THE INFLUENCE OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM ON INDIGENOUS IDENTITIES, CULTURES, AND LANGUAGES: A QUALITATIVE STUDY USING SHARING CIRCLES

A Thesis Submitted to the Committee of Graduate Studies in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of Master of Arts in the Faculty of Arts and Science.

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ABSTRACT

The Influence of the Education System on Indigenous Identities, Cultures, and Languages: A Qualitative Study Using Sharing Circles

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Indigenous children and youth have been exposed to educational institutions and curricula that are detrimental to their identity and cultural journey. This thesis explores the importance of educational institutions and curriculums complementing the needs of Indigenous students during their time in compulsory and post-secondary education. Five self-identifying Indigenous students attending Trent University share their educational experiences using sharing circles. Following this, the findings are analyzed, and recommendations for educational policies are discussed.

Keywords: Indigenous education, Indigenous identity, Indigenization, colonization, Indian Residential Schools.

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Chapter 1- Introduction

Under the guise of best practice, Canadian governments and religious institutions used education to erase Indigenous people's presence, culture, identity, and languages from society. Through the Indian Residential School System (IRSS) and Indian Day Schools, generations of Indigenous peoples forcibly attended these institutions, shifting the benefits and safety of Westernized education for past, current, and future Indigenous learners (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019). Youth typically spend significant amounts of time in educational environments, playing a pivotal role in shaping their identities, cultures, and languages. This is challenging for Indigenous learners as educational institutions are profound and multifaceted, often marked by a history of colonization, assimilation policies, and cultural suppression (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015b). Despite these challenges, Indigenous communities have shown remarkable resilience and strength in preserving and revitalizing their cultures and languages. In this thesis, I explore the influence of the education system on Indigenous identities, cultures, and languages, analyzing both the historical impacts and contemporary efforts towards cultural resurgence.

About the Researcher

Before discussing my work and research, I believe providing context on who I am, where I come from, and the experiences that led me to my research topic is essential. As Absolon (2011) states, "I begin by locating myself because positionality, storying, and re-storing ourselves comes first" (p.13). Indeed, Absolon (2011) contends that within "Indigenous contexts location does matter. People want to know who you are, what you are doing, and why" (p.71).

Kiana Pearl Dagwa'ging Cress n'diznikaaz, Ma'iingan dodem, Ketagaunseebee n'doonjibaa, Nogojiwanong Megwwaadoda. My name is Kiana Pearl Dagwa'ging Cress, and I

am proud Anishinaabe Kwe of Ketagaunseebee - the Creator's Garden, also known as Garden River First Nation. I am a member of the Wolf clan, the great-granddaughter of an Indian Residential School survivor, and the granddaughter of an Indian Day School survivor. My father, Stacey Vincent Cress, is Ojibwe and grew up in Sault Ste-Marie and Garden River, and my mother, Kim Nadeau, is French and grew up in Northern Ontario. I have two biological siblings, Danika and Mika Cress, and two siblings from a blended family, Jerrica and Nathan Peddie. I include this because I take great pride in being in a beautiful blended and interracial family.

I am what the government calls a 6(2) Indian since my father is Indigenous and is a registered 6(1) Indian, and my mother is non-Indigenous. I have light hair, fair skin, and blue eyes and am a spitting image of my mother. So, even though I am half Indigenous, I look entirely white. I am what society could call “white-passing,” which comes with its privileges but also its challenges. “White-passing” is a term used to describe people of colour who “pass” as being white (Laurence, 2004). Growing up as an urban Indigenous “white-passing” youth in northern Ontario was complex and confusing, and I felt like I was always walking in two worlds. However, I believe I only started struggling with my identity when I started school and was exposed to a network of peers, teachers, and other staff. This feeling of living “in-between” is something other Indigenous scholars discuss. Ineese-Nash (2019) mentions:

> I have wandered the spaces “in-between” in a dance of belonging and disconnect. I am continuously afflicted. Ashamed of my colour for its likeness to whiteness. Clutching my status card as a badge of authenticity, because blood quantum works so far as to legitimate your identity. For me, Indigeneity is a choice, or so I am told. I am able to walk in a way that does not outwardly mark me as native, and in this there is safety. My features exoticize me only as a slight deviance from normality, but not quite enough to mark my heredity. (p.10)

As a child, my father would talk about our culture, history, and family. My father infused our culture into our lives via Indigenous art, storytelling, traditions and Indigenous programming at the local Friendship Centre. My father used oral storytelling to tell us stories about animals

and Nanaboozhoo. I remember thinking my father was incredible since he could tell these stories without a book. Growing up, the only Indigenous representations we had were my father, who was and continues to be a great role model, and Pocahontas, which is based on racist and sexist stereotypes (Mihesuah, 2005). I was given Dagwa'ging as one of my middle names since it means autumn in Anishnaabemowin, the season in which I was born. However, between the ages of 10 and 18, I felt much shame about my middle name since it was hard to spell and difficult to say, and I was made fun of by my peers. However, now, I feel pride in having a traditional middle name and think it is beautiful. As an infant, I was given a medicine pouch, a beaded shaker with horsehair, a painting of my birth moon, and other traditional objects that exposed me to my culture.

Compulsory Education

I grew up in Porcupine, Ontario, where I attended French Catholic educational institutions between 2001 and 2015. French Catholic schools and curriculums meant I needed to learn about Catholicism and participate in Catholic traditions. For instance, learning how to read the bible, how to find passages in the bible, learning about Catholic figures and their role in society, attending masses, completing my first communion in grade 3, completing my confirmation in grade 7, learning and reciting prayers, and other things that I have since wholly disregarded and pushed away. In this context, discussing my culture and people was not encouraged.

One of the times I was exposed to Indigenous peoples and communities occurred in my grade 10 history class, which included a 40-minute lecture on Indian Residential Schools. We had forty minutes to discuss the legacy of Indian Residential Schools presented by a non-Indigenous teacher: forty minutes out of a whole 5-month semester. After this forty-minute

lecture, we never spoke about the subject again. Furthermore, I corrected the teacher in this lecture as he claimed that the last Indian Residential School closed in 1995 and not 1996. I remember putting my hand up and feeling nervous and anxious about correcting him. My face reddened, and my voice shook, but I persevered and used my voice to educate him and my peers.

My guidance counsellor was one negative influence I had at that time. In grade 12, we needed to meet with our guidance counsellor to start applying to colleges and universities and talk about our academic likes and desires. I remember going to his office and completing a quiz on possible careers I was interested in, and from there, we were to look up possible programs at colleges and universities. I completed the quiz in his office, and the first three options were all careers based on sciences, which I was good at but did not enjoy. I told my guidance counsellor that I was unsure about the careers listed, and he replied with "Tu es une cause perdue," which translates to "you are a lost cause." I left his office feeling completely unsupported and perhaps even disliked. I look back now, and I feel resilient and prosperous because I am now in my 8th year of my post-secondary studies. I am completing my master's and writing this thesis despite his declaration of my hopelessness.

In my grade 12 psychology course, we needed to create and present a family tree to the class. This assignment was difficult for me for several reasons. First, I needed to talk to my father about his side of the family, something my father had difficulty speaking about, and second, I needed to present it to the class. My family, on my father's side, is very complex, as he has eight siblings, and my grandma has children with more than one man. Because of internalized racism, I already felt shame for my Indigenous heritage and for being a family that went through a divorce; I was afraid to present this to the class on the chance that my peers or teacher would judge me. I struggled to ask my father these questions since I was not very close

to his side of the family and did not know how to navigate such delicate conversations. However, my father showed his resiliency and vulnerabilities when he spoke about his siblings, nieces, nephews, aunts, and uncles.

Undergraduate Studies

The first friend I made during my undergraduate studies was another "white-passing" Indigenous student. She also had blonde hair, blue eyes, and fair skin. I remember this being the first thing we connected on as it made us laugh. I met her in an Indigenous Studies course, but it happened that she was also majoring in social work, so we had quite a few classes together. She was the first Indigenous peer who opened my eyes to the different types of connections and conversations friends could have. We would talk about our family, Indigeneity, appearance, and struggles, and we both felt validated and no longer alone. At this time, I was 21 years old, and I finally met someone, apart from my siblings, who looked like me and identified in the same way I did.

I also volunteered through the Bidaaban Academic Support program at the Indigenous Initiatives Office. This program allowed university students to tutor Indigenous students at nearby schools. I applied to this program because my friend and I heard about it and decided to do it together. I tutored an Indigenous boy in grade 2, and we worked on his literacy and mathematics skills. This was the first time I had entered an elementary school in ten years, and I remember being stunned by what I found. This school had posters of the Seven Grandfather Teachings in the hallway and on classroom doors. I was utterly shocked, and it was so exciting to see.

An academic situation from my first year that stands out occurred when I applied for a research assistant position. At the time, I had no idea what a research assistant did, but I was

desperate to secure a job. Two individuals were interviewing me; one interviewer was Indigenous and had a similar white-passing appearance, and one was non-Indigenous. During the interview, I disclosed my Indigenous identity and the Indigenous interviewer asked, “Do you have a status card?” I responded, “Yes”. She then asked me where I was from, who my family was, and where I grew up. I felt very uncomfortable that the first question she asked related to a colonial piece of identification rather than asking about identity, community ties, or family members. I remember calling my father after, feeling completely frazzled and insulted. I was sick of needing to prove my Indigeneity to others, especially when I did not fully understand it. Academic settings were already intimidating, and this situation made them a lot more difficult for me.

My second year was a turning point in my academic life. I took five Indigenous studies courses: Indigenous Beadwork, Colonialism in First Nations, Identity and Wellness, Rights of and to the Land, and Invasion and Resistance. I honestly think each of these courses assisted my personal, academic, and cultural growth. In my Indigenous Beadwork class, my Indigenous friend and I met another Indigenous student, and we all became close peers. I learned how to bead, did it weekly, and connected with my professor and peers. I felt ecstatic that I was learning something cultural and traditional. In my Identity and Wellness course, I was immersed in a fulfilling learning environment in many ways. The professor for this course was an Indigenous man who could also pass as white and who frequently spoke about his identity struggles. In this course, I decided to write an essay on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. This professor stated that my writing style was great and that I could complete a master’s degree after my undergraduate studies if it interested me. I remember being completely taken aback since I struggled within academic spaces. I did not feel like I fit in and was not thinking of any long-

term goals. However, this professor gave me hope and made me feel like I was still on the right path.

Graduate Studies

My experience as a graduate student during my first fall term involved neglecting to address any underlying issues and misunderstandings and refraining from seeking clarification or assistance from my peers or professors. I knew little about research, what a thesis consists of, or how to go about everything, and instead of asking questions, I did nothing. I felt like a fraud in these environments; I kept questioning: am I smart enough to be here? Do I belong here? Do I fit into these spaces?

I eventually needed to start thinking about my thesis topic, which took me a while because I did not know how to approach it. After a lot of reflection and conversations with my father and my siblings, I realized I needed to choose a topic that was proximate to me. That is when I thought about my journey as a "white-passing" Indigenous student in the education system and all the feelings and experiences I have navigated in my life. In line at the Starbucks on campus on a November day, I envisioned my research questions. I did not know what to do with this vision, but I knew I could figure it out. I met with my supervisors, Dr. Dawn Lavell-Harvard and Dr. Cyndi Gilmer, at the end of November. We discussed my literature review, research methodologies, and path forward, which was overwhelming.

At the end of January, my friend introduced me to her new friend, an Indigenous Trent student and through her, I met another Indigenous Trent student. I was excited to meet more Indigenous people in Peterborough. My friendship with both flourished and allowed me to experience cultural things I never thought I would experience. In the winter semester, we smudged, sat around social fires, attended Indigenous performances, and went to the Elders

Gathering together, all on the Trent Campus. We related to each other by sharing everyday experiences of family trauma, lack of family connections and knowledge, and our academic interests. Meeting these Indigenous students completely changed my academic experience as the sense of community made my life fuller. It was amazing to talk to friends about essays and class assignments for suggestions, assistance, or support. I finally felt like I found my people.

During the spring semester, I was refining my thesis topic and saw a job posting for an Education Assistant at Sage and Sunshine, a culture-based private school. I read the job posting, I read over the website, and I was utterly amazed by the work Ashley Wynne, the principal and creator of Sage and Sunshine, was doing (Barker, 2021). I quickly applied for the job, was interviewed, and was a successful candidate. I was beyond happy and excited; it felt like a full-circle moment. I felt beyond blessed to have the capacity and opportunity to participate in this type of learning since I wish my siblings and I had been given it as children.

Sage and Sunshine is a private school in Peterborough where Indigenous and non-Indigenous children between the ages of 4 and 10 can experience an Indigenous culture-based education (Sage and Sunshine, n.d.). Students participate in revitalizing their culture, learn and practice Anishnaabemowin, and are exposed to Indigenous pedagogies and values such as the Seven Grandfather Teachings and the Seven Generations Principle, all while learning mainstream curriculum. I worked at Sage and Sunshine from April 2023 to June 2023, and it was the most emotional, cultural, and personally fulfilling job I have ever had. I witnessed Indigenous children speak the language, and help me learn the language. They start their day with a morning smudge and a morning check-in using Anishnaabemowin and a talking stick, learn and practice drumming, pow wow dancing, hoop dancing, make connections with Indigenous community members and organizations, read books with Indigenous topics, peoples,

and teachings, and use the Seven Grandfather Teachings as a way to acknowledge their acts of kindness. The walls were covered in Anishnaabemowin with posters of numbers, seasons, weather statements, colours, body parts, feeling statements, birds, water statements, and much more. A rug shaped like a medicine wheel, drums hanging on the wall, and posters of the Seven Grandfather teachings surrounded us. Sage and Sunshine taught me how two worlds can gently co-exist and not make students feel like they are walking in two worlds, as I often did. Sage and Sunshine inspired me to reconnect with my culture and language. Ineese-Nash (2019) states, "Growing up Indigenous, whether in an urban or reserve context, is a complicated path of reclamation, reconnection, and recovery" (p.11). When I left Sage and Sunshine, I could recall 20-25 words in Anishnaabemowin by heart, which I never thought I would achieve. I will always be eternally grateful for my time at Sage and Sunshine.

At the end of July 2023, I saw a post from the First Peoples House of Learning, an Indigenous office at Trent, for a Land-based experiential education camp in Wikwemikong at the beginning of August. I spent a week on the Land, consisting of a few days on Big Burnt Island and at Osawamick G'Tigaaning (Farm). I met a lot of Indigenous Trent students and connected with many of them on an emotional level. I had conversations with one of our land-based learning leads about being "white-passing and the struggles and challenges that come with it. I became very close with my now good friend, Makenna, as we shared experiences of being "white-passing" and navigating our identity in our twenties. While in Wikwemikong, I was surrounded by strong matriarchs who spoke the language. I learned how to make a medicine pouch, put up a tipi, strip tipi poles, fish with a net, and the protocols for participating in a feast. I was exposed to teachings about our sacred medicines, learned about the history of Wikwemikong, attended an Indigenous theatre performance, received teachings about the stars

and constellations, and learned from and on the Land. This experience took me out of academic spaces but still allowed me to engage in the learning process. I was exposed to good medicine for a week. In this environment, I experienced unfamiliar feelings: I felt visible, I felt Indigenous, and I felt respected.

