have a good experience in school and that it was not my fault. Instead, I have come to realize that it was the fault of the era I was born into when racism and discrimination was so blatant.

There was also purpose in me taking an unconventional path to earn my wings and to tell my story. The lessons I learned along the way and the people placed in my path to guide me, mentor me, gift me with their presence, or to just love me have helped shape my life and my leadership. It is through the Grace of my Creator whose forgiveness and eternal love that saved me, and it is the blood memory of my ancestors whose shoulders I stand on that give me the strength, courage, and resiliency to continue to advocate for our rightful space and place in education. This section is a culmination of âcimowin (my story) and tâpwewin (my truths) in response to the key questions that guided my research.

### **Cultural Transformations**

Looking back, I realized that half of my career span was in leadership roles from vice-principal and principalships in a provincial education system to being a director of education in a federal system. Like a butterfly, I would experience life and see the world but never did I think I would be sitting here writing my dissertation for a doctorate degree. How did this happen? From birth, my path was definitely unconventional, but it was my path to follow. A self-cultural affirmation and its emergent place in my life, throughout my life, and in my social surroundings is interpreted on the premise of how the world around me fits into (or that I choose to have fit into) my Indigenous ways of knowing and being. The cultural transformations in my personal life have not only shaped who I am but have also become principal foundations for my career in educational leadership.

A key question in my autoethnography was, ‘What underlying principle(s) is/are at the root of the alarmingly low graduation rates and alarmingly high dropout rates for Indigenous students?’

### ***Home Culture***

*I want you to come to my house, and yet I don't. You're so important, but our screen door has a hole in it. And my mother has no fancy cake to serve. I want you to come to my house teacher, and yet I don't. I wish I could trust you enough, teacher, to invite you to my house.*

*- Albert Callum (1971)*

I was a first-generation residential school survivor, and a product of the Indian Act (Hanson, 2009; Khalifa et al., 2018) growing up in a city that was fraught with racism, discrimination, prejudice, and indifference against Indians. I was openly (outside my home) subjected to this violence and abusive behaviour as a child and youth. So much so, it was normalized, and I just lived with it. My mother was the bravest woman I know and a fierce protector of her children. She suffered physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual abuse in residential school and sadly, she suffered the same in spousal abuse. Not only am I a first-generation residential school survivor but, I am also an intergenerational trauma survivor. I buried, deep within my psyche, the trauma and violence I witnessed because they are not things you want people to know. My mother raised thirteen children on social assistance. How she did that, still amazes me. She worked hard every day baking bread, cooking big meals, washing tons of laundry, and keeping a spotlessly clean home. She was frugal, shopping at thrift stores, buying in bulk, canning, and storing sacks of potatoes and vegetables in the cellar. As children, we never felt poor or never wanted for anything. We did not live in a fancy house but we had clean beds to sleep in, food to eat, and a TV to watch. We did not bring friends over to play inside our house, there were too many kids. The only visitors I remember were relatives from our reserve or those living in the city. I was never ashamed of my home it was my safe place. However, I was made to feel ashamed of being an Indian. How sad is that? I realize now that those people who inflicted this discriminatory behaviour knew no better. They were the colonizers and that was how they blatantly treated marginalized Indigenous people like me, child or not. Teachers never came to my house, I wonder why.

It is common knowledge that racism still exists in this world. It may be consciously or unconsciously practiced in spaces we least expect it to be, including public places of learning. Today, I have learned not to let peoples' perceptions or perspectives of me as an Indigenous person have power over me, it takes too much energy. I have also learned that it was not for nothing I was gifted with life (feet first), purpose, and a destined path, and whatever others thought of me, that was their problem. I would not let destructive mentalities defeat me.

## ***School Culture***

*I have come to a frightening conclusion. I am the decisive element in my classroom. It is my personal approach that creates climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I possess tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humour, hurt or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated, and a child humanized or de-humanized.*

*- Haim Ginott (1972)*

The abusive violent behaviours did not end when I went to school. I was sent to school every day, if I missed the bus, I had to walk. My mom probably thought the city schools were much better than her experience in the residential school. They probably were, however, in my reality, the name calling or hurtful teasing by school bullies perpetuated. I hated the bullying but I was too timid to do anything about it. Telling on them did not stop the bullies so I just tried to avoid them and continued to invisibilize myself. I obviously could do this quite well because when I was in grade one, the teacher mistakenly gave me the strap. First, who straps a six-year-old child, and secondly, who gave the teacher the right to strap a me. These are my questions as I write them today, but when I went to school, corporal punishment was allowed and readily used. My mom went to school with me the next day to confront the teacher. She denied giving me the strap until mom showed her my hands. The teacher told mom that she mistook me for another girl. How do you so viciously dehumanize a child and not realize you were hurting the wrong person? I can only surmise that one must be blinded with rage, hatred, or entrenched colonial mentalities and callous disregard for my Indigenous life. In retrospect, I believe it really happened for a more ingrained reason, I lacked individuality in this teacher's eyes. I was just an Indian girl, and we all looked the same. The school may have been more contemporary than the residential school my mom attended but, it was still very much a school entrenched in colonial Eurocentric mentalities. An example of this was when I completed grade eight, I was counselled by the principal and teacher about going into high school. They told me I only had the ability to achieve grade ten then provided me with information on what jobs I would be able to do. The

mentality of what was best for Indians and how to fix them was exercised that day. The preconceived judgement, and the collective dehumanizing, discriminatory, and indifferent mentalities made me feel like I did not belong which forced me to give up. I quit high school before I had a chance to walk the hallways. I could have lost myself hanging out with other dropouts, but Spirit had other plans for me. Just imagine, if racism, discrimination, indifference, and settler colonialism were removed from education, how much the playing field would be leveled and the difference that could be made in lowering or eliminating the gap in achievement and graduation rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.

### ***Culture of Unconditional Love and Unity***

*With all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*

*– Ephesians 4: 2-3.*

The most life-changing moment in my life was meeting and marrying my soulmate. We married young, I was seventeen, he was twenty-one; I knew little about the world, he travelled the world. We knew we were destined to be together spiritually, emotionally, mentally, and physically. We were young parents growing up with our four children and learning to love unconditionally. My life became whole and meaningful. All the hurts and shame I went through for being Indigenous was in the past where I buried it deep in my psyche. I am not saying that the racism stopped, it was just not my cross to bear any longer. I was loved for being me which uplifted my purpose as a wîcêwâkan (wife), okâwimâw (mother), and an Indigenous iskwêw (woman). This was my destined space and place in life.

When my children started school, it made me realize the importance of education. I wanted them to complete their education and graduate and not to be a school dropout like me. I loved being a stay-at-home mom but as our children grew, it was getting difficult meeting their needs as youth and pre-teen demands. I went back to school and earned a GED which opened the doors of employment and my ability to help support our family.

Marriage between two headstrong people can be a challenge at times. I knew what it was like to grow up without a dad and I did not want this for my children. Keeping our family unit intact was essentially important for us. We both learned the importance of forgiveness and together we strived to overcome any perceived obstacles that one encounters in life, in marriage, and in parenthood. I learned that marriage is a partnership that requires two people to put in the hard work to make it a successful marriage. I also learned that raising children is a huge responsibility and should never be taken lightly. We raised our close-knit family with unconditional love, yet, also with clear expectations and ground rules. We grew up together, we grew old together, we grew spiritually together, and were blessed with fifty-six and a half years of togetherness. The greatest accomplishment of our unity was being blessed with four children and three generations of grandchildren. It is amazing what love can accomplish!

### **Dropping Out of School is Unacceptable**

*“School systems are one of the basic foundations of society and play a leading role in providing the conditions for all students to have greater life prospects and to flourish in them.”*

*- Louie & Gereluk (2023, p. 55).*

One of the key questions that guided my story is, ‘How can telling my story invoke educational change to reduce student dropout and improve graduation rates for Indigenous students?’ The intent of my autoethnography was to share nitâpwêwina (my truths) for why I dropped out of school. It is also my hope that my research will be referenced by those in educational positions who can influence immediate and effective change in their school settings to help improve the stark statistics on Indigenous achievement and graduation outcomes.

When I see the recent research data on graduation rates for Indigenous students, it makes me question the current structures of education, especially, when it shows the disparity gap on graduation rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. The most recent research I alluded to was from the 2023 Provincial Auditor Report on education which showed that there was a 40% gap between First Nation and non-First Nation students in Saskatchewan. The report showed graduation data for years 2018-2021 had remained relatively unchanged with First

Nations graduation rate at 44% while non-First Nations graduation rate was at 88.7% (Provincial Auditor Report, 2023). The graduation statistics for off-reserve First Nations compared to on-reserve First Nations was also concern. This data showed that 73% of off-reserve students were more likely to obtain their high school diploma whereas only 46% of on-reserve students would earn their high school diploma. One can see from this data that off-reserve students are doing much better in graduation than on-reserve students. Overall, the data consistently showed that education, both provincial and federal, is failing Indigenous students. On-reserve schools are beginning to close the gap in resources to provincial schools, however, there are so many sustainable qualified resources and specialized services needed to make a significant difference in student learning. Whereas provincial schools have access to these resources and services because of their urban location, their years of educational structures, and their commitment to standardized expectations, yet their failing grade on Indigenous education remains significantly high.

My interpretation of this static data is it indicates that there must be a colonial legacy deep-rooted in education across federal and provincial jurisdictions that is obstructing improvement in Indigenous educational outcomes. It is also an indication that educational structures need a major overhaul and decolonization. Moreso, my lived experiences in the 1950s and 60s as a student were witness to the colonial subjugation of white perspectives on Indigenous students where racism, discrimination, indifference, marginalization, and achievement limitations remained the status quo. Sadly, these may be the same deep-rooted mentalities that are barriers to equitable education for Indigenous students.

