BROKEN CIRCLE: URBAN ABORIGINAL YOUTH AND THE DROP-OUT QUESTION

By

Amber Jolan White

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Program in Education
in conformity with the requirements for
the degree of Master of Education

Queen’s University
Kingston, Ontario, Canada

April, 2016

Copyright © Amber White, 2016
Based on findings from the National Household Survey, Statistics Canada (2012) recently released a report indicating that slightly less than one-third of First Nations persons living off reserve (between the ages of 18-44) did not earn their secondary school diploma or equivalent. Given the lack of student voices found in existing studies (Schissel & Wortherspoon, 2003) and because of the concentration of urban Aboriginal persons in Sudbury (Statistics Canada: Aboriginal Conditions in Census Metropolitan Areas, 2005), this study focused on hearing from those voices in that area. Accordingly, this thesis explored how eight urban Aboriginal youth (18-29 years of age) perspectives can illuminate reasons for this problem and suggest some solutions to it.

Through the framework of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit), I employ data analysis as a tool useful to further the interests of emancipating marginalized individuals from systems of oppression (e.g., discrimination against one’s gender, race, class, ethnicity, religion, mental/physical ability, and/or other social classifications; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). CRT works to bare witness to the voices of marginalized groups and individuals on the basis of their race (Willis et al., 2007). Emerging from CRT is TribalCrit (Brayboy, 2005). This theoretical framework extends from a specialized focus on issues of race and is used to expose the workings of colonization on the lives of Aboriginal groups and individuals (Brayboy, 2005). The collection of data occurred in three phases: (a) artistic activity, (b) Sharing Circle, and (c) individual storytelling. Using thematic analysis, I coded the data and created a narrative from the participants’ perspectives. Results of this study illuminate the participants’
perceptions on their formal learning journey and their decision to leave school prior to graduation.
Acknowledgements

I have often found that moving forward along a given path involves the process of deep reflection and the odd unplanned adventure. Over twenty years ago I found myself in a small, nondescript office of my high school guidance counselor. The interaction that occurred between us changed how I saw myself as a member of a school community and how much I in turn valued the formalized education system. I clearly remember the plain décor, the paint chipped walls and the uneven chair I sat upon. Seared into my memory was a teacher actively encouraging me to drop out of school in search of “other options.” I did not follow the advice given that day and I am grateful for the support and adventures I have had, including the following inquiry.

I am grateful for the opportunity openly given by the N’Swakamok Native Friendship Centre community to conduct this research. Many people at the centre made this work possible including Marie Meawasige, Kelly-Lee Assinewe, and Fawn Pettifer, all for which I say ‘Miigwech’.

To my Four Directions Aboriginal Students Centre family, you grounded me, raised my spirits and shared many laughs. To former Elder-in-Residence Betty Carr-Braint, Laura Maracle and friends, I continue to grow from our friendships, thank you.

To the Aboriginal Teacher Education Program at Queen’s University, thank you for the support given during my Bachelor of Education degree and the traditional knowledge so freely shared. I would like to thank Dr. Kate Freeman and Paul Carl for feeding my soul and creating a community within a community.

I would like to thank the staff of the Graduate Studies Office without whose support I’m sure I would have wondered the halls without purpose for the past two years.
I would also like to thank Dr. Theodore Christou for his patience, Dr. John Freeman for his invaluable ethics support, Dr. Corinne Laverty for shining light on my literature review, and my two sections of Bachelor of Education students who reminded me that teaching is not only a rewarding experience but co-learning creates social change far beyond a single community or degree, thank you all.

A large part of this work involved a sizable art exhibit hosted by the Studio at Queen’s Faculty of Education. Without the encouragement of Angela Solar and facilities to share the voices of the participants, the early steps of reciprocity would not have been as deeply realized. It was with support from the skilled Vicky Arnold, Queen’s University Communication Director, and Anne Craig to get the promotion well underway. I will always remain grateful for the grace in which you both adapt to every situation. As an extension, I have to also thank the various media outlets that shared this work: CBC Radio North, The Kingston Whig Standard, CKWS News and the Queen’s Gazette.

This brings me to my learning team. I am so honoured that Dr. Ann Marie Hill guided my learning from my very first Master’s class to agreeing to act as a chair at my defense, thank you. I found it funny how I crossed paths with Dr. Sam McKegney. Even though I didn’t win the Queen’s local Three Minute Thesis competition, I gained something much more valuable, an external reviewer. I value his insight and thoughtful questions. I will be pondering them for quite some time, thank you. To my committee member Dr. Rebecca Luce-Kapler, thank you for modeling the strength and beauty of narrative inquiry. I appreciate your time and your vast experience. So much could be said about my supervisor Dr. Lindsay Morcom, none of which would be able to encapsulate the unwavering support, autonomy, and academic rigor I felt working along side this
gifted human being. Lindsay instilled that positive change within our school systems is possible and every voice, presentation, ceremony, and ally is valued. I feel as if my learning path is full of possibly because of the mentorship I received from her and I will carry forward my gratitude along my journey because of her.

To my caring friends and family—a local Haudenosaunee woman recently shared, ‘it doesn’t take a village—it takes all of creation’ when it comes to accomplishing goals—it did take all of creation along with your love to achieve this inquiry thank you, forever.

To my in-house editor, time enforcer, number one cheerleader and love of my life, Sean, you inspire the very best in me. Husband, without you this journey never would have happened. You demand excellence and give love; you calm insecurities and share laughter everyday. You are my equal in every way and I hope I make you proud of me as I am of you. I love you.

Thank you to the Graduate Studies Office at the University of Western Ontario, Dr. Pam Bishop, Dr. Kathy Hibbert, and my encouraging and insightful supervisor, Dr. Immaculate Namukasa. I am grateful that I have found my new learning family at UWO and I look forward to the PhD journey.

I am forever changed as a result of the openness, honesty, and trust I encountered with the eight participants of this inquiry. Each shared their opinions, experiences, and hopes for the future. I saw numerous examples of respect, love, courage, humility, truth, wisdom, and bravery in our interactions. I am grateful for the opportunity to learn with and from each of you. I dedicate this work to each of you.
# Table of Contents

**ABSTRACT** .......................................................................................................................... II

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** ........................................................................................................ IV

**TABLE OF CONTENTS** ......................................................................................................... VII

**CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION** .................................................................................................. 1
  * Autobiographical Signature .................................................................................................. 3
  * Rationale ............................................................................................................................ 5
  * Purpose ............................................................................................................................... 7
  * Theoretical Framework ...................................................................................................... 8
  * Methods ............................................................................................................................... 10
  * Site Selection ...................................................................................................................... 10
  * Participants ......................................................................................................................... 11

**CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE** .............................................................................. 12
  * Lack of Aboriginal Pedagogies .......................................................................................... 14
  * Lack of Inclusion of Aboriginal Content and Curricula .................................................. 16
  * Impacts of Socioeconomic Status on Aboriginals’ High School Completion .................. 21
    * Table 1: Impacts of Socioeconomic Status on Aboriginals’ High School Completion .... 24
  * Racism in School ............................................................................................................... 28
  * Conclusion .......................................................................................................................... 35

**CHAPTER 3: DATA COLLECTION AND RESULTS** ............................................................... 36
  * Introduction ....................................................................................................................... 36
  * Data Collection .................................................................................................................. 36
  * Data Analysis ..................................................................................................................... 39

**CHAPTER FOUR: NARRATIVE OR FINDINGS** ..................................................................... 41
  * Participant Artwork and Individual Stories ......................................................................... 41
    * Bella, 22 ........................................................................................................................... 43
    * Jane, 29 ............................................................................................................................. 47
    * Jeff, 22 ............................................................................................................................... 50
    * Lola, 23 ............................................................................................................................. 55
    * Meadow, 18 ..................................................................................................................... 59
    * Paul, 28 ............................................................................................................................. 64
    * Tamera, 27 ......................................................................................................................... 67
    * Steven, 21 .......................................................................................................................... 72

**CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND THEMES** .......................................................................... 75
  * Personal Reflections ............................................................................................................ 75
  * New Themes: Change for Future Generations ................................................................... 79
  * Acceptance of Reality ........................................................................................................ 82
  * Full Responsibility .............................................................................................................. 83
  * Goals for the Future ............................................................................................................ 84
  * Limitations .......................................................................................................................... 86
List of Figures

Table 1: Selected employment characteristics of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Populations aged 25 to 54, 2008 to 2010 .......................... 24
CHAPTER 1: Introduction

It was another cold day in the second semester of my undergraduate degree in Sudbury. The completion of my history class was like any other. The weekly ritual included lining up for a private audience with the Chair of the Department of History, Dr. Susanna Smith, who encapsulated a quiet strength that was only matched by her well-refined intellect. She always made herself available for her students. Seeking insight about an idea for a paper, I too stood in line to see her. Our class had, less than a minute before, completed readings on Native education. I had a burning question, and I knew that no matter how long it took her, the conversations between student and professor were well worth the wait.

As I fixated my sight at the messy half-ponytail of the student in front of me, I noticed a few things. The air in the classroom was very hot and dry; it reminded me of my last trip to Arizona. My lungs screamed for moisture and they longed for the circulation of fresh air. The industrial flooring had remnants of coarse salt and melted snow where, just moments before, hot winter boots sat. I also noticed that the longer I stood in line, the increasingly heavy my haphazardly placed bag on my shoulder began to feel. Like ants with monolithic loads and knees buckling under the weight, we, as a collective, shuffled inch-by-inch towards our goal. In that moment I realized four things: (a) I was 13 years older than the average student, (b) I had taught for two years, (c) Only a few short years before, I had lived a successful life in cooperate business, and (d) I had the resolve to exercise great patience and emerge victorious through academic hurdles. On this day, I realized, compared to the other students, I was a minority.
Broken Circle: Urban Aboriginal Youth and the Drop-out Question

By the time I met Dr. Smith, I had forgotten the content of my savvy, articulate question. I had rehearsed the question for the past 15 minutes. With wide, kind eyes and an inviting smile, Dr. Smith welcomed me like a long-lost friend: “Hello Amber, how are you?” Being so excited to finally see her, I stammered out in rapid-fire: “Good, fine, you?” In my desperate attempt to regain control of my nerves, I stated the obvious: “Professor Smith, I have a question.” Moments later, I added: “Do you ever foresee a day in Ontario where all children are taught Native teachings from K-12?” Momentarily forgetting my industrial surroundings, I failed to observe the few other students straggling behind the mass of my collegial peers. A classmate, who was gathering what seemed like an armada of library books, asserted: “I don’t think so!” Not being one to shirk away from a strong opinion, I could feel my heartbeat in my throat. I was upset at her comment; however, I thought her timing was also rude. The seasoned decorum of Dr. Smith shone through. “I’m not sure, Amber. We should sit down and discuss this more.” Dr. Smith wished us a pleasant weekend and gracefully left the room. Now that “saving face” and “playing nice” need not be included in the rules, I openly asked a loaded question to my interjecting peer: “Why do you think Native education isn’t important?” Like a peacock with its imposing size and display of dominance, she uttered the words that have haunted me from that day to this: “Because they lost!” Point-blank. Without hesitation, I was shocked at her frank racism and colonialist attitude. After the shock, my anger set in. Later, anger fueled me to engage in an academic journey of my own.
Autobiographical Signature

My path towards thesis completion did not follow a straight line. In the desire to share the educational experiences of urban Aboriginal youth, I continue to learn about myself. As a person of Settler heritage, I feel I can be an ally by sharing the perceptions of their formal educational journey. The following retrospective narrative not only lays the foundation for my motivation to become a teacher and scholar, but it also reflects my reasons for creating awareness on the issue of urban Aboriginal drop out rates in Northern Ontario.

My alignment with Indigenous beliefs began many years ago. Over the past year many people in the academy were curious as to my cultural background. While many questions have been raised, one type of question has constantly been posed: why have you chosen to investigate Aboriginal education? This is my response.

Where I was raised, and now live once again, is far removed from the hustle and bustle of urban streets. I call the northern shores of Lake Ontario and the deer meadows beside my house, Home. As a child, I only understood education in terms of connectedness. Every experience was connected to a previous event or woven together with the next opportunity for learning. My first classroom was the outdoors. Learning occurred while investigating blades of grass between my toes, imitating the distinct calls of the local birds, and modeling my grandfather’s fishing techniques. Over the years I became aware of how this classroom changed. The land was both my playmate and my cathedral.

My belief system is rooted to my outdoor, land-based experience where I learned the value of interconnectedness. Aboriginal epistemology is interconnected with
Broken Circle: Urban Aboriginal Youth and the Drop-out Question

experiential learning, a form of knowledge production. Author Willie Ermine (1995) writes, “Aboriginal epistemology speaks of pondering great mysteries that lie no further than the self” (1995, p. 108). How I make meaning and understand my reality (ontology) is in keeping with this Aboriginal worldview. The methods I employ to reach this understanding are firmly rooted within the traditions of Aboriginal methodology. At times contradictory to Western methods of knowledge acquisition—methods which are in service to scientific ways of thinking and being in the world—Aboriginal values are deeply relational, holistic, contextual, cultural, and spiritual (Haig-Brown, Hodgson-Smith, Regnier, Archibald, 1997).

I have been honoured to receive sacred Aboriginal knowledge. Some of the entrusted keepers of cultural knowledge—Elders—have shared such knowledge with me. Elders of Anishinaabe, Cree, and Oji-Cree Nations have welcomed me into their communities, despite the fact that I am not Aboriginal. As a person of European/Settler heritage and as a member of the privileged racial group in Canada, I acknowledge that I do not share in some of the challenges faced by the young Aboriginal peoples of these Nations with whom I aspire to work.

Having lived in Sudbury for six years, I overheard many stereotypical and racialized comments. These comments ranged from substance abuse issues to the collection of Ontario Works in association with Aboriginal persons. The linguistic power ushered by such prejudicial constructs operates in the political, commercial, spiritual, and social spheres, and reaffirms the position of the Other. In these acts, Aboriginal values, culture, and spirituality are targeted as items to be marginalized.
Rationale

As a researcher who identifies as a having Settler heritage and therefore as belonging to the privileged racial group in Canadian society, my awareness of Aboriginal culture is not limited to these stereotypes. While living in Sudbury, I earned a minor in Native Studies and became practiced in Native spirituality. I was influenced by my interactions with my Aboriginal peers and I could not help the lingering comment “they lost” from resurfacing in my thoughts. One question above all claimed space in my academic journey: what led to the success of my Aboriginal peers in higher education and why was their representation in University low in comparison to non-Aboriginal students? This observation has led me to question what has been a barrier to Aboriginal student success. Based upon a review of sources, I have found that urban Aboriginal youth perceptions of education are an underexplored area of investigation, with little to no research advanced by non-Indigenous scholars. As Kovach (2012) further describes, Sharing of knowledge requires non-Indigenous scholars to become intellectually open to and familiar with Indigenous knowledges (as a way of knowing distinct from Western thought). They must be able to evaluate, at least on a preliminary level, Indigenous scholarship as to whether it is congruent with an Indigenous paradigm when that is what it seeks to accomplish. (p. 179)

Research continues to advance applications of Indigenous methods and frameworks to investigate Aboriginal youth perspectives on issues of racism, assessment, and spirituality in education (Chilisa, 2012). However, little research to date has explored the voices of urban Aboriginal youth about the reasons for these youth not completing
Broken Circle: Urban Aboriginal Youth and the Drop-out Question

secondary school. Consequently, without gathering the first person perspective of individual students, we risk constructing or assuming perspectives not grounded in their reality. Shaping a study around the perspectives of urban Aboriginal youth offers the chance to gain insight into the reasons why these youth decided to drop out of school prior to graduation.