I provide an in-depth exploration of my experiences in the education system as an Indigenous student because they contribute to my identity and simultaneously influence how I have navigated my identity throughout my life. It is important to share these experiences lest I feel I am doing a disservice to myself. I engage in this type of research because it is meaningful and proximate to who I am. I have been in school since I was four years old, and now, at the age of 26, I have spent 22 years in institutions that were once used to destroy my people and everything that defined us. Our culture, our language, and our connections. I have witnessed the ways that education systems negatively influenced my identity. However, I have also more recently witnessed many ways that schools have positively influenced it, thus leading to an awareness that educational institutions can do both.

Scope of this Research

This research focuses on the experiences of self-identifying Indigenous students at Trent throughout their time in education systems, beginning in compulsory elementary education and continuing their current post-secondary experiences. Before discussing the findings, the complexities of Indigenous identity and identity exploration prior to European contact, the historical attempts to erase the “Indian Problem” via education, Indigenous desires for Indigenous education and the influence of environment and space will be presented in a literature review. Discussing these topics will provide the critical foundation to understand why educational environments and systems need to change and transform into spaces that no longer

challenge or disregard Indigenous learner's identities, cultures, and languages. Additionally, the literature review contains the experiences and voices of Indian Residential School and Indian Day School survivors because their stories need to be heard and noticed. Indigenous research is not one individual's work but a myriad of Indigenous peoples, academics, allies, and participants (Kovach, 2010).

In this study, I used sharing circles as the chosen methodology as they reflect Indigenous pedagogies and ways of living and simultaneously challenge Western academic models, which is an essential goal of this researcher personally and many other Indigenous researchers collectively. For example, McGuire-Adams (2019) states:

> As Indigenous scholars, we can and should use our theories, languages, and worldviews to carve our unique research projects; to have the choice between seeking knowledge within our own worldviews, rather than being solely reliant on Western knowledge and processes. (p.35)

Indigenous peoples have been, and continue to be, researched with or without their consent, often resulting in the exploitation of Indigenous knowledge and culture, misrepresentation, and a lack of tangible benefits for their communities (Tobias & Richmond, 2016). For example, in Indian Residential Schools during the 1940s and 1950s, Indigenous children were victims of unethical and non-consensual nutritional experiments studying the impacts of vitamins on malnutrition, which was widespread among the children held in Indian Residential Schools. The experiments involved studying the impact of a fortified flour mix diet (which was banned at the time) compared to the control group of children who were given no change to their diets. Scientists wanted to use Indigenous children's hunger and willingness to eat anything to their advantage (Tennant, 2021). To disrupt the legacy of such unethical and exploitative research and the previous dominance of Westernized academic practices, Indigenous researchers are consciously using Indigenous research methodologies to create space and

dialogue in an environment that was historically not suited or created for Indigenous academics (McGuire-Adams, 2019). I hope to witness and be an active part of the rise of Indigenous academics and researchers. In order to create change, it is critical that Indigenous researchers bring their lived experiences in academia to highlight systemic disparities, the longstanding impacts of colonization, and the resiliency of Indigenous peoples and communities. McGuire-Adams (2019) mentions, "It is not enough to just include Indigenous peoples within the academy; rather, Indigenous ways of being must assist in transforming the research academy as a whole" if we are to truly thrive and not merely survive (p.37).

Importance of this Research

By exploring and developing an understanding of the complex relationship between education and Indigenous identity, I seek to contribute in a small but significant way to developing educational policies and practices that respect and promote Indigenous ways of knowing and being as a means of improving both the academic outcomes and the wellbeing of Indigenous learners. The historical lack of appropriate educational opportunities for Indigenous peoples has been outlined in numerous documents, such as *Indian Control of Indian Education* and the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (TRC). These foundational documents identify not only the specific learning needs of Indigenous youth but also the educational commitments that institutions and governments should implement to counteract the legacy of assimilative education systems on the health and well-being of Indigenous peoples (People for Education, 2023).

According to the People for Education (2023), following the years of the publication of the TRC, the Ontario provincial government committed to including Indigenous content in social studies and history classes for grades 4-8 and 10. Additionally, for grades 1-3, an Indigenous-

based social studies course that highlighted the resiliency of Indigenous families, the history and impacts of colonization, and the importance of Indigenous identity, language, Land, and culture were to be created with the involvement of Indigenous partners (People for Education, 2023, p.4). However, as of April 2023, the Ontario school curriculum has remained unchanged. Some progress has been made, like the 32 Ontario school boards that implemented a mandatory grade 11 Indigenous-focused English course and the integration of land-based learning and culture into daily activities (from 9% to 36% between the years of 2012 to 2022 for elementary schools and 22% to 51% between the years of 2012 and 2022 for secondary schools) (People for Education, 2023, p.14). These statistics display progress in Ontario; however, Canada has much to achieve to fulfill the calls to action in the TRC regarding education. As stated by the People for Education (2023):

> These Calls to Action emphasize the importance of informed consent, full participation, consultation, and collaboration with Indigenous peoples; all components that require building partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. So, while commitments to work together in the form of public statements and policy documents such as school curriculum are a critical first step, they alone are not enough for truth and reconciliation. (p.19)

Some researchers describe this much-needed shift as Indigenizing the curriculum (Louie et al., 2017; Bedard, 2018; Bopp et al., 2017). Indigenizing the curriculum can happen in various ways; Efimoff (2022) discusses how it can occur. Some examples of Indigenization are supports for Indigenous students, Indigenous student scholarships, Indigenous peoples in leadership roles, increasing the number of Indigenous graduates and students, and weaving Indigenous pedagogies, knowledge systems, and ways of living into education systems. Indigenizing the education system is not a one-size-fits-all approach; it involves the time, energy, and dedication of many. Gaudry & Lorenz (2018) state: "Canadian academy has rhetorically adopted an aspirational vision of reconciliation indigenization but is in fact largely committed to Indigenous

inclusion; in essence, post-secondary institutions are attempting to merely increase the number of Indigenous people on campus without broader changes" (p.191). The findings from this research consist of the feelings and lived experiences of Indigenous post-secondary students by highlighting the importance of shifting and challenging the current education systems and pedagogies. This research hopes to answer the following research questions:

1-How do Indigenous students at Trent perceive the role of past and current education institutions in exploring and navigating their Indigenous identity, culture, and language?

2-What experiences, positive or negative, stand out to Indigenous students at Trent, and how do they impact their Indigenous identity journey?

Chapter 2- Literature Review

Complexities of Indigenous Identity

Under the *Indian Act of 1876*, claims to Indian status are controlled and regulated. To gain Indian status, an individual must be either a 6(1) Indian or a 6(2) Indian. A 6(1) Indian is someone whose parents are both registered (it is vital to note registration does not necessarily indicate actual Indigenous ancestry as non-Indigenous women were able to obtain Indian status through marriage prior to 1985), and a 6(2) Indian is someone with only one registered parent (a non-registered parent does not necessarily mean non-Indigenous as enfranchisement laws revoked status from many who were born as status Indians under the act) (J. Corbiere Lavell, personal communication, August 6, 2023). Those registered as 6(2) are presented with the second-generation cut-off, meaning if they have children with someone not registered under the Act, they will not be able to claim Indian status (Palmater, 2005). Legislation dictating who can and cannot claim Indian status presents individuals with significant barriers, which are discussed below and throughout this paper.

In addition to, or perhaps even despite, the legal frameworks of status and registration, as Weaver (2001) explains, Indigenous identities are socially constructed through relationships and connections. Groups of individuals find similar and dissimilar characteristics and create identities from such relationships, which is why research suggests that Indigenous identity constructs did not exist prior to European contact. Indigenous communities, our First Nations across Turtle Island, were not homogenous, alike as each nation or tribe had their distinct languages, ways of living, systems of governance, cultural traditions and protocols, which then created their sense of identity and belonging that differed from one another.

Weaver (2001) discusses the three components of identity: self-identification, community identification, and external identification. In this context, self-identification is how an individual culturally identifies. Self-identification becomes complicated when an individual's identity does not match societal perceptions. The existing stereotypes, social expectations, and societal standards regarding the appearances, behaviours, lifestyles, and desires of Indigenous peoples and communities directly influence Indigenous and non-Indigenous people's thoughts. Canadian society has determined that Indigenous peoples should have brown skin and long black hair, should be living on reserves, should either be poor, not working, or somewhere living on the Land, or in the corrections system, in the foster care system or involved in sex work. When these generalizations and stereotypes influence an Indigenous person's thoughts, internalized oppression may become a challenge they need to confront and navigate (Poupart, 2003). For example, Indigenous individuals with lighter skin tones and features, such as myself, may not feel "Indigenous enough," and questions of where they fit on the "Indianness scale" become reoccurring thoughts that influence their self-identification, self-perception, and identity exploration (Palmater, 2005, p.32). Community identification is a sense of belonging to a group or community, such as a reserve whose history, lived experiences, pedagogies, beliefs, and practices contribute to a sense of belonging. External identification relies on the non-Indigenous perspectives and understandings of Indigenous identity as reflected in and reinforced by outside influences, such as stereotypes, representation in the media, and social constructs (Weaver, 2001). Exploring one's identity is not a stagnant process; it tends to develop in each life stage with increased knowledge, exposure, understanding, and life experiences. Thus, cultural identity tends to get stronger and deeper with age, given a supportive environment (Mihesuah, 1998; Anderson, 2011).

Indigenous identity is distinctly complex because of the historical and contemporary impacts of colonization. Self-identification was once illegal and deemed as inferior, community identification was once illegal and aimed to be extinct, and external identification was and is still controlled by governments (Weaver, 2001). Consequently, through the Indian Residential School System (IRSS) and Indian Day Schools, Indigenous children and youth were not able to explore their identity. As was previously mentioned, identity grows and strengthens through time. IRSS and Indian Day Schools used education to ensure Indigenous peoples would conform to Westernized ways of living, looking, and behaving rather than treating these environments as safe spaces where Indigenous peoples could learn about themselves and others, explore their identity with their peers, and be treated with care, love, and compassion.

Prior to contact, Indigenous peoples and communities had ways of living that allowed and encouraged Indigenous children, youth, young adults, adults, older adults, and Elders to explore themselves culturally, spiritually, emotionally, and communally. Discussing Indigenous life and identity prior to European contact and control is critical for understanding why the construction or development of a positive, healthy Indigenous identity in contemporary society is complex and challenging.

Indigenous Identity Exploration Prior to Contact

Community members, Indigenous daily practices, and life stages tended to and nurtured Indigenous identity from conception to adulthood. Once a woman was pregnant, this journey influenced the entire community as much as the immediate family. Bonds were instantly created with community members as everyone ensured the unborn child and mother were physically, emotionally, spiritually, and mentally balanced. Ceremonies of new life occurred, post-natal care included Elders and sacred medicines, protocols for umbilical cords and placentas were

exercised, and naming ceremonies transpired. Therefore, once the child was born, they immediately felt their sense of belonging and introduced to their cultural identity. This stage of life is characterized as "the health of the baby is connected to the health of the community" (Anderson, 2011, p.39).

Anderson (2011) describes childhood and youthhood as "the good life to the fast life" (p.65) and as "a celebration because children needed to develop a sense of belonging; the sense that you are important to the people" (p.70). In good life, children learned the importance of community, trust, and reciprocity. Children spent time with Elders and grandparents, became helpers in their learning, were disciplined by their aunts and uncles, learned how to self-discipline themselves, and immersed themselves in land-based education and work, which allowed children to find their place in the community and explore their sense of belonging (Anderson, 2011). Fast life began when youth explored their changing role in the community as they reached adolescence and puberty. Through ceremonies and life milestones, such as the first hunt or kill, first moon times, or fasting rituals, youth began their moral journey where they discovered community responsibility and viability, explored relationships with animals and the land, engaged in spiritual endeavors, and learned from Elders and community members (Anderson, 2011).

Indigenous women found themselves in the life stage called womanhood, also called the women's circle. Women's circle is a period of life when Indigenous women learned in the community, by the community, and for the community. It is known as “planning and planting life” (Anderson, 2011, p.97). As men left the community to trap, fish, or hunt, Indigenous women had to survive, thrive, and grow without the presence of their partners. Indigenous women took on caregiving, leadership, teaching, ceremony, and sustainability roles. They

focused on food management and security, clothing, work, keepers of relationships with other communities, and tending to the land. Men and women had their jurisdiction but worked together to ensure the health and well-being of their community, but women were the driving force (Anderson, 2011).

The final life stage is grandmothers and elders. Elders' importance is multifaceted, encompassing cultural preservation, wisdom, spiritual guidance, mentorship, language maintenance, and overall community cohesion (Viscogliosi et al., 2020). Their roles ensured Indigenous communities remained resilient, connected, and culturally rich. At the end of life, Anderson (2011) states: “Elderly women held a role that I am calling “doorkeepers to the Spirit world,” because they assisted people with the transitions between life and death” (p.154).

In short, prior to contact, Indigenous peoples and communities consistently tended to their identity as it determined their roles, values, pedagogies, and responsibilities. Indigenous peoples learned from the land and with the land. Therefore, their knowledge systems are deeply interconnected with the natural world (Anderson, 2011). As colonization began and deprived Indigenous peoples of the ability to explore their identity on the Land, forcing them instead into educational environments that did not suit their needs, they suffered culturally, mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually (Bougie & Senécal, 2010). The impacts of Indian Residential Schools and Indian Day Schools are severe to this day, causing the current generation of Indigenous peoples to grapple with the impacts of intergenerational trauma, all while navigating educational environments (Bombay et al., 2014). Exploring the longstanding history of education being used as a tool of assimilation is crucial to understanding its impacts on past, current, and future generations of Indigenous peoples.

Erasing the "Indian Problem" via Education

The Indian Act of 1876

The *Indian Act* was enacted in 1876 as Indian Residential Schools and Indian Day Schools operated concurrently across Canada. Sections 114-121 of the *Indian Act of 1876* focused on Indigenous education. These sections provide in-depth explanations of how Westernized education is to be implemented on Indigenous children and youth without the involvement, consideration, or guidance of Indigenous community members, parents, or caregivers. Sections 114, 115, 116, and 117 exist today, with some changes repealed in 2014. Sections 118, 119, 120, and 121 were repealed entirely in December 2014, a year before the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* was released in December 2015.

Before 2014, Section 114 focuses on Indigenous education ownership. Under this Act, the Minister is authorized to make agreements to educate Indigenous children with provincial governments, Yukon, Northwest Territories, Nunavut Commissioners, and school boards. The Minister also establishes and manages schools for Indigenous children (Indian Act, 1985, para 1 & 2). Section 115 describes the maintenance of Indigenous children and education. The Minister controls building regulations, pedagogies, transportation, support from religious institutions and organizations, and allotted money to maintain children attending Indian Residential Schools (when they were in operation) (Indian Act, 1985, para 3). Section 116 focuses on the forced attendance of Indigenous children and youth between the ages of 7 and 16. This section discusses how the Minister could expand this compulsory age range, forcing six-year-olds and eighteen-year-olds to attend school. The expansion of this age range was based on whether the Minister felt it was necessary, disregarding the consent or involvement of parents, caregivers, or community members (Indian Act, 1985, para 4 & 5). Section 117 focused on absences and

scenarios deemed acceptable by the Minister. Some of the reasons listed are sickness, household duties, farming, agriculture, instruction to stay home, or lack of accommodation. Nevertheless, Indigenous children and youth required written permission from the superintendent for any missed school (Indian Act, 1985, para 6).