### **What Does the Data Say**

Louie and Gereluk (2019) suggested the two key principles to improving successful outcomes for Indigenous students were, 1) the curriculum and pedagogy ought to reflect and represent Indigenous ways of knowing, and being, and 2) the systemic barriers of racism and colonization impeding the success of Indigenous student participation and success in education must be addressed. Hallinger and Leithwood (1998), as referenced by Khalifa et al., (2023), suggested that Western frameworks have ignored alternative epistemologies in the study of practice of educational leadership which is another tactic to marginalize First Nations ways of

knowing, being, and doing. Koptie (2009) asserted that instead of maintaining inferiorized communities across Canada, the journey to collaboration, sustainability, self-determination, and the making of a Canada that does **WITH** Indigenous peoples rather than **For or TO** must be the first order of business (p. 105). Leithwood & et al., (2019) concluded that it is leadership that has significant effects on the quality of school organization and student learning. They identified seven strong leadership claims from which I chose three that addressed leadership influence, 1) leadership is second only to classroom teaching on influencing student learning, 2) leadership improves teaching and learning indirectly and most powerfully through their influence on staff motivation, commitment, and working conditions, and 3) leadership has greater influence on schools and students when it is widely distributed.

Decolonizing education requires educational leaders who first acknowledge and understand there are disparities in Indigenous education, who are brave enough to challenge the status quo by openly addressing the inequities and disparities, who have the heart and passion to promote equitable educations for all learners, and those who, as stated by Daly and Chrispeels (2008), carry the significant influence to make effective change built on trust, relationships, risk-taking, vulnerability, benevolence, competence, integrity, openness, and respect. At a global level, the research of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2017) found pockets of promising practices used to identify a common formula in schools that are successfully supporting Indigenous students: 1) an inspirational leader, 2) capable and committed staff, 3) strong relationships with students, parents, and local communities, 4) the use of every possible lever to engage and support students to be successful, and 5) sustained commitment to achieve improvements. In addition, they also identified promising strategies, policies, programs, and practices that support the well-being, participation, engagement, and achievement in education of Indigenous students. Above all, we (educators) must always remember that as agents 'in loco parentis' we have a legal responsibility to ensure students are safe, cared for emotionally, mentally, and physically, and that they receive the quality of education we would expect for our own child (Oosthuizen & Watt, 1998).



## **Finding My Place**

My lived experiences within a school setting were mostly in community schools where the student body was primarily composed of Indigenous and underprivileged students. As a classroom teacher, I initially stayed within my space not fully trusting that other teachers would see me worthy enough to be perceived as a colleague. At the time, I still carried the baggage of dread, lack of confidence, and the uncertainty of belonging, fitting in, and being accepted, in a school environment, even though I now had a Bachelor of Education degree and was qualified. Gradually, I came out of my shell with more confidence in my role and in my ability to make connections with students and their parents. I naturally connected with students and parents because we were mostly Indigenous peoples, but also, like Indigenous peoples do, we connected through story by sharing our root locations, information about self, and familial relationships (Kovach, 2009) which strengthened our trust and respect for each other, and in our teacher/student/parent relationship. To me, relationality means building community whether that is in your familial role, social role, or place of work, and whether you are Indigenous or non-Indigenous.

## **Claiming My Space**

In community schools, I learned the impact relationality had on building community within a school and between the home and school, and how relationality could strengthen the teaching and learning environment. I filed what I learned was most effective to emulate in my own leadership career. Most importantly, I knew from my own experience what it was like to not feel I had place in school, therefore, my desire as a classroom teacher or an administrator was to create a learning space that engaged and motivated underprivileged and Indigenous students to stay in school. I wanted these students, who so reminded me of myself as a young student, to feel like they belonged, to know that school was a safe space to be, and to know that I was committed to help them achieve their utmost aspirations. It disturbed me to think back on the limitations placed on me as a student, and even more so, when I would hear teachers in both provincial and federal schools say, ‘my kids can’t do that.’ There is no room in 21<sup>st</sup> Century education for these colonial mentalities and those who have said or say these types of statements, must be held accountable for uttering preconceived limitations on student learning.

As a leader in education, it was my responsibility to maintain a teamwork environment that was respectful, collaborative, collegial, and focused on student learning and achievement. I valued learning communities that embraced responsibility and accountability for their learning programs, the efficacy and proficiency of their practice, and the learning outcomes of their students. I also saw and felt firsthand how relationality had the power to build community and erase barriers whether in my personal life or in my work in community schools. As a leader in education, I expected relationality, community, inclusivity, student achievement and engagement, high standards, accountability, professionalism, and commitment were the norm under my administration. I strived to ensure the children I served throughout my career had space and place in a learning environment where they could stay in school and flourish. Dropping out of school was not an option I was prepared to tolerate.

Schools need leadership that can acknowledge they have inherited some form of colonizing schools, and ‘leaders who can resist colonizing education, any school leader regardless of ethnicity, race, religion, sexual orientation, language, ability, citizenship, or gender can lead in ways that are decolonizing and promote students’ indigeneity’ (Khalifa et al., 2018, pp 33-34). I reflected on my community education experiences and have concluded that the style of leadership that worked well was a holistic shared leadership model that was inclusive, where leading was closely defined as servant and selfless leadership (Anuik, 2013). I am sure I would not be writing this dissertation if I were not empowered to be a leader through example.

### **Inspiration and Hope**

*“I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin, but by the content of their character.”*

*- by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (August 28, 1963).*

The last question of my autoethnography was, ‘*How can telling my story provide inspiration and hope to others with similar backgrounds, Indigenous or non-Indigenous?*’ In retrospect, I do see my unconventional path in life from humble beginnings to a school dropout, to a wîcêwâkan (wife) and okâwimâw (mother), to a school leader, and to a director of

education, was a courageous journey and a phenomenal accomplishment. I am humbly proud of these achievements and am blessed to live and share âcimowin (my story) to those who care to listen. I hope my autoethnography inspires you to courageously take the first step into whatever your heart desires, and to know you have the power to do it your way and to make a difference.

I was a little Indigenous girl who lived with racism, discrimination, indifference, and though I did not know at the time, I also lived in poverty. As a young child, I witnessed spousal abuse in our home and though I have buried it in the depths of my psyche, I still recall the fear and helplessness I felt. This was my normal as it probably was with many other Indigenous families then, and possibly still is with young school children today. I share this again, because we do not know what goes on in the homes of our students nor may they want you to know. When they come to your school, I hope you can welcome them unconditionally, care for them as you would care for your own children and provide them with a safe rich learning environment. When I received my Bachelor of Education degree, I promised myself to never be like those teachers who hurt me in school, or like those who cannot see past their own preconceived notions of Indigenous peoples. Instead, because I lived through trauma and for the most part, overcame it, I have a sincere understanding of how trauma of any kind can affect one's emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual well-being, therefore I lead with my heart and strive to always be empathetic and serve students and their families with unconditional love.

I was a school dropout at fifteen years with a grade eight education to count on for the rest of my life. I never thought about what my future would bring, I just lived for the day hanging out and helping my mom out at home. Though I chose to drop out of school, I do not recommend other young people to do this. Instead, I recommend you keep your dreams close to your heart, stay true to who you are and where you come from, and do not let anyone set limitations on your abilities. Know that Creator gave you the gift of life and that you are loved. Find your purpose and follow your path. The love and grace of Creator and His Son will bring you through the trials and tribulations of life, and the spiritual courage, resiliency, and values of your ancestral relations will always be with you and guide you through blood memory.

I married at seventeen and had four children at twenty-three. This was the most pivotal time in my life. It gave me eternal love, purpose, and responsibility. My husband and children

inspired me to become more intentional in my life. I returned to school, received a GED and worked in some respectful positions as a dietary aide, a housekeeping aide, a postal clerk, and a teacher associate. I was blessed and am grateful for my life with my husband, children, and grandchildren. The best lessons learned in life are those you share with those you love. Let love be your foundation in life.

My career in education spanned over forty years from teacher associate to director of education. It was not my plan to have a career in education but once I started working with marginalized children and youth in education, I was hooked. They were me as a child and I wanted their school experience to be rewarding and a memory they cherished as they reflected on their learning experiences. At each step of the echelon ladder in education, I was satisfied with the accomplishment I achieved and each position I earned as a result. However, it seemed the door of opportunity kept opening wider and wider, and forces within me were showing me the way, urging me to keep climbing. I became persistent along the way vying for every level of education attainment and the positions I was now qualified to do. I started believing in myself.

No longer did I feel like a failure or incapable of learning. I was fortunate to meet great people in education, some were mentors, and some became friends. I learned a lot from those relationships, some lessons I have actualized in my own career and some I filed because they did not fit in my backpack for educational leadership. Overall, it was amazing to think that my start-up in education was from a place where I was made to feel unworthy and hopeless as a student, to years later, a place in education that uplifted me and saw value in me as a person, an educator, and a leader. This was a journey, an unconventional journey to truly find my purpose in life, in education.

In closing, I have reached the last stage of my growth in educational leadership. I have morphed from a tiny being into a butterfly with beautiful wings. I have shared some of my most inner thoughts and lived experiences as an Indigenous iskwêwsis (girl), iskwêw (woman), wîcêwâkan (wife), okâwimâw (mother), ohkomimâw (grandmother), and educator through story to pass on the knowledge and lessons I have learned. By doing so, it is my hope that my story will be used as a steppingstone for others to stand up and be courageous; to find their voice; to reclaim their inherent identity and rightful place in this space we call Mother Earth; and to speak

out against the wrongs, injustices, and marginalization our Indigenous peoples have been subjected to for generations. I know that leadership flows through my veins in spirit and blood memory. I will forever behold the strength, resiliency, courage, wisdom, faith, forgiveness, and the traditional teachings of my mother, my spirit mother, and the grandmothers and grandfathers whose shoulders I stand on to guide me in leadership acumen and advocacy for improvements in Indigenous education.

### **Conclusion**

In Manuscript Four I shared my innermost thoughts, memories, and lived experiences. I shared these memorable moments and life experiences because they shaped the person I am today, as have the individuals who have influenced me along the way. I thank Creator for each moment and for every individual HE has placed in my Circle Of Life. My goal in the doctorate program was to share nitâcimowin (my story) filled with lived experiences from a school dropout to the highest level of education, a doctorate in educational administration with the hope that my story would encourage Indigenous and disadvantaged learners to never give up, to believe in self, to strive for excellence, and to fulfill their dreams and aspirations because they can. Though my lived experiences and historical past may align with those of my collective Indigenous relations, Manuscript Four is nitâcimowin (my story) and tâpwêmakân (it speaks the truth) from a place of vulnerability, hope, and love. In Manuscript Five, I conclude my autoethnographic dissertation with an overall synthesis, discussion, and final thoughts on Indigenous education moving forward.