In 2001, 976,000 Aboriginal people self-identified as living in Canadian urban areas (Canadian Census, 2001). More recent statistics show that 25 per cent of the urban Aboriginal population reported living in one of 11 major metropolises, including Sudbury, Ontario (Statistics Canada, 2001). Based on findings from the National Household Survey, Statistics Canada (2012) recently released a report that indicates that slightly less than one-third of Aboriginal persons living off reserve (between the ages of 18-44) did not earn their secondary School diploma or equivalent. Given these numbers and with such concentration in Northern Ontario, this population of urban Aboriginal youth has not attracted much attention from the academic community on the issue of school incompletion.

Given the lack of student voices found in existing studies, the concentration of urban Aboriginal persons in Sudbury, and the statistical evidence of school drop-out rates among Aboriginal communities, this study has the potential to yield insight that should be valuable to educational stakeholders, including policymakers, researchers, educators, and Aboriginal communities. While existing research shows that urban Aboriginal youth carry with them the notion that education holds “the means to improve their life prospects” (Schissel & Wortherspoon, 2003, p. vii), no research to date in Canada has
explored urban Aboriginal youth perspectives about the educational possibilities relating to life outside of school.

**Purpose**

The purpose of the study was to explore the perceptions of urban Aboriginal youth in Sudbury as to why they have not earned their Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD) or equivalent. My primary investigation sought to understand the determining reasons why these urban Aboriginal youth (18-29 years old at time of the study) decided to drop out of school. This study was designed to evoke and to share participants’ perceptions of their formal learning journey in Sudbury, Ontario.

The study is guided by four fundamental research questions, including the following:

1) What feelings do former mainstream high school students express about not earning their OSSD?

2) What factor(s) contributed to their decision to leave mainstream Secondary School without earning their full credits?

3) What have the participants learned from removing themselves from mainstream school?

4) What do the participants value as most important in their future emotional, physical, spiritual, and intellectual journey?

Given these questions, this thesis is oriented to direct systematic attention to the perceptions urban Aboriginal youth share in their reflections of having experienced school incompletion. Data from this study was be used to reveal urban Aboriginal voices that have been previously silenced, highlight the inequalities found in educational
Broken Circle: Urban Aboriginal Youth and the Drop-out Question

institutions experienced by such youth, and examine limitations of educational policies and curricula with respect to representing the cultural, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual ways of Aboriginal knowing and learning.

**Theoretical Framework**

I used Critical Race Theory (CRT) to address my research questions. CRT has been conceptualized as a “change-making strategy” (Patton, 2002, p.545.), an “extension of social constructivism” (Hays & Singh, 2012, p.41), and an “advocacy/participatory worldview” (Creswell, 2007, p.9). Historically, CRT emerged in mid-1970s in response to the retrograde progression of the American civil rights movement (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). The CRT movement was rooted in the Critical Legal Studies, a social justice movement that investigated African American men and their high percentage of incarceration in prison and jails (idem). Through the framework of CRT, data are therefore conceptualized as a tool useful to further the interests of emancipating marginalized individuals from systems of oppression, such as discrimination against one’s gender, race, class, ethnicity, religion, mental/physical ability, and/or other social classifications (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). In this process an alternative reality ideally emerges, such that the lived experience of oppression based on race has been vanquished and a move towards social justice occurs (Haynes, 2013). Throughout this journey CRT is considered instrumental in that is works to shift mindset from subordination to resistance (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). Aligned with this understanding of CRT, I have conceptualized the thoughts, feelings, and stories of the participants (urban Aboriginal youth) as a means to further their own interests for empowerment.
Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit) is an independent theory that differs from CRT by means of specifically addressing the localized needs of tribal peoples (Brayboy, 2005; Daniels, 2011). As a theoretical framework, TribalCrit advances the critical analyses of Eurocentrism and race as these two social constructs impact the experiences of Aboriginal communities (Brayboy, 2005). As an emancipatory paradigm, TribalCrit works to give expression to previously silenced individuals, thereby positioning them to counter historical injustices and pursue more authentic ways of being in the world (Noel, 2002).

In situating the lives of urban Aboriginal youth through CRT, I constructed what Margaret Kovach (2012) might describe as “a theoretical positioning… having its basis in critical theory with a decolonizing aim in that there is a commitment to praxis and social justice for Indigenous people” (pp. 47–48). Unlike other theoretical structures in human and social sciences research, CRT/TribalCrit is used to identify and respond to the social inequalities found in society—in this case, the everyday experiences of urban Aboriginal youth in Sudbury (Brayboy, 2005). As such, I understand that consistent with Indigenous education and research, CRT/TribalCrit has been and will continue to serve in this study as an “allied Western conceptual tool for creating change” (Kovach, 2012, p. 48). This understanding of CRT/TribalCrit is congruent with other studies that have explored broad challenges and systemic barriers that Canadian Aboriginal youth have faced in their education (e.g., Herbert, 2003; Smith, 1999). However, unlike the studies of Herbert (2003) and Smith (1999), my study specializes in illuminating the perspectives of the members of a particular group (i.e., Aboriginal urban youth) that reside in Sudbury, Ontario.
Broken Circle: Urban Aboriginal Youth and the Drop-out Question

Methods

Given the focal interest in Aboriginal urban youth perspectives, I chose a qualitative research orientation that used participant recruitment, data collection (Appendices A, F), and data analytic methods that are in keeping with previously used qualitative research methods designed in and for an Aboriginal context. I designed the site selection (Appendix E) and recruitment strategy (Appendices G, H), constructed a 3-phased data collection research process (Appendices B, C, D), outlined an inductive data analytic coding procedure, and framed the data representation in a narrative form. The following headings in this section describe how I addressed my expressed research questions throughout the research process.

Site Selection

I selected The N’swakamok Native Friendship Centre, located in Sudbury, Ontario, as the context in which urban Aboriginal youth were invited to participate in this study. Many urban Aboriginal youth, aged 10 to 29, participate in the Centre’s programs, including (but not limited to) the Aboriginal Courtwork Program, the N’Swakamok Alternative School, and the Cultural Connections for Aboriginal Youth Program. These and similar programs are facilitated by professionals operating in positions like the Aboriginal Courtworker, Native Education worker, and Youth coordinator. Within the context of these programs, the practice of Sharing Circles is regularly facilitated to honour spiritual traditions and to spark ongoing conversations about the emotional, physical, spiritual, and intellectual components (as represented on the Medicine Wheel) of personal Aboriginal identity and Aboriginal cultural well-being.
Participants

For my participants, I chose purposeful selection of urban Aboriginal youth using a criterion-based sampling method (Patton, 2002).

Participants met the following criteria:

- Were enrolled in Aboriginal alternative education setting/system (at time of the study),
- Were aged between 18 and 29 years (inclusively) at the time of study,
- Lived in the Greater Sudbury area,
- Had not earned the required OSSD credits in order to graduate, and
- Were of Aboriginal descent (specifically Anishinaabeg)

In keeping with Queen’s University ethics protocol, I was granted approval from the following parties: (a) the Education Research Ethics Board (EREB), (b) the General Research Ethics Board (GREB), (c) N’Swakamok Native Friendship Centre Board of Directors, and (d) the eight participants. Pseudonyms for participants and organizations involved have been used to promote confidentiality and have been chosen by the individual participants.
CHAPTER 2: Review of Literature

“We are getting kicked out of school and it makes us look like we don’t want to learn when that’s not true because I’ve always loved to learn.”


Echoed through school hallways, Friendship Centres, and alternative learning sites are statements like the quotation above from Aboriginal students that highlight ongoing issues in their educational journey. Disengagement from formal education, minimal personal connection to the curriculum content, and high secondary school dropout rates continue to affect Aboriginal learners negatively across Canada (Friesen & Friesen, 2002).

Many historic, systematic, legislative, and economic factors have contributed to low completion rates. In examining the experiences of and factors associated with educational success for Native students in the United States, ChiXapakaid, Inglebret, and Krebill-Prather (2010) invited 688 participants (Aboriginal Native education teachers and Natives with at least one postsecondary degree all as members of the National Indian Education Association) to respond to their two-phased mixed methods survey, featuring a combination of 6 open-ended (Phase 1) and 10 Likert-scale questions (Phase 2). Among their findings, the authors found that 70% of the participants felt that the K-12 public education system does not meet the needs of Aboriginal learners (ChiXapakaid, Inglebret, & Krebill-Prather, 2010). Furthermore, 93% of the Natives with at least one postsecondary degree felt that during their educational experience they had to “adapt to the education system,” rather than the other way around (ChiXapakaid et al, 2010, p.4).
The aforementioned study highlights the perceived lack of exposure to Aboriginal culture that students and educators face within the complex of state-funded educational systems. Despite this study taking place in the United States, many universal systematic inequalities are present on both sides of the border. This study raises the need to explore in more depth the literature documenting the national, provincial, and the local perspectives of Aboriginal students, educators, and educational programmers in their experience of barriers to urban Aboriginal youths’ school completion rates. Aboriginal educational researchers have found a strong correlation between enrollment at secondary schools and educational outcomes for Aboriginal students (Bazylack, 2002; Maxim & White, 2013; Kanu, 2006, 2007; Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003; Smith, 1999). Among the students who identified themselves as a member of the Aboriginal community in Canada, 37% completed high school. In contrast, students who did not identify themselves as being a member of the Canadian Aboriginal community, 65% completed high school. This literature review serves to reveal the existing body of research on what factors might be leading to school incompletion rates among urban Aboriginal youths in Canada or elsewhere. Drawing upon 16 empirical publications, I have analyzed this literature according to four emergent themes: (a) lack of Aboriginal pedagogies, (b) lack of inclusion of Aboriginal content and curricula, (c) socioeconomic factors, and (d) racism in schools.
Lack of Aboriginal Pedagogies

“So gently I offer my hand and ask, let me find my talk so I can teach you about me.”

As cited in Rita Joe (1988)

Research shows a rising interest in the adoption of culturally responsive instruction within the education setting—an orientation to teaching that emphasizes the importance of constructing learning contexts based on the students’ culturally located expertise, knowledge, interests, and experiences (Averill, 2012; Civil, 2007; Nasir, 2002). Aboriginal parents, teachers, students, and Elders have generally reported that their cultural traditions are not valued in the public education system (Bell, 2013; CHiXapkaid et al., 2010; Parent, 2011; Wolf, 2011). Aboriginal peoples in particular have felt schools to be part of the experience of social injustice (Bell, 2013). In a study that investigated holistic learning, Bell (2013) found that many Anishinaabe participants felt the current education system privileged Eurocentric epistemologies (e.g., knowledge as measurable and used as commodity), thus ignoring/disadvantaging the development of Anishinaabe culture and disrupting the authentic identity formations of their people. Given these concerns and others similar to them, Aboriginal students and their parents have urged public school educators to adopt, honour, and embrace their educational and social needs for the learning of their culture and its traditions (CHiXapkaid et al., 2010).

Aboriginal youth have shared their views about the need for designing education based on culturally inclusive practices and equitable discourses (Parent, 2011). For example, Parent (2011) describes how Aboriginal students expressed the desire to see both schools and community organizations collaborating to construct an inclusive and culturally-sensitive curriculum on specific social justice topics, including “two-spirited”
sexuality and gender norms, as a means to promote education in a more holistic manner (Parent, 2011). With a lack of equitable education on such sensitive, Aboriginal students in the public education system are more likely to report that their contemporary student life generally feels unsupportive, with some expressing sentiments that associate schools to being like “emotional, spiritual, and psychological war zones” (Wolf, 2011, p. 82).

While debate exists regarding the extent to which culturally responsive education improves academic outcomes (e.g., Castagno & Brayboy, 2008), there is a growing body of literature documenting the social impact of opportunities given to students to learn within and through contexts linked to their heritage culture (Bishop, 2008; Gay, 2010; Kanu, 2011). Averill (2012) found that infusing the curriculum with knowledge and activities emerging from the students’ ethnicities remains a challenging goal for teachers to practice in their classroom. Based on her findings, she cites the need for more resources, professional development, and community involvements to validate policies on culturally responsive instruction and to curate an increase in culturally informed relationships between the home and school environments.

With the tenuous link between culture and learning evidenced in the literature, researchers have begun to explore the impact such connections have had on Aboriginal youth perceptions of their schooling experience and motivations for pursuing higher education (e.g., Claypool & Preston, 2014; McDonald, 2011). Some Aboriginal students believe that their school experience sets them up to achieve graduation, postsecondary credentials, and pursue career aspirations (Claypool & Preston, 2014), while others have articulated that it works to inform their notions of academic success, which revolve around seeking high grades, demonstrating punctuality, and participating in after-school
Broken Circle: Urban Aboriginal Youth and the Drop-out Question

activities (Bell, 2004; Fulford, 2007). Regardless of shared experience of schooling, Aboriginal youth are widely observed as being situated within systemic efforts to affect positive change in the lives of the youth population as a whole (Parent, 2011).

**Lack of Inclusion of Aboriginal Content and Curricula**

“We have discarded our broken arrows and our empty quivers, for we know what served us in the past can never serve us again...It is only with tongue and speech that I can fight my people’s war.”

*As cited in Chief Dan George (1974)*

Aboriginal content in the provincial/territorial curricula across Canada appears to be lacking sufficient depth and breadth to inspire cultural pride or to empower Aboriginal youth to challenge existing colonial histories and become leaders in their communities. Non-Aboriginal Canadian students are 28% more likely to achieve the necessary credits for high school completion compared to their Aboriginal counterparts.

Many high schools in Canada offer students the chance to enroll in courses that administer Native Studies curricula. These curricula, however, are only rarely offered (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003). In some cases, curricula representing Aboriginal cultures are only offered on specific days (e.g. Louis Riel Day) or only in Native Studies classes (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003). For example, 122 students living in Saskatchewan during the 1997-1998 school year (65 elementary students in a conventional school; 25 high school students in alternative schools; and 32 Aboriginal students from Prince Albert) were asked to rate the importance of cultural teachings (language, ceremonies, art, history). They all desired higher levels of inclusion of Aboriginal content into their educational experience (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003).
Such administration of Native studies in the high school environment not only reflects a non-Indigenous conception of time and place, it also perpetuates the longstanding North American systems of schooling based in a Euro-heritage and social evolutionary tradition of “progression” from perceived savageness to civility (Atleo, 2009).

In response to this, some high schools across Canada have expressed the desire to ensure that the resources needed to address the systemic problems with education would be provided and that policies and programs would be anchored in the actual needs of the Aboriginal youth (Carpenter et al., 2008; Philpott, 2010). Some have called for models of bicultural education—that is, the integration or webbing of traditional and contemporary knowledges so that Aboriginal youth have the means to walk in two worlds: the Indigenous cultural world and the mainstream Euro-Canadian world (Bell, 2013). In such a model, the high school typically envisions a curriculum that seeks to balance particular Indigenous cultural knowledge and values (e.g., Medicine Wheel teachings) while also providing the mainstream academic subjects of math, language arts, social studies, science and technology, health and physical education, and the arts.