Before being repealed in 2014, section 118 discloses the type of schools Indigenous children should attend, either protestant or Roman Catholic, depending on the parents' denomination (Indian Act, 1985, para 7). Section 119 concentrated on the power and authority of truancy officers. Truancy officers could enter any place they believed Indigenous children of compulsory age were residing and not attending school, they could issue warrants for tardiness or missed school, and they had the power to take Indigenous children into custody who were absent from school while using any amounts of force. Additionally, truant officers were mainly men, as the *Indian Act of 1876* used, he/him pronouns (Indian Act, 1985, para 8-16). Section 120 determined the denomination of the schoolteacher, which was decided by two characteristics. The first was the denomination to which most band members belonged, and the second was through a vote by electors if there was no majority of band members belonging to a particular denomination (Indian Act, 1985, para 17 & 18). Section 121 focused on minority religious denominations' having schools or classrooms if there were enough children of that denomination or if approved by the Minister (Indian Act, 1985, para 19).

As mentioned, the Schools section of the *Indian Act* was revised in 2014, with some acts repealed while others remained. Thus, the *Indian Act* exerts considerable influence over pedagogical approaches, educational content, teaching staff and administrative personnel, and the broader educational settings for Indigenous peoples and communities.

Indian Residential School System

Before the official release of the *Indian Act in 1876*, Indian Residential Schools were implemented throughout Canada. The first Indian Residential School opened in 1834 in Brantford, Ontario, called the Mohawk Institute. From then on, other Indian Residential Schools began operating throughout the rest of Canada. The last Indian Residential School, which closed in 1996, was the Qu'Appelle School in Saskatchewan. Therefore, Indian Residential Schools operated on Canadian soil for 164 years, where generations of Indigenous children, youth, adults, parents, and Elders lived and learned away from their community, culture, language, and Land (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015b).

Under the guise of education and best practices, Canadian governments and religious institutions engaged in the cultural, physical, and biological genocide of Indigenous peoples and communities (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003). Police officers, Indian agents, priests, and other governments and church officials took Indigenous children from their families and communities and placed them in harmful institutions. In Indian Residential Schools, Indigenous children were exposed to many ways of living that displayed the opposite of love, care, and compassion. They were exposed to mental, physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, neglect, fear, loneliness, malnutrition, torture, non-consensual research experiments, loss of language, loss of culture, loss of family connections, loss of language, and inability to live on the Land (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003).

Upon survivors sharing their stories and experiences during their time in Indian Residential Schools, some Indian Residential School staff have been charged for the crimes they committed against Indigenous children and youth. For instance, Francoise Seguin, a 97-year-old nun who worked at St-Annes Residential School in Fort Albany between the years 1958 and

1968, has been charged with three charges of gross indecency in October 2023. Seguin is set to go to court in December 2023 in Moosonee (Forester, 2023). In June 2022, Arthur Masse, a 93-year-old retired priest, was accused of assaulting Victoria McIntosh while she attended Fort Alexander Residential School between 1968 and 1970. However, in March 2023, Justice Grammond acquitted Masse as McIntosh's statement "lacked" credibility (Hoye, 2023, para 4).

Many Indigenous children and youth died at these schools either from malnutrition, disease, overworking, trying to get home, or other unknown reasons, highlighting the toll of the abuse. Volume 4 of the TRC, titled *Canada's Residential Schools: Missing Children and Unmarked Burials* (2015), discussed circumstances and facts surrounding those who lost their lives while attending Indian Residential Schools. This report concluded that 32% of deaths were recorded without including names, 49% of deaths were recorded without naming the cause of death, most schools common practice was not to return bodies to communities, cemeteries on school properties were found to be abandoned, disused, and unmonitored, and a lack of guidelines, regulations, and care for those who passed away while attending Indian Residential Schools (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015a, pp. 22-27). In addition to this report, the discoveries in 2021 of unmarked graves at the Kamloops Indian Residential School and other mass grave sites across Canada display the neglect of Indigenous children and youth, alive or dead (Newton, 2021).

Louise Moine, a survivor who attended Qu'Apelle Indian Residential School, shared her proximity with death in her memoir titled *My Life at Residential School*. Moine (1975), as cited in *Canada's Residential Schools: Missing Children and Unmarked Burial (2015),* shares:

> There was a death every month on the girls' side, and some of the boys went also. We were always taken to see the girls who had died. The Sisters invariably had them dressed in light blue, and they always looked so peaceful and angelic. We were led to believe that

> their souls had gone to heaven, and this would somehow lessen the grief and sadness we felt in the loss of one of our little schoolmates. (p.2)

James Gladstone, a survivor who attended the Anglican Indian Residential School on Blood Reserve in Alberta, discloses how he saw a lack of medical care. Gladstone shares the circumstances that led to the death of Joe Glasgow, a fellow student, after stepping on a nail. Gladstone (1967), as cited in *Canada's Residential Schools: Missing Children and Unmarked Burial (2015),* states:

> Rev. Owen had made arrangements for a doctor from Fort Macleod, but he was a useless drunk who didn't come until it was too late. I looked after Joe for two days until he died. I was the only one he would listen to during his delirium. (p. 3)

Indian Day Schools

At the same time that Indian Residential Schools were operational, Indian Day Schools were other institutionalized educational environments where Indigenous children and youth could be placed. According to the Federal Indian Day School Class Action (n.d.), the first Indian Day School opened in 1863 in Cape Croker Reserve, Ontario, and the last closed in 2000 in Kanesatake, Quebec. Research shows that 699 Indian Day Schools operated on Canadian soil (Pind et al., 2023). Indian Day Schools are distinct as they are not included in the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* nor the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement. Thus, Indian Day School survivors apply to the Federal Indian Day Schools Class Action for compensation for their time in Indian Day Schools. Additionally, there is limited research and academic work on Indian Day Schools.

Indian Day schools operated in First Nation reserves, permitting Indigenous students to return home after school hours. However, returning home did not ensure an escape from the purpose of Indian Day Schools. Similar to Indian Residential Schools, Indian Day School

students experienced physical, sexual, emotional, and mental abuse, neglect, torture, and other forms of violence (Milloy, 2017). They learned Westernized logic, ways of living, values, and protocols rather than Indigenous pedagogies, teachings, values, and beliefs, directly influencing their cultural journal and identity exploration as youth.

From 1964 to 1967, Angela Simone Sampson attended the Tsartlip Indian Day School in Brentwood Bay, British Columbia and is one of the plaintiffs in the Federal Indian Day School class action suit. Sampson shares her experiences at the Tsartlip Indian Day School:

> My experience at Tsartlip involved but was not limited to being subjected to physical abuse on a daily basis by the nuns and other students. I was hit, choked with a spoon, dragged by my hair, and was swung side to side into a concrete wall by a nun until I was knocked unconscious. I was also subjected to emotional abuse on a daily basis by the nuns and other students. I recall being locked in closets; was denied food and the use of the bathroom, so I would end up soiling myself. I was constantly called names such as heathen, savage, evil, bloody little Indian rainmaker, and idiot. I was also made to witness other students being abused. (Federal Indian Day School Class Action, 2019, Plaintiffs section, para 9-10)

Research shows the generational impact of Indian Day Schools or Indian Residential Schools, disclosing the developmental effects they have on Indigenous children whose parents or grandparents attended either type of institution. Additionally, youth attending the institution would worsen such effects (Milloy, 2017).

Mariette Buckshot, another plaintiff in the class action suit, shared her experiences brought on by her father's attendance at Indian Day Schools. Buckshot states:

> My father had attended a Federally Operated Indian Day School in the late 1930s, where he experienced severe physical and sexual abuse. The abuse affected my family and myself. I did not endure the same pain and trauma as my father, but in turn, I denied myself my Anishinaabe identity. This came with stories of the abuse, pain, and hatred that I heard growing up, so I did not want to be hated. Some days, I did not want my son to go to school because of my experience. (Federal Indian Day School Class Action, 2019, Plaintiffs section, para 12-13)

However, Indian Day schools did not fully fulfill Canada’s assimilative goals. Indigenous children and youth were still exposed to their culture, community, and teachings despite the

influence of the poor treatment and educational content they were acquiring through these schools. Such minor but significant cultural exposure posed a threat to government officials, school officials, and church members involved with Indian Day Schools. The Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, Lawrence Vankoughnet, was the superintendent of Indian Affairs in the late nineteenth century. Vankoughnet saw the lack of Indigenous children conforming to Westernized ways of living and understanding. As cited in Milloy (2017), Vankoughnet (1887) states that Indigenous children "followed the terrible example set them by their parents and became as depraved as themselves notwithstanding all the instructions given them at a day school" (p.97).

The *Indian Act of 1876*, the Indian Residential School System, and Indian Day Schools are three colonial tactics that aimed to control, erase, and disregard Indigenous peoples, communities, and cultures. However, even with generations of Indigenous peoples attending these institutions, Indigenous peoples and communities are resilient, continue to fight for their rights, and strive for self-determination. Such resiliency creates a narrative that empowers Indigenous peoples to use their voices, lived experiences, and values to highlight existing educational barriers, learning needs, and policy changes.

Indigenous Desires for Indigenous Education

After generations of Indigenous students attended educational institutions that did not serve their needs and were detrimental to their Spirit, Indigenous peoples and organizations have been creating documents outlining the requirements and desires for Indigenous student success. It is important to note that reclaiming past educational practices and pedagogies is critical for Indigenous students to excel in educational settings and reconnect to their identity and culture since they were once unable to do so. Neeganagwedgin (2020) states, "There is a responsibility

to nurture and teach Indigenous youth, but this has been broken and ruptured as a result of colonialization, and Indigenous children have been subjected to and/or been witnesses of acts of violence in institutional situations" (p.2). However, research and policies show how educational spaces are transforming into environments that encourage Indigenous pedagogies, practices, and ways of learning.

Indian Control of Indian Education

In 1972, the National Indian Brotherhood, now known as the Assembly of First Nations, released a report to Jean Chretien, the minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, called *Indian Control of Indian Education*. This is a 38-page document outlining five essential characteristics:

1- Indigenous pedagogies and methods of learning that should be in the education system,
2- The different levels of responsibility and contribution that should exist (local, provincial, and federal),
3- The types of programs geared towards each level of the education system,
4- The demand for Indigenous staff and training for non-Indigenous staff.
5- The standards of the school building itself and what they should include to meet the needs of Indigenous students.

This report also outlines the barriers Indigenous students face while attending educational environments in which they outline the mental, emotional, and cultural struggles of Indigenous students.

Under the "Statement of the Indian Philosophy of Education" section, the report establishes a statement regarding the role of parents in goal setting. One of the goals is to focus on reinforcing Indigenous children's cultural identity with parental involvement, as not doing so

will cause harm (Assembly of First Nations, 1972, p. 3). The link between language and identity is also discussed. The report outlines the need for Indigenous teachers who speak the language to be present in educational environments, as much of the language is lost (National Indian Brotherhood/ Assembly of First Nations, 1972, p. 15). The need for Cultural Education Centers, which would allow Indigenous children and youth to explore all facets of their identity, is also reviewed. Cultural Education Centers, which would include lessons of Indigenous history, culturally appropriate pedagogies, engagement in Indigenous ceremonies and protocols, and language lessons and immersion, would permit Indigenous children and youth to explore their culture and identity at school with their Indigenous peers (National Indian Brotherhood/ Assembly of First Nations, 1972, p. 16). *Indian Control of Indian Education* is a critical policy framework and movement that advocates for Indigenous communities to have authority and autonomy over their educational systems, something that remains to be controlled through the *Indian Act.*

United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

In 2007, the United Nations and Indigenous groups released a non-legally binding document titled *United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP). This report focuses on reaffirming and honouring Indigenous peoples and communities' rights, specifically their self-determination, political, social, educational, economic, participation, and Land and cultural rights. Canada, Australia, the United States of America, and New Zealand voted against UNDRIP, while 144 countries adopted it and 11 countries abstained from it (Hanson, n.d.). In a CBC article, a journalist interviewed the Indian Affairs Minister, Chuck Strahl, who stated, "I am sorry we can't sign on. It's not balanced, in our view, and inconsistent with the charter." The Prime Minister at the time, Stephen Harper, stated, "We shouldn't vote for

things on the basis of political correctness; we should actually vote on the basis of what's in the document." (CBC, 2007). The opinions of these political representatives disclose how *UNDRIP* appeared to be inconsistent with the Canadian Constitution due to its content and language.

In 2010, the Canadian government endorsed *UNDRIP* as a framework to consider and follow but did not agree to its implementation until 2016, a year after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission addressed the need for the Canadian government to use it as their reconciliation framework (Duhamel, 2022). On May 10, 2016, Carolyn Bennett, Minister of Indigenous and Northern Affairs, spoke at the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, where she stated that Canada fully supports *UNDRIP*. Bennet (2016) states:

> The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People is the result of long struggles of Indigenous peoples for the recognition of their rights. I would like today to acknowledge their tireless efforts and resilience. These efforts have resulted in a monumental shift in the global will to protect the rights, culture, language, dignity and well-being of Indigenous people worldwide…We intend nothing less than to adopt and implement the declaration in accordance with the Canadian Constitution. Canada is in a unique position to move forward… Let's be honest: implementing UNDRIP should not be scary. Recognition of elements of the declaration began 250 years ago with the Royal Proclamation, which was about sharing the land fairly. UNDRIP reflects the spirit and intent of our treaties. (para. 7, 15, 24)

In 2018, Bill C-262 was passed by the House of Commons, mandating that UNDRIP be integrated into Canadian law and that the Canadian government ensure its legislation aligns with UNDRIP. Bill C-262 then went to the Senate, where it completed its first reading in May 2018, its second reading in May 2019, and then its consideration in committee in June 2019. Bill C-262 did not move onto its third reading or become a part of Canadian law (Bill C-262, 2019). However, in December 2020, Bill C-15 was created, deemed a greater version of Bill C-262. Bill C-15 became a part of Canadian law as of August 2021. Bill C-15 (2021) declares:

> This enactment states that the government of Canada must take all measures necessary to ensure that its laws are consistent with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and must prepare and implement an action plan to achieve the objectives of the Declaration. (para. 1)

As mentioned, one of the sections of *UNDRIP* focuses on the educational rights and involvement of Indigenous peoples and communities. In summary, Article 14 focuses on the rights, control, accessibility, and desires of Indigenous education. Article 14 in *UNDRIP* states:

> 1. Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural teaching and learning methods.
>
> 2. Indigenous individuals, particularly children, have the right to all levels and forms of education in the State without discrimination.
>
> 3. States shall, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language. (United Nations, 2017, p. 13-14)

Similarly, *UNDRIP* and *Indian Control of Indian Education* outline what Indigenous peoples and communities need to succeed and flourish educationally. These two documents, while published 35 years apart, disclose the barriers, the issues, and the influences of Westernized education on Indigenous students. The *Truth and Reconciliation Commission,* reviewed below, discloses Indigenous perspectives and desires on education in the 21st century.