## MANUSCRIPT FIVE

### Synthesis

#### Mirror Reflections

This dissertation was a mirror reflection of my lived experiences as a child, student, and school dropout in the early 1960s. Manuscript One provided the contextual framework for my dissertation. It addressed the inequities, disparities, and racism in my lived experiences as a student and in Indigenous education to date. In reviewing this chapter, my presumption for the greatest disparity gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous education is the lack of understanding and knowledge of Indigenous history which is Canadian history, Indigenous worldviews, languages, and traditional cultures and teachings. Though there are gaps of effective practices in Indigenous education, much more still needs to be done.

The purpose for me sharing my story (nitâcimowin) and my truths (nitâpwêwina) was to present the reasons why I dropped out of school, and to search for reasons why Indigenous students today have higher dropout and lower graduation rates than non-Indigenous students. For me, therein lay a problem of practice. It was my hope that my story would help uncover the root reasons for this phenomenon. The other purpose for sharing my story was to illustrate that being a school dropout does not forever define you. My autoethnography was a representation of how one can overcome struggles, challenges, and preconceived limitations to journey toward attaining higher education and a career in educational administration.

The Education Doctoral Degree (EdD) program at the University of Saskatchewan intrigued me with three of its core threads, 1) ethical leadership, 2) social justice and equity, and 3) Indigenous ways of knowing and contexts. I would learn that the fourth thread provided me a greater perspective of what I saw as problems of practice locally were also problems of practice globally. My intention before entering the EdD program was to someday tell my story of being a school dropout to becoming an educational leader in provincial and federal education systems. I saw the EdD program as an opportunity to bring this to fruition.

The first year courses provided in-depth overviews of educational leadership, educational leadership in governance, and educational leadership transformation. Though half of my forty plus years in education was as an educational administrator, the overview was a powerful refresher that helped me make connections to my own leadership, as well as to the leadership that influenced my decision toward a career in educational leadership. With this refreshed knowledge and the growing knowledge in designing practice-based research, I initially began to question how my story could be my dissertation until I learned about the autoethnographic approach.

### **Literature Review**

The literature review in Manuscript Two focused on Indigenous education, specifically, student dropout, graduation rates, disparity gaps, and inequities. Though I was the sole participant, researcher, and primary data for this study, I also chose secondary data from all sectors of government, educational institutions, scholarly researcher, and world renowned presenters to evidence the history of colonization and its intergenerational impact on Indigenous education, and to understand what the root causes and recommendations were for the phenomenon of continued low graduation rates, high dropout rates, and disparity gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. As I researched data, I also correlated it with my personal experiences as an Indigenous student. It seemed there were a lot of recommendations made over the years, but the educational outcomes for Indigenous students were still staggeringly unacceptable.

### **Autoethnographic Methodology**

In Manuscript Three, I provided a brief positioning of my life transition from a school dropout to a career in education, and now, as a doctoral student. After much angst, I chose the descriptive self-affirmative autoethnographic approach to share nitâcimowin (my story). Throughout this manuscript, I weaved my lived experiences as I developed my rationale for choosing an autoethnography, my position as the primary source of data collection, and my interpretation of the data. As well, the development of my findings were based on the secondary data of low graduation rates and high dropout rates, and the disparity gap between Indigenous

and non-Indigenous students. This data was correlated through my own primary data of lived experiences.

The autoethnographic approach opened the door for me to subjectively draw on my personal experiences and meanings (Cohen et al., 2018) of the world I grew up in as an Indigenous person, and who would later in life become an educational administrator and now a retired educational leader. There was no intention for me to return to the workforce after I received a doctorate in educational administration to apply the newfound knowledge or practices in another leadership role. Rather, my intention was to commit to achieving the epitome of educational attainment by completing the doctorate requirements and writing my dissertation with the combined newfound knowledge and my own practicing knowledge as an Indigenous educational leader, thus my story, thus my dissertation. It is my hope that this research will increase understanding, impact policy, motivate more appropriate forms of leadership, and inspire young Indigenous people to persevere. As well, my autoethnography is essentially important for non-Indigenous people to hopefully help them understand Indigenous issues, cultures, and values (Wilson, 2008) that emotionally, mentally, physically, and spiritual impact Indigenous students.

Kovach (2009) argued the methodology and methods we choose to use in our research is determined by our lived experiences which influence our choice of epistemological framework and theoretical lenses. I chose to use a traditional story narrative to share autobiographical memories (Lilyea & Cooper, 2021) of experiences and pivotal times in my life that evolved into my persona of leadership. Chang (2008) stated that what makes autoethnography ethnographic is its intent of gaining a cultural understanding. To provide the reader with an understanding of what life was like as an Indigenous iskwêwsis (girl) and iskwêw (woman) growing up and living with the subjugation of discriminatory racism, I had to share my innermost vulnerable realities as a child, student, and adult. Before I could go down this path, I had to do ceremony where I prayed and smudged for Creator to take my hand and walk me safely into the depths of my hidden memories. For this I had to dig deep into my psyche where I stored painful memories as a means to obliterate them from my life. In the research of Wilson (2008), he identified Indigenous research as ceremony because it comes from the shared aspect of Indigenous ontology and epistemology which is relationality, or that relationships form reality. Reliving my realities in my



writing was painful but it was also healing because I had greater connections and understandings for why I had chosen to write my story and why I felt so vulnerable. After getting past the first hurdle of sharing, I found sharing my personal experiences was less stressful, more purposeful, and healing.

## **Data Collection**

My research was a self-narrative of lived experiences and pivotal moments as a child, a school dropout, a wife and mother, and my journey into education as a career. As the sole participant and researcher, I was the primary contributor to my story and data collection. I initially started writing from memory using jot notes or other writings I did in the past about my life. In keeping with the purpose of my dissertation on why Indigenous students have higher dropout rates and lower graduation rates, I focused on my lived experiences as an Indigenous student who dropped out of school and as an educator and administrator who served many Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in provincial and federal schools. To help me stay focused, I needed more concrete data to guide my writing. Chang (2008), Cooper and Lilyea (2021); and Ellis et al., (2010) recommended that autoethnographers gather data from field notes, journal writing, self-observations, and artifacts to provide contextual information in my autoethnography. The exercise of data collection for sharing my story was beneficial in that my memories, family connections, pivotal experiences, lived experiences, accomplishments, and history were now at hand to help me generate rich data which included personal photos to provide context and support my primary data.

Considerable time was spent on gathering this data from coursework writings in the EdD classes and from other leadership presentations. I created data spreadsheets of external research and resources on the topics of Indigenous education, Indigenous student dropout and graduation rates, the impact of colonization on Indigenous education, the impact of leadership in education, and on the inequities and disparities in Indigenous education. For the primary data I created spreadsheets that detailed my history, school memories, marriage and motherhood, my career in education, as well as my interests, life-transforming experiences, mentors, and artifacts that I might include in my dissertation. I also created a timeline from birth to date depicting key periods in my life and a family tree showing my ancestral lineage. Though considerable time was

spent on data collection, adding personal memorabilia/photos was well worth the time in guiding my writing and tweaking my memory.

## **Data Interpretation**

The interpretation of data in my dissertation was organic in that I am the sole participant and researcher, and that the data is primarily comprised of my lived experiences and truths which are shared in story. Chang (2008) cited the research of Creswell (1998) who stated that interpretation involves making sense of the data, while Chang (2008) stated that meanings are not available from the data; rather they are already formulated in a researcher's mind, therefore, I am the generator, collector, and interpreter of the data. My autoethnography was written with preset biases as it was from my perspective as an Indigenous iskwêwsis then iskwêw sharing my personal experiences and truths. It was also written from my perspective of being an Indigenous student in school and what caused me to dropout at age fifteen. As an Indigenous educator and researcher, I came to realize that dropping out of school was still a problem in 21<sup>st</sup> Century education. I began to question why data on Indigenous education continuously showed alarmingly higher rates of school dropout and lower graduation rates than non-Indigenous students. My presumption for this gap was probably connected to my reasons for quitting school. To help me understand whether this was so, I keyed into the reasons why I dropped out of school to make connections to the existing data on school dropout and poor graduation rates to interpret similarities and differences, and to interpret how my personal story correlated with the secondary data on school dropout and low graduation rates.

## **Findings**

In sharing my story and researching Indigenous school dropout, low graduation rates, and the disparity gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in these areas, I have come to the conclusion that reasons for this phenomenon are deeply rooted in the repercussions of colonization and cultural genocide, and that education was established for Indigenous students to fail. The main question guiding my dissertation was related to me being a school dropout and non-graduate. To answer the question, 'What underlying principle(s) is/are at the root of the alarmingly low graduation rates and alarmingly high dropout rates for Indigenous students?', I

asked myself two ‘else’ questions and used secondary and primary research to correlate my reasoning.

**Why else are there disparity gaps in dropout and graduation rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students when the K-12 Saskatchewan curricular is mandated for all students?**

Mendelson (2008) blamed the phenomenon of low graduation rates for Indigenous students to years of colonization and the government’s oppressive control policies including the residential schools and the Indian Act. Wilkins (2017) argued there was a problematic imbalance in program delivery for Indigenous students, while Pratt et al., (2018), as referenced by Louie and Gereluk (2018), argued that current Canadian systems maintain a colonial agenda that forced indoctrination into Western systems and knowledge, oppressed Indigenous students through racism, and created little to no space for Indigenous content, pedagogy, or Indigenous educators and administrators (p. 44).