In research that explored the project of visioning, designing, implementing, and evaluating the Anishinaabe Bimaadiziwin Cultural Healing and Learning Program, Anishinaabe scholar Nicole Bell (2013) used a series of sharing and review circles to obtain insights on the performance of bicultural, educational programming from the perspectives of students, parents, and Elders. These participants contributed to the meanings of programming; leadership and resources; school climate; healing and identity; and parents and community. Essentially, the program is perceived as a model for
Broken Circle: Urban Aboriginal Youth and the Drop-out Question

off-reserve Anishinaabe communities to create culturally-based educational spaces for Anishinaabe youth to learn about their heritage while also gaining practical skills and knowledge useful to enter into the mainstream, contemporary Canadian society. Students felt empowered to extend their learning from school to the home and vice versa, while parents and Elders found that the relationship between the home and school was built upon partnership and excellent communication on a daily, weekly, and monthly basis (Bell, 2013).

While past and present forms of cultural belief and values have been used to inform bicultural education reforms in urban Canadian communities—thus giving expression to a partnership based on cultural interdependency and equality—other models of Aboriginal education have integrated these through the role of Aboriginal teachers, parents, and other similar adults who work to build upon, extend, and integrate cultural understandings but all the while within the mainstream education system. This archetype—Aboriginal mentorship—suggests that isolating adolescents from their heritage and community influences may limit their opportunities for learning (Atleo, 2009; Wolf, 2011). Educators must therefore trust that Indigenous communities continue to engender ethical principles that bear the capacity to guide young people in socially appropriate and proactive ways of supporting their community, through acquisition of powerful knowledge.

One predominate example of Aboriginal content incorporated into classrooms is the development of warriorship. Wolf (2011) offers insight on the concept of ogichidaawin—warriorship—through an examination of how the social practice of education in a public urban high school in a large US metropolitan area on the edge of the
Great Plains (Lakota/Dakota people) produced meanings of what it is like to experience becoming a warrior. *Ogichidaawin* is a practice offering a design for living, according to community cultural values of respect, harmony, balance, and cohesion, that includes “intense and purposeful learning” (p. 67). For Aboriginal students, that term might be represented as someone who articulates and enacts big ideas—ideas important to the collective welfare of the people. To acquire these attributes, Aboriginal youth must go through a rigorous journey of self-reflection inspired by the exposure to community leaders within and surrounding the school. According to one of the interviewees:

Native youth are warriors in a very traditional sense; they are the ones who will be expected to carry out the community’s decisions. If things are operating in a traditional mode, they would have had input into those decisions and participated freely in shaping their future. (p. 82)

For Wolf, the students who participated in *Ogichidaawin* learned American Indian history from an Indigenous perspective; thus such a context enabled them to study about Warrior identity and acquire the means to become one in relation to their teachers, Elders, and parents.

Another example of Aboriginal content in the education system is the learning of Native language and cultural history in the context of outdoor education. The research generally supports the observation that language proficiency is enhanced by studying a given language within the socio-cultural context of a language community (Dyson, 1988). Other studies have demonstrated that the discourse and learning produced depend on the roles employed by the teacher and learner (Ellis, 1992); the tasks and tools that are used in the learning environment (Freed, 1991); and the learning objectives (Kramsch, 1993).
Neganegijig and Breunig (2007) conducted an exploratory study through focus groups and individual interviews with twenty-two Aboriginal adults. The focus of their study was to understand the current state of K-12 and postsecondary Native language education in Canada and to examine the possibilities of incorporating outdoor education as a vehicle to promote Native language acquisition. Findings (Friesen & Friesen, 2002) show that learners wish to increase their Native language skills, and educators appear interested in facilitating Native language and cultural history through the use of outdoor education, including having lessons taught in selective geographic locations that have significance for the Aboriginal community. Overall, much work remains to revitalize Native languages in Canada and inspiring Aboriginal youth to remain in school to learn about their culture, language, and history.

The role of Aboriginal parents in the involvement of their child’s high school experience in some cases works to transfer elements of Aboriginal culture (Stelmach, 2008), thus teaching Aboriginal youth how to challenge Eurocentric norms and expectations alongside mainstream educational schooling. This orientation to schooling may illustrate bicultural education for a number of Aboriginal youth, including but not limited to the Maori (McFarlane, Glynn, Cavanagh, & Bateman, 2007), Anishinaabe (Bell, 2013), and Cree (Wolf, 2011), or complement and enhance Aboriginal mentorship and Native language instruction that places community Elders and educators as the primary agents of carrying forward Aboriginal knowledge, community values, and cultural practices (Neganegijig & Breunig, 2007; Wolf, 2011).

Irrespective of the choice of pedagogical method or preferred learning design for delivering Aboriginal content, the life experience and cultural values of many Aboriginal
students and their families differ significantly from what they typically experience in the schools, which are run largely by non-Aboriginal, middle class people for the purpose of advancing the values of the dominant culture (Silver & Mallet, 2002). Research continues to call for curricula and education programs that are based on an Indigenous conception of an ethic of care (Harris, 2006), with instructors having access to Aboriginal teaching certification programs (Lowan, 2009) as a means to substantiate their preparedness to design and deliver appropriate curricula. In turn, Aboriginal youth would likely feel more respected in the school environment and have less incentive to drop out (MacIver, 2012).

**Impacts of Socioeconomic Status on Aboriginals’ High School Completion**

“*Education is important because in the future you’ll have a better life. Because without an education, you wouldn’t have a job or go anywhere at all.*” Shannen Koostachin (2008)

Socioeconomic status is known to have significant impact on the formation of student identity, self-worth, and sense of cultural wellbeing among Aboriginal students (Smith, 1999, Haig-Brown et al. 1997, Maxim & White, 2013). In one study, 50% of children with Aboriginal ancestry were considered to live in poverty (Smith, 1999). Precarious employment and/or underemployment among parents of children with Aboriginal ancestry has often led these children to experience high rates of absenteeism and poor school performance (Smith, 1999).

Other research offers further perspectives on socioeconomic factors contributing to a lack of school success for Aboriginal youth. For example, many Aboriginal youth tend to live in families that are disproportionately single parent (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003), and with fewer economic resources than their non-Aboriginal counterparts.
Broken Circle: Urban Aboriginal Youth and the Drop-out Question

(Maxim & White, 2013). Furthermore, living in poverty increases the risk for Aboriginal students to face barriers to schooling, such as the lack of available and affordable transportation (e.g., public busing, taxi services, and car-pooling) to and from school.

Another factor that appears to influence many Aboriginal youth to leave school prior to grade 12 completion comes from the realities of life lived in poverty. For example, Cherubini (2014) studied the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal student cohorts with regard to educational participation and achievement. In this study, Aboriginal school counselors of an urban Aboriginal student support program reported that youth who were living in poverty had not much confidence in the worth of formal schooling. According to one of these interviewees: “School plays a lesser role when you don’t have food in your fridge or you do not have a way to get to and from school. Just the embarrassment of it. Not having clean clothes or hygiene or all of those things is embarrassing” (p. 54).

In Saskatchewan, the Joe Duquette High School was the subject of a case study conducted by three Aboriginal education researchers. Hodgson-Smith, Regnier, and Archibald (1997) explored students’ perceptions of poverty and how low economic status impacted their feelings of self-worth and personal shame. One student reported being harassed at school due to the quality and brand-name recognition of her clothing. In this case, parental addiction and low waged earnings resulted in the young female student not having a large disposable income to purchase brand-named clothing for school. Furthermore, the student reported, “I didn’t like the way people would make me feel just because of where I bought my clothes” (p. 127).
According to the Government of Canada, census figures generally demonstrate that, as a whole, Aboriginal people fare much worse than the general population in terms of their education, income levels, and labour force participation (Statistics Canada, 2010). However, during the labour market downturn of late 2008 and 2009, these differences were more prominently felt, with Aboriginal youths reporting having been impacted particularly harshly compared to their non-Aboriginal counterparts. The employment rates of Aboriginal youths fell by 6.8 percentage points, while the rate fell by 4.2 percentage points among non-Aboriginal youths. These declines were much larger than the declines among their 25 to 54 year-old counterparts. Within the Aboriginal population, between 2007 and 2009, Aboriginal youths had an increase in their unemployment rate nearly double that of non-Aboriginal youths, up 7.5 percentage points compared to 3.5 percentage points (Statistics Canada, 2010).

Examining the labour market characteristics in terms of sector, tenure, and income between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people is further telling about the environment in which Aboriginal youth make decisions concerning school completion. As demonstrated in Table 1, Aboriginal youth are faced with the stark reality that their older counterparts typically encounter significant differences in quality of work compared to the non-Aboriginal population who occupy the same age range. With these statistics, Aboriginal youth might view their educational experience as insignificant to overcoming such odds of inequitable employment conditions (Cherubini, 2014).
Another way of understanding high percentages of drop-out rates may be to consider the draw of short-term economic benefits of entering the labour market. As has been observed, there is a general tendency for employment prospects and income to increase with educational qualifications or credentials. Having a high school certificate, compared to having less than grade 9, increased average earnings by 25 per cent for Aboriginal people and by 18 per cent for the general population, while completion of a university degree, relative to high school completion, increased earnings by a further 82 per cent overall for Aboriginal people and 89 per cent for the population as a whole (Statistics Canada, 1998).

However, the highest concentrations of Aboriginal employees are found in clerical and services occupations, unskilled trades, and other areas that tend to be
characterized by low wages and poor working conditions (Government of Canada, 1999). Aboriginal people continue to be highly underrepresented in semi-professional and semi-skilled trades’ areas (Government of Canada, 2011). Even among those in positions that typically require at least post-secondary education—managerial and professional occupations—or in other jobs that involve better wages, benefits, and working conditions, Aboriginal people tend to be concentrated in lower or mid-level employment, in temporary or seasonal work, or in sectors that lack prospects for long-term career security and advancement (Canadian Council on Social Development, 2000).

Given these systemic, precarious workplace conditions, Aboriginal youth may likely feel discouraged to realistically entertain thoughts of pursuing a skilled career that justifies personal and financial investment in formal education beyond the high school years. One reason for such an orientation to the employment market may stem from the relationship between employers and employees. For example, employers fail to recognize substantial bodies of knowledge, skills, and other capacities within Aboriginal communities and segments of the population because they do not have the formal qualifications attached to them (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003).

The concept of positive change among Aboriginal youth is context-specific; that is, it can be understood as a historically laden term imbued with social, political, and economic connotations. Since the 1990s, the positive youth development movement in Canada and the United States has been invigorated by policymakers, practitioners, and academics who endeavor to develop youth policies and practices that work to mitigate perceived problems afflicting the progress of academic and social successes. This movement encompasses a set of principles which emphasize the need for individuals,
organizations, and institutions to nurture the growth capacity of young people while they
go through what pundits believe are “natural” stages of life (Parent, 2011).

With the increasing reliance on “evidence-based approaches” to policy and
practice and the expected adherence to such an orientation under the terms of federal and
provincial funding models (Parent, 2011), Aboriginal youth programs are faced with the
incentive to adopt positive youth development as a conventional frame of reference in
guiding their organizational philosophy, curricula, and relationships among policymakers,
practitioners, and clients. Accordingly, positive youth development appears to work
holistically—designed to serve the interests of the whole child.

However, some critics have introduced the idea that positive youth development
is itself a historical movement that crosses paths with the turbulent histories of
colonization, imperialism, and racism that Aboriginal peoples have uniquely experienced
over generations. Lesko (2001), for example, points out that notions such as
“adolescence,” “coming of age,” and “peer oriented” are ideological constructs that
modern scientific discourses use indiscriminately as a means to validate assumptions
about the aging process while other critics claim that the universalizing logic of positive
youth development ignores broader cultural histories impacting Aboriginal peoples today
and that used without acknowledgement to time and place can operate as a hegemonic
practice, privileging the work of the scientific community and users of empirical
knowledge over traditional Indigenous ways of knowing in the world (Baskin, 2007).

In spite of these criticisms leveraged on account of positive youth development,
research highlights that, for many Aboriginal learners, a successful, purposeful life is one
not necessarily rooted in having earned high school completion; rather, it is often
understood to be connected to knowledge of and or experience with one’s heritage, language, cultural practices, and spiritual beliefs (Bazylak, 2002; Colquhon & Dockery, 2012). The belief that success is something to be experienced outside of the traditional academic trajectory is further mapped out in recent studies that have measured Indigenous and non-Indigenous student attitudes about their employment prospects. Ross and Gray (2005) report that 60 per cent of Aboriginal students were concerned about employer attitudes and 40 per cent of non-Aboriginal students felt that employer attitudes would act as a barrier to their career aspirations. Furthermore, Craven and colleagues (2003) found that while Indigenous students generally believe schooling is valuable for good employment most of them also stated having very low confidence in being able to attain any good jobs. Based on their survey of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, these researchers concluded that schooling for Indigenous students was regarded as inadequate to counteract perceived barriers in the way to realizing educational aspirations and preferred employment prospects, including pursuing careers requiring having higher education credentials.

Many Aboriginal students have incentives to seek out alternatives to high school completion. Some who have chosen to re-enter education after leaving high school do so through second chance programs, thus affirming an agency that is widely seen as a personal struggle to reclaim successful personal and educational identities amidst the constraints and hazards in their daily lives such as poverty (Ross & Gray, 2005). Kanu (2011) argues that further research is needed to explore the relationships between micro- and macro level variables (e.g., school curriculum and socioeconomic status) affecting
schooling and the realization that meaningful and lasting intervention requires a systematic and comprehensive approach.

**Racism in School**

“We did not think about class. We thought about race.”

As cited in bell hooks (2000)

Aboriginal students in Canada continue to experience racism while attending high school. In the post modern context, race is understood to be a term referring to socially constructed groups that create identity relationally (López, 1994). For the purpose of this study, racism is the process where structures and agents of power create inequalities based on historic, scientific, and societal attitudes (Apple, 1993). Some Aboriginal students have expressed the need for educational practitioners and researchers to reconceptualize education in such way that schooling shifts to become an issue of working with them through their cultural heritage. In this reconceptualization of Canadian multiculturalism as a liberal discursive practice, the need to integrate an awareness of social justice into education becomes an issue about/for curricula. Orlowski (2008) showed that several British Columbia high school teachers of social studies curricula were aware that teaching about Aboriginal culture proceeds through a language that emphasizes contemporary colonial victimization. The attitudes of these same teachers support Mackay’s (2002) point that the discourse of Canadian neoliberalism enables the state, through the public education system, to manage both the Aboriginal peoples and the subsequent discourses about them. Accordingly, the Aboriginal students in the BC high school system have become racialized along the axes of these powerful discourses.
Orlowski (2008) further points out that teacher education programs in Canada might be a useful venue to reconceptualize Aboriginal education by deconstructing the systemic racism against Aboriginal culture. Pre-service teachers are positioned to learn about Aboriginal cultures in ways that increase the academic success of Aboriginal youth and enhance their professionalism as pedagogical practitioners entering the field of education, but that also enables them to deconstruct the liberal discourses to locate the power inherent in them in relation to conceptions about indigeneity, civility, and inclusion.

