"Mother First, Student Second": Challenging Adversity and Balancing Identity in the Pursuit of University-level Education as First Nations Mothers in Northeastern Ontario

by

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ABSTRACT

The literature surrounding the educational experiences of Indigenous Peoples is an ever-growing and diverse area of research in Canada. However, within this field, the voices of First Nations mothers attending post-secondary needs further development. Through a decolonizing methodology and the use of autoethnography and Indigenous storytelling, this project was designed to explore and better understand our experiences as First Nations student-mothers during the pursuit of university-level education while caring for our children. I argue that Canada's oppressive history of colonialism and the resulting intergenerational trauma have had specific implications on the post-secondary experiences of the First Nations mothers who participated in this research. The First Nations student- mothers from Laurentian University in Sudbury, Ontario, Canada who contributed to this research tell diverse stories about their experiences however, our narratives intersect in several ways. Areas of interest that emerged from the collected narratives include: (1) how we, as First Nations student-mothers have overcome obstacles, including what difficulties arose for us in the decision to pursue post-secondary education; what motivators contribute to our ongoing success, and how we experience self-doubt and internalized oppression despite our achievements and (2) how we, as First Nations student-mothers have blended our identities as First Nations women, mothers, and students within the university experience. Ultimately, this project aimed to contribute to continued efforts towards decolonization while furthering Indigenous-led research which hopes to improve the educational outlook for future generations of First Nations mothers.

Keywords

Academic, Decolonizing, Education, First Nations, Identity, Indigenous, Internalized Oppression, Mothers, Resilience, Students, University

RESPECTING INDIGENOUS RIGHTS

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) is a ground-breaking report which establishes "the collective rights and minimum standards on survival, dignity and wellbeing to a greater extent than any other international text" for Indigenous Peoples of the world (Fact Sheet on the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 2011, p.2). The UNDRIP was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly and although it is not a legally binding instrument of law; it has become a standard of practice for governmental policy and law-makers internationally. The following discussion on the UNDRIP outlines the principles and standards that are fueling the forward momentum of reconciliation for Indigenous Peoples in Canada and around the world. Further in the discussion, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRCC;2015) relays these principles and standards by providing the framework for implementation and Calls to Action that are necessary in order to respect, protect, and honour the damaged relationship between Canada and its Indigenous Peoples which has resulted in lower educational attainment for First Nations women in Canada.

At the 15th session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in May of 2016, at which I was an observer, Canada became a full supporter of the document which Canadian officials had previously voted against in 2007 (Patterson, 2016). The UNDRIP outlines measures that are being reinforced by the Canadian government in their efforts to respect and honour the goal of reconciling with Canada's Indigenous Peoples (United Nations, 2008). The measures outlined by the UNDRIP include Indigenous control over Indigenous education, languages, and cultures through effective measures that will allow Indigenous peoples "the right

to the dignity and diversity of their cultures, traditions, histories, and aspirations" (United Nations, 2008, p.7) to be reflected in educational and public information.

Honouring the UNDRIP document is important when promoting the decolonization of research and advocating for access improved to education for First Nations women. Here, I have outlined some of the articles found within the UNDRIP which are of value when conducting research that supports First Nations-centred education in Canada. The following is an outline of three sections from the United Nations (2008, p.7) UNDRIP Article number 14:

> 1. Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.
>
> 2. Indigenous individuals, particularly children, have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State without discrimination.
>
> 3. States shall, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language.

Finally, Article 21 section 1 states that "Indigenous Peoples have the right, without discrimination, to the improvement of their economic and social conditions, including, inter alia, in the areas of education, employment, vocational training and retraining, housing, sanitation, health and social security" (United Nations, 2008, p.9).

In addition to the UNDRIP, The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRCC, 2015) was established in 2008. The commission was mandated to discuss reconciliation and focus on varying aspects that reveal to Canadians the complexities and truth on "the history and the ongoing legacy of the church-run residential schools, in a manner that fully documents the

individual and collective harms perpetrated against Aboriginal peoples, and honours the resilience and courage of former students, their families, and communities" (TRCC, 2015, p.23). The TRCC (2015) also sets out to "guide and inspire a process of truth and healing, leading toward reconciliation within Aboriginal families, and between Aboriginal peoples and non-Aboriginal communities, churches, government, and Canadians" (TRCC, 2015, p.23). This process continues "to work to renew relationships on a basis of inclusion, mutual understanding, and respect" (TRCC, 2015, p.23). The Federation of Canadian Municipalities (2016) are identified as the national voice of municipal governments through the representation of 90 percent of Canada's municipal population and they recognize the significance of the Calls to Action laid out within the TRCC and are making efforts in order to ensure that the rights and aspirations of Indigenous Peoples are acknowledged in policies and in practices. The Federation of Canadian Municipalities (2016) explains that reconciliation depends upon positive and constructive action in order to address the ongoing legacies of colonialism, the residential school system, and the resulting intergenerational trauma. This action includes "Aboriginal peoples' education, cultures and languages, health, child welfare, [as well as] the administration of justice and economic opportunities and prosperity" (The Federation of Canadian Municipalities, 2016, p. 16). In an act of resistance and resurgence, and in harmony with the aims of the UNDRIP and the TRCC, this research hopes to promote and advance meaningful Indigenous scholarship and inquiry through the use of a decolonizing and relationship-building framework and methodology.

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To begin, I would like to humbly acknowledge the Robinson-Huron Treaty territory and the traditional territory of the Atikameksheng Anishnawbek on which I have the privilege to live, raise my family, study, and work. I would like to thank and acknowledge the Elders, knowledge keepers, and all those who have walked before me for the paths that they have paved and the guidance that I continue to receive from many of them.

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I would also like to give thanks to those wonderful mothers who took the time out of their busy schedules to sit and share with me. I never would have been able to succeed without your stories and contributions.

Lastly, I would like to thank my family: my future-husband, Chris; my daughters, Amy and Mya; and my step-son, Ryan. You have all been so incredibly understanding and supportive each and every day through the entirety of this journey with me.

Chi- Miigwetch!

DEDICATION

During the countless hours of writing this paper, my partner: Chris, and my children: Amy, Mya, and Ryan were present. The word thesis went from being a commonly used household noun, to an even more commonly used verb. The sentence: "I need to go thesis" became an everyday occurrence, especially near the end. They have been supportive, understanding, and even helpful throughout the entire journey, and for that, I am forever grateful.

This is for all of you.

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CHAPTER ONE
FOR THE LOVE OF WRITING

Writing this paper was easily one of the biggest challenges of my academic career. As a mother, a university student, an employee, a chauffeur, a chef, a teacher, a partner, a dog walker, a maid, etc. I found it very difficult to take time away from my family and my other daily tasks in order to fully submerse myself in the work that needed to be done. I am transfixed by the subject of education among First Nations women and also very enthusiastic about writing, yet I am reminded of my western upbringing and my background in the academic study of mainstream psychology when I re-read things that I have written and acknowledge the very particular box that I have placed my writing inside. In other words, I tended to follow a very strict academic guideline when putting together this work and as such found it difficult for me to truly accentuate my work as an individual who aimed to contribute to the decolonization of research through the exploration of Canada's colonial impact on the experiences of the First Nations student- mothers who participated in this work.

In my efforts to contribute to the decolonization of research and academia, I took a step back, I re-examined the original drafts and I put my heart and soul into the formation of the final version of this paper. The work contained within the following pages is the most recent summation of my lifelong journey for education as well as the journey of the wonderful First Nations student-mothers who took the time to sit and share their lived-experiences with me. I was a university student and mother of two when I first began to really *hear* and *understand* the trauma and degradation that the First Peoples of Canada faced historically, and in many ways continue to be impacted by today. I had long known that my grandmother was a survivor of the

Residential School System, but it was in university that I learned the truth about what that really meant. Learning for the first time about the suffering that First Nations children, their families, and their communities faced was an experience I will not soon forget.

This work was produced originally to help with my own decolonization, and soon became a selfless way that I could give back to the First Nations student-mothers who participated in this work, my community, my family, and on a grander-scale, all those who live their lives in fear of the dominant, western educational systems. Through my research, I have learned about the disproportionately low rates of educational attainment and the high rates of fertility and motherhood for young First Nations women. It is for this reason and many others that will be discussed throughout this paper, that this type of research is so incredibly important. It is through our combined resistance against dominant systems that we, as First Nations student-mothers, combat the oppression and the violence that continues to impact the lives of so many in order to continue working towards improving the rates of educational attainment for First Nations Peoples in Canada.

Within this paper, I draw upon the work of many Indigenous storytellers and researchers who came before me, such as King (2003), Stonechild (2006), Kovach (2009), Smith (2012), and Cote-Meek (2014). With the help of their research, I have implemented a framework which considers and respects Indigenous perspectives while being mindful of decolonizing research methodologies. I have also examined their work and acknowledged that the love they have for the subjects they discuss, is evident in the way in which they write. They speak directly to me, as though they wrote the work for only me to read. I hope that as you sit there, perhaps sipping a

warm cup of tea while you read this, that you get a sense of me sitting there across the couch from you, sharing stories.

Together, we will explore some of the many injustices faced by Indigenous Peoples throughout history, this will include a discussion on the traumatic impact of the residential school system and the resulting intergenerational traumas that continue to be felt today. This work sets the context for how First Nations student-mothers experience education today, with a focus on the multi-dimensional identity roles held by First Nations student-mothers. In addition, this work discusses the imposter phenomenon and its impact on high achieving women while exploring what this phenomenon means for high achieving First Nations women from the lens of internalized oppression. Within these pages, I argue that Canada's oppressive history of colonialism and the resulting intergenerational trauma have had specific implications on the post-secondary experiences of the First Nations student-mothers (myself included), who participated in this work. To conduct this research, I used two research methods: autoethnography (autobiographical ethnography) and Indigenous storytelling. In support of this argument, I have outlined areas of interest that emerged from the analysis that explore the ways in which the First Nations student-mothers who participated in this project, including myself, have: (1) overcome barriers in our pursuit for post-secondary education, and (2) blended and balanced our identities as First Nations student-mothers.

Situating Myself within the Research

When I began my journey into exploring the lived-experiences of First Nations mothers attending university, I prepared to integrate Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledges into a perfectly woven piece of decolonized art. This paper is the final product of the braided

relationship between ever-growing decolonizing methodologies and the use of autoethnography and Indigenous storytelling as methods. I truly hope that I have done this interwoven relationship the justice it deserves. Before I continue, and as is necessary in Indigenous and decolonizing research methodologies, I will tell you a little about who I am and the reasons I believe this research is so very necessary. Among others, Absolon and Willett (2005) suggest that Indigenous and decolonizing research methodologies begin with the meaningful acknowledgement of context and identity. Through these readings and other teachings from Elders and Indigenous professors and colleagues, I have been taught the importance of discussing what brought me here, what I feel I have or need to contribute to my people, my community, and/or my nation and from where I speak as an Indigenous researcher.

My name is Robyn Rowe and I am a First Nations woman of mixed ancestry, and a member of Matachewan First Nation with familial roots in Temagami First Nation on Bear Island. I was born and raised in Sudbury, Ontario, Canada. When I was in high school, I wanted to become a police officer or join the military. I dreamed of travelling the world, maybe getting a job on a cruise ship and seeing all that I could see before moving on with my life and getting an education, a steady career, meeting my prince charming, and then settling down to have kids. I discovered, quite young, that life never turns out quite like we imagine.

I would tell my dad about my dreams and he would tell me to do it; but, at only 18-years-old, I would always sigh and tell him "I wish I could, but I have the cats… I can't leave my cats." A year later I found myself with two cats *and* a newborn baby. The dreams of worldly adventures stopped when I was only 19-years-old, where even my nightly dreams were interrupted with responsibility and the crying of a small and helpless human. Just over three years later, I was up

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to three cats and two kids. I was still working at the same fast-food restaurant I had worked at since I was 17. I was getting-by financially, and had moved up the corporate fast-food ladder and truly believed that I was- what we called in the industry- a *lifer*. I had plans of working at this restaurant until I was no longer capable of working, and I was completely content with this new plan. I look back on this time and I realize that all of the obstacles that I have encountered have brought me to exactly where I need to be. When I finished high school, my goal was college. When that did not happen, I never dreamed of going to university. Being a single mother of two at 22-years-old made the possibility of university sound even more unrealistic than the dreams of 18-year-old me travelling the world by sea.

I was a young mother of two and a recent survivor of intimate partner violence when I decided to apply for university. It was at this time in my life where my story began to intersect with post-secondary education. I wanted to do something for my children and I, and in the process I became living-proof that having children does not mean that you cannot get a post-secondary education. I share this with you now in an attempt to provide a pre-narrative to the context of this paper. When I started my journey, I was young, single, living on my own with my 3-year-old and 3-month-old daughters. I have since realized that we all take different and bumpy paths to get to where we are meant to be and I believe that I was meant to be right here, introducing you to my story as a starting point for what we will explore together over the course of this paper.

In the early stages of designing this research project, I would look back at my experiences and what brought me to this very point; and I would wonder what the post-secondary experiences of other Indigenous mothers looked like. For me, university ended up providing me

with my first glimpses of the imperial[1] and colonial[2] history of Indigenous peoples in Canada. Being a First Nations woman of mixed ancestry, and having been raised by a First Nations mother, I found it odd that I had not learned much of our history at home. As I move forward in my post-secondary education, I learn more and more about the impact of Canada's history of colonialism and the resulting intergenerational trauma. This learning has been, and continues to be, an important aspect of my personal growth as a First Nations student-mother. I introduce you to this research as a First Nations mother and student, with the hope that this project can act as stepping stones for further research on First Nations mothers attending post-secondary institutions.

Situating and Introducing the Participants

The experiences of each of the women who participated in this research are unique. In no way did I aim to universalize them (Comerford & Fambrough, 2002). Within the discussion, I explore emerging areas of interest while also drawing upon the experiences that are unique to each of the First Nations student-mothers who participated in the project (including myself). The storytelling sessions resulted in rich, detailed narratives that were coded and were then woven together with the resulting autoethnographic narratives in an effort to understand the lived

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[1] The dictionary defines *imperialism* as "the policy, practice, or advocacy of extending the power and dominion of a nation especially by direct territorial acquisitions or by gaining indirect control over the political or economic life of other areas; broadly: the extension or imposition of power, authority, or influence" (Merriam-Webster Online, 2017).

[2] The dictionary defines *colonialism* as "control by one power over a dependent area or people" (Merriam-Webster Online, 2017). In this paper, the term *colonialism* will be used to mean when settlers who are non-Native to an area [in this case Canada] establish colonies and territorial power over those who are Native to the area resulting in subsequent processes such as assimilation.

experiences of the First Nations student-mothers who participated in this project, throughout their journeys in university. Below, I provide a brief introduction to the seven First Nations student-mothers who participated in this work, myself included. I maintain the privacy of my participants by not stating the names of each of their home communities and by providing each of the participants with a pseudonym (other than my own). The ages of the participant's children have also been withheld for confidentiality purposes. It is however, important to note that only First Nations women between the ages of 18 and 35 years of age were recruited for this project and all of the mothers had children who were elementary school age or younger at the time of the storytellings.

Kaci

Kaci attended college before going to university. She moved from her home community in order to accommodate her schooling. Kaci became a mother in her teens and today is a loving and strong-willed mother of five. She says:

> *For so many years I was a mother only, so I felt like my identity was built around that, built around being a mother…I have a different identity now because I'm not just an Aboriginal mother, I'm also a student with an education.*

Kaci keeps her busy life organized by keeping up-to-date calendars, agendas, and planners.

Maggie

Maggie was born and raised on a reserve. Leaving her community to pursue post-secondary education was one of the many personal challenges she faced. But for her, leaving her community for higher education meant not struggling financially. She attended college before going to university. Her three children have been a consistent motivator over the course of her education journey as she aims to complete her degree. She says: "*I'm going to finish and I'm going to graduate and get a job and support my family.*"

Niki

Niki lived in her First Nation community before moving away after high school to attend college. She shared her thinking with me explaining that *"if I want to get off this reserve, I need an education."* Shortly thereafter she became a mother. She began her university career while caring for her child. Despite the personal struggles that she shared with me, she completed her undergraduate degree and is now completing her master's degree. She manages her time with schedules and a strict routine.

Robyn

I began my journey through university as a single mother of two, caring for my 3-month-old and my 3-year-old daughters. I graduated from with a Bachelor of Arts with honours in psychology with a minor is sociology. At the end of four years I continued on with my post-secondary education at the Masters level. Today, my girls are six and nine-years-old and I am also the proud step-mother to a wonderful six-year-old son. Now that I have completed, my Masters degree in Indigenous relations, I will be moving into an interdisciplinary Ph.D. in rural and northern health.

Ruby

Ruby began her post-secondary career before having her child. After her second year, she gave birth to her daughter. From there, she took an extended leave for personal reasons and returned to university to finish her degree when her daughter was a preschooler. She is a fourth year student who works hard and is passionate about learning and teaching her culture and traditions to her daughter.