Truth and Reconciliation Commission

In 2015, the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (TRC) was released with 94 Calls to Action addressed to all levels of government, existing systems, and Canadian citizens. On top of the 94 Calls to Action, the TRC includes testimonies of Indian Residential School survivors who expressed their experiences of abuse, neglect, mistreatment, discrimination, and trauma. There are photos of Indigenous youth, Indian Residential School buildings, cemeteries, activities and tasks youth completed, and photos of priests, nuns, and other religious staff. The TRC is split into six sections: introduction, commission activities, history, legacy, challenge of reconciliation,

and calls to action. The TRC is a 440-page document created by Indigenous peoples and communities for Canadian society and its members.

Calls 6-12 focus on Indigenous education and discuss the funding, achievement, and educational gaps that exist between Indigenous peoples and their non-Indigenous counterparts. Some central themes in these calls to action are Indigenous control, involvement, consultation, and respect. For example, Call 10 is divided into seven sections honouring Indigenous rights to learning culturally safe and appropriate curricula. Call 10 is described as:

> 10. We call on the federal government to draft new Aboriginal education legislation with the full participation and informed consent of Aboriginal peoples. The new legislation would include a commitment to sufficient funding and would incorporate the following principles:
>
> i. Providing sufficient funding to close identified educational achievement gaps within one generation.
> ii. Improving education attainment levels and success rates.
> iii. Developing culturally appropriate curricula.
> iv. Protecting the right to Aboriginal languages, including the teaching of Aboriginal languages as credit courses.
> v. Enabling parental and community responsibility, control, and accountability, similar to what parents enjoy in public school systems.
> vi. Enabling parents to fully participate in the education of their children.
> vii. Respecting and honoring Treaty relationships. (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015b, pp. 149,150)

As of April 2, 2024, there are four Calls to Action, specifically call 6: repealing the spanking law; call 8: eliminate the discrepancy in federal education funding between on-reserve and off-reserve students; call 10: draft new Aboriginal education legislation, and call 11: provide adequate funding for First Nations students seeking post-secondary education are in progress as projects have been proposed. Two Calls to action, specifically Call 7: eliminate educational and employment gaps and Call 12: develop culturally appropriate early childhood education programs, are in progress as projects are underway. Additionally, Call 9: publish annual reports on education funding and educational and income attainments, has yet to be started (Barrera et al., 2024).

Indigenous Pedagogies and Perspectives

Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics study the dichotomy between Indigenous education and the current education system, highlighting the disparities between the two. As discussed in the reports above, there is a need for Indigenous ways of living, knowledge, pedagogies, and teachings to be included in the education system. Bell (2016) focuses on the Anishinaabe concept of Mino Bimaadiziwin, living a good life, and how this should be reflected in the education system to ensure Indigenous students are exposed to this well-being and holistic approach. The medicine wheel, or circle, is a guiding mechanism in my culture (Ojibwe) and other Indigenous cultures. Bell (2016) discusses the many functions of the medicine wheel:

> There is some variation in its teachings and representations, but the underlying thread of meaning to the web, or uses and significance of medicine wheels, remains the same: the importance of appreciating and respecting the ongoing inter-connectedness and inter-relationships of all things. (p.15)

The medicine wheel is split into four quadrants representing many concepts: mind, body, Spirit, and heart, or north, east, south, and west, or infancy, youth, adulthood, and old age. The medicine wheel allows us to approach situations holistically as it considers all things and their interconnectedness. Bell (2016) states how the medicine wheel can be used in the education system and journey to ensure that the student's mind, body, Spirit, and heart are tended to. Indigenous teaching and learning have always been delivered holistically, regardless of the many colonial tactics that aimed to erase it from Indigenous communities. However, the current education system only considers some aspects of the student, which is why Indigenous parents may feel that the K-12 curriculum is limited in terms of cultural learning and the benefit of their children (Bell, 2016). Additionally, the need for Land-based learning and education is another Indigenous perspective that should be rooted in the educational journey of Indigenous students. Johnson and Ali (2020) discuss how Land-based education is a cultural way to reconnect,

reclaim, and rebuild. Land-based education is crucial as it supports an individual's mental, physical, social, psychological, emotional, and spiritual health, a concept that the mainstream education system has not always done for Indigenous peoples. As Indigenous peoples and the Land are intrinsically linked in many ways, research has shown that when Indigenous peoples are given access to their Land and can learn from it, it allows for the rebuilding of previous Indigenous ways of living and improves the well-being of their community.

Education, Environment, and Space

Education systems and environments are known to be influential for all students. For example, in 1883, John A. Macdonald, Canada's first prime minister, expressed to the House of Commons the rationale of Indian Residential Schools as well as the influence of school systems on Indigenous children and youths' development. As quoted in the TRC (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015b):

> When the school is on the reserve, the child lives with their parents, who are savages; he is surrounded by savages, and though he may learn to read and write, his habits, training, and mode of thought are Indian. He is simply a savage who can read and write. It has been strongly pressed on myself, as the head of the Department, that Indian children should be withdrawn as much as possible from parental influence, and the only way to do that would be to put them in central training industrial schools where they will acquire the habits and modes of thought of white men. (p. 2)

In Ontario, the *Education Act* regulates education and schools across the country. Regulation 304: School Year Calendar, Professional Activity Days under the *Education Act* discloses how every school year should have a minimum of 194 school days. Regulation 298: Operation of Schools under the *Education Act* discusses how each school day should be a minimum of 5 hours, which excludes recesses and time between classes (Education Act, 1990). Ontario's education system is K-12; most children and youth attend 14 years of compulsory education. Therefore, in these 14 years, children and youth spend, on average, 2,716 days in educational environments, roughly around 13,580 hours. Therefore, when educational institutions do not

meet the specific learning and cultural needs of Indigenous students, these spaces perpetuate systemic barriers, hinder academic success, and contribute to the ongoing marginalization of Indigenous communities. Understanding the influence of Westernized education on the lives of Indigenous peoples is a complex endeavour, which is why educational statistics will be reviewed below. Additionally, these statistics are relevant as call 9*,* publish annual reports on education funding and educational and income attainments, was created by the TRC.

According to the 2016 census by Statistics Canada, three characteristics that influence high school and post-secondary completion are age, as Indigenous youth are more likely to be young parents; accessibility, as more Indigenous youth reside in rural areas compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts; and socio-economic status, as Indigenous families live in lower-income households (Layton, 2023). All these characteristics intersect and interrelate, contributing to the high school and post-secondary achievement levels for Indigenous youth. For example, due to Indigenous families having lower socio-economic status than their non-Indigenous counterparts, engaging in their educational journey becomes a struggle as they have familial and childcare costs. In the 2016 census, 48% of Indigenous women between the ages of 19 and 30 living on reserve were parents, whereas 26% of Indigenous men living on reserve were parents. It was also found that 48% of on-reserve Indigenous families lived in low-income (Layton, 2023, para 11).

It is also important to note that there are distinct differences between urban Indigenous youth and on-reserve Indigenous youth in terms of quality of education, completion, and accessibility. For urban Indigenous youth, 73% graduated in the 2015/2016 high school year compared to 46% of on-reserve Indigenous youth (Layton, 2023, para 5). This disparity is the result of many Indigenous youth having to leave their community for urban cities to engage in

their educational journey. Herkimer (2021) also found that with schools on-reserve and off-reserve being funded differently, curriculums, quality of staff, physical environments, access to resources and supports, and extracurricular activities are different. These disparities directly influence educational achievement, abilities, desires, and wellness.

As for post-secondary education completion and attendance, non-Indigenous youth are two times more likely (72%) to either graduate or attend a post-secondary program compared to Indigenous youth (37%) (Layton, 2023, para 6). However, the 2016 census concluded that achievement rates have increased in the 2011 census, both in high school and post-secondary education (Layton, 2023, para 15).

In addition to accessibility, age, and socio-economic status, there are other existing barriers. In a report written by Herkimer (2021) titled "*Holding our Ground: Indigenous Student Post-Secondary Persistence and Early Leaving*," they identified three main themes in why Indigenous students withdraw from their post-secondary studies early: systemic influences, socio-cultural influences, and individual influences. A critical systemic influence is the historical use of education as a tool for assimilating Indigenous peoples, fostering skepticism and doubt among Indigenous students about Westernized academia and institutions. This additional challenge forces them to navigate these feelings alongside their academic pursuits. Course content and pedagogies used in academic institutions were other factors that influenced students' desires to continue in their post-secondary journey. Herkimer (2021) also discussed how students' exposure to discrimination influences their quality of life while completing their post-secondary studies. Examples of barriers are systemic racism, the lack of cultural awareness, curriculum content, Indigenous representation, false narratives, and lack of finances and support.

Due to these barriers, Indigenous students may experience loneliness and the inability to feel seen and understood.

Herkimer (2021) identified community and cultural connections as a protective factor against early drop-out for Indigenous students. Socio-cultural influences fostered through campus cultural events, mentorship programs, and Indigenous-specific offices and spaces increase Indigenous students' quality of life and sense of belonging. Herkimer (2021) describes a study by Huffman (2001) in which Indigenous students find themselves in either two categories: estranged or transcultured. Herkimer (2001) states:

> Estranged students in the study had a sense of traditional culture but also a strong mistrust of education systems; many of them believed their identity as Indigenous people was at risk while pursuing post-secondary education. From the estranged student's perspective, their only options were to assimilate or leave. On the other hand, transcultural students also had a sense of traditional culture and a rejection of assimilation, but they were confident that they would not lose their identities. Instead, they drew strength and emotional security from being Indigenous, which allowed them to operate in two cultural contexts simultaneously. Therefore, both students begin the same (feeling alienated), but the point at which they begin to progress down a specific identity path (called the transculturation threshold) determines if they are more likely to leave school or to stay. (p. 11)

Post-secondary institutions are spaces where Indigenous students explore their post-secondary community and Indigenous identity. Thus, course content and Indigenous academic success should be priorities in the future to increase pride, success, and achievement rates. Lastly, Herkimer (2021) discusses the impact of individual characteristics that may influence post-secondary completion. Individual factors range from cognition to motivation, the responsibility to give back to the community, and self-perception. Additionally, gender, relationship status, parental education, dependents, and age are personal factors that influence post-secondary completion. Combining all three factors and the complexity of identity exploration creates a distinct post-secondary journey for Indigenous students. Herkimer (2021) states that “identity is not fixed; it is an ever-changing entity over the course of the human

lifespan" (p. 12), highlighting the consistent evolution of identity and the importance of tending to it.

Academic work and research on Indigenous identity exploration exist; however, it is limited. In one such reference, Barnes and Voyageur (2020) interviewed 60 self-identifying Indigenous students between 2005 and 2010, asking the following research questions:

> Do conventional definitions of identity, and conventional identity formations theories, offer ways to understand the identity of these Indigenous students? What role, if any, does post-secondary education play in the formation and/or confirmation of the identity of Indigenous students as Indigenous individuals? (p.1)

One of the participants discussed the positive influence of seeing Indigenous students present throughout the university. He recognized how other Indigenous students studied, worked, and navigated post-secondary institutions. Therefore, he not only created bonds with them but saw them as role models as well. Textbooks and curriculums showed participants the resiliency of their ancestors, piqued their academic interests, and provided them with context on who they were and how they identified. Barnes and Voyageur (2020) asked students to discuss social interactions that made them feel pride in being Indigenous and social interactions that made them feel shame. One participant shared how seeing non-Indigenous students in Indigenous studies classes interested in learning about Indigenous topics increased her pride in being Indigenous. The social interactions that made participants feel shameful in being Indigenous focused on being caught between two socially constructed worlds. One participant shared the struggles with leaving her home community to attend university as they faced judgment from friends residing in her community. One participant disclosed how his appearance made him feel trapped. This participant discloses how he was raised as a "white kid" but studied Indigenous studies in university; therefore, he felt judged by the white community since he was a white-passing person

in Indigenous studies and judged by the Indigenous community since he was a white-passing person in Indigenous studies.

To answer their second research question, Barnes and Voyageur (2020) asked students about their university experience which they state:

> The participants in our study generally saw post-secondary education as supporting or strengthening their Indigenous identity development or affirming their Indigenous identity. They gained an understanding and insight into their identity from attending university, including positive and negative experiences. Positive experiences included learning Indigenous history, ceremonies, and rituals. Negative experiences included encounters with racism, isolation, feeling alone, and not being accepted by others. Negative experiences did not make the participants give up on being in university; rather, they helped them become stronger as Indigenous individuals. (p.101)

Additionally, coursework that allowed participants to evaluate themselves and their familial history critically assisted them in navigating and strengthening their identity. When course content included Indigenous perspectives, participants felt their identity was validated and strengthened. Many participants discussed how they enjoyed taking Indigenous studies and various courses since they contributed to their knowledge bundles.

In this literature review, the complex landscapes of Indigenous education were explored while examining a range of scholarly works that highlight both the challenges and opportunities within this field. The critical importance of centering Indigenous voices, perspectives, and knowledge in educational discourse and policymaking is identified in this review. By amplifying Indigenous ways of knowing and learning, it is possible to create more inclusive and equitable educational environments that honour Indigenous communities' diverse cultural identities and aspirations. In the following chapters, I build upon the insights gleaned from this literature review, conducting research that contributes to the ongoing dialogue surrounding Indigenous education. Ultimately, I aim to contribute to the advancement of Indigenous education

scholarship and to support the development of educational practices that empower Indigenous learners and communities.

Chapter 3- Methodology

Indigenous Methodologies as a Flower

Absolon (2011) created a framework that assists Indigenous researchers with following, understanding, and practicing Indigenous methodologies. She compares the research process to a flower, in which each part of the flower has a separate purpose and is interdependent. Using an Indigenous methodology is essential to me as an Anishinaabe Kwe because it allows me to approach research in a manner that reflects my identity. Before starting this program, I did not know much about research, and I was intimidated by it since it appeared too "academic" for me. Even recently, I had a conversation with one of my supervisors where I told her, "I am not a research girly," she laughed and reassured me that I am; I just needed to find a methodology and approach that I understood and complimented me. Upon reading the flower framework (Absolon, 2011) and the contributions of other Indigenous scholars (Tachine et al., 2016; Pidgeon, 2019; Kovach, 2010), I realized that I am capable of understanding the complexities of research and even more capable of completing my research.