**âcimowin Correlation:** For years, my childhood and school years were clouded with racism, discrimination, hatred, and indifference. When I went to school in the 1950s and 60s, education was characterized with Dick and Jane basal readers, rote learning, direct teaching, teacher at front, desks in rows, corporal punishment, and where racism was also full-blown, both implicitly and explicitly. I learned about voyagers and explorers, the English and the French, the United States, the Hudson Bay Company, and the conquest of the North American Indians who were called savages in textbooks. There was no space for truth in Indigenous content in the curriculum. Instead, I was taught from the perspective of Eurocentric ideologies in Eurocentric educational structures under a colonial governance regime (Koptie, 2010). Reflecting back, my interpretation of my educational experience was that I was being conditioned to conform to the European ideals and to believe that I was inferior as an Indigenous person. I see now, why I was led into denying my identity and forced to feel shame for being Indian. This self-denial was imposed on me as a student by colonized mentalities, practices, and curriculum designed to inferiorize Indigenous students. I am sure we can all agree that racism exists in society, and therefore, whether we agree or not, colonialism which is rooted in racism, must also be deeply rooted in all structures of society and education.

**Why else do Indigenous students feel like they do not belong or that schools are not a safe space or place for them?**

The colonial treatment towards First Nations peoples has not only marginalized them in society but, it has also weakened their Indigenous realms of place, space, and voice in mainstream society (Khalifa et al., 2018). Friesen and Krauth (2012) referenced the research of Battiste (1995) who found the legacy of residential schools, and experiences of racism and marginalization in provincial schools have led parents to view schools with mistrust and anxiety. They also referenced Spence and White (2009); Richards, Vining, and Weimer (2010); and Beavon, Wingert, and White (2009) who found that a high incidence of social disadvantage exposure to poverty, lone parent households, mental and physical health issues, mobility issues, and absenteeism can create barriers.

**âcimowin Correlation:** As a victim of racism and marginalized subjugation, the attitude of indifference of many teachers toward my Indigeneity, did not make me feel safe or accepted. When teachers can mistakenly strap you without any regard for you as a child, or more specifically as a child who has their own identifiable traits, that is an outright disregard for diversity, dignity, and the human race. When others are not corrected for racially teasing and bullying you or because of your socio-economic status as an Indian girl, not only is that an injustice, but it is also another example of deep-rooted colonialism and savagery. When teachers and administrators can tell you that you do not have the smarts to make it past grade ten, that is a preconceived prejudice. This two-tiered practice for teaching and managing Indigenous students when I went to school, was the result of deep-rooted colonial mentalities. I suspect this mentality still exists on our schools which is why Indigenous students today feel they need to walk, or are being forced to walk, away from school. I was fifteen years old when I dropped out of school. It was a good decision for me at the time because it protected me from further contamination of my mind, but also because my unconventional path would teach me greater lessons beyond what I was taught in the classroom. It would also lead me to utterly understand who I am and where I came from, is inherently Indigenous.

## **nitâcimowin (My Story) nitâpwêwina (My Truths)**

Manuscript Four was nitâcimowin and nitâpwêwina. My journey travels an unconventional path from humble, uneducated beginnings to a significant career in education and educational administration. Throughout Manuscripts One, Two, and Three I shared bits and pieces of my lived experiences whereas Manuscript Four was inclusive of the primary data which provided an in-depth view into my life and the experiences that shaped my life. The purpose of sharing my innermost thoughts, memories, and lived experiences was to provide you with a glimpse of what life was like as an Indigenous iskwêwsis (girl), student, and iskwèw (woman) growing up and living in a time when colonization was very much the fabric of Canada, especially in my home town of Prince Albert. Most importantly, nitâcimowin is a journey through each stage of my life and the lessons learned that would take me from a school dropout to an established career as an educator, educational administrator, director of education, and soon, a doctorate in educational administration.

As an Indigenous school dropout at fifteen in 1963, and as an educator many years later, I realized that dropping out of school when I was young was more common than I initially thought. However, having served in both provincial and federal education systems, I realized that the phenomenon of Indigenous low graduation rates and high dropout rates were far too common in 21<sup>st</sup> Century education. Furthermore, I learned that the alarming disparity gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in these areas either remained the same or worsened. When Saskatchewan's 2023 data showed Indigenous students are graduating at 44% whereas non-Indigenous students graduated at 88%, I questioned why and how come this is happening in 2023. I used primary and secondary data to help me understand what the root cause(s) were for this phenomenon. My research concluded that the underlying reason for the disparity gap, and the low graduation/high dropout rates for Indigenous students is the deep-rooted fabric of colonialism embedded in the educational structures and practiced consciously or unconsciously. In the discussions and conclusions of this manuscript, I used primary and secondary data as sources I drew on to arrive at my conclusion.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

### **Intergenerational Colonialism is a Barrier**

The travesty in education for Indigenous students began with the implementation of residential schools where students like my mom only received a half day of academic learning and the other half as forced laborers doing domestic chores. The brutal onslaught of colonization and assimilation policies had a detrimental effect on Indigenous students who were legislated by policies to attend the regimental learning institutions. Through a series of assimilation, segregation, and integration policies and practices (White & Peters, 2009), Indigenous students were deprived from knowing, being, and practicing their inherent Indigeneity which caused severe emotional, spiritual, mental, and physical damage to their well-being and Indigenesness (Gamez et al., 2020; Koptie, 2010; and Voce et al., 2021) which First Nations leaders and secondary data sources have rightfully identified as a cultural genocide.

Residential school survivors were left to cope with their traumatic experiences on their own, though some, like my mom, embraced healing journeys, while others used addictive coping mechanisms to deaden their memories. Dr. Matè (2003) stated that whatever affected one generation, that has not been fully resolved, will be passed on to the next generation. Bombay et al., (2009) confirmed that traumatic memories were genetically embedded in the blood and psyche of trauma survivors, and its effect would cause emotional and psychological wounding over their lifespan and intergenerational trauma across generations.

In the research of Khalifa et al., (2018), they found characteristics of colonizing schools are evident in several leadership and administration practices from authoritative top-down leader to the use of schools and curriculum as a means to dislodge indigeneity and oppress Indigenous and minoritized students. They argued that Western epistemologies and structures became normalized and Indigenous ways became 'othered' through oppressive practices that have been sanitized, invisibilized, and excluded from official historical accounts and popularized understandings leaving behind a very White Western way of being, without really understanding how we arrived here.

In summation of this data, I have concluded that since the traumatic effects of colonization and cultural genocide affected not only the survivors, but also their generations thereafter, then the effects of colonization must also affect the subjugators of colonization and cultural genocide, who make up the dominate population in Canada, for generations thereafter. To me, this is the underlying principle for why colonial-like behaviours are so widespread in society, in our workplaces, learning places, medical places, justice, and even under our own roofs. Like racism, colonialism exists everywhere. It is deeply rooted in our minds and behaviours. Therefore, it is in our schools and educational structures. We cannot deny it any longer.

### **Blame: Who Me?**

The phenomenon of alarmingly high dropout rates and alarmingly low graduation rates for Indigenous students remains a serious concern locally, nationally, and globally. Provincial and federal governments, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (2017) have all acknowledged the phenomenon and made recommendations to eliminate or at minimum reduce the phenomenon.

This phenomenon has been a concern across all levels of governments, First Nations peoples and organizations, and educational institutions since the 1980s when I entered into the field of education and beyond. There has been considerable research, curriculum renewal, professional development, and specialized staffing undertaken to help reverse the phenomenon. Yet, high dropout and low graduation rates for Indigenous students persist and remains a black mark in education. I researched Indigenous education from the residential era to date as a means to provide data for nitâcimowin (my story) as a school dropout. Much of the data came from a colonial perspective where the blame for not graduating or staying in school was mostly attributed to students' Indigeneity, their socio-economic status, or being raised in a single-parent home. Though these factors may bear some truth in the problem, it was certainly unfair to suggest that because they were poor Indian children with only one parent in the family they could not learn or had no support from home to help them learn. This was a judgement I personally experienced in school when I failed grade four and when I was told I did not have the capacity to get beyond grade ten in high school. In the succeeding local, national, and global

data, the problem of low graduation and high dropout rates for Indigenous students focused on inequitable education, quality education, and disparity gap issues between Indigenous and non-Indigenous student achievement. For each study or report, an action was recommended to improve education outcomes for Indigenous students.

In Saskatchewan, the 2023 Provincial Auditor Report of Saskatchewan on graduation rates for Indigenous students indicated there was no change in the dismal graduation rates for the period of 2018-2021. Rather the report showed that Indigenous students graduation rate remained at 44% whereas non-Indigenous students' graduation rate remained at 88.7%. As well, the report made recommendations for the Ministry to make concerted efforts to improve education outcomes for Indigenous students (Provincial Auditor of Saskatchewan, 2023). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) Call to Action 7, called upon the federal government to develop a joint strategy to eliminate educational and employment gaps between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians (People for Education Research Institute, 2023). On February 27, 2012, in response to Shannon's Dream, the House of Commons passed a motion that called on the government to close the funding gap and to establish quality education for First Nations students (Boileau, 2020). The Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (2017) addressed the inadequate education supports for Indigenous students by developing the following formula to reverse the negative education outcomes – an inspirational leader, capable and committed staff, strong relations with students, parents, and community, insurmountable efforts to engage and support student success, and sustained commitment to achieve improvements.

Even with these action-oriented reports and studies from across the world which reaches a mass of educators and educational sectors locally, nationally, and globally, the data remains unacceptable. When you consider that the provincial curriculum must be taught in both federal and provincial schools in Saskatchewan, one must wonder where the breakdown is in the system. Louie and Gereluk (2021) argued that education must view disparities in educational success not as a deficiency of Indigenous learners but, as a deficiency in the educational structures whether that is at the policy level, division level, or school-based level.



## **Changing the Education Landscape**

The Inspiring Success Education Policy Framework (Saskatchewan Government, 2018) stated that in order to affect positive change, the responsibility lies within all teachers and administrators to transform their teaching and administrative practices both individually and collectively through continuous learning and professional development. Ermine (2007) argued that it was essential for educators to create ethical spaces of engagement and partnership where Indigenous knowledges and peoples are honoured and are active contributors to decolonizing the historical damage done by colonial education systems. Khalifa et al (2018) argued that the first step to transforming leadership is to acknowledge that they inherited some form of colonizing schools. They also referenced the research of Tompkins (2002) who stated that schools themselves are embedded in larger systems that privilege certain students, certain knowledge, certain ways of being at the expense of other students, other knowledge, and other ways of being in the world.