Stephanie

Stephanie is a mother of two who began her pursuit of post-secondary level education in order to enhance her skills, get a good job and ultimately provide for herself and her children. Attending university has given her the opportunity to learn things about her history, culture, and traditions

that she did not know before. She is working hard towards the completion of her degree and is looking forward to a financially secure job in the future.

Tabitha

Tabitha is a mother of two who describes "staying afloat" of her busy schedule as a mother and university student. She manages her time with "a lot of late nights." She moved away from her home community in order to pursue post-secondary education. She is working hard towards achieving her undergraduate degree and hopes to make an impact in her home community once she is finished her schooling by getting a job in her field back home, she says: "*I just feel better at home*."

A Note on Methods

The incorporation of Indigenous research methodologies within Indigenous research was newly emergent only 10 to 15 years ago. In more recent years, the literature showcases that this is an ever growing area of inquiry that continues to be articulated in academic discourses (Kovach, 2016). Qualitative inquiry across many disciplinary and interdisciplinary fields is expanding to include the use of Indigenous methodologies which incorporate a decolonizing framework "influenced by the protocols of respect, relevance, and responsibility found within the philosophical foundations of Indigenous knowledges and Indigenous methodologies" (Kovach, 2016, p.32). Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) speaks of the "intersection of two powerful worlds, the world of indigenous peoples and the world of research" (p.ix). Smith (2012) emphasizes the importance of research that not only focuses on bringing Indigenous values, attitudes, and practices to the centre of the work, but that also advances knowledge production by and about Indigenous peoples.

The stories and narratives resulting from the autoethnography and the storytelling sessions were recorded and then analyzed in search of common areas of interest among the participants. I listened to the stories of the participants with an open heart and an open mind, in order to respect and honour their voices as storytellers (Thomas, 2005). I listened to each of the recordings over and over, taking notes on tone of voice and remembering the conversations as they were had. I then read, and re-read the anonymized transcripts – knowing each of these stories inside and out before I decided upon the areas that were of particular interest. In an attempt to articulate and advance the Indigenous research agenda about which Smith speaks, this research strives to maintain the perspectives of First Nations Peoples through the interpretation, presentation, and sharing of the research results by and for First Nations Peoples. This work provides a retelling of the stories shared by all seven of us which in turn gives voice to our experiences as First Nations mothers in university.

A Note on Terminology

Reclaiming the identities of all Indigenous Peoples through the use of thoughtful and respectful language is a meaningful way of contributing, through research, to the continued discourse on decolonization and healing. The following is not an exhaustive list of terminology; rather, it serves to define some of the key words which will be used throughout this paper. Other terminology of importance will be defined in footnotes as needed. The National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO, 2016) explains that "readers should keep in mind that there is no single term to describe *Indigenous Peoples*" (p.1). According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2004, p.2) the working definition of Indigenous Peoples states that:

Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing on those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems.

In this sense, Indigenous means "native to the area" (NAHO, 2016). As such, within this paper, the term *Indigenous* will be used as an all-encompassing and collective noun that will incorporate people who are Indigenous to Canada; including First Nations, Inuit, and Métis populations. For the purposes of this research, we will be focusing more-so on terminologies which include First Nations Peoples, which includes the term First Peoples. Historically, the Constitution Act of 1982 distinguished that the term Aboriginal Peoples of Canada included Indian (First Nations), Inuit, and Métis Peoples of Canada (Canadian Charter, 1982, s.35(2)), however, the word Aboriginal, along with *Native,* and *Indian* will only be used when discussing or providing a direct quote or reference of another author's work.

Assumptions and Limitations of the Study

Within qualitative research, it is argued that the research process, including: data collection, analyses, and writing are greatly influenced by the personal beliefs and theories of the researcher (Patton, 2002). In this case (as a participant and researcher/insider and outsider), the collection, analyses, and results of this work were influenced by the collected narratives. Traditionally, science relies upon the importance of objectivity (Patton, 2002) however, within this work when I discuss the experiences of First Nations student-mothers, it is important to note

that the research findings are not absolute. The findings are both complex and transferable. One person may relate to the experiences shared by this group of participants, while another person may not.

Additionally, in my efforts to acknowledge any potential biases, I positioned myself in each of the roles (researcher and participant/insider and outsider) at varying stages of the project. Prior to sitting down with participants to hear their stories, I collected the necessary data for the autoethnography (journals, blogs, other writings, and introspection). This allowed me to be more aware of the biases I might reproduce in the analysis. During the storytelling sessions, I positioned myself as a researcher and a mother, two identities I genuinely hold. I signalled this to the other mothers by introducing myself, briefing them on my experiences as a First Nations mother and student while being understanding of their experiences within the same identity roles. I believe this allowed me to gather rich, contextual stories on their lived-experiences as First Nations student-mothers. Only once all the necessary stories and data were collected did analyses commence, again, using the position of researcher.

Summary

In this chapter, I have briefly introduced the seven participants (myself included): Kaci, Maggie, Niki, Robyn, Ruby, Stephanie, and Tabitha. The framework that forms the foundation for why this research is necessary for future First Nations student-mothers was also introduced. This will be discussed further within the literature review (Chapter 2) to follow. This work applied a decolonizing and Indigenous research methodology through the use of autoethnography and Indigenous storytelling. The First Nations student- mothers from Laurentian University in Sudbury, Ontario, Canada who contributed to this research tell diverse stories about their

experiences, however, our narratives intersect in several ways. Areas of interest that emerged from the collected narratives included: (1) how we, as First Nations student-mothers have overcome obstacles, including what difficulties arose for us in the decision to pursue post-secondary education; what motivators contribute to our ongoing success, and how we experience self-doubt despite our achievements and (2) how we, as First Nations student-mothers have blended our identities as First Nations women, mothers, and students within university.

CHAPTER TWO

DEEPENING OUR UNDERSTANDING

The role of Aboriginal post-secondary education has evolved from a
tool of assimilation to an instrument of empowerment
(Stonechild, 2006, p.2)

Indigenous peoples have survived centuries of subjugation and colonization and yet continue to take control over their own lives through advocating the validity of their cultures and by redefining their identities in current society (Barman, Hébert & McCaskill, 1986). The cultures and identities of Indigenous Peoples were greatly disrupted by European contact and it is only in more recent years that Indigenous Peoples are moving towards and insisting upon reconciliation[3]. The process of autonomy described by Barman et al. (1986) includes Indigenous control over Indigenous education. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRCC; 2015) discusses how increased post-secondary completion rates could help to close the income and unemployment gap for Indigenous Peoples. According to information from the 2011 National Household survey, only 9.8% of Indigenous Peoples in Canada between the ages of 25 and 64 have a university degree (Universities Canada, 2015). In comparison, 37% of non-Indigenous Peoples in the same age bracket had a university degree (Hull, 2015). Additionally, census data from 2006 revealed that 8% of Indigenous girls between the ages of 15 and 19 were parents, as

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[3] Reconciliation appears to mean different things to different people. For me, reconciliation means autonomy. It means Indigenous control over Indigenous education, housing, schooling, politics, etc. It also means that the government not only respects and recognizes the Calls to Action laid out in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, it means following through and acting upon the things that the Canadian government claims to honour/respect. It also means finding our voice as Indigenous Peoples through the resurgence of our cultures, traditions, and languages.

compared to only 1.3% of their non-Indigenous counterparts (O'Donnell & Wallace, 2011). According to Guimond and Robitaille (2008) early motherhood can dramatically increase the vulnerability of young First Nations women who are already disadvantaged socio-economically because of systemic racism and sexism.

Currently, the research surrounding the experiences of First Nations mothers attending university needs further development. According to what I found throughout the literature, additional research on the educational attainment of young First Nations mothers is necessary for many reasons including: (1) the statistics showcase that First Nations Peoples in Canada have lower university attendance rates than any other Canadian population (Hull, 2015); (2) First Nations women have higher fertility rates and have children at younger ages than non-Indigenous women (O'Donnell & Wallace, 2011); (3) the Indigenous population overall is much younger than the rest of the Canadian population (Statistics Canada, 2011); (4) Indigenous students and Indigenous professors continue to face systemic racism and other challenges in spaces such as post-secondary institutions (Cote-Meek, 2014); and (5) in Canada, it has long been argued (Barman et al. 1986) that the educational attainment of Indigenous Peoples is a shifting terrain that continues to increase at the university level (Gordon & White, 2014).

In an effort to address some of the realities facing First Nations women, and students-mothers the following literature review will include: (1) a discussion on the ongoing inequality and enfranchisement found within the Indian Act; (2) a historical overview of Indigenous education to the present; (3) an examination of the residential school system and the resulting intergenerational trauma experienced by Indigenous Peoples in Canada; (4) an exploration on the intersection of Indigenous womanhood and the resulting gender-based violence and

discrimination endured by Indigenous women in Canada today; (5) an analysis on the positive outcomes of resilience and healing; (6) a review of blending identities as Indigenous mothers and students, and finally; (7) a glimpse of the impact of internalized oppression and associated feelings of inadequacy discussed within the imposter phenomenon.

Enfranchisement and the Indian Act

The Indian Act[4] was first passed in 1876 and continues to hold much of its same form today (Hanson, 2009). It is largely criticised for its gender bias as a means of eliminating one's Indian Status[5] which has severely impacted the Indigenous rights of First Nations women in Canada (Hanson, 2009). In 1978 Jamieson published the first major study of discrimination against Indigenous women (Native Women's Association of Canada [NWAC], 2000) and argued that being born as a poor, Indian woman in Canada meant being the most disadvantaged minority in the country. Among the gender-based inequities facing Indian women was a form of enfranchisement that worked to eliminate Indian Status from First Nations women who married a non-Aboriginal, Métis, Inuit, or unregistered Indian man (Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People, 1996; Hanson, 2009). Enfranchisement has been defined as a legalized process

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[4] According to Hanson (2009) "The *Indian Act* is a Canadian federal law that governs in matters pertaining to Indian status, bands, and Indian reserves. Throughout history it has been highly invasive and paternalistic, as it authorizes the Canadian federal government to regulate and administer in the affairs and day-to-day lives of registered Indians and reserve communities."

[5] According to Hanson (2009) the Indian Act has defined who qualifies as Indian in the form of *Indian status*. Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (2016) elaborates by explaining that "An individual recognized by the federal government as being registered under the Indian Act is referred to as a Registered Indian (commonly referred to as a Status Indian). Status Indians are entitled to a wide range of programs and services offered by federal agencies and provincial governments. Over the years, there have been many rules for deciding who is eligible for registration as an Indian under the Indian Act."

of eliminating a person's Indian status in exchange for full Canadian citizenship (Crey, 2009). Crey (2009) explains that this was a key feature of the Canadian federal government's assimilation policies regarding Aboriginal Peoples. Voluntary enfranchisement was introduced in the Gradual Civilization Act of 1857 and was based on the assumption that Aboriginal people would be willing to surrender their legal and ancestral identities for the "privilege" of gaining full Canadian citizenship and assimilating into Canadian society (Crey, 2009). Individuals or entire bands could enfranchise. In the case where a man with a family enfranchised, his wife and children would automatically be enfranchised. However, very few Aboriginal people or groups were willing to abandon their cultural and legal identities, as anticipated by the colonial authorities. Enfranchisement would become legally compulsory with the Indian Act of 1876, where over time, Aboriginal people have been enfranchised for serving in the Canadian armed forces, gaining a university education, for leaving reserves for long periods – for instance, for employment – and, for Aboriginal women, if they married non-Indian men or if their Indian husbands died or abandoned them (Crey, 2009).

Hanson (2009) explains that in the case of an Indian woman losing her status, she would also lose her "treaty benefits, health benefits, the right to live on her reserve, the right to inherit her family property, and even the right to be buried on her reserve with her ancestors." In addition, and by extension, she would lose her inherent right to the opportunity to receive education funds through her First Nation community to help assist in the costs associated with attending post-secondary. In other words, the repercussions associated with marrying a non-First Nation man meant an additional financial challenge if an enfranchised First Nations woman wanted to pursue post-secondary education.

The Indian Act was amended in 1985 with the introduction of Bill C-31 which reinstated the Indian Status of those women who had previously lost their status when they married a non-Indian (NWAC, 2000). However, the gender-based discrimination found within the Indian Act continued to impact the lives of the grandchildren of Indian women who regained their status with the passing of Bill C-31 as their children would also gain status under Bill-31 as well but would be unable to pass status on to their children (NWAC, 2000). Indian Status men on the other hand would be able to pass status on to their children, grand-children and great-grandchildren, resulting in the enactment of a second-generation cut-off whereby the next generation of children born to women of Bill C-31 were unable to receive Indian Status (NWAC, 2000). The children born to status Indian women who fell under Bill C-31 would be unable to access their inherent treaty rights and benefits, and again, by extension, their right to educational funding.

In 2010, Bill C-3 was implemented in order to promote gender equity within the Indian Registration Act. This meant that the grandchildren of original Bill C-31 status Indians could now apply to register for their Indian Status (Hurley & Simeone, 2010). The fight against gender inequality within the Indian Act continues today because for men who were not impacted by the second-generation cut-off in Bill C-31 and the updated Bill C-3, Indian Status goes a generation further. The implementation of Bill S-3 is expected to remove the long-standing discriminatory treatment of Indigenous women within the Indian Act (Parliament of Canada, 2017). If the passing of Bill S-3 takes effects, additional generations of First Nations children will be able to access their inherent treaty rights. However, currently these children will continue to experience the same repercussions faced by their great grand-mothers when she married a non-Indian man,

ultimately missing out on their inherent rights as First Nations Peoples and by extension, being faced with the additional financial burden associated with attending post-secondary education.

Historical Overview of Indigenous Education

During the time leading up to and following the confederation, the belief was that certain individuals, including Aboriginal Peoples, were born defective biologically, intellectually and emotionally (Stonechild, 2006). This formed the idea that Indigenous Peoples and their culture would be unable to cope with the social and cultural changes associated with the arrival of the Europeans (i.e., colonialism) (Stonechild, 2006). When the Canadian government came to power, aggressive forms of assimilation aimed to assert further control over the lives of the Indigenous Peoples (Stonechild, 2006). This process of colonization is explained by LaRocque (1996) as "a pervasive structural and psychological relationship between the colonizer and the colonized and is ultimately reflected in the dominant institutions, policies, histories, and literatures of occupying powers" (p.11).

The cumulative impact of the Canadian federal government policies towards Indigenous People's was to eliminate Aboriginal bodies of government, ignore Aboriginal rights, and abolish the Treaties[6], through a process of assimilation (TRCC, 2015). In 2008, an official recognition of wrong-doing by the government of Canada during Prime Minister Steven Harper's time in office included a statement of apology and acknowledgement of the past atrocities. In his speech, Harper stated that "two primary objectives of the Residential School system were to remove and isolate children from the influence of their homes, families, traditions and cultures, and to

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[6] Treaties are agreements that were historically made between the original inhabitants of Canada and the colonizers.

assimilate them into the dominant culture" (Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, 2010). According to the TRCC (2015), the trauma experienced by Indigenous Peoples in Canada "will take many years to repair damaged trust and relationships in Aboriginal communities and between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples" (p.184). The TRCC (2015) also reported that "reconciliation must become a way of life" (p.184). The intent was to terminate Aboriginal Peoples as unique legal, social, cultural, religious, and racial entities in Canada (TRCC, 2015). Residential schools were established and operated across Canada with the central goal of assimilating the Indigenous children who attended them into the dominant Canadian culture. The TRCC (2015) describes this process as cultural genocide which they define as the "destruction of those structures and practices that allow the group to continue as a group" (p.1).

The assimilation of the Indigenous Peoples of Canada was "a radical experiment in social engineering" (Stonechild, 2006, p.19). Indigenous children were ripped from their homes, families, and communities and placed in "sterile, military-like, hostile institutions" (Armstrong, 1996) called residential schools where they "were to become fully assimilated into white culture" (Stonechild, 2006, p.19). The TRCC (2015) argues that "in their mission to 'civilize' and Christianize, the school staff relied on corporal punishment to discipline their students. That punishment often crossed the line into physical abuse" (p.144). Physical, psychological and emotional abuses, the enforcement of unsuitable living conditions, a failure to report incidents of abuse and inaction on the part of the church and the government are only some of the many horrific acts that were committed on Aboriginal children within the Canadian residential schools (Cote-Meek, 2014).

The residential school system was used as a tool to suppress and eradicate Aboriginal Peoples, including their ways of knowing and understanding (Cote-Meek, 2014). Ultimately, the residential school system failed as an educational system as it was based on "racist assumptions about the intellectual and cultural inferiority of Aboriginal people – the belief [was] that Aboriginal children were incapable of attaining anything more than a rudimentary elementary-level or vocational education" (TRCC, 2015, p.144). The majority of students who attended these schools never advanced beyond elementary school (TRCC, 2015).