Leveraging language that carries with it misconceptions about Aboriginal culture can set up the practice of racialized discourse. However, it also ensures the exchange of power-knowledge in human relationships. According to George Sefa Dei (2008), “We are very close to the prison complex mentality that Foucault (1980) talked about, especially when we bring the panoptic gaze to certain bodies...” (p. 351).

In further reflection of the dynamics of power implicit within the exchange of knowledge as discourse and its role in the formation of human relationships, the social politics of the school environment can be made evident in the study of peer and caretaker relations within that environment. These relations can manifest into the observation of perceived imbalances of power or social status (Delfabbro et al., 2006). Bullying is a form of abuse that occurs in the context of peer or caretaker relations in which there is a power differential (Pepler & Craig, 2000). According to Craig and Pepler (2007), a hierarchy of social power emerges from: “Physical advantage such as size and strength, but also through social advantage such as a dominant social role (e.g., teacher compared to a student), higher social status in a peer group (e.g., popular versus rejected student),
strength in numbers (e.g., group of children bullying a solitary child), or through systemic power (e.g., racial or cultural groups, sexual minorities, economic disadvantage, disability)” (p. 86).

Power is acquired through knowledge of another’s vulnerability (e.g., cultural background, sexuality, learning problem, or obesity) and using that knowledge to incite distress. This differential is clustered according to perceived differences in physical and social strength, but its vitality and veracity is mounted through repetition over time (Craig & Pepler, 2007). Emotional and verbal abuse, threats, as well as exclusion in which a person directly, or indirectly, ostracizes another person from a social group are typical examples of bullying (Delfabbro et al., 2006). With each repeated incident of bullying, the relations of power constructed in the exchange of knowledge among participating individuals become consolidated (Craig & Pepler, 2007).

The idea that white teachers deliver a curriculum that is reflective of and shaped by Eurocentrism and whiteness is not novel (Higgins, Madden, & Korteweg, 2015). However, Dion (2007, 2009) brings fresh perspective on this idea with the metaphor of the “perfect stranger,” a stance that is upheld through the systematic enactment of racism by spending the privilege afforded from being white and in the public teaching profession of North America. At its essence, the perfect stranger is a complex identity built up out of numerous strategies that emphasize Western cultural superiority (Archibald, 2008; Battiste, 2005). Dion (2007, 2009) claims that reinforcing the dominant modes of knowledge production and transmission through race and class privilege usually goes unmarked and unnamed by dominate ideologies (Frankenberg, 1993). Furthermore,
curriculum can be a means to uphold the ideological forces of Eurocentrism and Whiteness that the dominant peoples of the world maintain. Regardless of whether we are of Western or non-Western-colonized backgrounds, we are hegemonically implicated within the process of upholding these dominant ideologies (Battiste, 2005; Kincheloe, 2006).

In using Dion’s (2007, 2009) perfect stranger position as an interpretive frame, Higgins, Madden, and Korteweg (2015) conducted 16 focus groups with teachers (N = 71) involved in urban Indigenous education reform. The focus group questions directed attention towards three main themes: (a) teachers’ experiences as teachers of urban Indigenous students; (b) their perceived roles in the school board-wide Indigenous education reform; and (c) barriers to and support for teachers’ engagement in urban Indigenous education. Over 90 per cent of the teacher participants (N = 67, 94%) were white and of European heritage, reflecting congruence with the greater Canadian teaching population (Kanu, 2011). Among several quoted teacher participants, Madden and Korteweg (2015) cite one in particular that illuminates the characteristics of the perfect stranger position: “I have a different cultural background. I’m not opposed to learning different cultures. I love all cultures. However, … I just barely understand” (p. 254). They concluded based on their findings that the overwhelming majority of white teachers were occupying and upholding the position of the perfect stranger.

Unlike white teachers of Aboriginal students, who have exhibited elements of complacency and the burden of grief in not knowing about Aboriginal content and how to integrate it into the curriculum, Aboriginal teachers face different challenges. Feeling that racism in education was typically denied, ignored, and trivialized, Aboriginal
teachers in St. Denis’ (2010) study described various ways in which they experienced racism. They reported a disregard for their qualifications and capabilities, and for Aboriginal content and perspectives; a lowering of expectations of Aboriginal students; and a discounting of the effects of colonization and oppression of Aboriginal people. Institutional responses to racism were often seen as inadequate, leaving the burden for addressing racism on Aboriginal teachers.

However, non-Indigenous teachers (e.g., including but not limited to white teachers) may be seen to occupy a position that supports the interests of Aboriginal education but yet reinforces the status quo by maintaining the current public school system. The embodiment of the ally—a teacher who shows themselves as being “genuine, honest, and trustworthy; good listeners; and persons who remained positive and open-minded despite facing many challenges in education” (St. Denis, 2010, p. 8)—holds the promise of being an agent capable of showing respect and support for Aboriginal people by learning to use community resources. These non-Indigenous teachers are able to become allies by considering their privilege and learning about local traditions, values, and beliefs. For example, Aboriginal teachers have reported that simply seeking to be a part of the local Aboriginal community without taking over and not seeking to become saviours for or experts about Aboriginal people and culture is enough to place a non-Indigenous teacher of Aboriginal education within the proximity of being an ally.

The position of the ally is further articulated in the work of Madden, Higgins, and Korteweg (2013). As self-proclaimed white, Euro-Canadian university-based researchers, Madden and colleagues felt the need to deconstruct their own situated privilege and to construct a position that enabled them to gain insight about Indigenous perceptions of
schooling experiences from a more open and transformative point of view. They provided theoretical (i.e., colonization, whiteness, and Eurocentrism), methodological (i.e., poetic transcription), and contextual (i.e., larger research contexts) frameworks to guide interpretation and relational engagement with four emergently found barriers—unwelcoming schools, professionalization of classroom teaching, colonized classrooms, and unilateral colonization—remembered by Indigenous community members. In organizing the theoretical, methodological, and contextual to form a holistic framework suitable to learn about and with Indigenous community members, the dissemination of their findings invites non-Indigenous readers to reflexively and reflectively engage in rich interpretive practices that are congruent to and supportive of Indigenous education.

Richmond and Smith (2012) investigated the lived school experiences of 14 urban Aboriginal students living in Ottawa. The students were asked to report their worst experiences in school. Violence, bullying, and failure were the three most commonly reported experiences among those polled, with some citing “negative altercations with their teachers” (Richmond & Smith, 2012, p. 5). Other participants shared their feelings of frustration, specifically in relation with teachers. One young woman reported that her teachers offered very little support, triggering her to experience deep feelings of mistrust. Another student indicated that teachers failed to “fully appreciate the unique support needs” of herself and of her other Aboriginal peers (Richmond & Smith, 2012, p. 6).

Although in a different cultural context, Herbert (2003) investigated the impact of racism on Aboriginal student success across 27 Australian high schools. She found that racist attitudes among some teachers had great impact on student attendance, academic
motivation, and social inclusion. In response these attitudinal barriers at school, Aboriginal students attempted to exercise their autonomy by creating a collective space.

In further studies, Aboriginal students have constructed their own spaces at school to promote social inclusion and claim greater powers of independence. One such space is what Van Ingen and Halas (2006) have described as “the smoking doors” (p. 388). In their study of school landscapes and the spatial construction of whiteness in Canadian schools, Van Ingen and Halas (2006) found that Aboriginal students often took to the practice of social smoking circles before and after school and during classroom intermission. Fieldwork observations highlighted how racism towards Aboriginal students took place by means of manufactured landscapes, spatial segregation, and differences in the applications of school rules on the school property.

The architecture of education through the Eurocentric design of schoolyards, hallways, and classrooms can serve as a reminder to parents and grandparents of Aboriginal youth about their experiences directly, or indirectly, with the residential school system. The literature is saturated with examples of parental perceptions of mainstream schooling for minorities (Dei et al., 2002), and many of these examples exhibit the lingering influence of Canadian residential schooling era as a contributing factor to intergenerational trauma (Kanu, 2006) and distrust of public schooling (Freidel, 1999). While there is a positive relationship between parental involvement and student achievement (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003), this trend is less evident in the case of Aboriginal parents and their children. Urban educational projects began to appear across Canada in elementary and junior high schools in response to the Federal multiculturalism Act of 1971. A major goal of these projects was to better meet the cultural needs of an
increasing number of Aboriginal students living in urban areas. However, drop-out rates among Aboriginal students remain significantly higher than their non-Native counterparts, while having poorer academic achievement scores compared to non-Native students as well. Friedel (1999) attributes this comparative gap to impact of colonial structures extant in the communication systems between home and school, namely Aboriginal parents being arbitrarily assigned a predetermined role in their children’s education.

**Conclusion**

“...*Education holds the best promise for positive change, because it creates awareness of the inconsistencies between the world as it is and as it should be.*”

*As cited in Taiaiake Alfred (1999)*

As evidenced in this review of the literature, existing research offers knowledge reflecting four key areas of investigation: (a) lack of Aboriginal pedagogies, (b) lack of inclusion of Aboriginal content and curricula, (c) socioeconomic factors, and (d) racism in schools on Aboriginal youths’ high school completion rates. As this indicates, urban high school Aboriginal students face many systemic barriers in their education. However, there is a need for further investigation into urban Aboriginal youths’ perspectives on their choices to drop out of school. This lack of attention in the literature raises fundamental questions about reasons urban Aboriginal youth might give to explain their decision to drop out of school. This proposed program of study enters into conversation with the existing literature through a concerted effort to discover what urban Aboriginal youth feel is important to share in reflection of their experience of high school incompletion.
CHAPTER 3: Data collection and results

Introduction

The following section details the data collection methods, the data analysis, and the process for coding the data post-collection. I created the three-phase data collection methods to address the primary questions of what feelings do former mainstream high school students express about not earning their OSSD and why did they made the decision to leave mainstream school? Additional questions were posed to discover the future goals of each participant and what can be learned in their reflections.

Data Collection

I organized three phases of data collection to provide participants with the opportunity to share their perspectives in different formats.

Phase 1: Artistic Activity. To begin the data collection process, I designed an acrylic-based painting activity to stimulate participants’ narrative production of some deeper “aspect of their experience of a phenomenon” (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 278). This activity asked the participants to visually represent personal experiences of their learning journey while they were in mainstream high school. Students were offered one canvas (40.6cm x 50.8cm) and a wide variety of paint colours, mixing tools, and paint brushes. Participants were encouraged to add any additional item to their painting that is in keeping with their “expressive voice” (Patton, 2002, p.548). Similar to other forms of arts-based methods for data collection, the acrylic painting activity enables participants to powerfully communicate an experience that extends beyond words, while also furthering
expression of a cultural practice of communication through visual methods of representation (Hays & Singh, 2012).

**Phase 2: Sharing Circle.** Building upon the first data collection phase, I invited the same participants to join a Sharing Circle. The purpose of practicing Sharing Circles as a data collection method is two-fold: first, issues of participant “expertise and authority are removed” (Poonwassie & Charter, 2001, p.67) and second, the group members were encouraged to learn through the sharing and listening of others’ educational experiences (Poonwassie & Charter, 2001, p.67). Similar to focus groups in terms of being used as a technique to learn about the needs and circumstances of the participants (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010), Sharing Circles are a method to gather information about the perspectives of individuals as these perspectives relate to the experience of needs in reaction to planned or existing services, policies, or protocols (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Unlike focus groups (Bazylak, 2002), Sharing Circles emphasize, “culturally appropriate protocols” (Lavallée, 2008, p. 65) in that they are conducted within an ethic of traditional Aboriginal meaning-making practices (Archibald, 2008). In keeping with the objectives of critical theory, Sharing Circles allow participants to participate voluntarily and at their own discretion throughout this activity (Poonwassie & Charter, 2001).

For this study, the opening of the Sharing Circle commenced at observing the performance of traditional ceremonal protocols. This ceremony (Smudge) began with the burning of a sage, a traditional sacred medicine (Lavallee & Poole, 2009, p. 274). All of the participants and the researcher took part in the ceremony. The cleansing of a “room, people, or objects” is performed to honour traditional cultural values and practices
Broken Circle: Urban Aboriginal Youth and the Drop-out Question

(Kovach, 2009, p. 136). The geometry of the Sharing Circle (i.e., circle formation) is traditionally constructed among a group of Aboriginal participants to enable equal opportunity from everyone to share his or her experiences (Kovach, 2009). During the Sharing Circle, I encouraged each speaker to share his or her experiences without interruption until he or she has concluded the contribution (Archibald, 2008.), thus encouraging all participants to respect the individual expression of the speaker (Archibald, 2008). Data from the Sharing Circle process is deliberately set up in an inclusive environment for participants to share their intimate reflections with others (Regnier, 1994). Furthermore, the design and expected facilitation of this forum enables participants to relate their stories in a “holistic fashion,” meaning that what is said does not reflect the contributions of a “structural interview process” (Kovach, 2009, p. 99). Employing a Sharing Circle for data collection is a method that is in keeping with the “oral tradition,” since it coordinates “community interaction” (Parent, 2011, p. 37).

**Phase 3: Individual Storytelling.** Finally, I invited each participant to share his or her perspectives through one-on-one storytelling. Storytelling is a non-structured method of gathering data about the participant’s life by means of reflection, dialogue, and story (Kovach, 2009). It can be used to discover and “explore complex questions that [are] philosophical, ethical, psychological, political, religious, and ontological” in nature (Kuyvenhoven, 2009, p.5). In conjunction with qualitative research methods and frameworks, storytelling presents a particular aspect of one’s life in an oral custom (Kovach, 2009).
Participants were offered the opportunity to share their life stories as they pertain to education and leaving high school. Additionally, the Phase 1 artwork representation was presented to each participant as a means to extend his or her reflections and complement the visual description of his or her artwork. I introduced each individual storytelling interview with a Smudge ceremony to remain in keeping with traditional protocols for data collection (Lavallée, 2008). Data obtained from storytelling was used to make “social issues pertinent” to the participants, communities, and the academy, and to “contextualize information” (Kuyvenhoven, 2009, p.5), adding to the knowledge base in line with the two other phases of this study.

**Data Analysis**

I coded units of data to form a narrative out of the participants’ perspectives. Data representing the participants’ experiences are understood as a form of text in that such data are to be “shared, analyzed and archived” (Kenny, 2004, p.13). This orientation to the data enabled me to practice interpretation that is consistent with an Indigenous worldview and meaning making heuristic (Kovach, 2009), since thematic coding is presumed on the “inseparable relationship” between story and knowing, a methodology that activates the “interrelationship” between narrative and research (Kovach, 2009).

I analyzed the data thematically so that participant viewpoints and their visual representations are identified in terms of words, actions, and explanations that are emergent and distinctive from the participants’ reflective experience of school incompletion. Throughout this coding procedure, I constructed three types of coding categories from analyzing the data over the course of the
Broken Circle: Urban Aboriginal Youth and the Drop-out Question

research process: (a) initial codes, (b), focused codes, and (c) thematic codes. The direction of classifying the thematic codes into these three types serves to promote increasing understanding with respect to the data, culminating in a narrative account of the participant experiences according to specific themes.