I had the opportunity to serve students in community schools as an educator and administrator in schools where Indigenous and disadvantaged students were a significant portion of the school enrolment. As a classroom teacher and school principal, I was part of educational teams who believed in students, and who believed that building community in schools, between school and home, and the larger community was essential to keep students engaged in learning and in school life. From the proverb ‘it takes a village to raise a child’, I say, ‘it also takes a village to educate a student.’ In community schools, we created well-established partnerships with the larger community, businesses, higher learning institutions, and Indigenous organizations to provide additional educational supports and greater opportunity for students to extend their learning and make connections beyond the classroom locally, nationally, and internationally. Most importantly, we honoured and celebrated our Indigenous students and their culture not just one day, week, or month of the school year, but throughout the school year. I was fortunate to have served under an inspirational leader when I was a classroom teacher. We had a capable and committed staff who built positive relationships with students, parents, and community. And we were committed to professional development and adjusting educational structures to better serve all learners. My personal response to how education can be decolonized, I suggest we begin with making all schools a community school and that education fully embrace community and

Indigenous education philosophies and their holistic principles in their practices and administration. As an empowered educator and leader in community schools, the innovations undertaken to support student learning was a team effort driven largely by Indigenous presence, the students, and I am proud to say, I was respectfully a participant, agent, and leader in that development.

### **Lasting Thoughts**

In reflection, writing this dissertation was a challenge in that it forced me to write about my most private and innermost experiences and memories. It forced me to recollect pieces of my childhood I had buried deep in my psyche. But once I shared those parts of my story, it was a release that needed to happen for me to heal old wounds or to let go of old memories. Those recollections no longer hurt me. Instead, they have become the primary reason for my advocacy against racism, discrimination, indifference, and prejudice in education, particularly, Indigenous education. There is no space in education for attitudes that dehumanize you or relegate your ability to learn and achieve, nor should there be.

The literature and primary data in this dissertation showed there is a problematic imbalance in program delivery for Indigenous students. This became more obvious when local, national, and global data reported that the disparity gaps in graduation and dropout rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners was a significant problem which required the commitment of all actors in education to make learning equitable for all students, particularly, the Indigenous students whose graduation rate is 40% lower than non-Indigenous students.

There was no doubt for me after reading the mounds of research on Indigenous education and its poor graduation rates and disparity gaps, which was affirmed through *nitâcimowin* (my story), that colonization still exists in our time, in our world, and in educational structures. Why else are there disparity gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous education outcomes? Why else are Indigenous students dropping out of school at higher rates than non-Indigenous students? Why else are there far fewer Indigenous administrators in high level positions in educational structures? The list could probably go on, but I believe the point is made that colonialism exists in educational structures and that educational transformation is essential to ensure equitable

educational services and quality education for all students especially, Indigenous students. There is no room for top/down leadership in Indigenous education. We need leaders who lead with their heart, who believe in the gift of learning for all students, who embrace diversity, who place students first, who work in partnership with families, who raise the bar in education and supports students to achieve at or beyond, who empowers others to be leaders in their areas of expertise, who is accountable for student learning and teacher efficacy, and who builds community in school and between school and the home.

My final assumption based on the secondary data and my primary data is that there must be a colonial legacy deeply rooted in education that is consciously or unconsciously operating a two-tiered practice in the delivery of education programs which in turn, is essentially obstructing improvement in Indigenous educational outcomes. How does one determine if this is so? I suggest more autoethnographic studies by Indigenous researchers who have dropped out of school could shed more light on the problem of why Indigenous students drop out of school at higher rates than non-Indigenous students and why Indigenous students graduate at lower rates than non-Indigenous students. The alarming rates for Indigenous students dropping out of school and not graduating is a K-12 problem of practice. Do we blame the student? No. That is a colonial mentality. As an educator and retired educational leader, I believe it is time to look inward and own your responsibility for this problem of practice. If we take pride in being a card carrier of a Professional A Teaching Certificate, then we also need to consciously make every effort to reverse the statistics which blatantly reflect problems of practice in education.

Educational change is inevitable and must happen sooner than later. I know that as an Indigenous iskwèw, okâwimâw, kohkum, câpân, and tâniskocâpân, my children, your children, our children have a right to education, a quality education that is equitably delivered and where all children have equal opportunity to maximize their potential and achieve their desired dreams.

*'If nothing ever changed, there would be no butterflies.'*

*- Authour Unknown (wishuponabutterfly.com)*

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# Appendix 1 – Behavioural Research Ethics Board Application



## Behavioural Application

For Internal Use Only

UnivRS Internal ID:

Date Received: [Click here to enter a date.](#)

### PART 1: KEY INFORMATION

Title\*: **A Cultural Metamorphosis: From Indigenous School Dropout to Educational Leadership**

Level of Risk: \* **Minimal risk**

Expected Start Date: \* 2024-05-01

Expected End Date: \* 2024-08-31

If applicable, explain why this application is time sensitive:

**I am in a three-year EdDoctoral program with an expected Fall 2024 graduation date. All requirements must be completed by June 30, 2024.**

### Project Personnel

Principal Investigator				
Name:	NSID:	Email:	Phone:	Organization (Department):
Michael Cottrell	mjc270	mjc270@usask.ca	306-966-7690	Educational Administration
Sub-Investigator(s)				
Name:	NSID:	Email:	Phone:	Organization (Department):
Gordon Martell	gam131	gam131@usask.ca	306-966-7584	Educational Administration
Student(s)				
Name:	NSID:	Email:	Phone:	Organization (Department):
A. Valerie Harper	avh265	avh265@usask.ca	306-361-4548	Educational Administration
Primary Contact				
Name:	NSID:	Email:	Phone:	Organization (Department):
A. Valerie Harper	avh265	avh265@usask.ca	306-361-4548	Educational Administration

Secondary Contact				
Name:	NSID:	Email:	Phone:	Organization (Department):
Michael Cottrell	mjc270	mjc270@usask.ca	306-966-7690	Educational Administration

**Sponsor(s)**

Sponsor:	Pending / Awarded
Mistawasis Nehiyawak	NA

**Agency(ies)**

This project is funded: \*  Yes  No

The funding supporting this project will be administered at the University of Saskatchewan:  Yes, complete Part A  No, complete Part B

**Part A: For Grants and Contracts administered by the U of S:**

Project Application(s) Directly Associated with the Fund(s) Supporting this Project  
Specify the UnivRS internal ID# (for pending grants or contracts): NA

Project(s) Directly Associated with the Fund(s) Supporting this Project  
Specify the UnivRS internal ID# (for awarded grants or contracts): NA

**Part B: For Grants or Contracts not administered by the U of S:**

Agency:	Pending / Awarded
NA	NA

**Location(s) Where Research Activities Are Conducted**

Enter every location where this research will be conducted under this Research Ethics Approval: \*  
**Saskatchewan**

Country(ies): \* List all countries where you will be conducting your research under this Research Ethics Approval: **Canada**

If this project will be conducted within schools, health regions, or other organizations, specify how you will obtain permission to access the site. Submit a copy of the certificate or letter of approval when obtained. NA

If you do not plan to seek approval, provide a justification:

**Other Ethics Approval**



This project has applied for/received approval from another Research Ethics Board(s) \*  Yes  No

If 'yes', identify the other Research Ethics Board(s):

**Conflict of Interest**

Confirm whether any member of the research team or their immediate family members will:

Receive personal benefits over and above the direct costs of conducting the project, such as remuneration or employment: *	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Receive significant payments from the Sponsor such as compensation in the form of equipment, supplies or retainers for ongoing consultation and honoraria: *	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Have a non-financial relationship with the Sponsor such as unpaid consultant, board membership, advisor or other non-financial interest: *	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Have any direct involvement with the Sponsor such as stock ownership, stock options or board membership: *	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Hold patents, trademarks, copyrights, licensing agreements or intellectual property rights linked in any way to this project or the Sponsor: *	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Have any other relationship, financial or non-financial, that if not disclosed, could be construed as a conflict of interest: *	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No

If yes was answered to any question(s), explain the personal benefit(s) and how the conflict will be managed:

**Part 2: PROJECT OVERVIEW**

**Project Overview**

Summarize this project, its objectives and potential significance: \*

**The purpose of my qualitative research is to share my story of transformation from a school dropout to an accomplished educational leader in both provincial and federal education systems. This transformation journeys through the identity and cultural struggles I faced as an Indigenous student/person who was subjected to blatant racism and demeaning attacks on my Indigeneity, yet through love, courage, hope, and will, I was able to transform that negativity in my life to a place of pride in self and ability, and the will to achieve my place in education.**

Potential Significance:

**As an Indigenous high school dropout in 1963, the current issue of high dropout rates and low graduation rates for Indigenous students concerns me. Since I have a relational connection to this phenomenon, it is my hope that my story will shed light on some of the educational practices that forced me, and probably other Indigenous students today, to leave school.**

**As an educational leader, I know from personal experience, what I needed to do to engage and encourage graduation outcomes for Indigenous students. It is my hope that my research will be another source of information for provincial and federal schools systems to consider as they strive to improve graduation outcomes for Indigenous students.**

Major Question(s):

1. What cultural and life transformations were influential in my emergent career in educational administration?
2. How can telling my story provide inspiration and hope to others with similar background, Indigenous or non-Indigenous?
3. How can telling my story evoke systemic educational change to improve graduation rates for Indigenous students?

Provide a description of the research design and methods to be used: \*

My research is a qualitative self-study using an autoethnographic methodology. The autoethnographic approach provides me the platform to narrate my ontological and epistemological perspectives and lived experiences of/in the world I know/knew as an Indigenous person. It also allows me to narrate and encapsulate my transformational journey to educational leadership. I use four brief descriptive narratives to provide a glimpse of the world I knew growing up and as I transitioned into adulthood and my career which I have titled 'excerpts' in Chapter Three. It is these areas that I expound on in Manuscript Four.