While the schools proved to be a failure early on, according to Stonechild (2006), they remained in operation from approximately 1892 until the last one closed in 1996 (Elias, Mignone, Hall, Hong, Hart & Sareen, 2012). The TRCC (2015) estimates that more than 150,000 Indigenous children attended these schools and more than 6000 children are estimated to have died while in the care of the schools. The Residential school system proved to successfully destroy the cultural identity of those who attended and with that, began years of trauma and degradation that have resulted in intergenerational cycles of historical trauma that have been passed down through the generations (Morrissette, 1994; Kirmayer, Simpson, & Cargo, 2003; Cote-Meek, 2014; TRCC, 2015). The impact of intergenerational trauma has had negative effects on entire Indigenous communities (Goforth, 2007).

Indigenous Peoples in Education Today

The children who attended the Residential schools experienced a loss of culture, language, traditional values, family bonding, life skills, parenting skills, self-respect, and respect for others as a result (Elias et al., 2012; TRCC, 2015). The parents of these children also experienced great suffering in the loss of their roles as caregivers, nurturers, teachers, and family

decision-makers (Elias et al., 2012). The residential school system impacted the unique social structures of Indigenous Peoples through the violation of Indigenous traditions, cultures, languages, ways of living, thinking, and viewing the world (Mawhiney & Hardy, 2009). The aftermath of these schools resulted in poverty, devastation, cognitive, and physical impairments which were then passed down through the generations (Cote-Meek, 2014).

Indigenous Peoples in Canada continue to be underrepresented in post-secondary institutions as a direct result of the intergenerational trauma caused by the residential school system (TRCC, 2015). Armstrong (1996) contends that:

> the placement of our children in residential schools has been the single most devastating factor in the breakdown of our society. It is at the core of the damage, beyond all other mechanisms cleverly fashioned to subjugate, assimilate, and annihilate (p.x).

The statistics on the educational attainment of the children of residential school survivors are lower than the rest of the Canadian population and this "has severely limited their employment and earning potential, just as it did for their parents" (TRCC, 2015, p.146). The TRCC (2015) states that "it is significant that the lowest levels of educational success are in those communities with the highest percentages of descendants of residential school Survivors" (p.146).

The International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (2015) which aims to endorse and promote Indigenous People's rights to self-determination, their cultural integrity and their right to development on their own conditions, recognizes that "many Indigenous Peoples have come to see formal education as a way of assimilating them into mainstream society and eradicating their cultures, languages and ways of life" (para. 6). In 1998 Battiste described how Aboriginal languages and knowledge were still excluded in most Canadian educational systems. In 2006

Stonechild discussed how some universities had since implemented Indigenous knowledges into the classroom which began to play significant roles in the post-secondary attainment and achievement of Indigenous peoples, yet "they are not funded by Indian Affairs, nor are they Aboriginal-controlled" (p. 65). The TRCC (2015) explains that "as a result of the residential school experience, many Aboriginal people lost their language and lost touch with their culture" (p. 158). They outline the importance of language and culture and request that the government acknowledge Aboriginal rights which include language rights; including offering post-secondary courses which offer degree or diploma programs in Aboriginal languages (TRCC, 2015).

Indigenous Peoples in Canada are underrepresented overall in post-secondary education in comparison to non-Indigenous peoples (Statistics Canada, 2015; Cote-Meek, 2014). Statistically, for individuals between the ages of 25 and 44, only 12% of registered First Nations and 16% of non-status First Nations in Canada in comparison to 37% of non-Indigenous peoples have a post-secondary education (Hull, 2015). The International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (2015) argues that the education gap for Indigenous peoples within mainstream populations, remains a critical area of interest with deficits in areas of inclusion, access to upper levels of primary and secondary education, and low levels of post-secondary attainment.

The TRCC (2015) points to the median income for Aboriginal Peoples, explaining that in 2006 it was 30% lower than the median income for non-Aboriginal workers (p. 146). They go on to describe that the depth of poverty is much greater for Aboriginal Peoples who, on average, have lower income attainment that persists for a greater period of time than that of non-Aboriginal people (TRCC, 2015). According to the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs

(2015), there are many aspects which impact the educational attainment of Indigenous Peoples

including:

- a lack of or deficient school infrastructures,
- the financial burden which comes with post-secondary education and tuition fees, including indirect costs such as food, and transportation,
- a lack of qualified bilingual teachers or learning materials which can be understood by a student who is fluent in their traditional language,
- poor learning conditions, and;
- unsafe school environments which include discrimination, abuse, and violence.

When exploring the lack of Indigenous students within Canadian post-secondary institutions, "a significant body of research has identified an array of barriers faced by Aboriginal learners which include historical, educational, socio-cultural, geographic, person/demographic, and economic challenges" (Carr-Stewart, Balzer & Cottrell, 2013). Raham (2007) calls for the government's assistance in order to increase the educational involvement and achievement of Indigenous Peoples. In moving forward, decolonizing Canada's post-secondary institutions should continue to be a priority.

Indigenous Peoples with a university degree have lower income gaps than those Indigenous Peoples without (Wilson & Macdonald, 2010) and employment rates increase with higher levels of education regardless of one's culture or heritage (Statistics Canada, 2011). The unique minority status of Indigenous Peoples who possess post-secondary level credentials could create "a labour market demand for these graduates which, in turn, would help them to secure stable and well-paying jobs that require university credentials, particularly in the public sector" (Walters, White, & Maxim, 2004, p.296). Post-secondary education can act "as a vehicle for the

attainment of individual and community goals, community self-sustainability, and self-determination" (Carr-Stewart et al., 2013, p.26). In fact, Indigenous peoples with a post-secondary education "do just as well, if not better, than non-Aboriginals with a postsecondary education" (Walters et al., 2004, p.284).

A university education can be a transformative experience by expanding our knowledge, nurturing critical thinking skill and inspiring new ideas, creativity, and innovation (Universities Canada, 2015). Working towards closing the education gap between Indigenous Peoples and non-Indigenous Peoples in Canada will result in benefits to not only the Indigenous graduates, but to their communities and Canada as a whole (Universities Canada, 2015). Ultimately, the benefits to post-secondary educational attainment continue to outweigh any potential negatives, and as such, efforts must be made in order to improve and accommodate the achievement of Indigenous Peoples in academia.

The Intersection of Indigenous Womanhood and Gender-based Violence

Smith (2012) explains that "western concepts of race intersect in complex ways with concepts of gender" (p.47). The colonial history experienced by Indigenous Peoples in Canada as a whole extends even further affliction on Indigenous women; a reality that is far too often missed within the literature. Indigenous Peoples have been subject to governmental systems and forced assimilation set in place and controlled by men. Armstrong (1996) discusses the influences of a patriarchal[7] and imperialistic culture that was forced upon the fundamentally cooperative

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[7] Patriarchal systems are male controlled and male dominated.

family units of Indigenous Peoples. The damage inflicted upon the family-clan systems that have historically existed as the base units of social order in Aboriginal societies in Northern America following colonialism have been both devastating and dehumanizing, resulting in "severe and irreversible effects on Aboriginal women" (Armstrong, 1996, p.ix).

The investigation of Indigenous womanhood from a non-patriarchal lens is required in order to push back against historical ideas of gender-role differences for men and women. Smith (2012) adds that "gender refers not just to the roles of women and how those roles are constituted but to the roles of men and the relations between men and women" (p.47). A legacy of objectification, sexual exploitation, and marginalization has been left behind for Indigenous women who have experienced engendered and systematic racism by those who colonized Canada (Smith, 2012). Ultimately, the historical impact that wiped away the traditional systems that Indigenous women internalized, including family-clan dynamics, have resulted in a legacy of consternation for many Indigenous women today.

In response to the gender-based violence experienced by Indigenous women in Canada a National Inquiry into the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls has emerged (Government of Canada, 2016). Terese Marie Mailhot (2017), a columnist and an Indigenous mother writes about her experiences as an Indigenous woman while discussing and commenting on some of the atrocities that other Indigenous women have faced. Mailhot (2017) explains that the dominant society continues to perpetuate a stigma towards Indigenous women, maintaining that we are in some way troubled, dirty, or deserving of violence. Furthermore, Armstrong (1996) points out that in a country which boasts about its high standards, there continues to be a

struggle to nurture, protect, provide, and heal in an environment where Aboriginal women have been brought to the edge of total despair.

The Status of Women Canada (2017) have developed and implemented a comprehensive federal strategy and action plan in their efforts to address gender-based violence. Gender based violence is defined by the Status of Women Canada (2017) as any act of violence that is perpetrated against someone based on their gender expression, gender identity, or perceived gender. This includes physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, financial, and online acts of violence (Status of Women Canada, 2017). Within the goal of ending gender-based violence, the Status of Women Canada (2017) and the Government of Canada aim to address and implement a culturally-appropriate and community-driven strategy that recognizes the unique needs of different First Nation, Inuit, and Métis communities.

Resilience, Resistance, and Healing

There is a long history of Indigenous Peoples resisting the assimilative policies and practices of Canada's colonial systems. Indigenous Peoples in Canada are distinct nations with their own unique epistemologies[8] and pedagogies[9] (Battise, 1998). Colonialism and the resulting Canadian residential school system put the health and well-being of the Indigenous children who attended them at risk which has resulted in intergenerational cycles of trauma. Taking this into consideration, it is imperative to discuss the literature surrounding resilience, resistance, and healing as acts of decolonization.

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[8] I learned the concept of epistemology as an individual's knowledge systems.

[9] Similarly, I learned that the concept of pedagogy is defined as the way in which we come to learn that knowledge.

The most significant obstacles that many Indigenous Peoples in Canada must overcome are the difficult conditions that often result from a legacy of oppression. Indigenous Peoples within the literature are idealized for their persistence and resilience throughout history. Positively adapting ways in which we, as Indigenous Peoples in Canada can cope with difficulties, through resilience is one way of resisting and defying the impact of colonialism (McGuire-Kishebakabaykwe, 2010). In pushing back, we overcome emotional, mental, and/or physical distress in order to live a good life (Dion Stout & Kipling, 2003).

In order to move forward and heal, we, as First Nations Peoples, need to adopt positive coping mechanisms. Healing is necessary for those who have been subjected to heinous acts in order for that person to become well again (Cote-Meek, 2014). Healing is a process that can be facilitated in various ways but is one of the first steps to increase the likeliness of positive resiliency for Indigenous Peoples in Canada who are living with a deep-rooted history of colonial violence and assimilation. McCormick (1997) discusses individualism as a basis for the social structure that currently exists in colonized North America. For First Nations' cultures living within this society, structures of individualism can result in loneliness, anxiety, and feeling left out and unaccepted (McCormick, 1997). Through the use of proper mature defences, First Nations Peoples can continue to overcome this adversity. First Nations Peoples have a long history of collectivism and an orientation towards interconnectedness, which McCormick (1997) describes as a series of relationships that stem from family to community. McCormick (1997) found ten key categories that facilitate healing. In an effort to counter the hegemonic, individualistic structures that McCormick (1997, p. 177-78) discusses, the following categories intersect and inform one another in order to aid in this facilitation:

1. *Establishing a social connection and obtaining help/support from others*
2. *Anchoring oneself in tradition*
3. *Exercise and self-care*
4. *Involvement in challenging activities and setting goals*
5. *Expressing oneself*
6. *Establishing a spiritual connection and participation in ceremony*
7. *Helping others*
8. *Gaining an understanding of the problem.* [The problem can be any issue]
9. *Learning from a role model*
10. Establishing a connection with nature

Benard (1991) discusses what are called protective factors which increase one's chances of enhancing or building positive resiliency. For example, people who are more responsive, flexible when things do not go their way, empathetic and caring towards others, have good communication skills, and a good sense of humour have many protective factors that could help them to bounce back in cases of adversity (Benard, 1991). There are things that can help to nurture protective factors which include having nurturing parents and positive role models. Children require that their basic needs be met, that they experience safety, social connections, autonomy as well as a sense of purpose (Benard, 1991). If these factors are fostered then there is a greater likelihood of positive outcomes. However, risk factors such as poverty and parental alcoholism can increase the probability of a negative outcome (Dion Stout & Kipling, 2003). Other risk factors that attribute to poor-resilience include: a history of neglect, substance abuse, poverty, social isolation, living in a violent community, family structure (e.g. being raised by a single parent), domestic violence, and stress (Benard, 1991). A high-degree of resilience would be demonstrated by individuals who can overcome many risk factors. Despite an individuals' risk and protective factors, the adoption of "mature defenses" can help a person to cope with adversity (Dion Stout & Kipling, 2003). Mature defenses, such as humour and altruism can help

one to overcome a lifetime of adversity; "whereas anti-social or self-injurious coping strategies can aggravate existing risk factors and conditions" (Dion Stout & Kipling, 2003, p. iii).

After drawing upon the resilience research of others, it is clear to me that effective healing for First Nations People lies within the interconnectedness with which McCormick speaks. It is through cultural and spiritual self-care that we – as First Nations Peoples – can continue to rise above the historical trauma and pursue post-secondary level education.

Blending Identities: Mothers in Education

Becoming a mother is transformative for one's identity (McMahon, 1995), and becoming a student is an additional transformation that must merge with existing identities. Historically, the combination of motherhood and academia has shown to be quite difficult, which was reflected by the once-rare occurrence of mothers occupying full-time academic posts (Leonard & Malina, 1994). Managing the two roles of motherhood and academia in the past was found to be extra challenging because there were so few mothers in academia to begin with (Leonard & Malina, 1994). Jakubiec (2015) argues that patriarchal dominance persists within the academic environment, its culture, and its work ethic requirements. Cultural identity cannot be separated from the individual and forms a person's language(s), personality, expressiveness, and makes up all that they are as people within a society (Swinomish Tribal Mental Health Project, 2002). Whether we are aware of our cultural heritage or not, we are still carriers, and this heritage forms an essential part of our personal identity (Swinomish Tribal Mental Health Project, 2002). Thus, there lies a deep tie between personal and cultural identities.

Sexism and gender-based discrimination continue (Cote-Meek, 2014) despite growing numbers of women within the workforce and the fact that more women are acquiring post-

secondary education than ever before (Rhoads & Rhoads, 2012). Rhoads and Rhoads (2012) argue that despite there being more women in the workforce, traditional gender roles have not yet been eradicated "because men have not contributed in the domestic realm to the extent that women have contributed to family income through paid labor" (p. 13). According to Scott, Burns, and Cooney (1998) the number of mature students[10] has increased over the years with women holding a higher proportion of that increase. In 2013/2014, women accounted for 56.3% of total enrollments within full-time post-secondary institutions and 60% of part-time enrolments (Statistics Canada, 2015). With these numbers comes the growing concern that universities should do more in order to support student mothers (Havergal, 2015). Mature students also indicate personal benefits which are a direct result of their studies (Scott et al., 1998). The benefits include an increase in life satisfaction and higher self-rated levels of ability (Scott et al., 1998). In addition, mature women who were also student mothers performed better than younger non-mother students, stating that they had more personal motivators and a higher interest in the courses/topics that they chose to study (Scott et al., 1998).

Ward and Wolf-Wendel (2012) explore the context of academic motherhood from a different perspective; that of mothers who work in faculty positions within academic institutions. Although the perspectives they discuss may differ from that of student-mothers, their research is compelling and relevant none-the-less. In their effort to move the discussion surrounding academic mothers from a narrative of constraint and difficulty to a narrative of possibility, Ward

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[10] Mature Student: A student who did not begin post-secondary education directly after high school, rather they are older adults who have not been in high school for a few years. In many instances, mature students are also parents.

and Wolf-Wendel (2012) point out the importance of countering negative narratives in order to prevent ill effects on the choices women make such as delaying or forgoing all-together having children in order to pursue an academic career.

Within Western European history, the idealized notion was that the man within a family was the breadwinner while the woman in the family was the homemaker. When it comes to education, the concept of *thinking* (and thus being educated) was described throughout the centuries by Western philosophers as rational, unemotional, and logical (Pillay, 2009). On the other hand, *mothering* was traditionally associated with notions of nurture, emotions, and love for one's children and family while academia has been traditionally associated with reason and logic (Pillay, 2009). Lynch (2008) explains that "women's paths to higher education are still more likely than men's to be interrupted by family formation" (p. 585). Furthermore, within academic structures, for students who are mothers, there is the additional burdens such as feelings of guilt because they are not present as often as they would like for their children and hold high professional expectations for themselves (Trepal, Stinchfield & Haiyososo, 2013).