The Roots

Indigenous methodologies are based on and fueled by Indigenous paradigms, worldviews, and principles, which Absolon (2011) compares to the roots of a flower as they ground the researcher and research. Indigenous paradigms factor in historical influence and colonial powers as those shape Indigenous people's existence, realities, and search for and creation of knowledge. Absolon (2011) states, "Indigenous re-search is about being personal and political and responsible for creating change" (p.55). Indigenous worldviews are belief systems that contribute to Indigenous people's understanding, interconnectedness, and proximity to the world around them. Indigenous worldviews are the lenses that assist Indigenous researchers with

their search for knowledge. Indigenous principles are ethics and protocols that guide Indigenous researchers. The Seven Grandfather Teachings: wisdom, respect, humility, love, honesty, truth, and bravery; the 4Rs: respect, reciprocity, relevance, and responsibility; and the Seven Generations Concept, always keeping the future and past generations in mind, are guiding principles that contribute to the foundation of Indigenous methodologies.

The Flower Centre

Absolon (2011) connects the roots (Indigenous paradigms, worldviews, and principles) to the center of the flower, which she describes as the self as central. When Indigenous researchers disclose their identity, proximity, and research rationale, it not only situates themselves in the research but also goes directly against positivist research paradigms and Westernized principles. Additionally, the self in research is distinguished by the Indigenous researcher's memories and motivation, a concept that I firmly believe should influence all work, contributions, and knowledge production. This research topic and study would not be fulfilled without the personal reflections and experiences I uncovered and explored. As an Indigenous graduate student who has family members who attended Indian Residential Schools and day schools and whose identity and cultural reconnection have been influenced by educational institutions, this topic is a direct reflection of who I am, how I see the world, how I navigate myself in systems, and what knowledge I hope to contribute. This research was also fueled by the connections and relationships I have built with Indigenous students, professors, and teachers in which many conversations regarding Indigenous identity were had. Absolon (2011) states, "We are already aware of the difference, being othered, and with this awareness, we weave our stories and identities into the research process to reclaim our power and knowledge" (p.55).

Research Questions.

In this study, I hope to weave stories and identities into the research process by answering the following research questions:

1- How do Indigenous students at Trent perceive the role of past and current education institutions in exploring and navigating their Indigenous identity, culture, and language?

2-What experiences, positive or negative, stand out to the Indigenous students at Trent, and how do they impact their Indigenous identity journey?

Students are believed to find themselves in environments that allow and encourage their identity journey, as Trent University is deemed a frontrunner for Indigenous representation, environments, and support. Trent University has made tangible efforts throughout its campus, learning system, and duty as an institution. In 1969, Trent University was the first university in North America to create an Indigenous Studies program (Bell et al., 2022). In 2018, 3 years after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's release, Trent instilled an Indigenous course requirement that ensures all students take one Indigenous studies course during their time at Trent (Trent University, n.d.). This guarantees that all students are exposed to Indigenous knowledge, Indigenous professors and seminar leaders, Indigenous cultures, Indigenous history, Indigenous resiliency, and resurgence. In 2022, Trent released the Report of the Champlain Committee, which outlines the influence of the commemoration, name, and identity of Samuel de Champlain, a French explorer, in the Trent community. With the voices and opinions of alumni, undergraduate students, staff, and faculty, the committee highlighted the issues and opinions regarding the commemoration of Samuel de Champlain and created eight recommendations, which include the removal of colonial artwork, the importance of education, and the inclusion of Anishinaabemowin (Bell et al., 2022). Trent's vision statement also states,

"We foster an environment where Indigenous knowledge is respected and recognized as a valid means by which to understand the world" (Trent University, n.d., para. 3-4).

Participants.

I recruited five self-identifying Indigenous, Métis, or Inuit undergraduate students attending Trent University. Upon approval from the Research Ethics Boards at Trent University, student recruitment was initiated with support from the First Peoples House of Learning (FPHL). Through FPHL, students can self-identify as Indigenous, allowing them to stay updated with Indigenous events, groups, and activities. An email script (Appendix A) and a poster (Appendix B) were distributed to self-identifying Indigenous students. Participants were full-time or part-time students in various academic programs, namely social work, Indigenous studies, and Indigenous education.

The Leaves

Absolon (2011) describes the research journey as an organic process, one that is unpredictable and unplanned, just as photosynthesis, the production of nutrients, is in the leaves of the flower. This journey involves travelling, transformation, and healing. In Indigenous research, words, stories, feelings, smudge, researchers, and participants travel; it is an accumulation of interconnected travelers. Words and stories that travel in a circle are "manifestations of oral traditional and Indigenous ways of coming to know" (Absolon, 2011, p.90). This research project used traditional sharing circles to listen to and understand participants' lived experiences. Tachine et al. (2016) discuss how sharing circles are not widely explored or used in academia but have been used in Indigenous communities for generations and generations. Sharing circles encompass Indigenous values and pedagogies involving storytelling, interconnectedness, and respect. Storytelling has always been present in Indigenous communities

and is used to pass on stories, teachings, and knowledge. However, colonial efforts to erase storytelling have succeeded, so reclaiming and revitalizing this learning method in and out of academia is crucial. Tachine et al. (2016) disclose Indigenous perspectives on the concept of "sharing":

> Our use of "sharing" differs from colloquial use, which begins from a sense of individualized ownership where one party allows another access to his or her property. Whereas, sharing from an Indigenous knowledge system is often understood from an interdependent perspective, meaning the interrelatedness to all things. Indigenous peoples often view life as being connected to past and future generations of family, community, Tribe, and nation. (p. 283)

In sharing circles, introductions include participants' home/community, clan name, Spirit name, or any other personal information that should be shared, as this allows participants to feel interconnected or interrelated, as Tachine et al. (2016) mention. Having these values present in this research is beneficial as it facilitates participants sharing, conversations, and overall experience during the data collection period. Additionally, it is crucial for participants to feel familiar and comfortable with one another as this reflects the 4Rs framework. The 4Rs framework is an Indigenous wholistic framework encompassing respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility (4Rs). This set of values (or framework) can be present and used in many environments, such as research and education. This research project aims for all aspects of the data collection, analysis, and final report to embody the 4Rs because of the longstanding history of research on Indigenous people rather than research done by and for Indigenous peoples (Pidgeon, 2019).

Context on this Study's Sharing Circles.

The two sharing circles were two hours long and took place on Trent's campus. The first sharing circle focused on compulsory education, and the second focused on post-secondary education. Therefore, the five participants attended both (Appendix C). Before the sharing circles,

participants signed the consent form (Appendix D). Participants' names will not be disclosed to protect their identity, and gender-neutral pronouns will be used throughout. The sharing circles were audio recorded via a recorder and Zoom platform to interpret the data appropriately. They were then manually transcribed, which allowed me to familiarize myself with the data, the participant's tone of voice, and the stories being told. Participants were given a medicine bundle with sage, sweetgrass, tobacco, cedar, and the four sacred medicines to thank them for their time, energy, knowledge, and participation. Participants can withdraw from the study until the final stages of reporting, during which their data would be removed from the transcriptions and not used in the final version of the thesis.

The Petals

Absolon (2011) describes the petals of the flower as the "diversity and complexity of Indigenous methodologies. They include the Spirit, heart, mind, and body because Indigenous methodologies are wholistic in nature and encompass the whole being" (p. 118). She attributes concepts, feelings, and experiences to the Spirit, heart, mind, and body and discusses the importance of tending to these during the research process. For example, Spirit relates to reflection, intuition, and inner knowing; the heart relates to community, learning, and friendships; the mind relates to reclaiming memories, Indigenous scholars, and perspectives; and the body relates to listening, observing, and participating. Upon reading Absolon's (2011) interpretation of the petals, I noticed how these can be applied to participants' stories and experiences. For example, some of the stories shared tend to the participant's minds and some of the experiences related to their Spirit. As Kovach (2010) discusses, "the Indigenous researcher will likely have to utilize a mixed method approach for her research to be seen as credible within the larger research community" (p.132). She mentions how using thematic groupings while

telling the stories and truths of participants is a way of making meaning. Making meaning is essential since it uses a narrative in which I highlight the insights and central points of the conversations during the sharing circles (Kovach, 2010). Additionally, grouping stories and truths by themes is present throughout other Indigenous research, namely research on the influence of the education system (Efimoff, 2022; Barnes & Voyageur, 2020; Carter et al., 2018; Hollinsworth et al., 2021; Bailey, 2020).

Stories and Themes.

This chapter presents and thoroughly discusses the stories and themes identified in the analysis. A unique aspect of this research is the use of direct quotes from participants, which allows their voices to describe their lived experiences and personal feelings. This collaborative approach, which includes the vulnerability and participation of other Indigenous students, is crucial to highlight. It also reflects the 4Rs, particularly the principle of respect, throughout this research. It's important to note that the sample size includes five Indigenous students attending one university in Canada, and these findings may only represent some Indigenous students' experiences in the education system. However, through storytelling and themes, this research will highlight the key findings of students' perspectives of their identity journey in education systems in the 21st century.

Chapter 4- Results and Discussion

The results are grouped into themes and presented in a manner that tells a story of Indigeneity in the education system, touching on participants' minds, bodies, Spirits, and hearts. This presentation method highlights the interconnectedness of these four aspects in Indigenous cultures. Absolon (2011) points out that you cannot tend to only one of these; they all need to be considered, underscoring the holistic nature of Indigenous methodologies.

The findings revealed four overarching themes consistent throughout the sharing circles, and sub-themes emerged from these themes. The themes are mind: learning content and curriculum structure; body: Indigenous representation, or lack thereof; Spirit: self-perception of Indigeneity and identity; and heart: future educational desires and hopes.

Mind: Learning Content and Curriculum Structure

Compulsory Education

The participants consistently identified that topics regarding Indigenous peoples, cultures, history, and rights were not widely discussed in compulsory education. These findings link to the recent cancellations of curriculum rewrites that were supposed to happen in response to the TRC but were cancelled by the Ministry of Education in Ontario (Crawley, 2018).

Participants identified that even if Indigenous history and culture were discussed, participants mentioned how it was taught in a manner that only highlighted traumas, such as residential and day schools, painted Indigenous peoples as an extinct group of individuals and culture, or very much glossed over the treatment Indigenous peoples and communities faced. This is in keeping with the findings of Castagno and Brayboy (2008). These authors discuss the lack of Indigenous content in curriculums by mentioning the need for culturally responsive schooling (CRS), which is a framework that:

> Recognizes, respects, and uses students' identities and backgrounds as meaningful sources for creating optimal learning environments. Being culturally responsive is more than being respectful, empathetic, or sensitive. Accompanying actions, such as having high expectations for students and ensuring that these expectations are realized, are what make a difference. (Gay, 2002, p.3, as cited in Castagno et al., 2008)

Castagno and Brayboy (2008) disclose that CRS is crucial as it allows education systems to highlight self-determination and Indigenous sovereignty when teaching youth about Indigenous peoples and communities.

One of the participants attended a French Catholic high school, and they stated how there were more lessons and units on the oppression faced by French Ontarians than Indigenous peoples. Another participant discussed the erasure of Indigenous aspects in the Canadian history they were taught:

> We didn't learn that if you're an Indigenous person and you wanted to be in World War 2, you had to give up your status. This wasn't something that they taught us or gave us any context about. So, I took that as teachers thought that it wasn't something important to discuss. (P-1)

Some Indigenous aspects, components, and teachings were included during the participant's compulsory education. However, three participants noted how this content was taught by non-Indigenous individuals, either through guest speakers or schoolteachers (P-1, P-2, & P-3). They highlighted how it influenced the teaching style, as one of the participants mentioned their teacher was reading a script, the content was brief and solely based on the past and trauma, and the relatability of the topics as there was no level of proximity or lived experiences brought into the lessons. Two participants mentioned the noticeable lack of Indigenous awareness and history training for teachers (P-2 & P-3). One stated:

> I often find that educators use their fear of teaching Indigenous studies as an excuse to not teach it at all which is just as harmful. So, because of that, a lot of Indigenous perspectives are being lost. (P-3)

Similarly, People for Education (2023) notes that barriers to including professional development on Indigenous history were based on the discomfort and hesitancy of teaching staff. The participant who attended a French Catholic high school discussed the presence of hesitancy in an experience that happened in grade 11 when they wanted their school to participate in Orange Shirt Day, which is an annual day that hopes to create space for conversations and recognition about the legacy and impacts of Indian Residential Schools:

> I tried to bring it to my school's attention and bring it to the person at our school that was in charge of cultural programming, and they thought it was a bad idea because they didnt like want to offend anybody and appeared to be uncomfortable with the subject. I think their mindset was starting to change, but they didnt really know how to approach it, so they decided to not do it. I convinced students to wear orange t-shirts without the administration's support. I made a group chat with a girl I was friends with, and we added a bunch of students to it, and we made it happen. And then the year after that happened, when I was in grade 12, the school officially did it which was really nice and the years following they continued to do it. (P-1)

As outlined in the Call to Action #80 in the TRC, the federal government was to "a statutory holiday, a National Day for Truth and Reconciliation to honour survivors, their families, and communities, and ensure that public commemoration of the history and legacy of residential schools remains a vital component of the reconciliation process" (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015b, p.334). Bill C-5, pertained to this call, was passed in 2018, leading to many educational institutions participating in this day by advising their students to wear orange t-shirts and discuss the Indian Residential School legacy (Barrera et al., 2024).

Postsecondary Education

All participants noticed a significant difference between the content they learned in compulsory education and the content they currently learn at Trent University. One of the participants noticed how Trent University centers Indigenous learning and Indigenous

worldviews in their courses, explicitly highlighting the first-year required Indigenous studies course implemented for all students attending Trent University (P-2). Four participants said they enjoy completing course assignments and research as they can bring in their identity and culture, something they had not experienced before attending Trent (P-1, P-3, P-4, & P-5). Another participant disclosed the benefits of Trent's learning environment:

> Finding a space in university where people think critically about things and challenge dominant perspectives is a space where I thrive. And as soon as I found this space, I really felt that learning can actually be fun when you're learning to learn and understand and not just learning to regurgitate facts. When I found out about colonial studies, I felt that this is what I've been wanting to know this whole time. Like answers about colonization and answer to the questions that I have been asking my whole life. (P-4)

However, two participants emphasized how Trent University is a colonial institution at its core and how it continues to influence their learning journey and sense of belonging (P-2 & P-3). One participant disclosed how studying in a colonial institution is difficult for them to learn in and stay within, but highlighted how Indigenous pedagogies, staff, and support assist them with working through this barrier (P-1). Another participant questioned how and if all programs at Trent include Indigenous perspectives and content in their courses (P-2). A participant also disclosed how colonial attitudes and anti-Indigenous perspectives have been present throughout their studies.

> I remember one of the history professors here wrote an article about why canceling Canada Day is stupid and Indigenous peoples are taking it too far. That was hard for me as somebody who is Indigenous in this class, the only Indigenous student in his class, being taught by someone who spoke down on Indigenous peoples and having those assumptions and writing about them, but still being employed and having a job here. (P-3)

This finding aligns with the 2023 National Day for Truth and Reconciliation (NDTR) controversy at Trent University as the Head of the Trent (HOTT) fell on September 30th, 2023. HOTT is a homecoming celebration that overlapped with NDTR. Instead of rescheduling HOTT,

Trent University commemorated NDTR with a moment of silence, orange athletic jerseys, orange pins, and flags at half-mass (Kernya, 2023). Trent then celebrated NDTR on the following Monday, which made me question how Trent was willing to move NDTR but did not move a homecoming celebration.