**Narrative**

Story is honoured in our Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing. The resiliency of Indigenous peoples to retain their language and their cultural traditions is because of the stories and language passed on for generations. How I write and how I live comes from a place of *tâpwêwin* (truth) and the heart. Since this research is my story, I chose to use a narrative strategy of confessional-emotive writing to expose my most vulnerable self (Chang, 2009) through an autobiographical sharing of my lived and cultural experiences and pivotal epiphanies that changed the course of my path from school dropout to educational leadership.

**Data Collection**

*Primary Data* – As the sole participant and researcher, I am the primary contributor to my story and data collection. Thus, my data collection consists of mostly primary data which recounts my lived and cultural experiences as an Indigenous child and student in the nineteen fifties and sixties. The data also recounts the abuse of racism, indifference, and demeaning attacks on my indigeneity which inevitably forced me to quit school when I was fifteen. It also speaks to the reclamation of my inherent identity and place in education as a mature student and later, as a graduate student who would go on to achieve a full career in educational administration in both provincial and federal education systems. The primary data for my research included a collection of personal memories, field notes such as personal calendar and schedule logs over the course of my career, personal writings and presentation data, my family tree depicting my ancestral lineage, experiential data sheets including a time lapse from childhood to adulthood, timelines of pivotal moments in my personal life and professional life, data sheets of notable mentors/people, life-transforming experiences, interests, and memorable artifacts that were instrumental in my personal, social, and cultural/professional development, and the stories and teachings passed on to me by my deceased mother, grandfather, and Elder friend.



*Secondary Data* – Since my story is about being a school dropout, I reviewed many scholarly and peer reviewed articles on the impact of colonization on education, the inequities in Indigenous education, the disparities in graduation rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, and the impact of leadership in student engagement and graduation attainment. Other secondary sources reviewed included journals, theses/ dissertations, social media, provincial, federal, and international sources, and statistical resources all of which were authored by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers and levels of governments. I created spreadsheets documenting the research I reviewed for access of specific information and as references for my research. The secondary data honours my voice as the primary source and also adds another layer of credibility and trustworthiness (Cooper & Lilyea, 2021).

#### Data Analysis

My analysis was a process of reviewing, interpreting its cultural/relational significance, selecting, and organizing the data based on important milestones or pivotal epiphanies in my life. As I dug deep into my memory bank, my thoughts immediately went to places of fear, insecurity, and failure. All of which I knew I would have to overcome as I moved throughout my life. Like a butterfly, I saw my life morphing through four stages of life and development and how each stage was reliant on the other to fully evolve into its spiritual beauty. I drew on the butterfly as an analogy to depict the four pivotal stages that shaped my life. I used Kovach's (2009) Indigenous methodology of bundling the data into themes. After repeatedly reviewing, selecting and organizing the primary data, four emergent themes and the lessons learned evolved. These are the themes that will be presented in Chapter Four of my research.

1. Marriage, Motherhood, and Family – unconditional love, purpose, responsibility, and future
2. Employment and Education – self-worth, caregiving, ability, wisdom, and confidence
3. Identity – spiritual, affirmation, blessed, ancestral, and life everlasting
4. Leadership – learning, excellence, equity, relational, shared, humbleness, integrity, respect, and honesty

#### Limitations/ Delimitations

In writing an autoethnography the limitations I found begin with me being the sole researcher and participant, and that my research is primarily evidenced by my truths and lived experiences. However, if needed, the secondary data I use honours my voice and provides credibility to my truths. Another limitation is that my lived experiences as a dropout are from the era of the nineteen fifties and sixties which may or may not reflect the experiences of alike students today. The fact that I use Indigenous and First Nations interchangeably in my research to identify people indigenous to this land may confuse the reader, thus this limitation is identified in the stipulative definitions. I choose not to use the term Aboriginal in my research unless it is a direct quote or used by other authors. I prefer not to use the Constitutional term Aboriginal because it is a limitation used to define three distinct groups of peoples, First Nations, Métis, and Inuit, rather than honouring their distinct individuality and nationhood. Throughout my research I use my lived experiences to add personal credibility to the information being presented which could be perceived as a limitations. My last limitation is that education systems are so entrenched in their structures that makes my research more difficult to influence systemic change.

Delimitations to my research are that my lived experiences are centralized from the perspectives of an iskwêwis (girl) and an iskwêw (woman) whose âcimowin (story) and Indigenous ways of knowing and being is tâpwê -nitâcimowin (my true story).

The definitions for Plains Cree words used in my research are found under Stipulative Definitions and Plains Cree Relational Terms in Chapter One.

#### Duration and Location of Data Collection Events

Outline the duration and location of data collection for the following, if applicable:

Audio/Video Recording(s): **NA**

Ethnography: **NA**

Focus Group(s): **NA**

Group Interview(s): **NA**

Home Visit(s): **NA**

Individual Interview(s): **NA**

Non-Invasive Physical Measurement(s): **NA**

Participant Observation: **NA**

Questionnaire(s): **NA**

Secondary Use of Data or Analysis of Existing Data: **NA**

Other:

#### Internet-Based Interaction

Confirm whether this project will involve internet-based interactions with participants, including e-mails: \*

Yes  No

If a third party research or transaction log tool, screen capturing or website survey software or masked survey site is used, describe how the security of data gathered at those sites will be ensured: **NA**

Describe how permission to use any third party owned site(s) will be obtained: **NA**

If participants may be identified by their email address, IP address or other identifying information, explain how this information will remain private and confidential: **NA**

#### Anonymity and Confidentiality

Confirm whether participants will be anonymous in the data gathering phase of the project: \*

Yes  No

**NA – I am the sole researcher and participant.**

If 'No' was answered to the previous question, explain how the confidentiality of participants and their data will be protected, and include whether the research procedures or collected information may reasonably be expected to identify an individual:

Identify any factors that may limit the researchers' ability to guarantee confidentiality:

Limits due to the nature of group activities, such as a focus group where the project team cannot guarantee confidentiality: NA	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Limits due to context: individual participants could be identified because of the nature or size of the sample: NA	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Limits due to context: individual participants could be identified because of their relationship with the project team: NA	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Limits due to selection: procedures for recruiting or selecting participants may compromise the confidentiality of participants, such as those referred to the project by a person outside the project team: NA	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No

Other confidentiality limits:

**The primary data used in this research includes stories and teachings shared with me by my mother, grandfather, and Knowledge Keeper friend. In our traditional teachings, when something is shared with you it becomes a story or teaching that you can use to share with others. I also make reference to my mother's residential school records which I received from the Presbyterian Church public archives for Birtle Residential School in Birtle, Manitoba. My beloved mother and grandfather are deceased as is my friend and traditional Knowledge Keeper, Albert Scott. I respectfully consulted with Fran, Albert's wife, about sharing some of his teachings in my research. She gave me permission and her blessings.**

**I also honour Ms. Langley in my dissertation as one of my mentors and an advocate when I was a teacher associate at Saskatoon Public School Division in 1980-1981. She encouraged me to consider teaching as a career. Ms. Langley is also deceased.**

### Risks and Benefits

Explain the psychological, emotional, physical, social or legal harms that participants may experience during or after their participation:

Describe how the above risks will be managed. If appropriate, identify any resources to which they can be referred: NA

Describe the likely benefits of the research that may justify the above risk(s): NA

### Part 3: Community Engagement

#### Aboriginal Peoples and Community Engagement

Aboriginal communities, peoples, language, culture or history is the primary focus of this project: *	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Aboriginal people will comprise a sizable proportion of the larger community that is the subject of research even if no Aboriginal-specific conclusions will be made: *	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable
There is an intention to draw Aboriginal-specific conclusions from this project: *	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
This project will involve community-based participatory research: *	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No



There will be a research agreement between the researcher and community:  Yes  No

### Aboriginal Engagement and Community-Based Participatory Research

If 'yes' was answered to any of the above questions, complete the following:

Outline the process to be followed for consulting with the appropriate community: NA

Describe the organizational structure and community processes required to obtain approval within the specific community(ies): NA

Describe any customs and codes of research practice that apply to the particular community(ies) affected by the project: NA

Describe how the research plan will consider mutual benefit to the participating community(ies), support capacity building through enhancement of the skills of community personnel and the recognition of the role of elders and other knowledge holders: NA

Describe how the final project results will be shared with the participating community(ies): NA

## PART 4: RECRUITMENT AND CONSENT

### Participant Recruitment

Indicate the expected number of participants and provide a brief rationale for the number: \* NA

Describe the criteria for including participants: \* NA

Describe the criteria for excluding participants: \*

Provide a detailed description of the method of recruitment, such as how and whom will identify and contact prospective participants: \* NA

If the project involves vulnerable, distinct, or cultural groups, or if the project is above minimal risk, describe the research team's experience or training in working with the population: NA

Explain any relationship between the researchers and the participants, including any safeguards to prevent possible undue influence, coercion or inducement: \* NA

Provide the details of any compensation or reimbursements offered to the participants: NA

### Consent Process

Describe the consent process:

Specify who will explain the consent form and consent participants: \* NA

Explain where and under what circumstances consent will be obtained from participants: \* NA

Describe any situation where the renewal of consent might be appropriate and how it may be obtained: \* NA

If deception of any kind will be used, justify its use, describe the protocol for debriefing and re-consenting participants upon completion: \* NA

If any of the participants are not competent to consent, describe the process by which their capacity or competency will be assessed, identify who will consent on his/her behalf (including any permission

or information letter to be provided to the person or persons providing alternate consent), as well as the assent process for participants: NA

Describe how and when participants will be informed about their right to withdraw, including the procedures to be followed for participants who wish to withdraw at any point during the project: \*  
NA

## PART 5: SECURITY AND STORAGE

### Data Security and Storage

Identify the research personnel responsible for data collection: \*

**I am the sole researcher and participant therefore I am responsible for the primary and secondary data collection used in this study.**

Specify who will have access to raw data, which may include information that would identify participants: \*

**NA There are no other participants in this research other than me. The raw data is only accessible by me, and the principal investigators in the EdD program at the University of Saskatchewan Educational Administration Department.**

Describe the data storage plans, including the arrangements for preventing the loss of data: \*