Academic institutions are simply not designed to recognize or acknowledge the dual-interplay of identities for mothers who become academics (Pillay, 2009). Rosen (1999) discusses womanhood within academic structures, stating that "despite the fact that more women are now in academic life, men remain the frame of reference" (p.48) yet, the long-standing view of women as "novelties or exotic tokens" (Rosen, 1999, p.48) is changing. Rosen (1999) continues that "rather than adding to the burdens already weighing down female scholars, it's time for colleges and university to reconsider what institutional sacrifices must be made to accommodate them" (p.48). Leonard and Malina (1994) found that mothers pursuing education experienced academia

as a time of silence and isolation. Motta (2012) argues for the immediate dismantling of the social structures that devalue, suppress, silence, and discipline the experiences and realities out of student-mothers.

Blending Identities: Indigenous Mothers in Education

Indigenous women were traditionally held responsible for the loving and nurturing atmosphere that existed within a family unit (Armstrong, 1996). In such societies, social order and the earliest governmental constructs were built from quality mothering of children (Armstrong, 1996). Additionally, some early Indigenous societies were structured on matriarchal lines (LaRocque, 1996). Indigenous women also tended to play an important role spiritually within their inherent societal structures (Behrendt, 1993). Historical Aboriginal cultural beliefs and practices, according to the work St. Denis (2007) also suggests women within these societies often "occupied positions of authority, autonomy and high status in their communities" (p.33). The experiences and voices of First Nations women as they walk the border between motherhood and student-life are not heard as loudly as they should be within the literature.

With the limited available literature on the topic of Indigenous women within universities, I found it helpful to understand the experiences of Indigenous Peoples within all levels of education. Preston & Claypool (2013) explored the experiences of Indigenous students in secondary schools. Within their research, they inquired as to what motivated Indigenous students to succeed at the secondary school level. They aimed to understand what influences positive experiences at the secondary school level in order to help increase the long term educational success of Indigenous students. Preston and Claypool (2013) found that the caring and supportive relationships that were experienced by Indigenous students with their "teachers,

counsellors, and other educational workers within the school" (p.265) was a motivator for students to wake up and go to school each day.

Other motivators included student-focused learning that was designed for the students to learn at their own pace (Preston & Claypool, 2013). In addition, things that were outside the institution itself, such as having positive family role models, were also seen as motivators (Preston & Claypool, 2013). The students within Preston and Claypool's (2013) research "consistently acknowledged those family members, friends, and educators who helped them get to this point of significant achievement" (p.275). Ely (1997) had similar findings which acknowledged the needs of non-traditional students in order to foster persistence and improve the long-term outlook for these students. Ely (1997) found that in order to harbour this, non-traditional students required improved basic academic skills, accessible information about job opportunities, as well as decision-making and stress management skills. The key to educational persistence for non-traditional students, Ely (1997) explains "is social integration, fostered by faculty members, and creating a sense of kinship" (p.1). These things, along with "improved registration, parking, financial aid, networking, accessibility, and information services" (Ely, 1997, p.1) were found to also be a benefit to the non-traditional student.

The implication for women is often that the only true path to fulfillment is reaching motherhood, and "once a woman becomes a mother, she is bound by the expectations attached to her new role" (Lynch, 2008, p.586). The idea that while at work we are expected to be academic while forgoing our status as mothers, and yet at home we are expected to be mothers and not academics (Pillay, 2009) also needs to be modernized. These preconceptions form the stereotype that a woman is duty-bound by the role of motherhood and upon reaching this

"milestone" her identity is fulfilled. The conscious decision to attend higher education as a mother, places these stereotypes in jeopardy. The various social structures that are at play in these dichotomous belief systems should move forward into accepting and accommodating the synthesis and blended unification of First Nations mothers as students within Academic institutions. For mothers who are also students, there is a unique duality at play between these blended identities; mother and student (Lynch, 2008). For First Nations women, this accepted synthesis goes even further and needs to include the image of blending culture, traditions, motherhood, and academia. An Indigenous world-view of education and motherhood should be considered within future research.

Internalized Oppression: Feeling like an Imposter

The imposter phenomenon has been described as the inner feelings of falsehood and fraudulence reported by high achieving women (Clance & Imes, 1978; Kumar & Jagacinski, 2006). This has been shown to impact women who have lower levels of confidence in their own intelligence (Kumar & Jagacinski, 2006). Clance (1985) found that these feelings of guilt and failure are often experienced by marginalized and underrepresented populations. Internalized oppression was explored by Tappan (2006) and is described as the experience of those people "who are members of subordinated, marginalized, or minority groups" (p.2116). Those individuals who are powerless and victimized by dominant societal groups and who have been assimilated by the dominant group's ideologies may feel inferior status due to these experiences of oppression, prejudice, and discrimination (Tappan, 2006).

Imposters tend to doubt that their achievements are a result of their abilities; rather they attribute their success to non-ability factors such as luck and knowing the right people (Kumar &

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Jagacinski, 2006; Clance & O'Toole, 1987). Imposters believe and fear that their undeserving position and true lack of ability will be discovered by others. Clance and O'Toole's (1987) research discusses how women are more often impacted by this phenomenon explaining that imposters often experienced a fear of failure. They believed that if they made a mistake or failed at something, they would be humiliated (Clance & O'Toole, 1987).

Ultimately, such a phenomenon can inhibit those who experience it from reaching higher levels of achievement. Clance & Imes (1978) indicate that women who experience this phenomenon are in no way actual "imposters", in fact, their research showed that in all cases, the women have proved to be quite intelligent. It is simply their internal belief that they are a fraud which results in this phenomenon. Unfortunately, I was unable to find any research which linked feelings of inadequacy for specifically First Nations women. However, research surrounding this concept of the imposter phenomenon in relation to an internalized sense of oppression as a result of a colonial history and the resulting intergenerational trauma is needed.

Summary

Within this chapter, I explored many systematic failures that have been aimed to assimilate, subjugate, and annihilate Indigenous Peoples in Canada while focusing in on the systemic racism and sexism found within the Indian Act and its enfranchisement policies that have and continue to affect First Nations women in Canada. I also discussed colonialism and the cultural genocide enacted by the implementation of the residential school system which resulted in intergenerational cycles of trauma for generations of Indigenous Peoples in Canada. Lower-levels of post-secondary attainment within First Nations populations in Canada were explored and found to be in many ways a direct result of this intergenerational trauma. In addition, I

discussed the higher rates of fertility for First Nations women who also tend to have children at much younger ages than non-First Nations populations in Canada. I introduced concepts of resilience and healing found within the literature and delved into a discussion on the intersection of identity as Indigenous mothers and students. I also discussed gender-based violence and discrimination while briefly introducing concepts of internalized oppression and the imposter phenomenon said to be experienced by some high achieving women.

METHODOLOGY

In an effort to articulate and advance an Indigenous research agenda, this project incorporated the use of two research methods: autoethnography and Indigenous storytelling. Through the use of autoethnography and storytelling, my story and those of the storytellers who participated in this project, will contribute to a larger picture based on our combined experiences as First Nations women, students, and mothers. Storytelling is perhaps the oldest practice in human history (Chang, 2008). Sharing the stories of Indigenous Peoples who experience colonization using methods such as autoethnography and storytelling is an integral part of the efforts aimed at decolonization (*Sium* & Ritskes, 2013). Both of these methods resulted in narratives that were critically analyzed and coded.

I wrote this paper with a sense of eagerness that included both optimism and pessimism. Do I think that this work will change the world and render all those who read it fulfilled and decolonized? Sadly, no. Although, I do hope that the resultant collective story will provide inspiration to others who will help contribute to the movement for decolonization and perhaps support a change in the dialogue that exists when we speak of First Nations Peoples within post-secondary education.

Storytellers

The First Nations mothers (myself included) who participated in this research were students in varying levels of university at Laurentian University in Sudbury, Ontario, Canada. Seven women partook in this research, sharing our stories and experiences as First Nations

students and mothers. The mothers were between the ages of 18 and 35 years of age and began or returned to university after becoming a mother. The ages of their children varied and the number of children each mother had also varied. What was consistent and present throughout the interviews was the pride and love that each of the women had for their child(ren).

Autoethnography

Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) describe autoethnography as a research and writing approach which seeks to both describe and systematically analyze the personal experiences of the writer in order to better understand cultural experiences. They continue by explaining that as a method, autoethnography is characterized by a combination of both autobiography and ethnography (Ellis et al., 2011). Tierney (1998) explains that "autoethnography and life stories are powerful research tools that ultimately enable a writer to deal with differences and to ensure that, in doing so, people are not all assimilated into one mainstream sameness" (p. 49). Autoethnography, as explained by Custer (2014) "is a style of autobiographical writing and qualitative research that explores an individual's unique life experiences in relationship to social and cultural institutions" (p1).

Whitinui (2014) presents an Indigenous form of autoethnography and describes it as "discovering, exploring, constructing, and narrating notions of "self" as an indigenous person" (p.3) and how this "must take into account an individual's ability to articulate meaning in relation to why their world is socially, culturally, and politically different as an indigenous person" (p. 3). This is something I have made sure to consider along the way; constantly referring back to this idea of: *what makes my experiences as a First Nations person different from the experiences of other non-First Nation student mothers?* Thus, autoethnography was used to explore my

journey[11] and my experiences along the way to and during post-secondary, while further adding to my personal and cultural knowledge through a lens of decolonization and empowerment.

Anderson (2006) explains that "the first and most obvious feature of autoethnography is that the researcher is a complete member of the social world under study" (p.379). As a First Nations mother of mixed ancestry and a student in university studying the experiences of First Nations mothers within a post-secondary institution, I was a prime subject for this method. When I began my post-secondary journey, I held very little knowledge of colonial history. It was during this time that I began what would become a continual and -quite possibly- a life long journey of discovery into my personal subconscious, in an effort to find closure and healing from events in my life I had long-since buried deep inside. The very first time I was asked to "situate myself" within my research, I remember sitting in class, reading my work through my tears. Writing it, I found, was easy. Reading it out-loud made it all come back to me. This was the most memorable moment in my post-secondary career where I realized how much I had suppressed over the years. After this, I spent months seeking healing; I attended workshops, I went to ceremonies, spoke with family, and sought counselling. Custer (2014) explains that "the process of autoethnography can uncover many different feelings within the writer. It can be joyful, sad, revealing, exciting, and occasionally painful" (p.1). Despite the array of emotions that came forward when conducting this research, I continued to dig deep, and I discovered that many of my family

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[11] Although I refer to the autoethnographic portion of the research as *my* journey and *my* lived-experiences, I would like to point out that my partner and my children have played and continue to play hugely important roles in my journey through university and in life.

members' lived-experiences mirrored mine in many ways and could all be traced back to moments of colonial upset that impacted my maternal family[12] in many traumatic ways.

Indigenous Storytelling

*Stories hold power—the power to change lives and alter the
course of history* (McIvor, 2010, p.146).

Long before the written word, Indigenous cultures, histories, and traditions were passed from generation to generation through oral storytelling. Autoethnography is largely about telling one's own story and not unlike Indigenous storytelling, it also aims to teach, learn from, and create new knowledge (McIvor, 2010, p.140). Smith (2012) describes storytelling as oral histories which have become an integral part of Indigenous research stating that "each individual story is powerful" (p.145). Through storytelling, it is not one story which will encompass an entirety, as Smith (2012) explains, "the point about the stories is not that they simply tell a story, or tell a story simply" (p.145) rather, she explains that "these new stories contribute to a collective story in which every indigenous person has a place" (p.145).

Kovach (2009) discusses what has been coined *the conversational method* in Indigenous research which mirrors the concepts of storytelling explaining that this method is "of significance to Indigenous methodologies because it is a method of gathering knowledge based on oral story telling tradition congruent with an Indigenous paradigm" (p.40). The conversational method, Kovach (2009) continues "aligns with an Indigenous worldview that honours orality as means of transmitting knowledge and upholds the relational which is necessary to maintain a collectivist

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[12] First Nations side of my family.

tradition" (p. 42). Storytelling allows for the sharing of remembrances and evokes the spiritual, emotional, physical and mental, while allowing our voices as First Nations women to be included in the written records (Thomas, 2005). Thomas (2005) explains that "traditionally, storytelling played an essential role in nurturing and educating First Nations children" (p.237) and adds that "the beauty of storytelling is that it allows storytellers to use their own voices and tell their own stories on their own terms" (p.242).

Facing my own pain was something that I needed to cope with when conducting the autoethnographic portion of the project. However, as prepared that I thought I was to hear the stories of other First Nations student-mothers, I was not expecting that I would be exposed to so much "pain and anguish of other people who have experienced similar circumstances" (Custer, 2014, p.1). This is something that future researchers need to understand and be prepared for when using storytelling as a method. Deciding to include Indigenous storytelling as a second method allowed me to share and learn from the experiences of other First Nations student-mothers.

Early on in the project, before I collected any stories or data, I met with Gregory Scofield, a Métis professor of English Literature at Laurentian University and a Canadian poet. He sat with me without knowing who I was and we talked about my project and my research methods. I was searching for something at that point, but I was not quite sure what it was. I remember asking him what made Indigenous storytelling different than a story told by anyone. He explained that one of the differences is the listener's ability to learn something from the story: "Indigenous storytelling is interpretive, it makes you think... it can help someone to find their place of power when they feel disempowered" (Scofield, Personal Communication, September 21, 2016). I

remember I walked into his office feeling very nervous and unsure of the direction of my project in these early stages, and with his kind and wise words, I left there feeling much more prepared and even excited to begin the data collection portion of my project. Kinanâskomitin[13], Professor Scofield.

One of my supervisors also once said to me, while explaining the importance of re-reading the transcripts following the collection of stories was that: "the story may not change, but your perspective on the story may have changed" (Manitowabi, Personal Communication, September 29, 2016). King (2003) explores the truth about stories and writes that "the truth about stories, is that's all we are" (p. 92). Let that sink in; we are simply the sum of all our stories. The things that I learned from others while working towards the completion of this project have resonated with me and have helped to guide and influence the collection and analyses of the stories. We are the sum of our subjective stories and together, our individual stories can tell the tale of our shared experiences.

Ethical Considerations

This project was approved by the Laurentian University Research Ethics Board (Rowe 2016-06-07). With me being the exception, ethical considerations were made in order to maintain the anonymity and confidentiality of the six First Nations student-mothers who participated in this research. Each of the mothers also received a letter of information (see Appendix A) which outlined the project in advance and provided them with the contact

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[13] Kinanâskomitin is thank you in Cree

information of the Laurentian University Research Ethics Board as well as my information and that of my supervisors. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw at any time without penalty and did not need to share anything that they were uncomfortable sharing. In addition to this, once the storytelling sessions were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim before being anonymized. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to maintain anonymity and had the transcripts returned to them for their personal vetting.

Combining Methods

Despite a lack of literature which explores the combining of these two methods, I will attempt to articulate the benefits to braiding these methods. Indigenous storytelling was used within this project in conjunction with the autoethnography in order to explore the stories of the women who shared their lived-experiences with me. While hoping to maintain the integrity of each individual story, aspects from each story have been included in this paper in an effort to do as Smith (2012) discusses and "contribute to a collective story" in which each of the participants' voices has a place. In an effort to contribute to decolonizing approaches of research, much consideration was put into the decision of whether or not to use autoethnography and Indigenous storytelling as methods. Autoethnography and storytelling are both narrative methods of research which, when combined, allow for an even richer collective story to form.

In order to collect the information that was used for the autoethnographic portion of the study, I had to dig deep into old diaries, journals, and other pieces of writing that I found stored away for exactly this purpose. Introspection was used and allowed for deep, rich, details to emerge. I also took note of my regular routines, as a First Nations mother and as a student. Chang (2008) explains that this process is important because overtime customs, language, and

traditions become enculturated in the patterns of society. Prior to sitting down with my participants, I allowed the research questions that I was going to be asking them to resonate with me. I continued to take notes and write in my journals while reflecting upon my past and my present in order to provide the account of my experiences that are outlined within this paper.

Participants were each briefed on the project and the process and were provided with consent forms, a letter of information (see Appendix A) and provided a resource page including on-campus and local community resource information (see Appendix D) if they wanted one. Each of the participants joined me over coffee or tea and a snack in order to share with me aspects of their lived-experiences as First Nations student-mothers. Participants were recruited with the help of a poster (see Appendix B) that was shared through social media and around our campus at Laurentian University. Each of the mothers approached me and offered to share their story. The conversations were casual, although I did have a question guide (see Appendix C) which provided me with prompts, just in case they were needed. Some of the women would begin talking and not stop until everything was out, while others would ask me to ask basic questions to get the conversation moving. We sat, had a warm beverage and a snack, and shared stories about our hectic lives as parents and students, like mothers often do. The participants were asked to tell me their story, in whatever way that came out for them. Our conversations were recorded and then later transcribed. Each of the storytelling sessions lasted between 1.5-2.5 hours. This resulted in nearly two-hundred pages of narratives. I anonymized and sent the manuscripts from our sessions back to each of the mothers for vetting, giving them the opportunity to add, remove, or change anything that they were uncomfortable with. Other than some minor tweaks through

the removal of words such as "like" and verbatim sounds such as "uhm" all of the mothers who responded were satisfied with the resulting narratives.