Narratives were constructed out of the individual data and these reflect the linkage of the macro and micro themes together. Graphic organizers, such as cycle-, comparative-, and fishbone maps, as well as mind maps and network trees were generated. By creating these graphic organizers, I then synthesized the data reflecting the phrases and feelings of the participants into plot, storylines, and overarching literary metaphors. This mode of narrative inquiry enabled me to share the specific examples gifted by the participants.
Chapter Four: Narrative or Findings

Participant Artwork and Individual Stories

The alternative school site is situated within a historically and culturally diverse population (Mohawk, Oji-Cree, Cree, Métis). However, during the data collection methods, each of the eight participants self-identified as Anishinaabe. Many shared their identity during the third phase (storytelling) of collection and others openly made mention of their identity during the first phase (Sharing Circle). Each participant created their own pseudonym and had a story as to why they chose their specific names. Some chose to honour friends, family names or members of their families. Others made personal connections to literary characters or songs relevant to their lived-experiences.

The following chapter acknowledges and shares the individual voices, dreams, and barriers of eight urban Aboriginal students in their desire to complete their high school diploma. Each participant was invited to create a painting of the reasons why they left mainstream school prior to graduation. Although all eight participants were located in the same room together, each worked individually and in relative isolation from one another. At the conclusion of phase one (artistic activity), without discussion or inquiry, each participant placed her/his painting against a wall to dry. No one asked questions of each other’s work, and no one volunteered to describe the motivations for their decisions.

With that context in mind, the following eight vignettes are organized to share the individual paintings and artist descriptions of what they painted and their rational and motivation to paint the content created. In addition, after each artist’s description, an
amalgamated narrative based upon the three phases (artistic activity, Sharing Circle and individual storytelling) was created.
Bella, 22

Earth Mother
May 20, 2015
Acrylic on Canvas
Sudbury, ON
Broken Circle: Urban Aboriginal Youth and the Drop-out Question

**Bella, what is the story of your painting?**

*I painted the earth and a pregnant woman. I painted it because that was mainly the reason I did not attend a mainstream high school. I would have graduated this year if I would have stayed in a mainstream school. I came here to finish all my English lessons, and I will be graduating this year. It took me a little longer but that’s ok. I decided to leave because I felt that I was getting too old. The younger ones were coming to high school. I wanted to move out of the Rez into the city to be closer to everything.*

Simply stated, Bella’s commitment to graduate was a source of pride. Her mother had instilled the value of education from a young age: “The only thing that kept me going to school was my mom. She always told me ‘Get your education! Without your education you are going nowhere in life.’ Those parental sentiments resonated with Bella: “So I stuck to that. I didn’t want to go to school, but I went to school anyways.”

When Bella spoke about her day-to-day interactions, teachers and school administrators were a popular topic. Bella reflected about her first impressions with teachers, setting the tone for future encounters. “Some people didn’t like the teachers in general. The way they would introduce themselves, like a little snotty or treat you lousy.” However, trust was earned between Bella and her high school principal though a series of interactions: “I actually got into a fight at school, and the principal, he was new and nice. He wanted everyone to graduate, trying to get everyone to get out. He was real nice. I was supposed to get suspended for a month but he let me go for two weeks just because I was doing good in school.”
Bella noticed an interaction between a fellow peer and the principal: “He tries to believe that you can and everybody can do it. He was trying to be nice. I know another guy there, he just roams, not a care in the world. He would go there not even for school.”

According to Bella, the principal would attempt to motivate her peer: “Come on, man. Don’t you want to get out of here?” She added, the student “didn’t care about the principal. He student was older too, above age. The principal didn’t want to have to call in his parents and discuss it. He’s old enough, he doesn’t need his parents’ permission.”

The catalyst for leaving school was her pregnancy. Bella’s willingness to return to school was hampered by her age. Bella wanted to return to school to earn her diploma, but she indicated her age as being a factor in not being able to return to mainstream schooling. “I am too old to go to school. They don’t allow 23 year olds to go to high school now.” With her youngest daughter in tow, Bella shared her hopes for other young parents who are trying to complete their secondary school credits: “You can accomplish anything, even if you have a child at a young age. It’s not the end of the world.” With a matter-of-fact tone, Bella shared her immediate goals: “I had two babies. I took a year off with my second one, and I have 4 credits before I graduate. I decided to come here because I can do them all in one year.” The larger financial implications for Bella came down to her willingness to provide for her family. “In the world today you need a job, a good paying job, if you want money to pay for things for yourself or things for your family.”
When asked to describe one of her best experiences in mainstream schools, Bella smiled widely. She went on to share one of her favorite memories, where cultural content and formal education interconnected. “At school there was a dance class. It was fun. We got to go to Toronto for two weeks and perform on stage with other reservations, like BC and lots of others.”
Jane, 29

Mother’s Love
May 20, 2015
Acrylic on Canvas
Sudbury, ON
Broken Circle: Urban Aboriginal Youth and the Drop-out Question

Jane, what is the story of your painting?

It is representing me and my daughter. I had her at a very young age. I wrote daughter because I had a little girl. Why I drew it is because she means everything to me. I drew wings...I don’t know, I was thinking at the time she’s my angel. She’s my little angel. I just want to teach her that school is...education is everything. I just want her to learn that.

When reflecting on her time in mainstream high school, Jane shared her feelings of being “scared.” Elaborating, she added, “[I felt] scared about not being able to get through all of my courses. I just wanted to fulfill my…get all my work done, get all of my credits. I was so good at school before I got to high school. I always got 100 percents. I felt as though I wasn’t able to keep up.” Adding to her self-imposed stress, Jane made decisions that impacted her formal education: “I started experimenting with alcohol and drugs. Then I met the father of my child, got pregnant at 16, and just decided to stop going to school. It felt like I just gave up after I started drinking.”

The focus of raising her daughter full-time was paramount to Jane. “I decided to start raising my daughter until she started school.” When envisioning her immediate goals, Jane said: “I’m excited. I can’t wait to be done. It is going to be so awesome. I am doing this for my daughter, too! That’s why I drew a picture of her. I want for her to see me graduate. I want to be a role model for her.”

Jane further added, “I just want my daughter to have a happy learning experience, more hands-on. [I would like her to] make good memories, good friends and teachers.” Additionally, Jane holds deeper educational aspirations for her daughter: “I don’t want it to be the same [as mine], not even close. I want her to finish when she is suppose to
finish school, not drag on like mine did. It’s important to get your education, and I want her to see that. [Obtaining a high school diploma is important in order] to get a job after and go to college, you know."

Jane told me about an event that changed her concept of safety within the greater community. When she was 15, Jane and her best friend were drinking and hanging out with friends in the downtown core when the two girls were separated from the group. Jane went on to say that while they were at the bank they were approached by a group of white males in a truck. As a young man exited a vehicle they engaged in small talk. According to Jane, for no apparent reason, the man shoved her friend into a nearby puddle while shouting, “go back to the reserves you stupid Indians!” A verbal altercation ensued, the girls were separated, and then a foot-chase began. “It felt as if there were 20 of them chasing me. They wanted to beat me up while calling me a bunch of racist names. They were chasing me through back yards and everything,” shared Jane.

With haunting sharpness Jane shared the fear she felt at the time: “I felt as if it was in the olden days like the KKK kind of thing. I don’t want to say that but, yeah, it felt like they wanted to put me up in [a tree]. It felt kind of scary to me. If they were going to get me, I felt like I would have been beaten to death. They were chasing me all over town. They really wanted to kill me it felt like…because I was Native. That was one experience that I had that was really scary.”

I asked Jane how she felt about the community now based upon her history. Even though Jane recalled the event with great clarity she shared an additional thought on the matter, “I didn’t hold it against them.”
Jeff, 22

What Not To Do
May 20, 2015
Acrylic on Canvas
Sudbury, ON
Jeff, what is the story of your painting?

Can’t make money going to school everyday, so I ended up quitting school and getting a job instead. She left me and it got harder to keep going to work and not going to school and taking care of this kid by myself. So, I got a DNA test, just to see if he was actually mine. It came back and the results were negative, he wasn’t mine. CAS intervened and said that I could take him if I wanted to, because the mother wasn’t fit to be able to take care of him, whatsoever. I said no because it was getting a little bit too hard on me to always go to work, and I couldn’t get a better job because my education. I wanted to go back to school, but, like I said, on my painting [was] time, just a little too much just slipped by before I wanted to go back. One of the reasons is loss of time; not only that, but I took care of him for almost two years. I thought he was mine. When they told me he wasn’t mine I just went on a total binger, everyday just to be numb. Not to care or feel anything. The only thing I cared about was the next drink, the next toke or anything else, because I didn’t have to care anymore about anyone else. The loss…I really did love that little kid. I took care of him for so long.

Jeff shared his strong feelings towards many teachers he had encountered: “They pretty much gave up on you before you even tried. So, no help from the teachers, those are the ones that are supposed to want you to get good grades and pass. What you (teachers) are just showing us is why bother to come. They act like they just don’t care.”

Despite having many friends and family to support him, Jeff explained how negative feelings could escalate: “that’s usually the problem. Kids can’t say nothing. They’ll build it up until it’s too late. They will hurt themselves or somebody else.”
Jeff openly revealed his learning challenges: “I have a reading disability, I’m dyslexic…where I can’t read. I had problems in class with asking for help with teachers. If you have a lot of people in there [class], like 35-40 people, everybody else there knows how to read and write.”

The social pressure Jeff encountered compounded his anxiety:

I just didn’t want to feel different. Some of the teachers would be ignorant and rude about it. [Teacher said] ‘You’re in grade 11 how the hell did you get here if you can’t read.’ [From] that point right there I didn’t want ask for help, especially from no fucking teachers. If you are going to be rude and ignorant about it, why the fuck should I ask you anything? That’s probably one of my downfalls, not asking for help because of some ignorant teachers. Not all teachers are like that. That’s how I perceived everybody else.

Despite a negative interaction with a staff member Jeff spoke with enthusiasm about a science teacher that created a positive memory about learning. Jeff shared how differentiated instruction fused learning and fun in every lesson. Jeff went on to say, “every time I went there I was always happy to go to his class. He was happy to help you out if you needed a hand. He didn’t put you down just because you didn’t know nothing.”

With the realities of parenthood rapidly approaching once his girlfriend became pregnant, Jeff placed emphasis on securing gainful employment. “Can’t make money going to school everyday, so I ended up quitting school and getting a job instead.”

When asked about how to make the mainstream high school experience better for future generations, Jeff added how beneficial a spiritual or teen counselor would be: “So
for kids with problems if they come in and they don’t feel like talking to their friends
they could take them off into a room, totally confidential and just let them say something.
Just something in high school so someone can go talk to somebody, just have somebody
[in school] to talk to.”

Jeff added not only do teenagers have to contend with adolescent issues, but other
challenges as well that may feel overwhelming at times. He added further clarity to his
statements, “teenagers now-a-days have problems on top of problems. Some kids are
living through full-grown man problems. I’ve lived through a lot. I tell people these
stories and they are like, ‘you’re so young’. I don’t feel young. I feel 40 for Christ sakes.”

When asked about interactions with peers and the formation of school cliques,
Jeff was quick to add, “I was always left alone.” Jeff went on to confess, “I was actually a
little bit of a bully ” in the school setting. For Jeff, family served as a support system in
the school itself. Many older cousins and family friends were already enrolled in high
school before Jeff entered in grade nine. Jeff could relate to a specific group without
having to fear the negotiation process of belonging.

Self-described tensions between groups were present in Jeff’s storytelling. The
divisions between groups were, “subjugated by your Natives on one side, you had your
Whites, your Goths, your preps, and all your other stuff ” on other sides, Jeff added.

Sometimes violence would erupt at school between groups: “Everybody…feared
the Natives for certain reasons. Almost all of them [Native students] did was drink or
fight. You talked to the wrong Native, call them ‘bush nigger’ or you call them something
stupid like that and they would just snap.” That occurred regardless of the location or
consequence. Jeff said, “it wouldn’t matter where it happened, in a classroom, hallway, or outside, they are going to smash you, they don’t care where.”

Jeff spoke about a specific instance of racism between a janitor, himself, and his friends. One day in school, Jeff and two of his Aboriginal friends were walking through the halls, releasing the magnets on the fire doors between hallways. Jeff overheard the janitor call the threesome a bunch of “wagon burners.” According to Jeff, a verbal altercation occurred between him and the school employee. When probed as to what happened next Jeff offered a systematic criticism:

We didn’t bring it to the teacher or nothing…or principal…what the hell is he going to do? Just brush it under the table really. [Principal speaking] well, if he says it again, they we will do something. What the hell is that? If we [Native students] said something to one of your staff, if we threaten them or anything, or said a racist comment, we would be instantly expelled or suspended.
Lola, 23

Awareness
May 20, 2015
Acrylic on Canvas
Sudbury, ON
Lola, what is the story of your painting?

[The story of my painting is] just a lot of hurt, pain, and disrespect. I just like bold stuff. I just like my art to stand out. [I chose to paint these words, ‘(slut, ugly, fat, stupid, worthless, sick)’] to show that other...other people went through things and no one should be alone to deal with being bullied or abused.

The stories experienced by Lola are haunting and humiliating. The incidences of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual violence are undeniable. Lola stated the obvious reasons for her early departure from her mainstream high school: “I left school because I was bullied everyday. I used to get beat up everyday, in and outside of school.” When I asked if she ever experienced negative events, Lola’s list of examples was staggering.

Lola described her day-to-day interactions with her peers: “I experienced racism from other students at school. I used to be called ‘dirty Native’ and told ‘you don’t belong here’ and ‘go back to where you come from,’ everyday.” The stories did not end there. With great detail, Lola described her encounter with a teacher: “One time I was sitting in class trying to do my work and my teacher called me a horrible name. She called me a slut. It escalated, and I told the principal and nothing happened. She was really ignorant and rude towards me.”

As an educator myself, I was shocked into the simplest of questions: why?

“Because I was Native.” Lola’s answer, like her art, was bold and very personal.

“Tell me about the fractured heart,” I asked her. Without hesitation Lola shared how every night after school she would confide with her best and only friend—her mother.
Every single day, “I would talk to my mom. I would cry every night. I would do the unthinkable. I would slit my wrist all the time.”

The concept of mainstream schooling not being safe was raised: “School was the main part [of] why I was doing this [cutting] in the first place. I was afraid to go to school. I was not wanting to go. I was getting tired of getting shoved into lockers, breaking cheekbones. It was insane.”

Suddenly, Lola’s mother and her only support, died. Without her support, Lola chose to escape from the mainstream educational environment to break the cycle of violence. Now, Lola has found meaning and family in the supportive peers and staff at the N’Swakamok Alternative School. Adding to her feelings of new-found safety, Lola shared: “You have more support here than you would have at an actual high school. These people are your family. They are not just your friends or your classmates, they are your family. We help each other out the best we can through anything.”

When looking back on her interactions with teachers, Lola had much to share. Lola hoped that teachers could do more for other students than they had done for her. Specifically, for teachers, she shared a parting plea: “Stop the abuse of children in schools. Take a stand. Stand up for their kids.” For Lola, making a difference was as simple as, “make [students] feel successful. Show them support” and offer students genuine feedback that includes praise.