Body: Indigenous Representation

Peers and Classmates

In compulsory education, one participant noted that they were the only Indigenous student in the school (P-3), and another disclosed that they were part of a handful of Indigenous students attending their school (P-1). They noticed how this impacted the support and acknowledgment of their identity throughout their time in these spaces. The participant who attended a French Catholic high school noticed a stark difference between their school and the neighbouring English public school:

> The English public school had a lot more Indigenous student than we did and from my understanding they had a lot more support, like an Indigenous student space in their school. Even observing it in high school, my school board was a lot more behind in Indigenizing its system, the curriculum, and the way they operated. I think a part of that could be caused by the lack of Indigenous students at my school, but I don't think that is justifiable in my mind because reconciliation is up to everyone and not just Indigenous peoples. (P-1)

As outlined in the Call to Action #9, the federal government should "prepare and publish annual reports comparing funding for the education of First Nations children on and off reserves, as well as educational and income attainments of Aboriginal peoples in Canada compared with non-Aboriginal people" (Truth and Reconciliation Commission 2015b, p.148). Without these reports, supporting the distinct learning needs of Indigenous students is not possible, and as of May 2024, this Call to Action has not been completed. Self-identification is a newer process that assists with understanding the student population and demographics. However, self-identification

is a complex decision as Indigenous peoples and Indigenous identity historically aimed to be erased from society and were deemed as inferior (Canadian Education Statistics Council, 2008). The rise of pretendians, individuals who falsely claim Indigenous identity throughout academic and non-academic spaces, also adds another complex layer to this complicated situation (Hayden Taylor, 2023). Therefore, navigating the complexities around identity is complex and intimidating, especially if Indigenous students, such as myself, who are "white-passing", do not look like the stereotypical Indigenous person.

During their time at Trent, all participants agreed that having Indigenous peers and classmates was a new experience but a calming feeling. One participant stated the benefits of the Indigenous Learning Diploma Program, which is a 1-year program solely for Indigenous students that assists with the transition to post-secondary:

> Going to spaces where its entirely Indigenous students was so comforting, liberating, and kind of fun…because I've never been around that many Indigenous students. You also learn so much about your Indigeneity and identity through your peers too and that was my biggest takeaway. I had this friend I met in my first year and I learned more from her about Indigeneity at the time then through my professors and that was through conversations, seminars, and getting to know each other. (P-1)

Another participant agreed:

> A lot of us come from families in which we were not raised traditional, so now were learning how to do that with our friends which is pretty special. Like learning how to reclaim your traditions and your culture and being with other Indigenous students, not only helps your education, but it's a really special experience. (P-4)

Milne et al. (2015) found that peers are fundamental to Indigenous student success, allowing them to explore their culture and identity safely and respectfully. Similarly, Bailey (2016), who conducted a study on racism and Indigenous student experiences in post-secondary, noted that friendships and relationships between Indigenous peers resembled an on-campus family unit that aided with support, studying, and socializing. Peers were vital to my post-

secondary experiences since I created a multi-dimensional friendship with these friends. We could talk and relate to each other about our family dynamics, academic interests, future career goals, identity, and reconnection journey. It made me feel less alone and validated the imposter syndrome feelings I experienced and will probably always experience.

Educators

A common finding throughout the sharing circles was the lack of Indigenous educators, support staff, or administrative staff in the participant's time in compulsory education. This finding is in line with the report released by the Ministry of Education in Ontario (2007) titled "Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework" in which they identify the following goal "to increase internal capacity within the ministry to support school boards and schools in their efforts to close the gap in First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students' academic achievement by hiring First Nation, Métis, and Inuit educators" (p. 11).

Four participants noted that learning from an Indigenous educator in post-secondary has been reassuring, inspirational, and beneficial (P-1, P-3, P-4, & P-5). For example, one participant disclosed how they were able to learn about the positive contributions some Indigenous professors made to the university (P-1). Another participant mentioned how Indigenous professors facilitated a space of conversations for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and the difficulty of navigating different groups of students:

> I feel like a lot of the Indigenous professors like for the Indigenous studies courses do a really good job at allowing for positive learning spaces since there are students that are Indigenous that don't know their culture, but they're also students that are non-Indigenous that need to learn for the first time. So, managing both of those different groups and putting that into your teaching is so important. (P-3)

Indigenous representation via educators is crucial since it presents students with Indigenous perspectives, pedagogies, and lived experiences, concepts that provide invaluable

insights to Indigenous student's learning journey (Wilson, 2021). However, McGuire-Adams (2019) discuss how Indigenous educators are presented with distinct barriers since "academia remains steeped in settler normativity, where linearity, objectivity, and an Indigenous non-presence permeate most, but not all, disciplines. Settler normativity in academia silences different culturally based ways of seeing the world" (p.40). Therefore, Indigenous educators must navigate between two worlds when teaching or working in academia. They must confront the history and legacy of colonization and education while validating their research and challenging Westernized ways of doing and researching while tending to their identity.

As a graduate student, Trent offered me a graduate teaching assistantship while completing my studies. I was grateful enough to work in the Chanie Wenjack School for Indigenous Studies for one of the Indigenous course requirements, INDG 1001-Foundations of Reconciliation. As an Anishinaabekwe and graduate student, leading weekly seminars discussing my culture, people, and history was overwhelming but rewarding. For the first time, I could bring my identity, passions, and lived experiences into my work and a group of Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners. I conducted the seminars in a manner that tried to meet students where they were in their learning journey while touching base on important concepts and introducing new and relevant content. As it has been discussed, not all post-secondary students have learned about Indigenous peoples and history. Therefore, it is important to navigate these learning environments knowing such.

Events and Spaces

Throughout compulsory education, three participants noted some Indigenous representation in their educational spaces (P-1, P-2, & P-4). One participant noted how their school's logo was an Inukshuk (P-1). However, the rationale behind it was not a topic of

discussion, and a second participant discussed how there was an Indigenous mural in their school, but the unveiling of it never discussed the meaning or introduced the artist (P-2). Another participant recently looked at their high school's website and noticed that there are now some Indigenous student initiatives, a self-identification form, and a land acknowledgment, which they were happy to see (P-4). This participant also disclosed how their school completed land acknowledgment when they were in attendance, but why they began doing them was never widely addressed.

Participants observed the amount of Indigenous representation through events and support and in their physical learning environments. One participant noted an early move-in event for Indigenous students and how it positively influenced their post-secondary journey:

> We had dinner, toured the university, went to all the Indigenous student spaces, and they gave us a smudge kit. And 3 years later, I still talk to one of the kids who was there that night. That night was very important to me because that was when I met a First Peoples House of Learning staff, and I still go to her office now for emotional support now. That was a very successful and good program, I loved it. (P-4)

Three participants mentioned how Indigenous student spaces, such as the Gathering Space and the First Peoples House of Learning (FPHL), are necessary ayas they aid with their identity journey and exploration, introduce them to other Indigenous students and peers, and make them feel welcomed (P-1, P-3, P-4). Two participants highlighted land-based learning experiences through Trent in which their identity and Indigeneity flourished through getting to know peers and experiencing learning outside the classroom and on the land (P-2 & P-3). One participant stated:

> We spent a week in Wikwemikong and participated in land-based activities, and I found that to be such a pivotal point for me and for my Indigenous journey and exploring my Indigeneity. I met so many strong and beautiful Indigenous women who I'm still friends with now and meeting them through Trent and having that opportunity through the university was so powerful. I learned so much about myself, I learned so much about my

> culture, I learned about my own Indigeneity, and I learned how to accept my identity and others. (P-2)

Two participants disclosed how physical representations of Indigenous peoples, Elders, and art throughout Trent's campus stand out to them and make them feel that Trent's efforts of Indigenization are present and concrete (P-4 & P-5). Similarly, Efimoff (2022), who conducted a study on Indigenizing post-secondary institutions, disclosed that their Indigenous participants felt that Indigenous events, spaces, and programs affirmed their beliefs and ways of thinking, allowed them to feel comfortable and safe, and assisted with their personal growth.

Spirit: Self-Perception of Indigeneity and Identity

The above themes, mind: learning content and body: Indigenous representation, or lack thereof, influenced participants' self-perception of their identity and the ability to reconnect and learn about their culture. Therefore, reviewing the mind and the body was significant before reviewing the Spirit.

Isolated

Feeling isolated as an Indigenous student is a sub-theme that emerged throughout conversations regarding participants' experience in compulsory education. One of the participants discussed their behaviours in the classroom:

> Schools were just never built for Indigenous students to begin with, like being confined in these walls, so like going to school every day was a chore and not a very safe space for me. And through the racism I experienced, and again not speaking about who Indigenous peoples are, I feel like that framed on how I presented myself in a classroom. I was a very timid and shy native girl, so with that in the classroom I was never able to speak my mind, and I never contributed. (P-3)

Hare and Pidgeon (2011) suggest that feelings of isolation stemming from the curriculum, westernized pedagogies, and institutional racism are directly linked to Indigenous students' attendance, interactions with peers and teachers, and efforts and contributions in class. It has also

been concluded that if Indigenous students do not feel safe, welcomed, or valued, they will not attend school and will not be able to reach their full academic potential (First Nation Education Steering Committee and First Nations Schools Association, 2020).

Concealing their Indigenous identity led to one of the participants also feeling isolated in compulsory education. They identified themselves as an "invisible Indian" because no one knew they were Indigenous, as they were still navigating how they see themselves and how they identify (P-4). Similarly, Downey (2018) writes in their master's thesis how, in high school, they did not see themselves as an Indigenous person because of their appearance, which resulted in pushing their Indigeneity aside. Barnes and Voyageur (2020) also disclose how a few of their participants struggled with their Indigeneity in post-secondary environments because of their light-coloured skin. This is something I have struggled with throughout my entire academic career. I did not tend to my Indigeneity in high school and college. I wanted to push it down, ignore it, and act like it did not matter. However, I was doing that because I was uncomfortable, feared judgment, and was presented with a plethora of thoughts that stemmed from internalized racism. I also felt that once I identified as Indigenous, I would have to continuously validate that I was Indigenous to everyone around me because of the way I looked.

One of the participants disclosed how they also had to validate Indigenous peoples during their high school experience consistently:

> I think it was so messed up that I had to teach other peers that what they were saying was wrong, all while validating my own identity and experiences and experiences of other Indigenous peoples as well. Especially if you're the only indigenous person in a room, which can be uncomfortable and isolating, you feel like you kind of have to say something so your non-Indigenous peers have more of an understanding of us and cultures and struggles. (P-1)

Having to corroborate Indigenous people's experiences and your own Indigenous identity is an ongoing narrative that exists in society. Indigenous peoples are told to "get over it";

however, it is difficult to “get over it” when intergenerational trauma and contemporary colonization exist. Honourable Murray Sinclair answers the famous question, “Why can’t Indigenous peoples get over it?” by stating:

> My answer has always been: why can't you always remember this? Because this is about memorializing those people who have been the victims of a great wrong…We should never forget, even once they have learned from it, because it's part of who we are. It's not just a part of who we are as survivors and children of survivors and relatives of survivors, it's part of who we are as a nation. And this nation must never forget what it once did to its most vulnerable people. (Sinclair, 2017)

In academia, Indigenous peoples and researchers must prove that their research, methodologies, and contributions are essential, relevant, and needed. This creates a sense of “walking in two worlds,” which refers to navigating and balancing the needs and perspectives of Indigenous communities and academia. Indigenous researchers need to bridge the gap between the two worlds, understanding and respecting the cultural values, knowledge systems, and protocols of Indigenous communities while also adhering to the academic standards and research processes (Styres et al., 2010).

Stereotyped

On top of feeling isolated, two participants were exposed to stereotypes and racism during their time in compulsory education. One participant disclosed how the lack of care and support from teachers for Indigenous students was evident in one specific experience:

> I remember a moment when I was in grade 5, in an all-white school, and one of the white students called me a “drunken Indian” in class and I was so upset, I stormed out of class. I was told to go back in, and he had to stay out of the classroom the entire day. But after that, this teacher did not talk about Indigenous peoples, did not talk about the history, did not talk about why there are stereotypes like that at all, they just kind of let it be and never addressed the situation to the class. (P-3)

A study conducted by Hare and Pidgeon (2011), analyzing the challenges of Indigenous students in compulsory education, obtained similar findings as their participants experienced

racism from their peers and teachers. Racist attitudes, biases, and prejudices were some of the experiences the participants disclosed. According to the People for Education (2023), there has been a rise in professional development on Indigenous education for staff (from 34% to 76% between the years 2012 and 2022 for elementary schools and 34% to 82% between the years of 2012 and 2022 for secondary schools) (p.6). Professional development is intended to assist with confronting Indigenous education and histories to support Indigenous students better. Thus, a rise in such is progress.

Another participant mentioned how the lack of modern-day photos of Indigenous peoples influenced how they viewed themselves:

> When I started to discuss that I am Indigenous, but did not look like the pictures that we saw in history books from the 1700s, did not look like the depictions other students had in their minds, did not look like a stereotypical Indian or Indigenous person, and did not show up to high school in a head dress or ribbon skirt, I would feel that my peers would not believe me. I remember them sarcastically saying "oh yeah… you're Indigenous" or saying "oh ya ha ha, you're Indigenous" because I don't look like the pictures that we saw. (P-2)

Mihesuah (2005) discusses the representations of Indigenous peoples in society by highlighting common stereotypes. Some of the stereotypes are "Indian women are princesses, all natives live on reservations, all natives are drunks, and all natives are naturalists and live in harmony with the environment" (pp.17-22). She discusses how debunking these myths and stereotypes via education and written work is vital to ensure the preservation of Indigenous peoples and cultures is tended to. Therefore, proving that the curriculum changes outlined in the TRC that include Indigenous content and history are more important than ever (People for Education, 2023). The navigation of stereotypes was an experience another participant was exposed to. This participant discussed how the lack of knowledge about First Nation communities and reserves caused their non-Indigenous peers to disclose statements with

microaggressions “She expressed that in her mind reserves were just tipis and that’s it. I told her…no they are communities, it’s like a town, they have houses and other community buildings” (P-1).

Educating your non-Indigenous peers about Indigenous peoples is something I believe all Indigenous peoples will need to do throughout their entire lives. As an Anishinaabekwe, I do not particularly appreciate hearing or confronting stereotypes, but I also know that most of the time, these stereotypes come from a lack of education and understanding. However, once again, because of the way that I look, I am never being called a stereotypical remark; I am just being told that I do not look Indigenous or that I am not Indigenous. This goes back to me constantly having to prove to others who I am.