Storied Analysis

The stories that resulted from the autoethnography and the storytelling sessions were analyzed in search of common areas of interest. Thomas (2005) discusses the importance of listening to the stories of others with open hearts and open minds, in order to respect and honour the storytellers, and this is what I did. I listened to each of the recordings over and over, taking notes on tone of voice and remembering the conversations as they were had. I then read, and re-read the anonymized transcripts – knowing each of these stories inside and out before I began data analysis.

The two chapters that follow, chapter four: "Overcoming Obstacles" and chapter five: "Blending Identities: Indigenous, Mother, Student" explore and discuss the stories that were shared during the two-year long journey that this research involved. In each of these chapters I quote, at length, parts of the collected stories/narratives and offer insight and discussion to how the stories relate to the literature. I will argue that the experiences of the First Nations student-mothers who participated in this research have been influenced by the sociocultural implications associated with colonialism.

In chapter four, I focussed on the varying obstacles that we faced when deciding to become students. For many of the participants, the biggest obstacle to overcome was the decision to leave their home communities. The question then becomes, what would motivate a First Nations mother to embark on a post-secondary education journey in the first place? The motivators for becoming a student as a First Nations were discussed by the participants and I as being fluid and

changing throughout the process. Following the exploration of motivators, the second area of interest that falls under the topic of overcoming obstacles is, self-doubt in which the mothers who partook in this research, including myself, discussed feelings of self-doubt as First Nations student-mothers.

In chapter five, I focussed on the blending of identities as First Nations mother, and student. This chapters explores the ways in which the participants and I discuss balancing our identities as First Nations mothers and students. I explored four main facets in this section, the first involving the ways in which we identified as mothers and managed to blend this role in with other aspects of our identities. I then moved into an exploration on student life and the identity shift that is involved when mothers become students. The next emerging area of interest that falls under the topic of blending identities involves culture and traditions. In this section I share the ways that the participants and I discuss keeping culture alive within our homes and for our children, and finally, the merging of these identities is explored when the participants and I discuss the ways in which we manage these identities in our efforts to change the conversation surrounding Indigenous women and mothers.

Summary

Within this chapter, I introduced you to the literature surrounding the chosen methods that were used within this research; autoethnography and Indigenous storytelling. These methods were selected as a means of continuing with the respectful and decolonizing research approaches that have been discussed throughout this work. Earlier and higher fertility rates found within Indigenous Canadians compared to non-Indigenous Canadians often results in higher disadvantages for those First Nations women and girls who are already hindered by their

cultural background and gender (Guimond & Robitaille, 2008). It is important to understand the experiences of young First Nations mothers who are often overlooked within Academic research (Cooke, 2013). Through the use of decolonizing research methodologies, this work aimed to discuss the unique experiences of the First Nations student-mothers who participated in this research.

CHAPTER FOUR
OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

Within this chapter, I explored what it took for the First Nations student-mothers who

participated in this research to become university students. The following includes excerpts from

the stories and narratives that were collected along with a discussion that explores how the

storytellers and I have overcome various obstacles including the challenge of leaving home and

experiences of self-doubt. Briefly, before we begin, I would like to introduce Table 1 (below)

which outlines the academic achievement of each of the participants at the time of the

interviews, the number of children each of us have, whether we attended university before or

after having children, and whether or not we left our home communities in order to attend post-

secondary.

Table 1: Description of the Academic Achievement of the Participants

Participant Name/Pseudonym	# of Children	Year in University	Attended University Before/After having Children	Left home community (yes or no)
Kaci	5	4th year of Bachelor of Arts	After	Yes
Maggie	2	4th year of Bachelor of Arts	After	Yes
Niki	1	3rd year of Masters degree	After	Yes
Robyn	3	2nd year of Masters degree	After	No
Ruby	1	4th year of Bachelor of Arts	Before and After[14]	No
Stephanie	2	4th year of Bachelor of Arts	After	No
Tabitha	2	2nd year of Bachelor of Arts	After	Yes

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[14] Ruby began university before having her child, once she had her daughter she took an extended leave from school before returning to finish her degree when her daughter was in preschool.

Leaving Home

In this section I discuss the experiences of some of the First Nations student-mothers in their choice to leave their home communities. Following that, I look at what motivated and continues to motivate us to pursue post-secondary. Four of the seven participants left their First Nations communities in order to pursue post-secondary (Table 1). Within my study, I found that the idea of leaving home, although difficult at times, is often discussed as a motivator as well. It is for this reason that this section combines the notions of leaving home with what motivated the participants and I to pursue post-secondary as Fist Nations mothers.

I will start at the beginning, where the decision to leave one's home community as a First Nations mother in order to attend post-secondary education was the first step for some of us. Deciding to pursue a university-level education as a mother is a choice that takes courage. Deciding to pursue post-secondary as a mother who needs to pick up and move her family to another city, takes perseverance and dedication. Tabitha is not a big fan of Sudbury and cannot wait to move back home with all the new skills she has learned in university. She shares how she encourages others to leave their community in order to pursue post-secondary:

> *Both of us [a friend of hers] have two kids. Her oldest is seventeen and her youngest is eight. And then there's me, right? We're both the same age. I keep trying to convince her to move off the Reserve because there's really no place to go to school down there for post-secondary at all. It's just sometimes people get comfortable being there. I guess. They just don't want to leave which is really sad because it's like, sometimes you do have to leave and get that education and come back, you know, become that contributing member of your community. That's just what I'm trying to do, I guess.*
>
> *[Tabitha]*

Becoming a contributing member of her community is exactly what Tabitha plans to do. She hopes to return home and work in a position (a helping field) that will benefit her community

with the skills that she learned in university. The mothers in this study often described living within their home communities as simply "surviving". They viewed post-secondary education as something that would be difficult to attain, but also as something that required action. The literature review highlighted how low levels of educational achievement within Indigenous populations in Canada have been shown to result in life-long unemployment, poverty, poor housing, substance use and abuse, family violence, and ill health (TRCC, 2015). Whether or not we had to leave our home communities in order to attend post-secondary, all of us discussed the benefits to higher education as an improvement on our current quality of life and our current employment status.

In many cases however, leaving their home community in order to attend post-secondary was a decision that needed to be made. For Niki, leaving her home community meant an education and a life for herself:

> *I remember thinking when I was in grade ten or eleven, saying, you know what, if I want to get off this reserve I need an education, I need an education to get out of here. That's my ticket off here and I'm going to go*
>
> *[Niki]*

Leaving one's home community is a big decision which generally involves leaving behind family, friends, and support systems. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRCC; 2015) has highlighted the negative historical impact of the dominant western educational system on the experiences of First Nations Peoples in Canada. As a consequence of systemic racism and discrimination, post-secondary education today is viewed by many First Nations Peoples and communities as being affiliated with notions of assimilation. This system has been described as cultural genocide due to the forced removal and isolation of First Nations children from their homes with the intent to assimilate these young minds into the dominant culture. The aftermath

of the residential school era has resulted in higher levels of poverty, devastation, cognitive, and even physical impairments which were then passed down through the generations (Cote-Meek, 2014). The literature has shown that the depth, extent, and length of poverty is generally much greater for Indigenous Peoples in Canada as well (TRCC, 2015). It is therefore understandable that making the first step to leave home, to go outside one's community/comfort – despite the intergenerational cycles of trauma – in order to pursue post-secondary education within dominant societal structures can be viewed as a challenge for many and should be understood as something that is an achievement all on its own.

It takes great resilience to rise above the historical impact of the residential school system in order to leave your home to obtain a post-secondary education. The United Nations (2008) mandate the rights of Indigenous Peoples within the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and outline the establishment and control of educational systems, the right to an education without discrimination, and access to education that respects Indigenous cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations. Indigenous Peoples have the right to improved economic and social conditions without discrimination through education. In addition, the TRCC honours the resilience and courage of former residential school students, their families, and communities and aims to inspire a process of healing.

Indigenous Peoples in Canada have a history of losing their roles as caregivers, nurturers, teachers, and family decision makers, which has resulted in a loss of culture, language, traditional values, family bonding, life skills, parenting skills, self-respect and respect for others (TRCC, 2015). As stated within the literature, Indigenous Peoples are underrepresented in post-secondary institutions as a direct result of this intergenerational trauma, and stories, such as Niki's and the

rest of the participants are needed in order to change the conversation surrounding First Nations

mothers within post-secondary education. The stories/narratives that were shared with me

showcase the resilience of First Nations Peoples and aim to inspire others.

Motivators

For some of the mothers who participated in this study, they took what could have been

a difficult obstacle and turned it into a motivator for themselves and their families. Kaci highlights

how leaving her home community meant breaking the stereotypes of what a First Nations mother

could accomplish:

> *You know, there's a lot [of] stereotypes, right? A young teenage mom from the rez [reserve] isn't going to amount to anything. A young teenage mom may live on the rez for her whole life, on social assistance, having kids. And if a young mom from the rez decides to leave the rez, she'd be working at a fast food restaurant or something. And I told myself I'm not going to fall under these stereotypical biases and that I could change my future despite being a statistic. And so I take great pride in that, that I'm not a statistic and that I decided to advance in life and not just settle.*
>
> *[Kaci]*

For me,

> *I was born and raised in Sudbury, and I often question whether I could ever live anywhere else. The idea of leaving, and uprooting my children from their schools, their friends, and extended family is the number one reason I never moved away from Sudbury when I began pursuing post-secondary. I can imagine that leaving one's community and support system is one of the more prevalent constraints that First Nations mothers face when deciding to leave their home communities.*
>
> [Robyn]

As mentioned, four of the seven participants were born and raised in their home

communities and had to make the initial decision to leave home. I was one of the two that did

not have to face that decision. As a student however, wanting to move forward with my academic

studies, we are told that getting all of your university education (as in a Bachelor of Arts, a

Masters, and a Ph.D.) from the same place looks bad when applying for jobs. So I have had to struggle with the idea of having to leave Sudbury (*my home*) in order to pursue my post-graduate degree elsewhere. I chose to stay in Sudbury; for my family and for my children. In all instances, an individual who has chosen to move cities (be they First Nation or non-First Nation), there are associated costs, and burdens. Finding a place to live, travel costs, moving costs, and if you are moving for school, there are the costs associated with being a post-secondary student. In addition to that, there can be the emotional burden associated with leaving what one considers "home", in my case- Sudbury, which would involve leaving friends, family, support systems, doctors who I am comfortable with and who know my health records etc. If I were single and childless, the decision would have perhaps been much easier to make.

Indigenous Peoples have a deep connection to their home land, and for me, my connection lies in Sudbury. Ruby also did not have to leave her home community in order to pursue university, in fact, she moved back home with her parents after some time in college:

> *I changed my mind [about the program she was taking in college] and I decided to go back home and go to Laurentian and to go into [the program she chose].*
>
> [Ruby]

For Ruby, being with her family while pursuing university was a way for her to save some money while also having a solid support system nearby while she challenged herself in university. Regardless of the path we take to get to university, it is clear that we each, in some way hold a strong tie to the lands we were raised. Be it within our home communities or in our home-towns, the bond we have to the places we come from is strong, and that strength often comes from having our families nearby.

The TRCC (2015) has laid out a series of Calls to Action which are specifically meant to improve the educational outlook for Indigenous Peoples in Canada. They have called to action the federal government of Canada in order "to develop with Aboriginal groups a joint strategy to eliminate educational and employment gaps between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians" (TRCC, 2015, p.147). Ultimately, the TRCC's (2015, p.2) Calls to Action includes:

> We call upon the federal government to draft a new Aboriginal education legislation with the full participation and informed consent of Aboriginal peoples. The new legislation would include a commitment to sufficient funding and would incorporate the following principles:
> i.   Providing sufficient funding to close identified educational achievement gaps within one generation.
> ii.   Improving education attainment levels and success rates
> iii.   Developing culturally appropriate curricula
> iv.   Protecting the right to Aboriginal languages, including the teaching of Aboriginal languages as credit courses.

Despite the changes that are suggested in the TRCC and that are occurring within some post-secondary institutions in Canada, many First Nations mothers have been making the decision to pursue post-secondary education with their own motivators in mind.

Making the conscious decision to pursue post-secondary education as a First Nations mother is not the same as being a single person, who wakes up one day and decides that this is the next step in their journey. As is the case of this research, the stories and narratives that resulted demonstrated that each of us had a reason for why we made the decision to pursue post-secondary education, and motivators that changed throughout our journeys through the institution. Tabitha, for example, shared how she wanted to be a stay at home mother, but after having a child of her own, losing her mother and finding herself single her perspectives changed:

> *After having a kid and seeing it fall apart [her relationship], you know, and seeing some of my sister's relationships flounder and stuff, I just thought "it's got to be*

me [who makes a change in her life] because nobody else is going to do it. Nobody's going to come rescue me. Nobody's going to rescue my family." So, that drives me to go and finish because I know it's all [responsibilities of parenthood/adulthood] going to be on me eventually, at the end.

[Tabitha]

In this case, Tabitha had to make a plan. She had to arrange to leave her community, register for school, find a place to live in Sudbury, move, get settled, arrange for a babysitter/daycare, and start school. She did this, for herself, and for the love of her children and the betterment of all of their lives. Ruby shared the difficulties that exist for her within the "western world" and how she requires her own personal motivational strategies in order to cope.

It's easy to get discouraged [being a First Nations student and a mother] because of how there are so many barriers that are put up in the western world and whatnot. There are so many things that you have to deal with, so you have to have your own personal coping strategies and your own personal way of staying motivated

[Ruby]

Ruby continued sharing with me on of these challenges. She discussed raising her daughter in the "western way" and how she gets discouraged that her daughter cannot be the "free spirit she wants to be."

I have a struggle with her [daughter] because she's very defiant, and it always brings to mind with me how I should be raising her, like because the way that I'm raising her is like the western way of raising kids with structure, right, I bring them to school and they're supposed to sit down and just have things sucked into their brain like sponges and stuff like that, and they're supposed to listen to their teachers and they're not supposed to do anything except for play, and they're told what to play with and what to do and what to learn. And today was really hard, ironically, because I brought her there to school, and it's a secure school whereby you have to go to the reception area when you first walk in and the parents can't bring their kids to their classrooms. The kids have to either be brought if they're little or they go on their own, right. She didn't want to leave me today, she wanted me to stay, or she wanted me to bring her to her class and I couldn't so I had to wait for another teacher to bring her, and it was hard because she was getting upset and stuff and I felt bad because I'm leaving her in this strange building with this strange person, you know, trying to learn all these things in a western way

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when really she's meant to be, you know, out there in the land, learning her land, and learning her language and being the free spirit she wants to be, and that was really hard.

[Ruby]

For Ruby, this included keeping her traditions alive and visiting her family regularly. She continued by discussing how her family did not believe she could finish her degree, and she used their doubt to fuel her completion. Niki talks about how she struggles at times to continue with her post-secondary education, but keeps the idea of building a better life for herself and her child at the forefront:

Even though I was going through a lot at one point in my life, the big picture is if I keep going to school and I keep- like, I want to provide for my son, be well off and just focus on us, and go on trips and all these little things that I have planned for him and I. Big picture!

[Niki]

Both Ruby's and Niki's stories resonate well with me, despite how hard I knew things were going to be, I too wanted to make a better life for my small family, while also proving to those who doubted me that I could succeed:

I started when I was twenty-three; I had a 3-month-old and a 3-year-old. We were just getting by each month and I looked around and realized that I wanted more for them. I knew it wouldn't be easy, but I was determined.

[Robyn]

Kaci highlights how her children were her number one motivator to leave her home community and attend post-secondary:

I always wanted my children to go to school off reserve when they were older because, I got bullied, severely when I was on the rez [reserve]. Mostly in the middle grades. So, I always wanted to let the kids go to daycare there and for elementary, but I knew I always wanted to move them off reserve. So I knew this [attending post-secondary] would be my way of getting them off reserve. Like, I either went to school or got a job in the city. I just always wanted them to go to school off reserve.

[Kaci]

When we make the decision as First Nations mothers to pursue post-secondary, I found that we are often thinking of the additional benefits that will come with having a degree in terms of job security and the resulting financial security. Within the review of the stories/narratives I found that we, as student-mothers, are also teaching our children the benefits of post-secondary education. Post-secondary education results in more employment opportunities that often mean higher income and lower rates of unemployment (TRCC, 2015), and thus, we, as First Nations student-mothers could potentially be influencing change in future generations of First Nations Peoples simply by teaching our children the benefits of post-secondary education. In essence, we are saving two generations in one go from the historical and intergenerational trauma that have resulted in poverty and devastation for Indigenous Peoples of Canada for so long. For Ruby it was important for her to finish her degree in order to improve her socioeconomic status through the attainment of a job that required workers with a post-secondary education:

> *I wanted a better job, obviously. I hated working in retail constantly and I knew that I could get a better job, and I knew that I could succeed if I was motivated enough. And also because of the time that had passed I was a different person too, I had grown more, I was more mature.*
>
> [Ruby]

Lower levels of post-secondary academic achievement have limited the employment opportunities and income levels of generations of Indigenous Peoples who struggle with intergenerational trauma as a result of the residential school system. The desire to beat those stereotypes by rising above them was an experience shared by all of us.