**All electronic data will be stored and saved on the student researcher's personal laptop which is password protected. The data is transferred electronically to the principal investigators as an Adobe document for storage as per U of S data storage policies.**

Confirm whether the Principal Investigator will be responsible for data storage: \*  Yes  No

If no, specify the reasons and indicate who will be responsible for data storage: NA

Specify how long data will be retained: \* **5 years minimum as per University of Saskatchewan Guidelines**

If other, specify duration and provide justification: NA

Explain how the collected data is intended to be published, presented, or reported: \*

**The data in this research will be used for the student researcher's EdD dissertation and may be published in academic journals or used for presentations at conferences, Indigenous organizations, and other educational meetings, and potentially, a future memoir.**

Describe the final disposition of research materials: \*

**The disposition of researcher's materials will be stored as Adobe documents on researcher's personal thumb drive and One Drive, and on principal investigators' One Drive at the U of S for five years as per storage policies. The dissertation data is electronically transferred to principal investigators via protected access and password protection.**

State whether data will be transferred to a third party: \*  Yes  No

Organization(s) where data will be transferred:

Indicate how data will be transferred to the third party: Password protected and Encrypted portable media - i.e. Thumb drive

If other, please specify:

## PART 6: DECLARATION OF PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR

By submitting this application form, the Principal Investigator (PI) attests to the following:

- the information provided in this application is complete and correct.
- the PI accepts responsibility for the ethical conduct of this project and for the protection of the rights and welfare of the human participants who are directly or indirectly involved in this project.
- the PI will comply with all policies and guidelines of the University and affiliated institutions where this project will be conducted, as well as with all applicable federal and provincial laws regarding the protection of human participants in research.
- the PI will ensure that project personnel are qualified, appropriately trained and will adhere to the provisions of the Research Ethics Board-approved application.
- that adequate resources to protect participants (i.e., personnel, funding, time, equipment and space) are in place before implementing the research project, and that the research will stop if adequate resources become unavailable.
- any changes to the project, including the proposed method, consent process or recruitment procedures, will be reported to the Research Ethics Board for consideration in advance of implementation.
- will ensure that a status report will be submitted to the Research Ethics Board for consideration within one month of the current expiry date each year the project remains open, and upon project completion.
- if personal health information is requested, the PI assures that it is the minimum necessary to meet the research objective and will not be reused or disclosed to any parties other than those described in the Research Ethics Board-approved application, except as required by law.
- if a contract or grant related to this project is being reviewed by the University or Health Region, the PI understands a copy of the application, may be forwarded to the person responsible for the review of the contract or grant.
- if the project involves Health Authority resources or facilities, a copy of the ethics application may be forwarded to the Health Authority research coordinator to facilitate operational approval.

## DOCUMENT(S)

Please provide a list of documents that are being submitted along with this application: e.g. Consent forms, questionnaires, interview questions, data collection sheets, recruitment materials.



## Appendix 2 – Behavioural Research Ethics Board Certificate of Approval



Behavioural Research Ethics Board (Beh-REB) 16-Apr-2024

### **Certificate of Approval**

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Application ID: 4704

Principal Investigator: Michael Cottrell

Department: Department of Educational  
Administration

Student(s): A. Valerie Harper

Funder(s):

Sponsor: Mistawasis Nehiyawak

Title: A Cultural Metamorphosis: From Indigenous School Dropout to Educational Leadership

Approved On: 16-Apr-2024

Expiry Date: 16-Apr-2025

Approval Of: Behavioural Research Ethics Application

Acknowledgment Of:

Review Type: Delegated Review

#### **CERTIFICATION**

The University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board (Beh-REB) is constituted and operates in accordance with the current version of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans TCPS 2 (2022). The University of Saskatchewan Beh-REB has reviewed the above-named 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 project, and for ensuring that the authorized project is carried out according to the conditions outlined in the current approved protocol. This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above time period provided there is no change in experimental protocol or consent process or documents.

#### **ONGOING REVIEW REQUIREMENTS**

Any significant changes to your proposed method, or your consent and recruitment procedures must be reported to the Chair through submission of an amendment for Beh-REB consideration in advance of implementation.

To remain in compliance, a status report (renewal of closure form) must be submitted to the Beh-REB Chair for consideration within one month prior to the current expiry date each year the project remains open, and upon project completion. Please refer to the Research Ethics Office website for further instructions and current forms.

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*Digitally Approved by Olga Lovick  
Vice-Chair, Behavioural Research Ethics Board  
University of Saskatchewan*

Appendix 3 – Data Excerpts from Birtle Residential School for Helen Johnston (#0333)

3. a.) Registration and Assigned Number

Note: Signatures has been removed for privacy/security reasons in publicly-accessible documents.

BIR-002513-0003

### APPLICATION FOR ADMISSION

To the  
Deputy Superintendent General  
of Indian Affairs,  
Ottawa, Canada.

Ottawa, August 9<sup>th</sup> 1934

Sir,—

I hereby make application for admission of the undermentioned child into the Birtle Residential School; to remain therein under the guardianship of the Principal for such term as the Department of Indian Affairs may deem proper:

Indian name of child \_\_\_\_\_

English name Annis Helen Johnston 0333

Age seven

Name of Band Mistawasis

No. of ticket under which child's annuity is paid 186

Father's full name and No. Solomon Johnston 186

Mother's full name and No. Grand Johnston 186

Parents living or dead Both living

State of child's health Good

Religion Presbyterian

Does applicant speak English? a little

Previously attended Mistawasis

Note—If mother or guardian signs, agent must forward full explanatory note.

I hereby certify that the above application for admission has been read over and interpreted to the applicant and that the contents were explained to him. I witnessed his signature on this \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_ 1934.

I recommend the admission of the above child, who is of good moral character and is eligible to be admitted to the school.

\*Principal or other official of the school must not sign as witness.

Note—All the above particulars must be fully given, especially the "Name of Band," "No. of ticket under which child's annuity is paid" and "Religion." The minimum age for admission is seven (7) years, except in the case of an orphan, destitute or neglected child. When application is made for the admission of such cases, full particulars should accompany the application.

Form No. 21. (over)



3. b.) Certificate of Health

Note: Signature has been removed for privacy/security reasons for publicly-accessible documents.

BIR-002513-0004

Agency \_\_\_\_\_  
Birth Indian School \_\_\_\_\_  
August 25<sup>th</sup> 1884

### CERTIFICATE OF HEALTH

Annuity Ticket; Name and number and Band of Parent or Guardian—  
Solomon Johnston Neustawasis

Candidate's Name Annie Helen Johnston

Age Seven years  
Height 46 1/2 inches  
Weight 45 lbs.

State defects of limbs, if any None  
State defects of eyesight, if any None  
State defects of hearing, if any None  
State signs of scrofula or other forms of tubercular disease, if any None  
Describe what cutaneous disease, if any None  
State whether subject to fits No  
State whether child has had small-pox No  
State whether vaccinated, and if so, in what year Vaccination March  
Is this candidate generally of sound and healthy constitution, and fitted to enter an Indian School?  
Yes.

I certify that I have made a personal examination and that the answers set down by me are correct.

\_\_\_\_\_  
M.D.

N.B.—No child suffering from scrofula or any form of tubercular disease is to be admitted to school; if in any special case it is thought that this rule should be relaxed, a report should be made to the Department setting forth the facts.

3. c.) First Indian Pupil to Attend Birtle High School

**INDIAN RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL QUARTERLY RETURN**

Page 1

No.	Name	Age	Sex	Religion	Date of entry												Remarks	Date of departure	Remarks
					1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12			
18	Isabelle Johnson	18	F	Methodist														Jan 18/04	Late returning
19	John Johnson	17	M	Methodist														1 Aug/04	
20	John Johnson	16	M	Methodist														1 Aug/04	
21	John Johnson	15	M	Methodist														1 Aug/04	
22	John Johnson	14	M	Methodist														1 Aug/04	
23	John Johnson	13	M	Methodist														1 Aug/04	
24	John Johnson	12	M	Methodist														1 Aug/04	
25	John Johnson	11	M	Methodist														1 Aug/04	
26	John Johnson	10	M	Methodist														1 Aug/04	
27	John Johnson	9	M	Methodist														1 Aug/04	
28	John Johnson	8	M	Methodist														1 Aug/04	
29	John Johnson	7	M	Methodist														1 Aug/04	
30	John Johnson	6	M	Methodist														1 Aug/04	
31	John Johnson	5	M	Methodist														1 Aug/04	
32	John Johnson	4	M	Methodist														1 Aug/04	
33	John Johnson	3	M	Methodist														1 Aug/04	
34	John Johnson	2	M	Methodist														1 Aug/04	
35	John Johnson	1	M	Methodist														1 Aug/04	