Tokenized

Two participants felt tokenized by peers or teachers as they were the only Indigenous high school students in the class (P-1 & P-3). One participant recalled unwanted attention:

> I was so othered in elementary school and high school that I was not trying to present myself as Indigenous to be furthered looked at or pointed out. Like the one day we spoke about residential schools in my history class and tell me why everyone turned their back to look at me during this lesson. (P-3)

Another participant agreed:

> I remember when teachers would discuss Indigenous topics in my history class, geography class, or law class, my teachers would make eyes to me. They would ask [participants name] what are your experiences or what are your thoughts on it? I think I was like uncomfortable, but it wasn’t something I was concerned about, I kind of just dealt with it and faced it because I really didn’t have a choice. (P-1)

Pidgeon (2016) discusses the presence of Indigenous tokenization in education, specifically post-secondary, showing its applicability to other educational spaces. She discusses the difference between tolerating Indigenous knowledge systems instead of welcoming and fully integrating them into the educational foundation. Superficial integration of Indigenous

knowledge and peoples comes across as a checking-a-box rather than a meaningful approach. Similarly, Auger (2020) discusses Indigenous tokenization with Michelle Buchholz, a Wet'suwet'en woman, academic, and consultant. Buchholz mentions how universities will ask Indigenous peoples to come to these spaces to talk about their culture and to educate others but will not involve them in any decision or policy making. She mentions, "Our bodies are welcome as Indigenous people, but then our experiences and our protocol is not. And to me, that is tokenization" (Buchholz as cited in Auger, 2020, para. 14). I noticed that tokenization is something I fear of happening to me. I want my voice, knowledge, and opinions to be heard and respected because they matter and not because I am that "token Indian" in whatever space I find myself in. I have felt like that sometimes in academia, but I luckily find myself in spaces with other Indigenous peoples, providing a sense of comfort and belonging to my identity journey.

Sense of Belonging

Contrary to how participants' identity was influenced during compulsory education, which was harmful and non-conducive to their Indigeneity, post-secondary spaces have been beneficial and safe. A common denominator for all participants to explore their Indigeneity and identity was formed by forming relationships with their Indigenous peers. In addition, two participants stated that a sense of belonging was fostered through attending events organized by FPHL as they learned about Indigenous ways of living, such as beading, keeping fire, or making ribbon skirts (P-3 & P-4). One participant disclosed how this is where they met most of their friends, as it brought Indigenous students together (P-5). On top of the events through FPHL, the staff from FPHL and the Chanie Wenjack School for Indigenous Studies were supportive and fostered a broader sense of belonging:

> They really encourage and allow you to find your own identity and to embrace your Indigeneity. I came into Trent knowing I'm Indigenous but looking more white passing

> and disconnected to community and culture, but I found over time it's encouraged to embrace your culture and I think that's really important. (P-2)

Another participant felt similar support from professors:

> I feel that the Indigenous staff are constantly cheering all of the Indigenous students on, especially after they read papers that are specifically about your life and identity or reflections that talk about your reconnecting journey. They let you know that the path that you are on is the right one and you're going to be doing a good job. (P-3)

Absolon (2011) discusses how supports are the backbone to all Indigenous researchers, students, and academics. She states, "Our cultural identity precedes our academic identity…We are both Anishinaabek and scholars" (Absolon, 2011, p.112). Remaining connected to our identity, culture, and Spirits allows us to move through academic spaces in a manner that tends to our identity. I always say I can never and will never leave my identity at the door because it is the guiding principle in everything I do, how I behave, and how I see the world.

One of the participants is completing their bachelor's in Indigenous education, and they discuss how they express their Indigeneity and culture:

> Through my placement I wear ribbon skirts at least once a week if not more in the school and a teacher told me that there was a lot of kids that were identifying as Indigenous now because I was wearing my beadwork and ribbon skirts. So just seeing somebody that is a part of your culture that might even look like you, gave Indigenous students that push to feel that they are okay here. (P-3)

According to the People for Education (2023), there has been a rise in partnerships and engagement with Indigenous speakers, Elders, and Knowledge Keepers. From 2012 to 2022, there has been a significant increase in Ontario; for elementary schools, it rose from 22% to 55%, and for secondary schools, it rose from 41% to 76% (People for Education, 2023, p.10). When I was working at Sage and Sunshine, the students were constantly exposed to their culture, and I think those were pivotal moments in their identity and cultural journey.

Heart: Future Desires and Hopes

Conversations of past and current educational experiences were present throughout the sharing circles. However, conversations of future educational hopes emerged from participants.

Support from Indigenous Staff

All participants agreed that Indigenous representation through staffing needs to increase specifically in compulsory education, as they know the consequences when it does not exist. One participant disclosed, “Having that support for Indigenous youth to make sure they are reaching their full potential because when you don’t have that, especially in educational spaces, it can be harmful to your Spirit, identity, well-being and how you perceive yourself” (P-3). Wilson (2021) states "the antidote to a lack of Indigenous perspective is as simple as employing and empowering educators with an Indigenous perspective. Indigenization of education will occur when more Indigenous community members come to the school and become involved” (p.13). One desire a participant highlighted was having Indigenous student centers with counselling services, housing, food support, and peer support services. However, they did discuss existing barriers to running culturally appropriate and safe programming. One participant described how support for Indigenous staff also needs to exist in educational spaces to ensure they are not overworked or tokenized, as this is something they know from one of their Indigenous professor’s experiences at Trent (P-2).

Relationship Building

On top of increased Indigenous staffing, participants highlighted how educational institutions need to partake in relationship-building with Indigenous communities, peoples, Elders, teachers, and language speakers. One participant disclosed how this will allow students to

see themselves in the content and ways of learning (P-5). Another participant mentioned how this will create a further sense of belonging:

> …Which is crucial because it's important for Indigenous students to feel safe, not feel othered, or not feel that they are too much because of their Indigeneity. Indigenous students should not feel like they are a burden but instead they should feel celebrated and welcomed. It's not a burden to include Indigenous perspectives and community members because it's not a bad thing, it shouldn't be seen as a task since it does help everyone and is a good thing. (P-4)

Relationship building is also important to dismantle the education system's legacy since it will bring in Indigenous perspectives, voices, history, and teachings. There remains a lack of discussions regarding systemic issues, colonial actions, and contemporary realities; therefore, building relationships will build upon these conversations (Wilson, 2021).

Indigenous Perspectives

As mentioned throughout this chapter, participants noticed the lack of Indigenous perspectives and pedagogies in the compulsory education curriculum. They highlighted how it negatively influenced their ability to accept and explore their Indigeneity. One participant mentioned the importance of land-based and experimental learning as it brings in Indigenous pedagogies and ways of doing (P-5). On top of land-based learning, changing the curriculum to acknowledge and advance Indigenous histories, contributions, strengths, empowerment, and knowledge systems is a change one of the participants hopes to see in the future (P-1). Another participant agreed and highlighted how there needs to be a good balance between discussing Indigenous trauma and Indigenous success:

> It's so heavy on the negative side sometimes that a lot of our youth are growing up not really understanding that Indigenous peoples are still here are very much thriving in the conditions that we were forced into. (P-3)

Hare and Pidgeon (2011) also state that "Indigenous youth struggle to find relevance in classrooms that make little or no efforts to represent their histories, values, perspectives, and

worldviews" (p.96). Furthermore, learning content that only touches on the traumatic history that Indigenous peoples were exposed to fuels stereotypes and misrepresentations and created more educational barriers (Wilson, 2021).

Discussion

The main goal of this research project was to analyze the link between education systems and Indigenous identities, cultures, and languages. Through the sharing circles and existing literature, this goal was met. It was vital for me to tell the story of the Indigenous students who participated in my study while touching on the realities of other Indigenous scholars and academics and incorporating my own.

One of the most notable findings was the sub-themes resulting from the conversations regarding participants' perception of their Indigeneity and identity. The four main feelings throughout the sharing circles were isolated, stereotyped, tokenized, and a sense of belonging. Devaluing of Indigenous identities was solely exclusive to participants' time in compulsory education and not post-secondary education. However, Barnes and Voyageur (2020) found that participants in their study attending post-secondary institutions felt tokenized, extracted, or forced to conform to their surroundings. Likewise, Bailey (2016) found that one of their participants also felt isolated as the only Indigenous student in the classroom. However, this student was speaking about their experiences in post-secondary. Nonetheless, this was different for the participants of this study. Participants felt that Trent University mostly supported their identity and reconnection journey. Similarly, Barnes and Voyageur (2020) also concluded that most participants felt that post-secondary institutions played a part in exploring and understanding their Indigeneity and identity.

The lack of modern-day and strength-based discussions about Indigenous peoples, cultures, and histories influenced how participants viewed themselves, which is essential to highlight. These findings align with Clark et al. (2016), who studied the link between Indigenous students, microaggressions, and university experiences. Clark et al. (2016) disclosed how their

participants noted a primitive and past-based narrative regarding Indigenous peoples and cultures found in and outside of classroom settings. In the study done by Clark et al. (2016) and in this study, participants noted how stereotypes and the lack of Indigenous culture integration guided how conversations regarding Indigenous identity were carried out between them and their peers. There were doubts, misconceptions, and microaggressions rather than truths, realities, and appropriate questions. Therefore, discussions regarding identity in compulsory education resembled concepts of identity erasure, devaluing, and unimportance, concepts of which are rooted in colonialism and Westernized mindsets.

In addition, participants noted the lack of Indigenous supports, educators, staff, peers, knowledge systems, and pedagogies in compulsory education. These findings are consistent with the numerous documents, Indian Control of Indian Education, UNDRIP, the TRC, and the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, that outline the educational needs of Indigenous students and the culturally inclusive changes that should be implemented in education curriculums. Similarly, in the study by Clark et al. (2016), their participants noted a curricular elimination or misrepresentation. However, these findings stress the importance of the People for Education (2023) conclusions. They discuss the recent changes to Ontario's publicly funded schools, such as a grade 11 Indigenous English course, a rise in professional development, and a rise in relationships with Indigenous communities, Elders, and Knowledge Holders. Therefore, hopefully, the current generations of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students will be exposed to an appropriate and culturally aware curriculum that includes Indigenous histories, cultures, contributions, resiliency, knowledge systems, and pedagogies.

Chapter 5- Conclusion

In this research, I investigated the intricacies between the education system and Indigenous identity in the 21st century, highlighting the historical and contemporary events and concepts influencing Indigenous identities, cultures, and languages in educational settings. For Indigenous learners, educational settings are more than just institutions that provide academic opportunities; at times, they work against Indigenous students, forcing them to indirectly or directly navigate these spaces. The implications of colonization and Indigenous erasure are still felt to this day as Indigenous students do not see themselves or their history, culture, or peoples in current education systems (Crawley, 2018), as education gaps and funding disparities exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students (Layton, 2023), as Indigenous students are exposed to racism, microaggressions, and biases (Hare & Pidgeon, 2011; Herkimer, 2020; Bailey, 2020), and as Indigenous academics and scholars are forced to "walk in two worlds" (Styres et al., 2010, p.644). To shift and change the current education system, Indigenous peoples and educators need to be in guiding positions (Ministry of Education in Ontario, 2007), superficial inclusion, such as tokenization, needs to be challenged and disregarded (Pidgeon, 2016), meaningful relationships must be created (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008), and Indigenous perspectives, knowledge systems, and beliefs should be respected and embraced (Hare & Pidgeon, 2011).

Scholars and academics discuss and study this topic (Efimoff, 2022; Barnes & Voyageur, 2020; Carter et al., 2018; Hollinsworth et al., 2021; Bailey, 2015), and the needed curriculum changes have been outlined and discussed in well-known government and Indigenous-led documents, such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. However, failure to complete the Calls

to Action and Calls for Justice supersedes curriculum changes, Indigenous involvement, professional development, relationship building, and progress reports. Nonetheless, some changes and progress have been made across Ontario (People for Education, 2023), but Canada has a journey ahead. The Calls to Action and the Calls for Justice about education are there. However, all governments, organizations, institutions, and Canadians must pay attention to them. Honourable Murray Sinclair states:

> We may not achieve reconciliation within my lifetime, or within the lifetime of my children, but we will be able to achieve it if we all commit to working towards it properly. Part of that commitment is that every year [on September 30] we will stand up together and we will say never again. What we did in this country was wrong, and we will never allow that to happen again. (Sinclair, as cited in Rideout, 2021)

Society cannot undo what it has done to Indigenous peoples, communities, and cultures; however, it can listen to the voices and experiences of Indian Residential School survivors (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada., 2015b) and Indian Day School survivors (Federal Indian Day School Class Action, 2019), apply Indigenous educational frameworks, such as Indian Control over Indian Education (National Indian Brotherhood/Assembly of First Nations, 1972) and learn about systemic barriers (Herkimer, 2021) to change the narrative of the next seven generations (Absolon, 2011).

Reflections

This research gave me insight and knowledge about the possibilities of changing and challenging current education systems and academia. Through this thesis, I discussed the education system and academia with my support system, which Absolon (2011) highlights the importance of doing. I talked with one of my supervisors and committee members about the confinement of Westernized academia, listened to their knowledge and experiences, and witnessed their contributions, which gave me optimism. My sister, Danika, is another person

who provides me with optimism through the many conversations we have. She is a primary, junior French teacher in North Bay, Ontario, and her teaching journey is something we discuss a lot. She once said, "At school, I'm only seen as a French teacher and not an Indigenous-French teacher.". That broke my heart because her passion for Indigenous peoples, rights, history, and culture shines through her. Although others do not see her as an Indigenous teacher, she tends to maintain her identity and culture in every class she teaches. She talks to her students about the contributions of Indigenous youth, such as Autumn Peltier, the Indigenous water activist; she brings in Indigenous teachings, such as the Seven Grandfather teachings; she proudly wears her beaded earrings; she teaches her students about Orange Shirt Day, she advocates for Indigenous professional development, and sits on the Indigenous advocacy committee. This narrative of optimism reflected by my committee members and my sister is something I hope to add to through this research, the knowledge I gained, the passion I feel for this topic, and the work I complete after this degree. As I finish writing my thesis, I am starting a new job at Durham College as the Indigenous Communities Outreach Coordinator in the First Peoples Indigenous Centre. My hopes and desire for this next chapter are to support Indigenous student's distinct learning needs and abilities, highlight Indigenous success and resiliency, be a bridge between Indigenous communities and Durham College, and continue to disrupt and challenge academia while using my voice and lived experiences as an Anishinaabe Kwe.

Reading about Indigenous methodologies, seeing them throughout other research, and witnessing them being recognized and respected was a guiding principle for the way I conducted my research. Sharing circles are important to Indigenous communities (Tachine et al., 2016); therefore, it was vital for me to use this method. I previously participated in sharing circles; they always felt like a safe space to share, connect, and engage. Sharing circles also

reflect the 4R framework: respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility. As an Indigenous researcher, I showed respect by using the work of Indigenous scholars, choosing an Indigenous research methodology, hosting the sharing circle in an Indigenous space at Trent, offering participants a smudge before and after our sharing circle, and ensuring the wellbeing of participants was considered. I displayed relevance as I am proximate and deeply passionate about my thesis topic since I have explored my identity in educational settings. I was reciprocal as I gathered a group of Indigenous students with the hopes of creating a larger sense of community and belonging in a space that can be intimidating and was once used to erase us. I was responsible for providing participants with culturally appropriate mental health resources, keeping recordings and data confidential and safe, displaying Indigenous values through the sharing circles, and including Indigenous youth's stories and lived experiences in this thesis. As an Indigenous researcher, I aim for my research to feel safe and ethical rather than extractive and powerless to challenge the research narrative that Indigenous peoples and communities have been exposed to (Tobias & Richmond, 2016).