Within the literature review, I explored some of the motivators surrounding the attainment of post-secondary education for student-mothers which included higher achievement levels due to personal motivators such as family (Scott et al., 1998). A change in

motivators throughout the post-secondary journey was also commonly discussed. In my case, I began university wanting to make a better life for myself and my family and today, although that original motivator still holds true, I have honestly just found a deep passion for education that makes me want to keep moving forward. Once in university, motivators sometimes come on the faces of our children while they glow with pride over our accomplishments. Niki explains how she was part of a radio show where she mentioned her son. When she told him about it, he wanted to hear it. When he heard the part of the radio show where she mentions him, he got very excited and said "you said 'my son', mommy! That's me, that's me." She continued by telling him "It's because of you I'm in school and I'm still going." Niki continues her story:

> *He's sitting there proudly. He's looking out the window and he's listening to the rest of the interview. I totally forgot I did one (another interview) for (another station), as well. And he comes running home, "Mom, my teacher said that she saw you on the news and you were talking to a lady," and I was like, "Oh, yeah, I forgot I did that interview." I said, "I'm so sorry I forgot to tell you." He's, like, "Yeah. And you didn't tell me you were talking about me again." Just, like, "Oh, my God, I'm so sorry. I forgot to tell you," He's like, "Can I see it?" I'm like, "Sure." So we go online and we look at it. He just "[gasps] That's me. I did that, mom." So he's taking-almost, ownership kind of it: "because of me you're in school." I almost see that in him. So now he's talking about, "When I grow up I'm going to go to Monsters University like mom" … just because of the cartoon, right?*
> [Niki]

Maggie too, shares how proud she made her son by going to school:

> *My sons in kindergarten and he's like so proud of me for going back to school. Yes, this is great and that was like my motivator to just like get up and keep going and on the days that I didn't want to go, or you know, days where I was feeling lazy, it's just like, no, he's proud of me. I have to go because he's super excited.*
> [Maggie]

The encouragement we receive from our children as we move forward in our educational journeys is overwhelmingly reassuring. As with Niki's son, it is often that our children take pride and ownership of our accomplishments. As First Nations student-mothers, we all discussed

moving forward with our academic goals in order to show our children what can be accomplished with a lot of hard work and perseverance.

     Motivators were also discussed at times during the storytellings as interconnected to the concept of leaving home. As previously shared, Kaci also discussed the motivator of leaving her home community as a First Nations mother of five in order to pursue post-secondary. Women in general are often plagued by the implication that once motherhood is achieved, one's identity is fulfilled (Lynch, 2008). Gender bias is something that First Nations women are all too familiar with. The implementation of the Indian act, which was discussed within the literature review, has been largely criticised for its unequal treatment of First Nations. Maggie shares her point of view on gender inequity:

> *But like I think for myself, like being an Indigenous woman is just the fact that we have to try harder, I feel like. We have to succeed more because we're not expected to. Because expectations are low of us and because society views us as nothing, you know?*
>
> *[Maggie]*

Historically, many First Nations women in a relationship with a non-Indian man had to choose between whether or not to marry and be enfranchised (losing all inherent treaty rights) or go to post-secondary. Again, Maggie discusses some of her motivators for pursuing post-secondary, including her desire to leave her community in order to improve her socioeconomic status:

> *I think my real motivation to pursue post-secondary education was to just get off the Reserve and to not just live on welfare or live cheque to cheque. Cause that's the kind of lifestyle that I've seen around me and so I thought "okay, no, like I want more. I want to see more, I want to like live more and do more, experience more."*
>
> [Maggie]

Maggie continues by explaining how she did leave her community and attended college. Before

having the chance to complete the college program, she got pregnant. She left college in order

to have her child, where her motivation to continue with her post-secondary education changed:

> *So I took [first year of College program] and then half way through it I got pregnant with my first son. So I was like, "okay, well I'm going to take a year off from the program to raise my son and to spend the time with him that he needs." So that's what I did. I took a break and was kind of like, met with a lot of criticism for taking that break. It was kind of like, "oh, well, you have kids now so you're not going to back to school now. Right? You're just going to drop out." I kind of used that as my motivation to be like, "no, you're wrong. Like you're all wrong. Like I'm going to go back and I'm going to finish and I'm going to graduate and get a job and support my family." You know? And rub it in your face. And so I did.*
> [Maggie]

As described here, Maggie too used the doubt of others to fuel her post-secondary journey. Ruby

was amidst completing her university degree, before taking a leave due to personal reasons,

when she got pregnant. She took an extended leave from school, before going back to finish her

degree when her daughter was a toddler. Here, Ruby talks about what motivated her to continue

her education:

> *I wanted to finish it [her bachelor of arts degree]. This was important to me when I started so I wanted to finish what I'd started, and also I wanted to prove to people that I was going to finish it because there are some people like my sister, one of my sisters and my mother who point blank told me to my face that I was a quitter basically. So, there is that.*
> [Ruby]

The discussion surrounding proving those who doubt our ability to success wrong is something

that was described as a strong motivator for many us. We experience doubt from others, and use

this as a means of motivation, and yet, in turn, we doubt ourselves.

Self-Doubt

As a First Nations woman, I have been taught- perhaps subconsciously at times to always be humble and kind. I don not speak about my achievements, I certainly don not gloat (even when I really want to), and I strive to be kind. Within the literature review, we discussed the imposter phenomenon and internalized oppression. The imposter phenomenon was described as inner feelings of falsehood and fraudulence reported, in particular, by high-achieving women (Clance & Imes, 1978; Kumar & Jagacinski, 2006). Internalized oppression was described as affecting members of subordinated, marginalized, or minority groups (Tappan, 2006) in which the individuals who experience this internal oppression feel powerless and victimized by dominant societal groups.

The First Nations student-mothers who participated in this research discussed inner feelings of self-doubt (internalized oppression) that could very well be attributed to these same concepts. Maggie shares how she never imagined moving past her college degree because she did not believe that she was smart enough to attend university:

> *I'm not smart enough for university… I just don't feel like academically that I'm there yet. Like I don't know how to do research. I don't know how to cite properly. I don't know how to go through a list of academic journals and cite what I need for a research paper and that makes me really nervous because I'm really scared that I'll like, get kicked out for plagiarism or something, you know. Like something really, like Western like that. And I don't want to attempt university without having the proper tools under my belt.*
>
> [Maggie]

Although I could not find any research on the imposter phenomenon that was specific to First Nations peoples, the participants and I did share similar feelings of self-doubt. There is countless literature available on the topic of Indigenous Peoples that discusses the resilience of a People,

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who rose up against the dominant oppressors and pushed back against those who historically aimed to assimilate us into the dominant western culture. Despite our collective and ever-growing resilience, and the accomplishments that we as First Nations student-mothers achieve individually, we still experience this sense of internalize oppression and self-doubt. Perhaps, despite the lack of literature, this is an experience that is shared by First Nations Peoples who want to pursue post-secondary. How could the imposter phenomenon impact the lives and decisions of First Nations peoples who want to pursue post-secondary but are perhaps too afraid of failure to try? Could it be that the imposter phenomenon is yet another consequence of colonialism in the same way that internalized oppression impacts members of subordinated and marginalized groups? Either way, the legacy of the residential school system has resulted in a fear of the mainstream educational system for many Indigenous Peoples in Canada (TRCC, 2015). That legacy, mixed with feelings of self-doubt, otherness and not-belonging has, I believe, contributed to the low rates of post-secondary educational attainment that afflicts Indigenous Peoples in Canada.

In support of this, I have included some additional dialogue on the feelings of self-doubt (internalized oppression) that were shared with me and experienced by me throughout this research. Niki became a single mother when she was pursuing university. She finished her undergraduate degree and when deciding to continue her education and apply for a Masters degree she was convinced she wasn't smart enough. When she got into the Masters program she was overjoyed. She eventually applied for a Ph.D. program and again, she was convinced that she wasn't smart enough- regardless of her previous academic success. During our conversation, Niki

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expressed feelings of self-doubt on three separate occasions during our storytelling session

together:

> *This new Masters program just opened up. I was like, oh, I wonder if I should apply … I'm not smart enough for a master's, no, no way.*
>
> *I'm not smart enough for this (Masters program) but, if I get in, we'll see. Maybe that's the path I'm supposed to be on, who knows.*
>
> *I said I'm only going to apply to one PhD program, I probably won't get in, I'm not smart enough. [laughs] And the letter came in two weeks later that I got accepted.*
>
> <div align="right">[Niki]</div>

Kaci didn't believe that she was smart enough for university either. She had a friend persuade

her to attend post-secondary:

> *Because I was living on the rez, just basically surviving, taking care of my kids. I was on social assistance, so I had no job. And she (her friend) kept saying, you know, you're really smart, you should really go to school. And for years, I was like oh, my god, I'm not as smart as you, I'll never be able to do it. I don't even know if I'll be able to leave the rez.*
>
> <div align="right">[Kaci]</div>

Later on in our conversation, Kaci shared that:

> *From the first year to now, I was very self-conscious. I still had the mindset that I wasn't smart enough and that I shouldn't be here and that my job is to be a mother and that's it. So it took a long time for my thinking to change. But I feel like if I wasn't educated and if I didn't come to school, I think I would've still been stuck under this umbrella having everyone make my decisions for me.*
>
> <div align="right">[Kaci]</div>

With a long history of racist and sexist stereotypes being the reality for First Nations, a

debilitating sense of self-worth and self-confidence could very well be the result. Stigmatizing

statements such as *dumb Indian, drug addict,* and *welfare* mom (Gibson, 2016) can seriously

harm the emotional and mental well-being and belief systems of Indigenous Peoples. Research

conducted by Fazio et al. (2015) explore the concept of fictitious beliefs. They demonstrated that

if lies (false claims) are told often enough, they are believed by participants. Albert Einstein wrote at some point in his life that *"everyone is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid."* After centuries of degradation, forced assimilation, and cultural genocide (Kirmayer, Simpson & Cargo, 2003; Quinn, 2007), is it possible that we, as First Nations People believe what we hear? Kaci explains in her story how she believed she wasn't as smart as her friend, stating: *"I'm not as smart as you, I'll never be able to do it."* It is for these reasons that future research should continue to explore what the impact is of colonialism on the experiences of First Nations women and mothers within post-secondary education. I too, share in the self-doubt that was described by the participants:

> *I really don't like to tell people what I'm doing. Only those that are really close to me will know my titles, the jobs I hold, the degrees I'm working towards. Even now, nearly done my Masters degree and pursuing a Ph.D. in the Fall, I still feel like if I tell people where I am in life, they'll believe I got here due to some unearned advantage.*
>
> [Robyn]

The feelings of self-doubt as mothers and academics were persistent throughout the stories/narratives. The impact of a colonial history on Indigenous Peoples in Canada, and the oppression, degradation, and marginalization of First Nations Peoples who continue to experience intergenerational trauma as a direct result of these offenses continues to be experienced today as intergenerational trauma. Cote-Meek (2014) speaks about feelings of inferiority within her research. She explains that as Indigenous Peoples, we are sometimes labelled as not being real academics, or finding ourselves disadvantaged as students taking Indigenous courses that are labelled as "not real" academic programs (Cote-Meek, 2014).

As First Nations Peoples of Canada, our shared history of colonialism has resulted in generations of trauma for our children, our families, and our communities. As a First Nations

woman and mother in university, I have had conversations with colleagues about the feeling of what Cote-Meek (2014) discusses as *unearned advantage*. These are real feelings that as an Indigenous academic, I sometimes encounter and perhaps to some extent, the First Nations student-mothers who participated in this work, also confront. This feeling of an unearned advantage can be thought of as a racialized and gendered privilege. For example, a white person may come from a poor socio-economic background, yet they have an unearned advantage within western society based solely on their whiteness due to the racism often experienced by people of colour. For me, as an Indigenous person, I experience this feeling for a couple of reasons: 1) because I am a status First Nation, I received student sponsorship from my First Nations community which allowed me to pursue post-secondary education without the huge financial burden experienced by others, 2) because I am a First Nations person, there are programs that allocate a specific number of spaces to minority students, which I qualify for, and; 3) taking an Indigenous Masters program in university I believe that some people perceive that my acceptance into the program is based solely on the fact that I am an Indigenous person. Whether it be an internal feeling, the actual opinions of outside sources, or my perceived assumptions of what other people are thinking, it is for reasons such as these that I speculate that First Nations women experience the imposter phenomenon as an additional consequence of colonialism which results in internalized oppression which may be holding First Nations women and mothers back from pursuing their educational goals.

Summary

This chapter explored the overcoming of obstacles as First Nations mothers and students within university. Leaving home, motivators, and self-doubt were presented as well which

discussed the challenges and rewards that participants shared about their educational journeys. We looked at what some of the participants face when leaving their home communities in search of a better life and the courage that it took to get there. The concept of achieving a better life by getting a university education that could result in a better job in order to support one's family is a strong motivator for myself and the First Nations student-mothers who participated in this research and showcased the love we hold for our families. Another motivator that was discussed was being able to show those who doubt our abilities as First Nations women and mothers that we can rise above the oppressive and racist stereotypes that exist within a system that has historically set us up for failure. The motivators for pursuing post-secondary education appears to change throughout the journey as well. Many of the women discussed continuing with their studies because of the pride their children have for their achievements. Another common topic of conversation included feelings of self-doubt/internalized oppression that were discussed by myself and the participants, despite our overall achievements. Finding personal coping strategies and holding on to those motivators has helped myself and the other participants to continue moving forward in our educational goals. The following questions can also be taken away from this chapter and considered for future research:

- Could it be that the imposter phenomenon is experienced differently by First Nations student-mothers as a form of internalized oppression and is an additional consequence of colonialism?

- Could it be that the historical impact of the residential school system has left behind such a traumatic legacy that the feelings of self-doubt discussed throughout the

chapter can be attributed to low rates of post-secondary educational attainment today?

- Could it be that the long history of racist, and sexist stereotypes experienced by First Nations women have debilitated our sense of self-worth?

- Could it be that this internalized oppression is holding First Nations mothers back from pursuing their educational goals?

- On a larger scale, what are the experiences of First Nations student-mothers today?

CHAPTER FIVE

BLENDING IDENTITIES: FIRST NATION, MOTHER, STUDENT

Indigenous Peoples in Canada have been working towards the decolonization of our

Peoples for many years, and this has included gaining control over our own lives through the

advocacy for and the validation of our cultures, traditions, and our identities. The colonial history

experienced by Indigenous Peoples in Canada is the result of a male dominant (patriarchal) and

imperialist culture that was ultimately forced upon the fundamentally cooperative family units

of Indigenous Peoples. Despite the difficulties that we, as First Nations student-mothers

experienced and shared during this research, we also discussed ways in which we blend and

balance our identities in our efforts to break social norms. It can be very difficult and

overwhelming to take on the multiple roles that come with being a mother and a student. A long

history of objectification, sexual exploitation, marginalization, and violence has made being an

Indigenous woman dangerous in some instances. Finding ways to balance our identities as First

Nations student- mothers is an important synthesis which needs to include the image of blending

culture, traditions, motherhood, and academia.

Motherhood

Some of the mothers discussed being the single, sole-providers for their households,

while having to work full or part-time in order to provide for their children. Each of the mothers

discussed their identity in different ways. For me, motherhood was never something I had

planned to partake in, however, as I've learned, things change:

> *I was so young when I had my first child that I never really had a chance to be a*
> *teenager. I spent those years helping to raise my little brothers and when I got my*

first taste of freedom, I got pregnant. My whole world has evolved around children and I really don't know anything different. I think when they're grown and moved out, I'm going to have a serious melt down. It will be like a whole Robyn-rebranding.

[Robyn]

A deep loss of identity is experienced by those Indigenous Peoples who have a lived-experience or a family lived-experience of residential school attendance. The TRCC (2015) shares the story of Doris Young, she attended the Elkhorn residential school in Manitoba:

> Those schools were a war on Aboriginal children, and they took away our identity. First of all, they gave us numbers, we had no names, we were numbers, and they cut our hair. They took away our clothes, and gave us clothes… we all looked alike. Our hair was all the same, cut us into bangs, and straight short, straight hair up to our ears… They took away our moccasins, and gave us shoes. I was just a baby. I didn't actually wear shoes, we wore moccasins. And so our identity was immediately take away when we entered those schools (p.145).