After exploring her past and present educational experiences, Lola revealed her greatest goal for future generations. It was for Native students to be “happy” and have “smiles, a glow to their face. I wouldn’t want to see that [what I experienced] everyday, crying because of something that has happened to them. No, I would want to see [them]
Broken Circle: Urban Aboriginal Youth and the Drop-out Question

express their day” in a positive manner. Lola wished for students to reflect back on their mainstream education and share “I did this and it was so much fun”. With four more credits to earn, Lola shared her reality of not receiving enough academic, cultural and emotional support in her mainstream schooling. With respect to her current education, Lola remarked, “I love it. You come to school and everyone is just doing their work but as soon as they hear someone they all look up and start screaming ‘hi, how are you?’ It’s nice. You have more support here than you would have at an actual high school.”

Lola’s last comment during our time together revealed her own philosophy. “We are all the same. We are not going to change, we are what we are!” As clear as her words painted on her reflective canvas, Lola wanted to be bold, so change may happen for others living in unsafe educational settings.
Meadow, 18

A Lonely Path
May 20, 2015
Acrylic on Canvas
Sudbury, ON
Meadow, what is the story of your painting?

The lockers in the background represent the high school I went to. Then I painted a girl who represents me. [There is] nothing around her just the lockers in the background because that’s what I felt like in high school. Just surrounded by lockers with not much there, no one really there. The blue represents that blue feeling and sad feeling. Then I tried to make something that makes a path that goes into things that stopped me from going to school. I drew a picture of an alcohol bottle and a picture of a pot leaf because that is what I was into instead of going to school. I would hang out with people. It kinda stopped me from going to school because the people I would hang out with wouldn’t go to school. I would stop for a bit then go back. Then I would stop again and go back. That [black line] represents a death that happened. So, I didn’t go to school for the last 3 weeks of that year. So I didn’t really get to finish what I had to do, whatever I had left to do.

As Meadow increasingly withdrew from her limited group of peers she realized, “I would just rather go to school to meet these people (who consumed illegal drugs). It was better than being alone all the time.” Silently wandering the halls of her mainstream high school, Meadow added, “not having friends in school did not motivate me to go to school as much.” At one point in grade 11 Meadow had considered transferring to another school to create an opportunity to socialize with new peers. In the end, Meadow decided against the transfer and can see her lack of presence in social media photos many of which show her former peers graduating. She added, “I always thought that I would be
graduating when I was suppose to be graduating. It’s a disappointment.”

Meadow shared great feelings of isolation and depression without hesitation. When prompted, what did mainstream school feel like? Her answer resonated with me: “I felt invisible.” Verbalizing thoughts of despair combined with her painted self, Meadow added her rationale for her feelings: “They (administration) never came and talked to me to find out what was going on with me. They spend more time talking to the troubled kids because they show it (emotion) more than me. They showed more concern for them than me.”

A self-described “shy person”, Meadow chose not to actively seek help from teachers about her stressors. However, there was a resource teacher who made a difference for Meadow: “In times when I was struggling to go to school, I would usually spend more time with him in the resource room then in a classroom because I usually didn’t talk to anybody at that school. He was a really nice teacher. [He] just talked a lot and helped me out a lot, as much as he could.” According to Meadow, the ease of conversation between teacher and student encouraged sharing: “I would talk to him sometimes but not too much because I didn’t want to talk about how I was feeling inside.”

When Meadow spoke of barriers to her learning the subject of living with a mild learning challenge surfaced. She added that the mainstream high school teachers, “made it easy for me to learn. I have a disability and I found it easier than elementary school.”

Meadow was the first person to share the impact living with low socio-economic status had on her life and education: “When I first started working at the end of grade 10, I didn’t get as much shifts [at work] but by the end of grade 11 came I got more shifts.”
Broken Circle: Urban Aboriginal Youth and the Drop-out Question

Then I didn’t go to school as much. I just wanted to go out and buy myself clothes and stuff. I never had…well I had clothes, but nothing I really liked. Just things I just wanted but in a way stuff I also needed, too.”

The consequences of earning income aided in Meadow’s ability to socialize:

“Having money was just nice…to hang out with people and do things, just be like the way the normal kids in my school would do. It made me feel like I would fit in more.”

Some of the social barriers Meadow faced affected her ability to relate to others outside of her peer group: “It was hard to get to know them.” Constantly seeing herself as an outsider, Meadow revealed,

“It was kind of different hanging out with those people rather than the people I hang with because the people I drifted to were in the same situation where their families aren’t wealthy. It was easier to connect with them than wealthier people. It’s harder to go out and do things when you don’t have money. All these other people [with higher income] can go out and do things. You need money to go out and do some of the things you are doing. So, I think that was a big issue. It was hard to relate and to build relationships.”

Many mixed emotions were felt by Meadow as she walked the hallways: “It felt lonely and you see everyone else in these groups or walking with their friends. I was really lonely, really boring, kind of sad.”

Confusion was voiced as Meadow reflected, “I used to be like all the other people walking with friends and I don’t know what happened. I just wanted to leave rather go out and find new friends.”
Besides walking the halls Meadow also felt anxiety about classroom dynamics. The mere thought of working on an assignment or group work with another student generated self-doubt for Meadow: “Also sitting in the classroom, knowing the people in there but not having an actual friendship with them especially when times you have a project to do and you have to partner up. I was like oh my gosh I don’t know. Oh, no! I don’t know who will be partners with me.”

When Meadow created meaningful relationships in her mainstream school she found that peers aided in her learning:

“I was doing well in school. Most of the time, I did pretty good in school. I found that I did better when I had friends in my class. It was just easier to learn with your friends. Once I started going to school and not having any friends in my class anymore, it made class boring. I was having a harder time understanding some of the stuff, I think. Even thought it was just me, having friends around somehow just helps. Not having friends in school did not motivate me to go to school as much.”

Living with a learning disability, Meadow was challenged to get the support she needed. I asked, “What would you change?” She responded, “Smaller classes help. Providing activities to do that you don’t have to pay for. Coming from my type of family I didn’t always get to go on trips because of the cost associated with it.”
Paul, 28

The Path Unseen
May 20, 2015
Acrylic on Canvas
Sudbury, ON
Paul, what is the story of your painting?

At first I was just going to draw a person in the center and have black on the edges fading to white around him, looking like people surrounding him. But, I scrapped that. I went a different direction. What I painted was a mountainous landscape with a big sky, green field with a path headed off into the horizon. I was going to draw a person there but I would loose all the detail because I knew how I was going to end it (completion of the painting). So how I finished it was...I just dropped paint all over (the canvas) then smeared it so you have a bunch of colours like black just blocking the landscape. When I was back in high school, the reason why I left was because I couldn’t see where I was going. I was smart...everybody told me that my whole life. I never had difficulty doing the work. I just never did it because I never knew where I was going. I just stopped working towards the end.

Paul revealed that he was the only Aboriginal student in his school. With a deep, soft voice, Paul spoke of a single teacher that had lasting impact. “I had one teacher, science teacher, she was really funny. She was probably the reason why I stayed as long as I did.” When I looked for deeper understanding of his affection for this teacher, Paul expressed that it was “because I really like being around her.”

Paul said, “growing up I was really the only Native kid in class, so I think that there wasn’t any cultural identity programs I could use. That would be helpful, make me feel less alone.” This feeling of loneliness led to Paul making the decision to withdraw from peers and social events: “I kept isolating myself from the rest of the crowd. So, I just left school. A few years later I got into trouble and I was ordered to go back to school or do something [jail time, prison]. So, I came here and that was 9 years ago now.”
Broken Circle: Urban Aboriginal Youth and the Drop-out Question

“What could have kept you going?” I asked. He responded, “I guess someone to get me to try things, everything and anything.” For Paul, each school day was repeated: “I was just there. Get up to school, come back home. I didn’t do anything.”

Acknowledging barriers based upon his educational attainment, Paul reflected, “I knew I had to do something.” Looking for change in his financial situation, Paul offered, “that a few years ago I was just doing a job, living pay cheque to pay cheque. I didn’t like that.”

Hardship and doubt were common features in Paul’s life. He was highly aware of his situation: “Then I just asked myself, what are you doing? Why are you still here? I couldn’t answer that. I went out and tried to find an answer. Just to try something.” Paul decided to attend Espanola College and entered into an Arts-based program. Achieving highest honours, Paul admitted, “I just didn’t know what to do after that.” However, a flicker of pride was revealed in our conversation: “It was just a paper, but it was the first time I completed something that mattered. That’s why I came back here fully committed. Before that it was just for someone else coming here. That’s why I’m coming here. It’s for me.”

In keeping with his painting, I asked Paul, “Have you found your path?” “Not really found ‘the’ path but I’ve found ‘a’ path,” he answered. Demonstrating his deep insight, “I’m hoping to come to that later. But that’s just how I am. I like to wing it.” With his laid back way of being, Paul easily embraces a “Let’s see what happens” mindset. In the fall he will attend a community college in a photography program. “Now I have a goal in mind so I’m finally finished so I’m good to go.”
Tamera, 27

My Old Life
May 20, 2015
Acrylic on Canvas
Sudbury, ON
Tamera, what is the story of your painting?

*I painted a picture with money on it because when I quit school I just wanted money in the here and the now. I also painted an alcohol bottle and prescription drugs. I went through a lot of alcohol abuse, drug abuse. I painted the disco ball and balloons to represent the party aspect of my old life. That’s pretty much why I left school. The crowds I was hanging out with, the party crowds, I wanted to fit into those crowds. I was never comfortable. I don’t know why I just never... maybe it was the teachers in elementary that kind of gave me an uncomfortable feeling in school.*

As clear as her words on canvas, “not comfortable,” Tamera shared her feelings about her long-standing relationships with teachers. Tamera offered: “I found as a teenager in high school that the teachers would look down to you, opposed to at the same level.” Not all teachers, according to Tamera, displayed this hierarchical belief. However, in a few instances, “there were certain classes I would go to, [because of] the teachers I liked.”

Tamera expressed a desire for calm in her schooling. However, her desire was rarely realized in her interactions with some of her teachers. The perceived moods of her teachers left a lasting impression. Tamera suggested that it would be beneficial if teachers were “not angry and grumpy, that helps, cause I’ve had a lot of real fucking angry teachers.” On the same theme Tamera added, “I think it deters people from going further. Even though you know how important it is, you just don’t feel comfortable.”

Tamera encountered financial hardship that affected her day-to-day living. As a result she compensated by “working at a bar at a very young age.” Once Tamera left
school, financial scarcity created the mindset of her wanting “money in the here and now.” Conversely, Tamera found that many negative racial stereotypes existed. She shared that “being in Sudbury more I hear this, ‘Indian gets everything for free.’” Tamera expressed that she didn’t understand what the basis of this false belief is within the greater community.

Tamera gravitated to others who also consumed alcohol and drugs: “I don’t know how—I just ended up with people who partied. I wanted to live that life.” Offering more insight, Tamera added: “maybe it’s because what I had seen growing up. I thought it was ok. I thought it was normal but it wasn’t. It’s not normal. It’s not ok. I’ve learned that now.” Furthermore, “I really believe that children do as they were taught or what they see, which is a big problem within Aboriginal communities.”

Drawing upon her lived experience, Tamera offered perspective on what it was like to live with the struggles of her parents: “I know that my mom was abused as a child and her father was in residential school. It stems from there, he was beating her and she never saw the love that he should have been giving the children.” The manifestation of her mother’s struggles compounded when she had children, “so when she had us, she was clueless. That’s the way I see it now. That’s just the way it happened.” Now knowing the historical, cultural, sociological, and systematic factors of her family dynamics, Tamera reported, “I have learnt about all the stuff she [my mother] went through now. Life makes a lot more sense now.”

When contemplating factors that made mainstream school feel uncomfortable Tamera stated, “personally I have this fear of doing things wrong or getting something wrong. I think a lot of people feel that way sometimes and they don’t ask questions in
Broken Circle: Urban Aboriginal Youth and the Drop-out Question

class.” Adding her thoughts on the next possible step, “there needs to be a way to bring out more of the questions so that kids aren’t lost. If you do answer a question wrong half the time, kids would laugh and then you would feel stupid after.” Tamera continued her thought, “I think there needs to be a way to eliminate that and make the support system better.”

Giving back to her community is of the utmost importance for Tamera, “I want to advocate the importance of education with children. I want to figure this [situation] out too. Kids need to go to school more.” Seeing a causality, Tamera voiced her thoughts, “the way I see things if we want better generations we need to teach them, education them: we are not going to get better generations if we don’t.”

What motivates Tamera is her gratitude, “it’s been a crazy life thus far. I’m thankful though.”

When asked about the future of education, Tamera’s candor continued: “More people need to be educated on the history of Aboriginal people, because then you will understand why there is alcoholism; why there is drug abuse; why there is abuse. It makes you understand it a bit better, and I think it should be taught in schools opposed to the mass-genocide hidden under the carpet.”

Tamera has a personal understanding of all factors. As a young child, Tamera was sexually assaulted. Reflecting on her past trauma Tamera added, “I think that had a very big impact on my life. I think that’s what stems from the alcohol and drug abuse and not dealing with it.”

Moving forward, Tamera smiled as she spoke of her nearing completion of her last credit in Biology and her desire to help others in a similar situation. This fall Tamera
will be “going to the Early Childcare and Youth program at Espanola College,” because she endeavours to “work with youth, specifically troubled youth like I was. I want to show them that there is more, that there is support and help. The support I felt here I want to give back. I really want to show youth, Aboriginal youth, that there’s more than drugs and things that happen on reserves. There is more than that.”
Steven, 21

Four Roads
May 20, 2015
Acrylic on Canvas
Sudbury, ON
Steven, what is the story of your painting?

There are four roads that lead to the city; that’s where the ideal life is found. Two real choices is found, two roads. One road is smooth and safe; the other is faced with lots of obstacles. [The road on the left] winds through a crooked landscape. Many barriers are out there; many barriers exist for me. Some [barriers are] commitment to family. Sometimes family lets you down, and sometimes you let your family down with the choices that you make. Stuff that happens in school is like bumps in the road, they just slow you down sometimes. That white space represents different barriers I don’t even see right now. It’s the negative I have not come across yet, but I know it’s out there.

Steven readily shared his perspective on his mainstream high school journey. “I kind of lost perspective on my life” while in school, he stated, adding, “I’m easily influenced.” Steven discussed subjects about falling in love, participating on athletic teams, and challenges associated with living with low socio-economic status. Steven shared: “I grew up in poverty a little bit. It wasn’t as bad as others. But I was able to manage; but it still affected my family.”

Steven shared a story about how he perceived his reputation at school to change after he was involved with a fight at the end of grade 9. Remarking that he became noted less as “a good kid who goes to school” and more noted as “that guy who got into a fight and won that fight and smokes weed everyday.” Steven understood that the reasons for the change in reputation were based upon his choices. “I kind of got [into] smoking more marijuana and stuff like that so my grades when down. Then I got kicked out of that school for fighting again.”
When our conversation turned to interactions with school administrators, teachers, and staff, Steven expressively shared his perspective about some teachers: “Some are like potholes. Like in my painting, they are barriers to what you need.”