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BIR-0014

3. d.) Talk of the Town

**BIRTLE INDIAN RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL**  
(PRESBYTERIAN)  
**R. WEBB, PRINCIPAL**

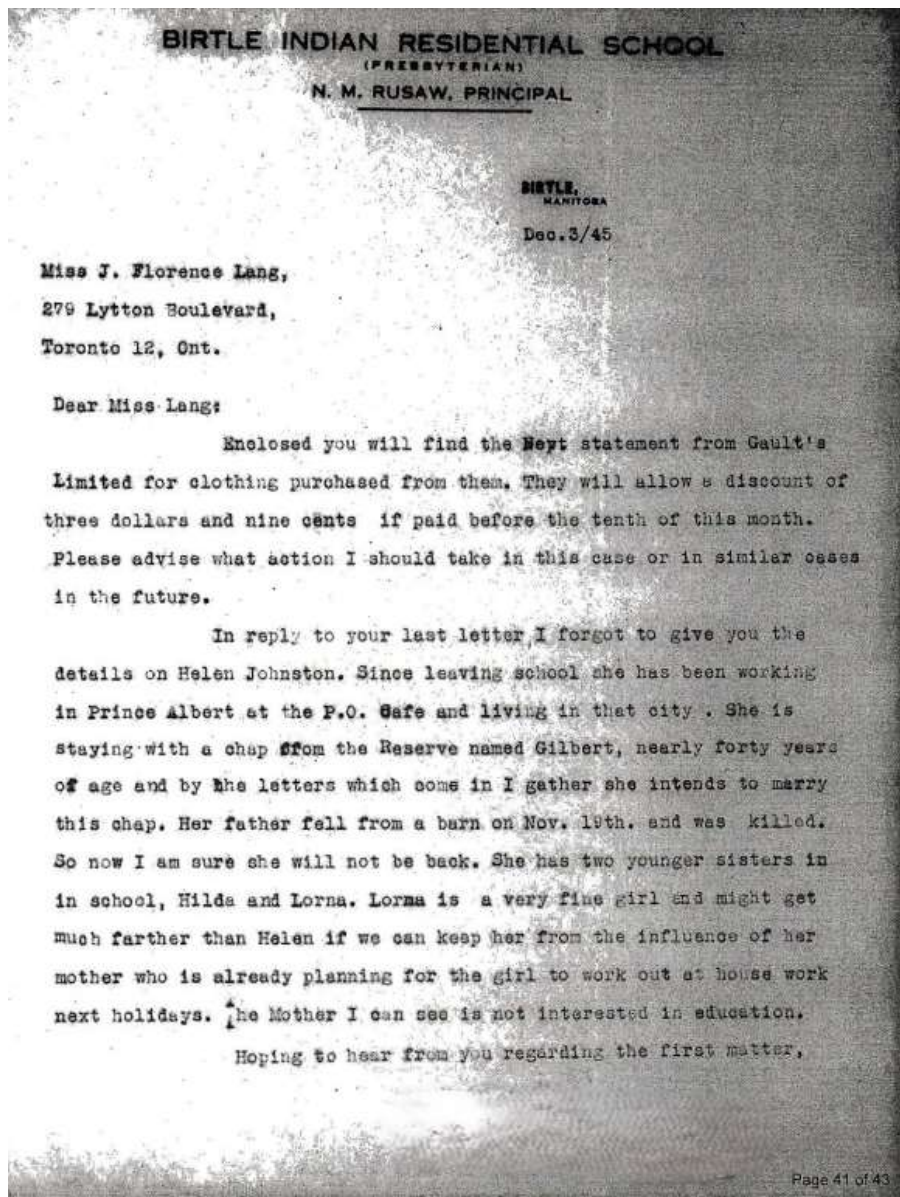
BIRTLE, Manitoba, Dec. 4, 1944.

Dear Miss Lang:

You were asking how Helen Johnston is getting along in the town school. Her teachers say that she seems to be a good average student. But, they would rather wait until after the Term exams for a final statement. She was very shy at first; but she is a little better now. It's really quite the talk of the town that an Indian girl is going on to High school.

### 3. e.) Why Helen Did not Return to Residential School

Note: Signature has been removed for privacy/security reasons in publicly-accessibly documents.



## Appendix 4 - Paternal and Maternal Genealogy for A. Valerie Harper

### 4a.) Alexander Isbister (b. 1794) (m. Fanny Sinclair) Genealogy

PARTIAL GENEALOGY - ISBISTER / DREAVER/ HARPER FAMILIES													
JOHN ALEXANDRA ISBISTER (b. 1794 or 1796) (m. FANNY SINCLAIR)													
CHILDREN													
Gen. 1													
2	Betsy (Elizabeth)	John	James  (founder of PA)	William	David	Adam	Fanny	Mary	Robert Myles (b. 1848) (m. Margaret Draver (b. 1859))	Eben	Alexandra	George	Benjamin
3									(All our great grandfathers) John James Draver Isbister* Francis Isbister (b. 1878) Helen (Ellen) Isbister Edward Isbister George Isbister John (Jack) Isbister (1885)* Frederick Isbister (1889)* Margaret (Maggie) Ahenakew William Joseph Isbister*				

3 Francis Isbister (m. Wright; 2nd m. John Harper) - Robert (m. Florence Morrisette) Harper Genealogy

3 Frederick Isbister (Annie Sasakamoose) - Gilbert Isbister (m. Helen Johnston) Genealogy

3 John (Jack) Isbister (Annie Sasakamoose) - Cecil Isbister (Helen Isbister) Genealogy

3 William Joseph Isbister (Ada Ahenakew) - Mariel Isbister (m. Frederick Draver) Genealogy



#### 4b.) Isbister/ Harper Genealogy

Gen.	PARTIAL GENEALOGY - JOHN ALEXANDER ISBISTER (b. 1794/1796) m. Fanny Sinclair									
1	ROBERT MYLES ISBISTER (b.1848) (m. Margaret Dreaver (b. 1859)									
2	(children)									
3	James (b. 1876)	Francis (b. 1875) (m. Wright) (m. John Harper)	Helen (b. 1880) (Ellen)	Edward (b. 1884)	George (b. 1886) Hardy	John (Jack) (b. 1885) (m. Annie Saskatchewan)	Frederick (b. 1889) (widow - Annie Saskatchewan (b. 1886) (Nancy Saskatchewan) (Mama Bird)	Margaret (b. 1892)	Richard (b. 1895)	William (Bill) (b. 1887)
4		Maggie Wright  Mary Harper Kate Harper William Harper Robert Myles Harper (b. 1914 - 1995)				Ellen John Cecil Isbister (b. 1917 - 1995)** Mebina Tony Gerrale Bernice Lorna Kenny	Gilbert Isbister (b. 1912 - 1984)**  Robert Ernest			
4		Robert Myles Harper (b. 1914-1995) (m. Florence Morrisette (b. 1920 - 2015)				Cecil Isbister (b. 1917- 1995)** (widow - Helen Isbister (b. 1927-2019)	Gilbert Isbister (b. 1912-1984)** (m. Helen Johnston (b. 1927-2019)			
5		Paul Edgar (b. 1945-2022) (m. Aileen Valerie Isbister) Bernice (b. 1946 - 2018) (m. Joyce Buffalo) Rita (b. 1947 - 2022) (m. R. Zankowski) Lorna (b. 1948) (m. D. Gray) Linda (b. 1949- 2000) Dorcas (b. 1950 (m. Peter Gardippi) John (b. 1951 - 2013) Sharon (b. 1952) (m. A. Zimmerman; 2nd m. David Genale) Judy (b. 1954 - 2013) Lorna (b. 1956-2013) (m. H. Wason; 2nd m. Lorna) Myles' Chip (b. 1957- 2010) Brenda (b. 1964) (m. J. M. Tremblay) Rosaliah (b. 1960) (m. L. Quinn; 2nd m. Robert Vismette) Sandra (b. 1961) (m. Barry Kingfisher) Roland (b. 1964) Robert Jr. (b. 1964 - 2004)				Ronald (b. 1951) (m. Maggie Genale) Arnold (b. 1952 - 2022) Marionne (b. 1954 - 1977) (m. Terry Isbister) Colleen (b. 1955 - 2016) Rita (b. 1956 - 2014) (m. J. Lorenz) Gleada (b. 1958) (m. Barry Sopp) Lloyd (b. 1959) (m. Shirley Binette) Roderick (b. 1960) Debbie (b. 1962) Shelly (b. 1963) (m. Dennis Lambie) Dana (b. 1964)	Verna L. Isbister (b. 1948-2024) (m. Wilma Parks) Arlene Valerie Isbister (b. 1948) (m. P. Edgar Harper)			

#### 4c) Isbister/Johnston/ Harper Genealogy

Gen. 1	Unknown	<b>JOHNSTON / ISBISTER/ HARPER GENEALOGY</b>		John Alexander Isbister (1794 or 1796) (m. Fanny Sinclair)
2	nicápán JACOB JOHNSTON (b. 1851-1931) Mistawasis Nehiyawak (m. Isabel Starblanker) CHIEF BROKEN JAW'			nicápán ROBERT MYLES ISBISTER (b. 1848) nicápán (m. Margaret Dreaever (b. 1859)  Mistawasis Nehiyawak
3	nimosóm SOLOMON JOHNSTON (b. 1888 - 1980) Mistawasis Nehiyawak Married March 3, 1919 nóhkóm (m. Mary Duncan (b. 1905 - 2000) (Daughter of Eliza Big Man)			nimosóm FREDERICK ISBISTER (b. 1889) nóhkóm (wíwéwákan-Annie Savakamoose (b. 1894)  Ahtahkakoop Cree Nation
4	okáwimáw (m. HELEN JOHNSTON (b. 1927-2019) Mistawasis Nehiyawak nohtáwiy (m. Gilbert Isbister - 1946) Ahtahkakoop Cree Nation	<b>MARRIED JANUARY 7, 1946</b>		nohtáwiy GILBERT ISBISTER (b. 1912-1984 ) Ahtahkakoop Cree Nation okáwimáw (m. Helen Johnston - 1946) Mistawasis Nehiyawak
5	<b>Arlene Valerie Isbister (b. 1948)</b>  <b>MARRIED MAY 7, 1966</b>  <b>Paul Edgar Harper (b. 1945 - 2022)</b>			
6	Shawn Paula Harper (b. 1967) (m. Solomon Sanderson - 1988)	Jason Vince (b. 1968)	Travis Lee (b. 1969 - 1986)	Kari Rochelle (b. 1972) (m. Ernie Jules Roy (1952-2013)
7	Amanda Lee Anne Sanderson (b. 1986)  Keegan David Saul Sanderson (b. 1988)	Chasity Rae Arlene Demontigny (b. 1988)  Tristen Leo Otto (b. 2011)		Aaron Travis Jules Harper (b. 1994)  Jade Ryan Shaun Harper (b. 2000)
8	Emma Shante Dylan Sanderson (b. 2004)	Liam Sawyer Otto (b. 2014)		
9	Aniyah Florence Gray Sanderson (b. 2023) Khabl Hade Paul Sanderson (b. 2024)	Rhiannon Anderson (b. 2001)		
8	Keshawn Wade Sanderson (b. 2009) Nevaeh Raine Wolf (b. 2011) Blake Solomon Lee Wolf (b. 2012)	Javelin Jaguar M. Anderson (b. 2016) Josiah C. Anderson (b. 2018) Riot Lüth B. Bremner (2023)		