Earlier in the work, I mentioned the traditional role of Indigenous women, in that they were typically responsible for loving and nurturing the children (Armstrong, 1996). Literature on resilience has shown that protective factors, which foster higher resilience in children include having nurturing parents who act as positive role models (Benard, 1991). Historically, the combination of motherhood and academia has been shown to be a challenge (Leonard & Malina, 1994), however, attending post-secondary is a way of being a positive role model for our children as a First Nations mothers, despite colonization and the resulting intergenerational trauma.

Traditionalists may idealize the image of the perfect mother, which can prove to be difficult to manage if you are also a student in university. For Kaci, her life was built around being a mother and for many years her identity revolved exclusively around her role as a mother:

> *Sometimes it's hard for me to look at myself in a different view, right? Because for so many years I was a mother only, so I felt like my identity was built around that,*

built around being a mother. And so coming to school, I have taken on a whole different role and identity.

<div align="right">[Kaci]</div>

Niki also shares the strong hold that motherhood has on her:

Through all of this (university and personal struggles), my son is doing well and that's my main priority. Mother first, student second.

<div align="right">[Niki]</div>

Being a mother is a transformative experience. In some instances, there was talk about how motherhood completed their identity. Some of the women discussed the belief systems of their family and friends which was that they no longer needed to pursue post-secondary education because motherhood would be their job. We as women and mothers, chose to also become students.

Student life

Anyone in university will tell you that it isn't easy. Being a student all by itself is difficult and demanding. While Kaci shared how she once felt as though her identity revolved exclusively around motherhood, she also adds how her identity expanded when she became a student:

There are a lot of stereotypes regarding Aboriginal women, and being educated is a way to kind of break free from the stereotypes. Especially, there's like a stereotype of Native women having huge families, and it's normal. I always thought I played into it because I'm an Aboriginal person who has five kids myself. But I have a different identity because I'm not just an Aboriginal mother, I'm also a student with an education and it is kind of tricky.

<div align="right">[Kaci]</div>

As a person who became a mother quite young (nineteen) and spent the majority of my youth babysitting my younger brothers, even I felt the change within my identity when I became a student:

<div align="center">71</div>

I've never been really sure who I am without kids in my life, but university has certainly helped me to uncover aspects to myself I never even knew were important to me.

[Robyn]

One of the most revealing aspects about attending university is learning about Indigenous culture within the classroom. Many First Nations families have historically chosen to not share the traumatic history of cultural genocide with the younger generations, so in some instances, decolonization begins within the classroom. For Ruby, her identity was expanded by the things that she learned in university:

So, coming to university I've found out more about my identity, I've learned about the struggles of indigenous people, even if I haven't lived a lot of them. Coming to university has definitely had a big impact on my life for sure in terms of indigenous people.

[Ruby]

Stephanie also discusses how prior to university; she didn't know much about her First Nations history:

I've only really got into culture and everything when I started school [university]. My grandmother didn't even want me to talk to her about being Aboriginal. Now she's more open about it, but not when I was growing up. If I'd ever bring it up she'd be like, "Oh stop talking about that or don't talk about that". When she grew up, I guess for her family is if you could pass off as white you would.

[Stephanie]

For many, attending university allowed for a revitalization of culture. In this case, their identity as a mother and as a student grew to further incorporate their identities as First Nations Peoples.

Culture and Traditions

In addition to the various demands of adulthood, motherhood, and student-life- the mothers shared some of their experiences on keeping culture alive and flourishing for themselves and their children. For Kaci, cultural revitalization is alive and well in her family:

When I was small, I always wished that I could be a jingle dress dancer. But there's no one in my family who does any of that, so there was never any guidance or any way to do it. So then when my children, especially my oldest, when she was small, she's like I want to be a jingle dress dancer! But I never knew what to do, I didn't know how to make a dress or who to see or I didn't even know how to do the dance or nothing, so she's, none of my kids were ever dancers.

And I think that's something that, you know, I regret, because I wish I would've figured it out and done it. But yeah, after I got therapy and got help and started looking at everything as a whole, my kids' grandmother, she kind of stepped up and they started, they got sober cause they were alcoholics- but they got sober and then they started on the red path, so they got my girls into dancing. She made them dresses and took them to powwows and they go to ceremonies and all of that. So, we have like, culture in our family life now, opposed to when I was really young.

I do sweats once a year. Sometimes I do it a few times a year. Even just the daily, the smudging. Getting rid of the negative energy. Talking to elders. Taking part in ceremonies. Having my children take part in ceremonies, having my children take part in sweats. And so all of it is just full circle. Full circle. And just incorporating it into your life. And still learning, like I'm still learning everything.

[Kaci]

Keeping culture alive can sometimes also prove to be a challenge with the busy schedule of a First Nations student-mother. Ruby shares how she sometimes has to incorporate culture through the car-stereo because of her busy lifestyle:

I pick up my daughter and usually we go home if we don't have any other things to do like appointments. I'll go to my mums, and then come home, and sometimes we'll listen … my daughter will want to listen to drumming music in the car too so I have that, and come home, and feed her supper, and I spend time with her, and then she goes to bed and I do my work.

[Ruby]

In a sense, we as First Nations student-mothers are re-creating a sense of culture that works for us and our busy schedules. Whether that be playing traditional music through our car stereo, teaching our children cultural values through arts and crafts, smudging when we have the time, or attending a local pow-wow, we are making culture work for our lives. Making the time for

traditions is something that Maggie's household is very adamant about. She discusses the importance of keeping culture alive explaining how these sorts of acts covered her whole medicine wheel of self-care:

> *Culture's is very big in our household just because of the way my partner and I were raised. We were raised with ceremonies, going to a lodge, big lodge ceremonies four times a year, seasonal ceremonies. And then just living that life style. So we like smudge at least once a week. We should be doing it daily but there's just not enough time. But we smudge when we can. We offer tobacco when times get tough. We try to instil that in our children. If there's any kind of ceremonial things happening in the city, we'll make time to take them. Like if there's full moon ceremonies offered nearby or if there's boys drumming. Even like sweat lodge ceremonies, or naming ceremonies, we'll take them. We'll push aside everything in our schedule and we'll just make the time for ceremonies and culture, just because it is a huge part of our life and how we want to raise our family.*
>
> [Maggie]

Niki talks about how she incorporates at-home Cedar Baths into her self-care routine:

> *I would have a cedar bath at home. I would pour a little cedar into my bath and Epsom salt. And, like, that's nice was relaxing. He's sleeping [her son], I'm in my bath, in my Zen zone.*
>
> [Niki]

Tabitha also shares how she incorporates her traditions:

> *I do smudging and stuff in the morning if I'm feeling off. I'll smudge, or do my little prayers and stuff. I do my spirit plates for my parents at things like thanksgiving or family dinners. We do a spirit plates for them.*
>
> [Tabitha]

In my home, I aim to teach my children about our colonial history and our family traditions:

> *I've attended ceremonies and various workshops over the years where I bring home new skills and knowledge that I share with my kids. I like arts and crafts, so together we've made small beaded headdresses, dreamcatchers, bracelets. I try to give them a small teaching while we do it. I also try to smudge regularly, and attend the powwows when the trail comes this way. My girls have fancy dancer shawls for this year's powwow that they're excited about. I also like to do a lot of reading with them. I picked up a bunch of children's books that introduce the residential school systems and things like that, so that they have an idea of our family history as they get older.*
>
> [Robyn]

The revitalization and sharing of traditional knowledge has allowed us as First Nations student-mothers to adopt positive coping mechanisms in order to find our own paths to heal as Indigenous Peoples. As McCormick (1997) outlined in his work, we, as First Nations Peoples have found means of anchoring ourselves in our traditions as a means of countering society's hegemonic and individualistic structures. Through the incorporation of traditions and culture, we, as First Nations student-mothers have found a way to manage school, motherhood, and life in general. Speaking with Elders, smudging, attending and dancing at Pow-wows, participating in ceremonies, including sweats, having family dinners, and setting out spirit plates for loved ones were discussed as some of the ways that the participants practice their traditions, in some cases, as a means of exercising self-care. For many, attending post-secondary also meant a rediscovery of traditions through the resources and the Indigenous programs offered through the university.

Merging our Identities

Becoming a mother at a young age, as many of the participants and myself did; has been statistically shown to result in even poorer socio-economic conditions for First Nations women because we are already disadvantages because of systemic racism and sexism. Identity struggles for First Nations mothers in university, have multiple dimensions. Firstly, there is the role of having to be both a mother and an academic. You want to be available for your children, you want to experience their lives and bask in their accomplishments; but you have dinner to cook, laundry to do, and two assignments due this week. As First Nations mothers, we also seek to find time to share our culture with our children. The First Nations mothers who participated in the project, tended to be bound in some way to their cultural belief systems and in many cases are

working towards teaching culture to their children. Maggie speaks passionately about her role as

a mother and a student in her efforts to break the stereotypes surrounding Indigenous women:

> *When you're looking at things like the missing and murdered Indigenous woman in Canada and how an inquiry is just starting now after almost close to two-thousands deaths, right. It just goes to show how we're viewed. And when you go and look at these cases, Western Society is like "oh, well native women are just drunks, or native women are just hookers, they're this or they're that. They're not humans. They're not woman. They're not worthy." You know? That just makes me… well I'm an Indigenous woman and I'm an Indigenous woman who also identifies as a scholar, so I'm going to try harder and go and show them that there are people like us who exist as well.*
>
> [Maggie]

We each discussed some of the ways in which we try to teach our children to enjoy school. I find

this idea of blending our roles as First Nations mothers with our identities as students quite

interesting. Tabitha discusses her role as a mother and a student and how she works with her son

so that he too can be a good student:

> *It's just me and my son, my six-year-old… So it takes a lot of my time to try and work with him because I just don't want him falling behind at school. He's in grade one now. So my main goal during the evening and after school is doing homework and I try and to do little activities with him that don't seem like schoolwork activities so he gains interest in that. Oh, mom's playing with me, instead of oh, she's making me work. I don't want him to hate school so I do little fun stuff with him. So he's usually in bed by 8:30 and after that, that's when I'm in the books or doing my readings and I try not to stay up past 1:00 because otherwise I'm like really tired the next morning and a lot of my classes are 8:30 start.*
>
> [Tabitha]

Ruby has been learning an Indigenous language in school, and has become very passionate about

revitalizing the language within her community. As such, she has taken the things that she is

learning as a First Nations student and hoping to teach it to her child:

> *I've thought about like trying to get that language in her so maybe asking elders if I can bring her over to their home for a day and they can just speak to her and stuff like that, but I can't do that right now because I want to finish my fourth-year of*

school and I already have too many things where like I bring her over once a week to my mothers, you know, and other stuff like that.

<div align="right">[Ruby]</div>

In addition, each of the participants (myself included) expressed the ways in which they cope with managing their multiple roles and identities. I propose that it is in the way that First Nations student mothers cope with their multiple roles that make them unique to First Nations women. The storytellers discussed the ways in which they manage their time with agendas, day-planners, and calendars. Stephanie explained how she keeps organized as a busy First Nations student-mother:

> *I set up schedules for myself and I'll write down what I have to do for the week, and I'll spread it out instead of one day like doing everything. I can't do that.*
> <div align="right">[Stephanie]</div>

It is worth noting that these time management skills could be typical of a non-First Nations woman as well. However, despite the agendas, the structure, and the organization of day-to-day activities and tasks, the participants and I discussed embracing traditional cultural practices as a means of self-care through: cedar baths, smudging, ceremony, feasts, and other traditional avenues. The blended identities and experiences of student mothers has been researched and cited by others over the years, yet few, if any have researched the identity experiences of First Nations student mothers. Future researchers should consider this area for further exploration.

We discussed often finding ourselves multi-tasking and trying to fit in all of the tasks and errands that encompass our lives as parents and as adults. Ruby explains how she is managing everything as a single mother:

> *I did my third year at school [university], it was like I was a single mum caring for my daughter, I had to stay really organised, and I did graduate, and now I'm doing it all over again. Fun, fun, fun, and now this time I live alone now with my daughter, but I have a roommate. To do it again I have to stay organised and make sure I*

keep on top of my assignments and my readings, and she's in school and she's also in an actual daycare program.

[Ruby]

Ruby adds that:

I learned my skills of being organised [as a student] from being a mother for one thing. Having them (her child) and from being a mother and staying organised [as a mother].

[Ruby]

Ruby is not the only one who has to stay organized in order to get things accomplished. I, too maintain a steady stream of agendas and calendars, yet still often feel that there is simply not enough time:

I have a calendar on my wall at home. A big calendar I'm pretty sure is called something like 'mom's planner'. I use this to list after school activities, in-school field trips, upcoming birthdays and parties, appointments that are outside of school hours and any other event that may be going on during the month that my family needs to know about. At work, I have a calendar in my email that gets filled up with meetings, teleconferences and other school and work related events that are scheduled for specific times. Separate to all this, I have a physical agenda I carry around with me that lists all of that other stuff and any money coming in and going out, bills, what's paid, what needs to be paid, what assignments are due. So my life is basically run by a series of very timed-events.

[Robyn]

Kaci discusses her need to schedule her routines:

Yeah, well, I had to learn quickly how to prioritise my time. Agendas and calendars and everything is key for me. Being busy keeps me sane. I love a schedule. So, if you were to look at my house, we have a schedule of what has to be done at different times. Like, everything is scheduled, right. And I feel like when our life isn't in a routine, that's when it's very chaotic for me, and that's when things are overwhelming. Like, beyond overwhelming. But it brings order to my life, having everything lined up. So, like even today, like if you look on the calendar, there's like a line for everything that has to be done, at every hour of the day.

[Kaci]

Mothers who are also students, can find themselves learning to navigate parenthood with student-life. Some students can also find themselves navigating the roles of partner, cook, cleaner, dog-walker, shopper, taxi, and more, all the while trying to be a good mother in the process. Facing the reality that time is of the essence as a busy parent and student is something that is consistent across all peoples.

When seeking to understand the difference between First Nations People's perspective on time and that of the dominant western society, patience is key. Growing up I would often hear that my Aunties, who would be late arriving for a family gathering must be living on "Indian time" and over the years that became "Nish time". I inquired about what this meant when I was younger and remember being told by my mom something along the lines of "oh, you know, they run on their own clocks. They'll get here, though." And they always did, usually with a desert or gifts that took a little extra long to bake or wrap. Taking the extra time that was needed to do things in a good way, or in Anishinabe to live mino-pimatisiwin (to live the good life). With time allotted to do our work as students, we schedule that time to complete our assignments in a good way.

Blending and balancing our identities is certainly not without its challenges. There are times when we can be the best moms and the best students, and there are other times where we have to make a choice. Stephanie discusses how she sometimes struggles with managing these roles:

> *Well during the day I'm doing a lot of, you know, house stuff, errands, stuff like that. Like I find it hard to focus, to be able to sit down and do homework because I feel like there's so much else to do. If I don't do it, it's just going to be crazy… And I don't know, like night time, I just – I don't want to do anything. So I'm just like, you know, I put them to bed and I'm mentally exhausted. There's no way I could*

look at homework, I'll watch TV. You know, it's just me like releasing – stop just thinking about everything, just sit on the couch and watch TV.

[Stephanie]

By exploring the lived-experiences of First Nations mothers as university students, we work to disseminate the concepts of balancing and blending the identities of First Nation, mother, and student. Balancing motherhood and education can have limitations for academic mothers. Post-Secondary institutions can help to eliminate the stigma that many Academic mothers face while in the classroom. When at work, women are to be academic, forgoing their status as mothers, and yet, while at home, women are expected to be mothers and not academics. The various social structures that are at play in these belief systems should move forward into accepting and accommodating the synthesis and blended identities of First Nations mothers as students within Academic institutions.

Summary

This chapter explored the blending and balancing of identities as First Nations mothers and students within university. Specifically, we examined the role of motherhood and the idea of being a "mother only" (Kaci) before furthering that journey and blending that role with the identity of student. For many, this new identity as a student was empowering, allowing us to understand who we are as individuals and as First Nations women. This dual identity (mother and student) provided us with the opportunity to renew our understanding of Canada's history from a lens that some of us had never seen. From that, we, as First Nations student-mothers are continuing (and in some cases renewing) our identities as Indigenous women and are passing down this new knowledge to our children by partaking in historical traditions (smudging, ceremonies, teachings, etc.). Merging our identities as First Nations mothers and students is one

of the ways we, as Indigenous Peoples can continue to persist against conventionally acceptable institutions, structures, and practices. Some of the key questions to take away from this chapter to be considered for future research include:

- Is the way in which the participants of this research cope with their multiple identities as First Nations student-mothers unique to other groups of First Nations women?

- Are the self-care routines (incorporating culture and traditions) of the participants similar across other groups of First Nations Peoples?

- What are the identity experiences of First Nations student-mothers at other institutions?

- In what ways can post-secondary institutions help to eliminate the stigma that many Indigenous mothers face when choosing to pursue post-secondary?