His honesty was haunting. When asked about his future Steven revealed: “sometimes I can’t even see the road ahead.”
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND THEMES

The content of this chapter addresses the researchers’ personal reflections about the learning and the inquiry process, the new contribution to the literature based upon the research questions and data analysis, and the limitations of the study, and it concludes with the summarizing reflections.

Personal Reflections

When I look back at what I have learned from this research I find that the willingness of community members to help is overwhelming. From the local Haudenosaunee women I am honoured to call friends to the Anishinaabe participants who agreed to share their time, trust and story with me, I am grateful for this journey. Beyond my personal feelings I can share my understanding of the strong sense of community and commitment to each individual student that I witnessed at the N’Swakamok Alternative School. As its name suggests, N’Swakamok—literally meaning, “where the three roads meet”—uses a 3-way partnership between the local friendship centre, provincial government, and the local school board to facilitate the mandates of the centre and the alternative school site (Fulford, 2007). The N’Swakamok Alternative School places emphasis on the “personal empowerment” of students and utilizes a variety of teaching methods to combine culture with curriculum (p. 210). By addressing the emotional, physical, spiritual, and intellectual elements of each learner, the Alternative School is well positioned to meet the holistic needs and educational goals of its programming.
Broken Circle: Urban Aboriginal Youth and the Drop-out Question

I entered the school as a guest and listened with an open heart to their individual voices. At times their stories reflected pain, joy, pride, and perseverance. The honesty I felt in their sharing was humbling yet this experience informed me of their desire to achieve personal goals, one of which was to graduate from secondary school.

As the participant voices emerged, themes were identified and thereby the research questions could be answered. The answers reflect voices recorded in the three phases of data collection. Returning to the four research questions explicitly addressed in the introduction of this inquiry, the following account is a pairing of these questions and their corresponding answers.

*What feelings do former mainstream high school students express about not earning their OSSD?*

Answers from the participants spread across a large spectrum. Many participants report deep, negative feelings about not earning their OSSD. Feelings such as fear, guilt, shame, regret were expressed through the creation of individual paintings, Sharing Circle time, and reflective moments during private storytelling. Emotions shared demonstrated various responses and judgments based upon those feelings. Manifestations of fear of teachers for example, created a suspicion of teachers’ intent towards the student. Even if participants did not express shame for not earning their OSSD, they often shared isolation from peers who did graduate.
What factor(s) contributed to their decision to leave mainstream Secondary School without earning their full credits?

Many factors contributed to individual participants leaving mainstream school. For example, systematic barriers, emotional, physical, spiritual, and intellectual factors manifested in stories of teen parenthood, colonialism, poverty, racism, violence in schools, substance abuse, teacher neglect and substandard teacher training.

What have the participants learned from removing themselves from mainstream school?

Participants have voiced that their short-term goals took precedence over other long-range goals. The emphasis on meeting their immediate physical (avoidance of in-school violence) and emotional needs (peer isolation) superseded their spiritual (cultural teachings/holistic education) and intellectual needs (earning their OSSD). Many participants shared that once additional (financial, family, legal, social) pressures were felt, the desire to return to school became prominent in their day-to-day events. Once the decision to return to school was realized, their spiritual (engaging in ceremonies, attending Powwows) and intellectual needs (earning credits, attending post secondary institutions) became the primary focus of their learning.
Broken Circle: Urban Aboriginal Youth and the Drop-out Question

What do the participants value as most important in their future emotional, physical, spiritual, and intellectual journey?

Based upon their emotional needs, a category of change for future generations emerged. When addressing their physical journey, the construct of taking full responsibility for their past, present, and future decisions was evident. Spiritual-based desires were expressed by the creation of goals for the future. Many participants spoke of re-connecting to cultural traditions, ceremonies, and teachings. Intellectual-based intentions were heavily based upon a personal acceptance of reality. For two participants, completing their OSSD equalvancy became a gateway for a future in post-secondary education. These two participants’ primary purpose of continuing their formalized education was to challenge themselves, assert autonomy and offer a counter-narrative to an mainstream educational system that largely ignored, repressed, assimilated, and blamed the Aboriginal learner for non-completion. The following section addresses the four new themes present in the data.
New Themes: Change for Future Generations

A theme of change was present in a number of areas including individual paintings, group circle time, and private storytelling. “Change” was expressed as a desire; as a state of mind; and as a shift in practicing a way of life. Throughout each of these expressed contexts, the meaning of change was carried through the participants’ choice in representing their experiences in acrylic and by brushstroke, as well as reverberating through the collective and individual conversations had in the circle and interviews. The participants elicited such conceptions of change by pointing out the need to look beyond the personal experiences as students in mainstream high school to envisioning the future for others. They shared an intention to see and realize a very different educational reality for their sons/daughters, brothers/sisters, and community members than the one experienced by and among them.

These expressions of change point to the presence of entrenched sentiments about education and schooling experiences held by many Aboriginal peoples in Canada. For example, the mainstream education system is widely perceived to marginalize the practice of indigenous epistemology and world-making within high school settings (Bell, 2013; CHiXapkaid et al., 2010; Parent, 2011). In response to this lived-experience, several Aboriginal students like those in my study have expressed an activist orientation towards teachers, administrators, peers and community members; specifically, the need to integrate and give expression to the emotional, physical, spiritual, and intellectual dimensions of the Aboriginal learner.

Change was further expressed as a shift in relationships from those framed in conflict and discord to those that foster positivity and embrace support. The primary
source of tension and conflict for many participants included expressions of Eurocentric relationships with teachers. This revelation mirrors to a large extent interpretations of academic performance standards found in other Aboriginal mainstream schooling experiences (Bell, 2004; Claypool & Preston, 2014; Fulford, 2007; McDonald, 2011). However unlike these previous and other studies that have contributed to conceptions of academic success and credential-based learning within the public education system as a whole (Bazylak, 2002; Friesen & Friesen, 2002; Krahn & Taylor, 2005), this study brings further understanding to how these conceptions impact individual choices to remain in school.

Most of the participants referred to a specific example when envisioning a deeper connection with teachers. Many participants felt that teachers “did not care” about them, yet some others indicated having had positive connections with teachers; for example, some had teachers who encouraged them to stay in school for as long as they did. Such sentiments operate congruently with the literature (Harris, 2006; MacIver, 2012), thus extending the argument about the perceived nature of the education system as serving nation-state interests and not concerned sufficiently with advancing the individual welfare of Aboriginals (Harris, 2006; Silver & Mallet, 2002).

Furthermore, some participants hoped for generating positive relationships with teachers while others spoke of building stronger connections with support staff and principals. Few of the participants sought for a future that included positive interactions with peers in the mainstream school environment. Despite these differences, all the expressed data indicate the presence of systemic, institutional, and individual barriers that limited the expression of the whole person (Averill, 2012; Civil, 2007; Nasir, 2002; Wolf,
Like other Aboriginal students (Craig & Pepler, 2007; Delfabbro et al., 2006; Pepler & Craig, 2000; Richmond & Smith, 2012) the participants expressed the idea that their mainstream high school environment was not safe for them.

One discussion point that emerged in conversation with the participants was the desire for cultural connections embedded into the mainstream curriculum. Only one participant communicated the inclusion of Aboriginal content into mainstream schooling by means of traditional dancing. All other participants spoke of their desire to have a culturally inclusive mainstream experience despite not receiving one themselves until attending the N’Swakamok Alternative School. When addressing concepts of time, traditional teachings, spiritual expressions, and community connectedness, most of the participants, like several others as evidenced in previous research (Averill, 2002; CHiXpkaid et al., 2010; Civil, 2007; Nasir, 2002), wanted to see a reflection of their culture in the mainstream curriculum for future generations. Unlike in previous studies that have expressed topics of change (Atleo, 2009; Bell, 2013; Parent, 2011), the participants shared a desire for the next generation to have a very different experience in mainstream school than they had. Specifically, the participants expressed a desire to have their sons and daughters experience safety, trust, friendship, and joy in a mainstream educational environment.
Acceptance of Reality

Participant narratives demonstrated implicit notions about reality and of their relations to such realities. All participants recognized the impact of having made personal decisions in their recent past in relation to their current educational status. None of them, for example, overtly assigned blame or appropriated responsibility to someone or something else for their experience of schooling.

This expression of acceptance appears to stand alone within the extant literature, as previous studies have obtained data reflecting much broader frameworks of inquiry, including issues of teacher training (Lowen, 2009; MacIver, 2012; Mackay, 2002; St. Denis’, 2010), historic impacts of the Residential School System (Dei et al., 2002; Freidel, 1999; Higgins, Madden et al., 2015; Kanu, 2006), social-economic barriers to learning (Cherubini, 2014; Haig-Brown et al., 1997; Hodgson-Smith et al., 1997; Maxim & White, 2013; Smith, 1999), inclusion of cultural practices and pedagogy (Bell, 2013; Bishop, 2008; Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Gay, 2010; Wolf, 2011). The participants mentioned some barriers to earning their OSSD; however, everyone individually shared reflections about their decision to complete the high school requirements, with the majority explicitly expressing that this choice represented an individual endeavor.

Many highlighted that earning their OSSD was an opportunity for experiencing a more enjoyable future. Each expressed awareness about the expectations needed to complete their secondary school credits and to correspondingly graduate. However, many indicated holding to a sense of nihilism, which took them to recall negative sentiments about their past. For example, a wide range of hopelessness was shared, from self-induced isolation to thoughts of suicide attempts. In this regard, participants
demonstrated deep personal trauma that projected into their daily mainstream educational settings, echoing, to some extent, Wolf’s (2011) findings that mainstream schools have operated as “emotional, spiritual, and psychological war zones” for Aboriginal students (p. 82).

Despite these varied experiences, all participants reported having come to terms with their past experiences in schooling, as well as indicating how these experiences have informed what actions to take in the present.

**Full Responsibility**

Through the art-making, the Talking Circle, and the one-on-one storying, most of the participants indicated wanting to be role models. Becoming someone with positive influence (i.e., a role model) by completing high school was seen to be socially meaningful in that it carried sufficient power for helping inspire members of families and communities to seek out alternatives for the future. This personal transformative orientation expressed throughout the phases of research might indicate the participants’ need for exposure to mentorship (Neganegijig & Breunig, 2007; Wolf, 2011) and to become a source of positive influence for others.

Having the expressed motivation to complete school therefore developed into discussions about shaping individual agency in such a way that enabled for such completion. Although all participants cited that they encountered road-blocks, barriers, and “potholes” in school and in life, each expressed the innate desire to gain confidence in school, practice self-determination, and feel empowerment through their educational pursuits. The literature, however, describes the end-goal of the education system-to produce good producers and pursue a career that benefits society (Claypool & Preston,
Despite encountering a series of traumatic events, including questioning their individual identities and in some cases being brutalized in mainstream schools, all of the participants accepted that they personally exercised withdrawal from high school. While the historic stigmatizing barriers of colonization continue to impact Aboriginal students negatively (Herbert, 2003), the participants did not appear to be aware of the degree in which it informed their decision to leave school. The impact of decolonialisation in this case seems to have offered the participants an opportunity to return to a learning environment that encourages the use of cultural knowledge and celebrates personal autonomy (Cherubini, 2014; Krahn & Taylor, 2005). Accordingly, the participants shared their readiness to complete high school and of the means by which they intend to matriculate and to pursue dreams for the future.

**Goals for the Future**

As participants shared stories about dropping out of mainstream school, most of the conversations, echoing Schissel and Wotherspoon (2003), included descriptive statements about the desire to obtain a “career, not a job”. In the sharing of their own employment history, many did not want to continue being employed in a precarious sector of the marketplace, such as retail, seasonal, and part-time employment (Canadian Council on Social Development, 2003; Government of Canada, 2011). A few participants wanted to become the highest grossing income earner in the household, with the ability to financially take care of their immediate and extended family members.

Other than financial goals, each participant expressed the deep desire to move beyond their current educational status. Many participants counted down to their graduation dates by the month, week, or assignment. Few demonstrated having the desire
to extend their formal learning journey into post-secondary programs. Few had the end goal of achieving their OSSD and “getting it all done” as quickly as possible. Some focused on giving back to their communities thus reflecting a traditional Aboriginal teaching of reciprocity (Absolon, 2011). While some focused on acquiring financial stability through career advancement others expressed the desire to survive the current day.
Limitations

As with any research, there are several limitations to this study. First, this study is checkered by the experiences of the researcher. While I have equipped myself with cultural sensitivity to the lives of urban Aboriginal youth, I entered into the study with postsecondary credentials and am visibly of settler heritage. These personal characteristics may have resulted in a power imbalance between the researcher and the participants and they reflect the footprint of colonialism in the present day.

Accordingly, this dynamic not only shaped the conditions upon which the data were elicited and gathered but also points to the second limiting factor of this study: the sample population. Although the participants were purposely recruited and attended the Alternative School within the N’Swakamok Friendship Centre, these individuals offered the insight necessary to address my research design, agenda, and questions. However, the findings recorded are sample specific and in this particular inquiry, all participants returned to school which may have changed the findings significantly. For example, participating in an environment that once was a place associated with dropping out is now a context that offers one the ability to matriculate, and thereby address perceived experiences of negativity, isolation, racism, and enduring colonial trauma. What was shared therefore is interpreted to reflect a wide range of emotions, not all of which were seen by the participants as originating from the moment they left school but seamlessly projecting in the present learning environment as well. Accordingly, the participants’ narratives speak to the lived experiences of both past and present forms of belief about schooling, and of how perceptions about dropping out has become challenging to temporally situate.
With these limitations in mind, the design of the study resulted in the collection of data that was anchored in the lives of a select group of urban Aboriginal youth and the study aims to represent the data as authentically to the lives of these youth as possible.
Summarizing Reflections

Exploring urban Aboriginal youth perspectives on their decision to leave secondary school prior to completion has led to a deeper and more holistic understanding about the interplay of existing factors impacting education for urban Aboriginal youth. Grounded within a CRT and TribalCrit perspective, I intended to collaborate with the population of interest in an effort to sensitively map out the reasons why a significant discrepancy exists between urban Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal graduation rates. As a colonial settler who also identifies herself as an ally, the reporting of this study is not conceived as a representation of understanding without context; rather, it is the mobilization of research which is aligned with the recognition of the lived reality of being an urban Aboriginal youth. The literature review for this inquiry revealed barriers to the participants earning their OSSD: (a) lack of Aboriginal pedagogies, (b) lack of inclusion of Aboriginal content and curricula, (c) socioeconomic factors, and (d) racism in schools.

In response to the research questions posed in this inquiry, eight urban Aboriginal students have expressed the need to integrate and give expression to the emotional, physical, spiritual, and intellectual dimensions of themselves as learner. This inquiry has contributed to new data that can inform new directions for research. Based upon the voices of the participants, four new themes are offered to share participants’ perceptions of their formal learning journey in Sudbury, Ontario. The new themes are: (a) the desire to change the mainstream educational experiences for future generations, (b) the
acceptance of reality, (c) individual students taking full responsibility for decisions that impact OSSD completion, and (d) the ambition to achieve and create goals for the future.

Based upon the findings, areas of research which may address some of the systematic inequities present in mainstream schools include: the integration of Aboriginal pedagogies into all school environments, the need for deep cultural training for teachers and teacher candidates, and the decolonization of mainstream curricula.

This study is located in the environment of, eight Aboriginal peoples and the intersection of their-past, present, and informing the future.
References


Broken Circle: Urban Aboriginal Youth and the Drop-out Question


Broken Circle: Urban Aboriginal Youth and the Drop-out Question


Broken Circle: Urban Aboriginal Youth and the Drop-out Question


Broken Circle: Urban Aboriginal Youth and the Drop-out Question


Broken Circle: Urban Aboriginal Youth and the Drop-out Question


Statistics Canada. (2013). *The education and employment experiences of first nations*


Broken Circle: Urban Aboriginal Youth and the Drop-out Question


Zietsma, D. (2010). Aboriginal People Living Off-Reserve and the Labour Market:

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Phase Two and Three Questions

Phase Two-Potential Conversation Starter Questions

My initial question may be as follows

1. What are your reasons for attending the Friendship Centre?
2. Tell me where you come from or where you grew up?
3. Tell me the three best and worst memories of your high school experiences?
4. What is the highest level of education that you have completed?
5. Why did you withdraw from school?
6. How do you feel about your decision to leave school?

Phase Three-Potential Prompting Questions

1. Describe what you have painted?
2. What do you think of when you see your artwork?
3. Share with me the story of your painting.
4. What would you like people to see in your work?
Appendix B

Letter of Information/Consent

Broken Circle: Urban Aboriginal Youth and the Drop-out Question

**Researcher**

Amber White  
Master of Education Candidate  
Faculty of Education  
Queen’s University  
Kingston, Ontario, Canada  
Email: 11aw66@queensu.ca

**Purpose of the Study**

I am hoping to find out why Aboriginal youth have left high school before graduating.

**What will happen during the study?**

In this study, you will be asked to create a painting to show your feelings towards school, take part in a Sharing Circle, and Storytell your High School memories. The study will take place over one week. Each part of the study will last one hour. Participants will meet three times for one hour each. The sessions will be audio recorded.

**Are there any risks to doing the study?**

There is little risk with participating. You may feel some anxiety, but I will make you as comfortable as possible. Elders, Social Workers, staff, and trusted community members will be available on-site during the study. I have done my best to make sure that Anishinaabe culture and traditions are honoured and practiced during this study. You may withdraw from this study at any time.

**Are there any benefits to doing this study?**

This study will not benefit you directly. However, the results will be shared with community school boards, Friendship Centres, and local Band Offices to best create positive change within local schools. I will also write a paper for publication about the results to share with other researchers and other communities. This sharing of results could help improve education for Aboriginal children across Canada.
Privacy

At all times, I will make sure your privacy is protected. Your name or personal information will never be shared with anyone else or published. I will keep all the information that could be used to identify you on secure memory sticks or locked cabinets where only I have access. Personal information will be destroyed once the study is done. If you decide to be interviewed, others may be able to identify you on the basis of the stories you tell or the comments you make. I will do my best to make sure that your privacy is protected, but please keep this in mind when you decide what to share with me or the group. At the end of the study, an archive of data, without the identifying information, will be kept at Queen’s University.

What if I change my mind about being in the study?

You may decide at any time to stop participating in the study, with no questions asked. No person will be forced to participate even if the consent forms have been signed. To withdraw from this study, you can tell me in person or email me your decision to leave at any time.

Information about the Study Results

I expect to have the art, Sharing Circle, and the Storytelling complete by May 2015. I will provide you with a summary of the results then. I am happy to answer any question you may have about the study at any time by phone or by email, and I will be in regular contact with the Friendship Centre staff or Elders at their request.

Questions about the Study

If you have any questions about the study, please contact Amber White by email at 11aw66@queensu.ca, or my supervisor, Dr. Lindsay Morcom at 613 533-6218 ext. 77269. If you have any ethical concerns, please contact the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board at chair.GREB@queensu.ca, or by telephone at 613 533 6081.

This study has been granted clearance according to the recommended principles of Canadian ethics guidelines and Queen’s policies.
Appendix C

Consent

I have read the information present in the information letter about a study being conducted by Master of Education Candidate Amber White of Queen’s University. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my involvement in this study, I, may withdraw from the study at any time. I have been given a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

Please sign one of this consent form and return to Amber White. Keep the second copy for your records.

Signature: __________________________________________

Your name (please print): __________________________________________

I agree to participate in the “Broken Circle” study.

[ ] Yes [ ] No

I agree that the Sharing Circle, Storytelling will be audio recorded. (Please note: You can be interviewed even if you do not want to be audio recorded).

[ ] Yes [ ] No

I agree to have my artwork shown in future publications.

[ ] Yes [ ] No

I agree to have my artwork on display at the Faculty of Education, Queen’s University.

[ ] Yes [ ] No

I would like to receive a copy of this thesis in; paper copy [ ] or email [ ]

(Please mark your choice in the box.)
Appendix D

Consent Form-Phase 1[Art]

To Be Handed Out To Each Participant After They Have Completed Their Artwork.

I agree to have my artwork (original) shown in future publications.

☐ Yes ☐ No

I agree to have my artwork (photographically duplicated) for the purpose of future publications.

☐ Yes ☐ No

I agree to have my artwork on display for 3 weeks at the Faculty of Education, Queen’s University.

☐ Yes ☐ No

I would like my painted returned to me at the end of this study.

☐ Yes ☐ No

Signature:_____________________________________________________

Your name (please print):________________________________________
Appendix E

Letter of Intent (Site Recruitment)

N’Swakamok Native Friendship Centre
Executive Director- Marie Meawasige
110 Elm Street
Sudbury, Ontario
P3C 1T5
(705) 674 2128

Dear Members of the Board of Directors,

My name is Amber White and I am a Master’s of Education student at Queen’s University and I am writing to ask permission to conduct important research at the N’Swakamok Native Friendship Centre. As an alumnus of Laurentian University, I understand the important community services, programs and safe spaces that the centre provides local Aboriginal community members.

My thesis (Broken Circle: Urban Aboriginal Youth and the Drop-out Question) will be investigating the perceptions of eight Aboriginal youth (aged 18-29) and the reasons why they have left school prior to graduation. The design of the study includes three phases (painting, Sharing Circle, and Individual Storytelling) of data collection that would span one hour per session, three hours in total. Participants will receive monetary compensation for their time ($10 per phase).

Participants would be allowed to leave the study at anytime and are encouraged to speak other languages if they prefer. This study has been created to be as culturally accessible and is communal in design, with Indigenous spiritual protocols being followed (Smudging and possible Elder support). This study has been granted clearance according to the recommended principles of Canadian ethics guidelines and Queen’s policies.

Thank you for your consideration,

Amber White
1law66@queensu.ca
613 893 2353
613 389 1903
Appendix F

SCRIPTS (PHASE ONE-THREE)

To be used each and every phase of data collection. To be read by the researcher in front of the participants before data collection begins.

SCRIPT FOR PAINTING (Phase One)

Researcher: Good morning. My name is Amber and I am from Kingston, Ontario. I am doing my Master’s in Education at Queen’s University. I would like to take this time to share with you my purpose for coming here and some of the goals I would like to accomplish with your help. I would like to know more about why each of you has decided to change to Alternative school instead of mainstream high school. What experiences led to your decision? How did you feel about this experience? How do you feel now?

I know talking about your experiences might be difficult. At any time, for any reason you may leave this study, no questions asked. All I ask is that you email me, or tell me in person that you are withdrawing from the rest of the study. After each session (Art, Sharing Circle, and Storytelling) you will be paid $10.00 for a total of $30.00.

Possible Schedule (as suggested by the N’Swakamok Alternative School Coordinator)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10:00-11:30 am (first day)</td>
<td>Phase One</td>
<td>Painting (Research Notes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>Notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>---------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:30-12:00</td>
<td>Not Research</td>
<td>Break (Elder Available)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:00-1:00</td>
<td>Not Research</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:00-11:30 (second day)</td>
<td>Phase Two</td>
<td>Sharing Circle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:30-12:30</td>
<td>Not Research</td>
<td>Break (Elder Available)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:30-1:30</td>
<td>Not Research</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:30-2:30</td>
<td>Phase Three</td>
<td>Storytelling (Individual)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:30-3:30</td>
<td>Phase Three</td>
<td>Storytelling (Individual)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:30-4:30</td>
<td>“”</td>
<td>“</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4:30-5:30</td>
<td>“”</td>
<td>“</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:30-6:30</td>
<td>Phase Three</td>
<td>Storytelling (Individual)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:30-8:30</td>
<td>“”</td>
<td>“</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:00-11:00 am (third day)</td>
<td>“”</td>
<td>“</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:00-12:00</td>
<td>Phase Three</td>
<td>Storytelling (Individual)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
HAND OUT LETTER OF INFORMATION AND PERMISSION FORMS (to be filled out immediately) EXCEPT SECONDARY ART PERMISSION FORM.

Read a-loud, line-by-line each form to the group. Ask if there are any questions. Review schedule (see insert above). Set up for Smudge and painting.

**Researcher:** I would like to offer everyone the opportunity to Smudge. As in many Circles, you do not have to participate in the Smudge and have the right to “pass” if you wish.

**DEPENDING ON HOW MANY PARTICIPANTS ARE PRESENT, SMUDGING MAY TAKE 10-15 MINUTES.**

**PAINTING BEGINS.**

**Researcher:** Please do not sign your name on the front of your painting. If you would like to place your name on the back of the painting, feel free to do so. I will place tape over your name so your work cannot be identified. If anyone would like to work in a private space please let me know so I can help you feel as comfortable as possible.

When you think about attending mainstream high school and why you left mainstream school, what images come to mind? Please take your time thinking about your experiences. I would now like to invite you to draw, sketch, or paint the images that came to mind and why you switched to Alternative School.

**AFTER PHASE ONE IS COMPLETE, HANDOUT PERMISSION FORMS (CONSENT FORM 1[ART]. READ-A-LOUD QUESTIONS TO EACH INDIVIDUAL. ASK THEM TO FILL OUT THE FORM.**
SCRIPT FOR SHARING CIRCLE (Phase Two)

Researcher: Good day. Before we begin, I would like to offer everyone the opportunity to Smudge. As in many Sharing Circles, you do not have to participate in the Smudge and have the right to “pass” if you wish.

DEPENDING ON HOW MANY PARTICIPANTS ARE PRESENT, SMUDGING MAY TAKE 10-15 MINUTES.

Researcher: Thank you for all being here. I am here to learn about your decision to leave mainstream school. I invite you to share your thoughts and feelings about dropping out of mainstream school. You may experience strong feelings about this time in your life. Elders are available after the circle if you wish to share time with them and discuss your feelings.

I would like to remind everyone that you will be audio recorded and what you share here is to remain in the circle. If you wish to talk about your thoughts outside of the circle you may do so, but I ask for you not to share anyone else’s stories and experiences.

Sharing Circle takes place and after the last participant has shared the researcher will share a parting thought and reminder.

Researcher: We are now at the end of our Circle time. Should you feel the need to explore your feelings further, the Elder-in-residence and/or counselor will be available for you. Thank you for sharing. I kindly ask for you not to share anyone else’s story or experience heard here.

I look forward to hearing your individual stories next. If you are leaving for the day, please confirm with me when I will see you next for your Story time. Thanks.
SCRIPT FOR STORYTELLING (Phase Three) Researcher: Before we begin, would you like to Smudge?

DEPENDENT ON THE ANSWER GIVEN BY EACH INDIVIDUAL, SMUDGING WILL OCCUR DIRECTLY AFTER PROMPT.

Researcher: Thank you for agreeing to share your story with me. It is my goal to learn about your experiences in mainstream school and what led to your decision to leave before graduation. Everything you share is confidential and kept in a secure location. I will be changing your name and any references made to specific individuals, schools or any other organization to protect confidentiality, to the best of my ability. Our meeting will be audio recorded so I hear your words as they have been spoken.

Do you have any questions? Ready to begin?

I WILL ASK THEM TO DESCRIBE THEIR PAINTING.

Researcher:

Thank you for your words. If you would like, the Elder and counselors are available for additional meetings if you need to discuss your feelings further.

I see here on your consent form your contact information. Is this correct? I will be in contact with you by email/phone (depending on participant indicated choice) so you may have a copy of the study and/or return your artwork. Do you have any questions? Is there anything you would like to add?

Thanks again for your time and participation.
Appendix G

Ethics Approval

May 14, 2015

Ms. Amber White Master’s Student Faculty of Education Queen's University Duncan McArthur Hall 511 Union Street West Kingston, ON, K7M 5R7

GREB Ref #: GEDUC-769-15 Title: 'GEDUC-769-15 Broken Circle: Urban Aboriginal youth and the drop-out question'

Dear Ms. White:

The General Research Ethics Board (GREB), by means of a full board review, has cleared your proposal entitled "GEDUC-769-15 Broken Circle: Urban Aboriginal youth and the drop-out question" for ethical compliance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (TCPS) and Queen's ethics policies. In accordance with the Tri-Council Guidelines (article D.1.6) and Senate Terms of Reference (article G), your project has been cleared for one year. At the end of each year, the GREB will ask if your project has been completed and if not, what changes have occurred or will occur in the next year.

You are reminded of your obligation to advise the GREB, with a copy to your unit REB; of any adverse event(s) that occur during this one year period (access this form at https://eservices.queensu.ca/romeo_researcher/ and click Events - GREB Adverse Event Report). An adverse event includes, but is not limited to, a complaint, a change or unexpected event that alters the level of risk for the researcher or participants or situation that requires a substantial change in approach to a participant(s). You are also advised that all adverse events must be reported to the GREB within 48 hours.

You are also reminded that all changes that might affect human participants must be cleared by the GREB. For example you must report changes to the level of risk, applicant characteristics, and implementations of new procedures. To make an amendment, access the application at https://eservices.queensu.ca/romeo_researcher/ and click Events - GREB Amendment to Approved Study Form. These changes will automatically be sent to the Ethics Coordinator, Gail Irving, at the Office of Research Services or irvingg@queensu.ca for further review and clearance by the GREB or GREB Chair.

On behalf of the General Research Ethics Board, I wish you continued success in your research. Yours sincerely,

Joan Stevenson, Ph.D. Chair General Research Ethics Board

c: Dr. Lindsay Morcom, Faculty Supervisor Dr. Chris DeLuca, Chair, Unit REBMs. Erin Wicklam, c/o Graduate Studies and Bureau of Research
Re: Urban Aboriginal Youth and the Drop out Question-Research/AmberW

Kelly-Lee Assinewe <assinek@rainbowschools.ca>
Thu 30/04/2015 8:15 AM
Inbox
To: Amber White <11law66@queensu.ca>

Hi Amber
This is to confirm that you have permission to conduct research with youth and students in the Alternative School at the N'Swakamok Native Friendship Centre. If you require any additional information, please let me know.
Thanks
KI
Kelly-Lee Assinewe
Coordinator
N'Swakamok Alternative School
(705)674-2128 ext. 240

This email, including attachments, is solely for the use of the intended recipient(s) and may contain confidential and/or privileged information. Any use, distribution, printing or copying of this email must comply with Rainbow District School Board's procedure on the Acceptable Use of Information Technologies. If you have received this email in error, please delete it immediately from your system and notify the originator.