CHAPTER SIX
SHARING NEW WISDOM

Indigenous Peoples in Canada continue to hold many non-dominant roles within sectors of society, yet we persist in their efforts to preserve, develop, and transmit our identity, cultural patterns, and social institutions to future generations (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2004). Indigenous Peoples in Canada share a long history of colonialism brought about by imperial forces that aimed to assimilate us into the dominant culture. This project was designed to explore and better understand our lived-experiences as First Nations student-mothers during the pursuit of university-level education at Laurentian University while caring for our children. I argue that Canada's oppressive history of colonialism and the resulting intergenerational trauma have had specific implications on the post-secondary experiences of the First Nations mothers who participated in this research.

In this research project, I let the pieces of our stories loose into the world in the hopes that I did each storyteller's voice justice while creating a new story that can be shared with future generations. A story that embodies the integrity, resilience and courage each of the women showcased when beginning their post-secondary education journeys as First Nations mothers. This paper aimed to deepen your understanding of the history of Indigenous Peoples in a way that respected and honoured the voices of the First Nations student-mothers who participated in this research. The impact of the residential school experience has resulted in intergenerational trauma which has been linked to lower levels of educational achievement resulting in lower income and housing rates for Indigenous Peoples in Canada. The participants within this research discussed making the choice to rise above this in order to secure employment that would provide

for themselves and their families. With First Nations women and girls having some of the highest fertility and birth rates among other Canadian groups (Guimond & Robitaille, 2008), I suggest that universities and other post-secondary institutions should consider avenues that could engage and accommodate young, First Nations mothers who already have the disadvantage of being marginalized based on their culture and gender.

Thomas King (2003) writes that "stories can control our lives, for there is a part of me that has never been able to move past these stories, a part of me that will be chained to these stories as long as I live" (p.9). I interpret this statement in that our future is influenced by our past and holding onto stories from our past can change the trajectories of our lives. I truly hope that I honoured the pieces of the stories that I presented here. My central goal was to give each of them the respect and dignity that they deserved "for once a story is told, it cannot be called back. Once told, it is loose in the world" (King, 2003, p.10). Through storytelling, the stories and narratives were collected and compiled to reveal areas of particular interest to me that impacted the educational trajectories of the First Nations student-mothers (and myself) who participated in this research throughout our post-secondary educational journeys.

In my experience, being a parent is exhausting at the best of times. The additional responsibilities that come with being a mother and a student are difficult, regardless of ethnicity or culture. Together we have moved through the literature review which, among other areas of interest, explored: (1) the history on the ongoing inequality and enfranchisement found within the Indian Act; (2) an overview on the history of Indigenous education; (3) the residential school system and the resulting intergenerational trauma experienced by Indigenous Peoples in Canada; (4) the intersection of Indigenous womanhood and the resulting gender-based violence and

discrimination endured by Indigenous women in Canada today; (5) the positive outcomes of resilience and healing; (6) the blending of identities as First Nations mothers and students, and finally; (7) the impact of internalized oppression and associated feelings of inadequacy discussed in the imposter phenomenon.

This work aimed to advance the available literature surrounding First Nations student-mothers in an effort to change the conversation so that one day the education gap may be closed, and research such as this will no longer be needed. Perhaps, with a clearer understanding of how First Nations student-mothers experience university, further research can be explored on this subject which could contribute to the continued efforts to decolonize universities in Canada. This work was conducted through mindful and meaningful approaches that took into consideration the experiences of First Nations student-mothers. Areas that were of particular interest to me and were uncovered during the analysis, included: 1) how the participants made the choice to pursue post-secondary education, including the choice that some of the mothers made to leave their home communities and what motivated that decision, 2) how we experience self-doubt as First Nations student-mothers, and 3) how we merge our identities as Indigenous, mothers, and students including how the participants and I discussed utilizing Indigenous traditions and cultures within our self-care routines.

Future research should consider whether First Nations women on a larger scale experience the imposter phenomenon and what impact internalized oppression has had as a result of colonialism and the resulting intergenerational trauma. Another area of particular interest surrounds the notions of identity. Universities and other post-secondary institutions should take into consideration the multiple identity roles that First Nations mothers are faced

with when becoming university students. Future research on the topic of mothers within university should further explore the role of culture and motherhood for First Nations women attending post-secondary. First Nations mothers within university should continue to find and share their voices while continuing to encourage others to take that first step to pursue post-secondary in order to push back against the colonial institutions, structures, and practices that we have all grown so accustomed to.

Final Reflections

We are living in a time of great change in which we hope for reconciliation between Indigenous and Canada. I recently attended a beautiful ceremony that commemorated the grand opening of an Indigenous Sharing and Learning Centre at Laurentian University (June 21st, 2017). I sat in my seat and listened to the words and prayers of those trail blazers and Elders that I have looked up to for years with such high regard. It is absolutely incredible how far the university has come in terms of respecting Indigenous rights in the six years that I have been attending Laurentian. The space I sat in was circular and filled with brightly coloured red chairs, with doors at all four directions (East, South, West, North), with high ceilings and large windows that let in the sun, on what was the first day of summer in Canada, and could not have been a more perfect and beautiful day. There was less-than standing room only as many people had to flood out of the large space and into the rest of the centre in order to watch the ceremony live-streamed on televisions set up outside. I could not believe how much love, honour, and respect filled that room. I sat there, clutching a small medicine pouch they had gifted us that I had picked up off my seat and I felt every emotion that ran through the bodies of the women who presented. I laughed, I cried, I was simply overjoyed. I suppose my point for telling you about this moment, is this:

although the work presented here discussed the obstacles associated with leaving home, the self-doubt that the participants and I discussed and the additional efforts it takes in order to blend and balance our identities as First Nations student-mothers, changes are happening. My goal is to continue to advocate for the educational attainment and success of Indigenous Peoples in Canada and to influence others to advocate as well. Perhaps, in the future, we will no longer need to have conversations about the limitations, discrimination, and self-questioning surrounding the experiences of First Nations mothers attending post-secondary education. My hope is that in years to come, when we research Indigenous people's experiences of formal education, the dialogue will be completely different and the connotation for the need for the research will be much more positive.

What began as a project meant to assist in my own decolonization soon encompassed the passionate voices of strong First Nations mothers who chose to stand up against colonial constructs despite the perceived obstacles and road blocks historically set in place in order to prevent the success of Indigenous Peoples. Truth be told, working as an insider and an outsider on this project was both difficult and interesting. I have gained new perspectives and insights, particularly in the blending of identities. With the amount of research that I have done for this project, I have opened my eyes even more to my place in this world as an Indigenous woman, mother, and student. I have re-blended my identities to further push back against colonial structures by: 1) revisiting my history and ensuring that my children are aware of their ancestry and culture; and 2) by ensuring that in every aspect of my life, I speak the words of an Indigenous revolutionist, rebelling against dominant social, oppressions. Throughout this work I have deepened my cultural and traditional knowledge, become a more fluent student, and somehow,

I have even become a more patient and more understanding mother to my children in the process.

We are First Nations women, First Nations mothers, and First Nations students who are working towards improving the lives of our families and our communities while forging the path for future generations of First Nations mothers and scholars.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Letter of Information/Consent

LaurentianUniversity
Université**Laurentienne**

RESEARCH PROJECT:

Building Relationships and Sharing Stories with Indigenous Mothers as Students

LETTER OF INFORMATION

Introduction

My name is Robyn Rowe and I am interested in learning about the lived-experiences of mothers who are Laurentian University students (35 years of age and under) and Indigenous to Canada (First Nations, Métis, Inuit). I am interested in learning about what challenges and successes you faced both getting to University as an Indigenous mother and what experiences you've had as an Indigenous mother now that you're a student. I am a 28-year old Graduate student in the Masters of Indigenous Relations program and I began my post-secondary career at Laurentian University in 2011 as a single mother of two. I have been working with my thesis committee: Dr. Jennifer Johnson (co-supervisor) Prof. Susan Manitowabi (co-supervisor), and Dr. Lynne Gouliquer (committee member).

Purpose of the Study

This study invites you to participate in one or more storytelling sessions in order to share your story on the challenges and successes you've faced as a parent getting to University and what experiences you've encountered now that you're here. The purpose of this research is to document these stories so that we can contribute to the current literature about Indigenous women with children attending post-secondary education. I plan to give at least one conference presentation on the findings and publish at least one paper about the research.

What do we ask of you?

I ask that you sit with me and share the story of how have combined being a mother and a student. In general, we will talk about how you came to be a student at Laurentian University and what challenges and successes you experience now that you are a student and a parent. Joining me for more than one session is optional and each session will take approximately 60-90 minutes. Your stories will be completely

anonymous and I will ask you to select a fake name (pseudonym) for yourself so that your confidentiality is protected.

Study Requirements

In order to participate in this study, you must be a mother and a student at Laurentian University, 35 years of age or under, who is an Indigenous person of Canada (First Nation, Métis, Inuit), and you must have begun post-secondary after having children. You must be 18 years or older in order to consent to participate and you will need to be fluent in English for the session. The session will be recorded and later transcribed. The transcripts will be kept for an indefinite amount of time. All de-identified transcripts will be securely stored on the hard drive of a double-locked laptop in a password-protected file. These transcripts may be examined further to support future research. There are no other requirements for you to participate in the study. Your total time commitment will be approximately 60-90 minutes, however, if you would like to continue to share your story over the course of more than one session, you and I can discuss that at the end of the session.

What's in it for you?

This is an opportunity for you to help start the conversation on Indigenous mothers as student and may also be a chance to provide insight and make available information on the lived-experiences of mothers who are Laurentian University students. A summary of the study results will be shared with Indigenous communities, your peers, and others who might want to utilize the findings in their own research. This is your chance to talk about your challenges and accomplishments! If you would like, you can receive a summary by email or a hard copy of the research upon completion of the study.

Confidentiality

Personal information gathered as part of this study and information that could uniquely identify you will remain private and confidential and will only be used within any publication or presentation of the study's results. All information regarding your identity will be kept confidential. The data will be secured by password protection and will only be accessible to myself. During the storytelling, should you indicate that you are planning to inflict immediate harm to yourself or others, we will end the session and I am required to report the incident.

Voluntary Participation

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw from this study at any time, without consequence. You are in control of what stories and experiences you would like to share.

Questions

If you have any questions about how this study is conducted or your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Laurentian University Research Office, telephone: 705-675-1151 or toll free at 1-800-461-4030 or email: ethics@laurentian.ca. You may also contact one of my co-supervisors:

Dr. Jennifer Johnson jljohnson@laurentian.ca or Prof. Susan Manitowabi smanitowabi@laurentian.ca

Additionally, if you have questions about the study itself, please contact myself, Robyn Rowe rrowe@laurentian.ca. Please save this information for future reference.

 Sincerely,

Robyn Rowe, HBA, Masters of Indigenous Relations Candidate

RESEARCH PROJECT:
Building Relationships and Sharing Stories with Indigenous Mothers as Students
INFORMED CONSENT

Consent to Participate

☐ I have read the Letter of Information explaining the nature of the study and I agree to participate in it. All of my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

☐ I understand that I will remain anonymous in this study and only my pseudonym will be used in future works.

☐ I agree to be audio-recorded and I give consent to the release of the transcripts of those recordings

☐ I am aware that the transcripts will be kept for an indefinite amount of time and any information that may personally identify me will not be associated with the transcript.

Participant Name (printed):   _____

Signature of Participant: _____

Date: _____

Signature of Researcher: _____ Date_____

Detach here ---

I wish to receive a summary of the results of this study which will be available by September 2017, at the following email address: _____

Question Guide

Please choose a pseudonym (otherwise I will assign you one randomly) by which I will refer to you as within all transcripts and any future works:

Participant Pseudonym: _____

Date: _____   Time: _____

Hi there, my name is Robyn Rowe. As a First Nations mother attending LU myself, I began the pursuit of my post-secondary education after the birth of my second child. I am interested in the stories you have to share about your decision to pursue University and your experiences now that you're a student from whatever perspective you feel comfortable. You are free to share whatever you feel comfortable sharing and I will use this guide if you would like some direction.

I will be taking notes during our time together and I will also be recording our conversation. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Take your time, have a snack. Thank you so much in advance! I really hope that you feel comfortable sharing your story with me.

Notes to self:
If I suspect that participants are planning to inflict immediate harm to self or others, I will stop the interview and report the incident. I have a list of resources available if participants would like to discuss anything further with a professional. Should participants, at any time, begin to feel uncomfortable or share a story that was/seems traumatic I will interrupt them to ensure that they are comfortable and ask if they would like to continue. QUERY: "I realize you are sharing a story that was/seems traumatic, would you like to stop this discussion?"

Questions: [Note: prompts will only be used as necessary]

1. Can you tell me about yourself and your life?
    a. Prompt: Do you identify as an Indigenous person under the age of 35?
        i. First Nations? Inuit? Métis?
    b. Prompt: Is there anyone else in your family who has pursued post-secondary education?
        i. If yes, did they inspire you in any way? How?
        ii. If no, what made you decide to come to University?
2. Tell me about your children?
    a. Can you tell me one of your favorite stories to share about your children?
3. Can you tell me a story about something you're proud of?
4. What role does your culture and traditions play in your life?
    a. Prompt: Do you speak or practice a traditional language?
5. What program are you taking? How long have you been at Laurentian?
    a. Can you tell me why you chose to go into that program?
6. Can you tell me about your life and what led you to pursue University?

    a.   Prompt: What impact did your children have on your decision to pursue post-secondary?
7. Was there anyone in your life that helped you in making the decision to pursue University?
    a.   Is there a particular story that comes to mind when you think of the moment you decided to go to University?
        i.   Or what you experienced and felt when you received your acceptance letter?
8. What role did being an Indigenous woman play in your life in your pursuit of education?
    a.   Prompt: What role does your culture play in your life?
    b.   Prompt: What role does culture play in the lives of your children?
9. What role did being a parent play in your life and in your pursuit of education?
10. Do you have any stories you can share that could draw the image of what it's like to be a mother and student on a typical day?
    a.   What do you find is the most difficult part about being an Indigenous mother and a student?
11. Can you tell me about what you found to be the most difficult part of getting to Laurentian University as an Indigenous parent?
    a.   Can you share how your approached and dealt with these challenges or difficult experiences?
12. What do you find most difficult now that you're here at Laurentian? How did you overcome these difficulties?
        i.   What do you find the most convenient?
13. Can you tell me what your experience was; going back to the moment where you first found out that you would be a parent.
    a.   Looking back, what would you want yourself to know now?
14. What would you tell an Indigenous parent contemplating pursuing post-secondary for the first time?
    a.   Prompt: Can you tell me a story about your greatest success as a student and a parent?

Conclusions and Debriefing

Thank you so much for sharing! I really appreciated hearing all you had to share! Do you have any questions for me? [I will then answer questions]

How are you feeling? [Listen]

Would you like a copy of the resource list that was mentioned in the Letter of Information? [give letter if wanted]. If at any time in the coming week you feel like you would like to talk more, feel free to get in touch with me. My contact information is on the Letter of Information that you received earlier.

We can also set up another session right now if you wish.

Also, just as a reminder, your pseudonym will be used on all future documents and any features that would otherwise identify you will be changed. In the coming weeks I will be transcribing the audio, would you like me to send you along a copy so that you can correct, edit, or change things as you wish? This is also a good opportunity for you to make sure that I have caught all of the identifying features and perhaps for us to sit down again if you like.

<div align="center">*Yes _____ No _____*</div>

Thank you so much for coming out to share your story.

Appendix D: Participant Resources

ON CAMPUS

Indigenous Student Affairs Office ....Room L-222, RD Parker
    Number .... 705-675-1151 ext. 4052
    Fax Number 705-671-3836
    Email..isa@laurentian.ca

Cynthia Belfitt, MSM, RSW- Indigenous Counsellor and Student Engagement........................Room L-222, RD Parker
    Number .... 705-675-1151 ext. 1048
    Fax Number 705-671-3836
    Email.. cx_belfitt@laurentian.ca

Laurentian Counselling and Support Programs... G7 student street (SSR)
    Number 705-673-6506
    Email.. supportprograms@laurentian.ca

OFF CAMPUS

In Case of Emergency...911

Health Sciences North Crisis Line/Mobile Crisis Unit.. 127 Cedar Street, Sudbury
    Number (Crisis Line Open 24/7) 705-675-4760
    Toll Free.. 1-877-841-1101

Canadian Mental Health Association ....111 Elm St. #100, Sudbury
    Number (Crisis Line Open 24/7) 705-675-7252
    Toll Free.. 1-877-841-1101

The Regional Warm Line...6pm – 12am (7 days a week)

    (available through Northern Initiative for Social Action) .... 36 Elgin, 2nd Floor, Sudbury
    Toll Free.. 1-866-856-9276 (WARM)

YWCA Genevra House..370 St. Raphael St., Sudbury
    Number 705-674-2210
    Website .... http://ywcasudbury.ca/