Through this research, the participants in this study uncovered the lasting impacts of colonization by discussing their negative experiences in educational environments and the systemic issues that contributed to them. The contributing factors that inhibited their ability to accept or explore their Indigenous identity were a lack of Indigenous educators, Indigenous pedagogies, Indigenous-focused supports, and inclusion of Indigenous history in courses. The findings identified a shift between compulsory educational and post-secondary settings, namely the environments and spaces at Trent University, as participants' post-secondary experiences were mainly beneficial and positive. However, a few of the participants acknowledged how Trent University is a colonial institution; therefore, it still does have flaws and colonial

undertones that impacted their learning journey as Indigenous students. The combination of such with their experiences as Indigenous students in compulsory education led participants to discuss changes they hope to see in educational institutions. Some of the recommendations are:

1- Hiring Indigenous educators, support staff, administrative staff, and supervisors.

2- Ensuring Indigenous staff have proper support.

3- Creating Indigenous student centers where Indigenous-based supports exist.

4- Building meaningful and reciprocal relationships with Indigenous communities,

5- Including Indigenous perspectives, pedagogies, history, and content into the curriculum.

6- Discuss Indigenous success and resiliency with students.

7- Ensuring reconciliation is a value present throughout the institution (staffing, events, names of buildings, content)

There were two primary research questions guiding this study:

1-How do Indigenous students at Trent perceive the role of past and current education institutions in exploring and navigating their Indigenous identity, culture, and language?

2-What experiences, positive or negative, stand out to Indigenous students at Trent, and how do they impact their Indigenous identity journey?

Through the sharing circles and analysis of the stories and experiences participants shared, these questions were explored and answered. The broadness of the questions allowed participants to define the education institution as they wished, whether it was discussing the curriculum, the staffing, their peers, and their feelings and views as Indigenous students. Additionally, the sharing circle allowed students to have conversations with one another, and it naturally grew.

Implications

These findings can have significant implications for Indigenous education, suggesting it is crucial to tend to Indigenous identity during student's time in the education system. Including Indigenous pedagogies, ways of knowing, community members, and Indigenous cultures, educational institutions will play a pivotal role in the reconciliation process, reaffirming Indigenous rights and contributing to cultural revitalization (People for Education, 2023). Educational institutions must reclaim their roles and implications due to the legacy and impacts of Indian Residential Schools and Indian Day Schools. Additionally, students spend significant time in educational settings. Therefore, these spaces should be safe and beneficial to Indigenous learners (Schaefli et al., 2018). The results from this study also highlighted the contributions of other Indigenous policymakers, organizations, scholars, and individuals. Mentioning the existing documents, framework, and bill changes shows how Indigenous people continue practicing self-determination and resiliency to fight for their rights.

This study also contributed to the growing scholarly work about the complexities of Indigenous identity in the 21st century. Navigating your Indigenous identity can be difficult for many; therefore, highlighting Indigenous people's experiences allows us to create a more extensive dialogue about its challenges (Barnes & Voyageur, 2020). For myself, being a “white-passing” Anishinaabe Kwe, I am presented with different barriers than someone who is visibly Anishinaabe. I enter and navigate spaces looking like someone who is only White; therefore, I use that to its advantage. However, I do not let my physical appearance determine who I am because I know I am Anishinaabe regardless of what I look like. This is something that I have grown to explore and become comfortable with thanks to meeting other Indigenous students, reading literature that addresses stereotypes and physical appearances, and seeing

Indigenous peoples who look like me in spaces and roles that I hope to be in one day. Academia has started to create spaces for many Indigenous students to explore who they are while learning about the history of our peoples; therefore, researching the relationship between these two topics is crucial.

Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into the link between Indigenous identities, cultures, languages, and the education system, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations:

1. The sample size was relatively small and only focused on the experiences of Indigenous students attending one university in Canada, limiting the findings' generalizability.
2. The participants were enrolled in humanity and social justice-based programs where Indigenous topics are widely discussed throughout their courses, which is not the case for all the programs at Trent University.
3. The participants attended a university where they made many tangible efforts that displayed Indigenous involvement and reconciliation, such as the First Peoples House of Learning, the first year required Indigenous studies course, designated Indigenous spaces, and relationship building with surrounding communities.

Being in spaces that engage in reconciliation efforts directly influences Indigenous students' experiences. Therefore, their experiences may not reflect the experiences of other post-secondary Indigenous students.

This study also relied heavily on self-reported data, possibly introducing response bias and inaccuracies. As someone who can understand and relate to some of the experience’s participants shared, my biases were probably present throughout this research. However, this did not influence the experiences participants shared in the sharing circles as general questions were

asked, and from that, conversations flowed between one another. I like to think that my proximity to the topic created a sense of comfortability and related to Indigenous values, such as truth, respect, love, and humility. As Absolon (2011) discusses, the flower center is the self in Indigenous research. The self is important because it guides Indigenous researchers' work and contributions; therefore, choosing a proximate topic makes sense since it follows Indigenous research methodologies. Without my proximity to the research topic, this work could appear extractive and unethical, which Indigenous research and methodologies aim to challenge and avoid. This topic directly reflects who I am and where I am at in life; therefore, exploring it with other Indigenous students and academics has been a unique educational and personal experience.

Future Studies

Future studies could expand on the components and limitations of this research project. For example, it would be interesting to choose a sample of Indigenous students and conduct interviews at the beginning of their undergraduate degree, followed by interviews at the end to show how their identity journey started versus how it ended. Interviewing Indigenous educators at all levels of the education system would also be thought-provoking as they would have experience as both students and teachers. As some participants expressed their struggles as "white-passing" Indigenous students, exploring this concept in future research would be crucial to study as societal expectations and stereotypes are widely influential. Exploring Indigenous identity in educational settings is relative and important in today's context because of the complexities of Indigenous identities, the much-needed academic changes, and the highlighting of the realities of the education system and institutions for Indigenous learners.

Baamaapii and Miigwetch

We will never be the Indians you love to inspect
Nor will we be complacent in your rife disrespect

In this time of unrest, we have much to protect
Our futures are ours to define and direct. (Ineese-Nash, 2020, p.15)

This research showed that Indigenous student's identity is largely influenced by the educational spaces and environments they find themselves in. It is important to note that educational spaces consist of various individuals, courses, academic contexts, pedagogies and supports that directly impact how Indigenous learners navigate them. Acknowledging the complexity of Indigenous students' needs will assist educators, support, and administrative staff with tending to the entirety of Indigenous students, meaning their physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects. This research hoped to highlight why it is essential to use education to respect and embrace Indigenous identity, culture, and languages and fuel Indigenous empowerment and resiliency. The path forward is integrating Indigenous knowledge systems, creating meaningful relationships with Indigenous communities, centering Indigenous voices and experiences, and establishing support for Indigenous students to create an inclusive, equitable, and culturally responsive education system.

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Appendix A

Aaniin all,

My name is Kiana Cress, I am a Graduate student at Trent University, and I am an Anishinaabe kwe from Garden River First Nation. For my graduate thesis, I am looking to recruit Indigenous students to take part in my research.
My research focuses on the influence of the education system on Indigenous cultures, identities, and languages. This research is important as there is limiting academic work about this topic, therefore the voices of Indigenous students are crucial and important.

Why does your participation matter?
You will be able to share your experiences as an Indigenous student in the education system, a system that was previously used to erase our people.
You will be able to make connections with other Indigenous students at Trent.
You will be a voice in academia and my research.

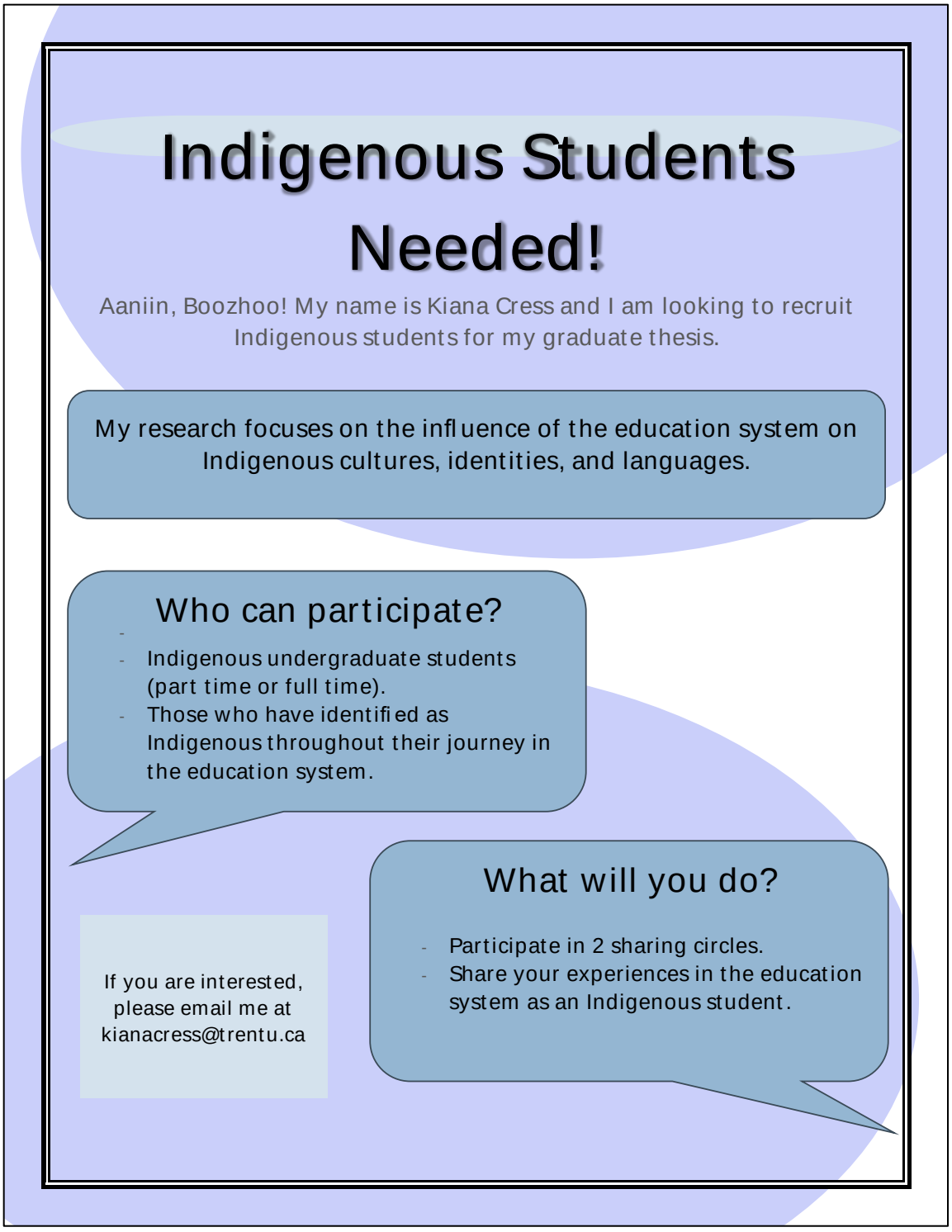
Who can participate?
Undergraduate students at Trent University, part time or full-time.
Those who are willing to attend 2 sharing circles.
Those who have identified as Indigenous throughout their journey in the education system.
Those who have ties to an Indigenous community in Canada, regardless of the environment you were exposed to (rural, remote, urban, on-reserve, or off reserve).

If you fit these requirements and are interested in participating in my study, please reach out to myself via email (kianacress@trentu.ca). Additionally, please let me know the community in which you have ties to and the environment(s) you have resided or currently reside in (rural, remote, on-reserve, off-reserve, and/or urban).

Chi miigwetch for your interest and participation,

Kiana Cress

Appendix B


Indigenous Students Needed!
Aaniin, Boozhoo! My name is Kiana Cress and I am looking to recruit Indigenous students for my graduate thesis.
My research focuses on the influence of the education system on Indigenous cultures, identities, and languages.
Who can participate?
- Indigenous undergraduate students (part time or full time).
- Those who have identified as Indigenous throughout their journey in the education system.
What will you do?
- Participate in 2 sharing circles.
- Share your experiences in the education system as an Indigenous student.
If you are interested, please email me at kianacress@trentu.ca

Appendix C

Sharing circle 1:
The first question is: Was Indigeneity visible in your schools? Example, teachers, staff, or other students?
The second question is: Can you describe how Indigenous history, cultures, or peoples discussed or taught in these spaces? How is this significant for you?
The third question is: How did the depictions of Indigenous cultures, languages, or identities impact your experience in the classroom? And education system in general*?*

Sharing circle 2:
The first question is: As we are all Trent students, how do you feel about your current learning environments and studies? Is Indigeneity visible in this university? Such as, teachers, staff, or other students?
The second question is: Can you describe if your current learning environments differ from previous learning environments?
The third question is: Can you describe any changes you would like to see in elementary school, middle school, high school, or post-secondary learning environments?

Appendix D

FROST CENTRE FOR CANADIAN STUDIES AND INDIGENOUS STUDIES

Research Participant Information and Consent Form

The Influence of the Education System on Indigenous Identities, Languages, and Cultures (Romeo Application 28577)

Principal Researcher: Kiana Pearl Dagwa'ging Cress
Supervisors: Dr. Dawn Lavell-Harvard (dawnlavellharvard@trentu.ca) and Dr. Cyndi Gilmer (cyndigilmer@trentu.ca).

You are invited to participate in research I will be conducting for my graduate thesis as I am a student in the Master of Arts in Canadian and Indigenous Studies. My research will focus on collecting data on the influence of the education system on Indigenous identities, languages, and cultures. You are being invited as you self-identify as Indigenous and have spent time in the education system. Please look at the following information.

What is the focus of the study?

Children, youth, adolescents, and indeed adults spend significant amounts of time and energy in educational spaces throughout their lives. Whether it be during elementary, secondary, or post-secondary studies, or employment opportunities, these environments should have the capacity to fulfill the specific learning and cultural needs of Indigenous students. The focus of my study is to research if there are links between time spent in the education system and the exploration and strengthening of Indigenous identities, languages, and cultures.

What is the purpose of the study?

By discussing if the education system and educational settings influence the exploration, acceptance, and strengthening of Indigenous identities, languages, and cultures my research will contribute to a much-needed policy dialogue on educational practices.

How will the research be conducted?

Using traditional Indigenous sharing circles, my research project will explore your journey through the education system generally with a specific focus on how educational spaces influence your ability to accept, explore, and value Indigenous identities, cultures, and languages.

The sharing circles will be audio-recorded, and I will personally transcribe the dialogue. The audio recordings will be stored on my password protected laptop which will be stored and locked at Trent University. You will also choose a pseudonym or use your first name as an identifier. The audio recordings will be deleted upon completion of my graduate thesis in August 2024. Therefore, these findings will only be used to write my graduate thesis project and there is no commercialization of the findings.

How many participants will be recruited?

Approximately 8-10 participants will be recruited, all of which are recruited on a voluntarily basis. Confidentiality is a core value during the data collection process therefore it will be considered and reflected throughout. As I am recruiting Trent University students to be a part of my research, there may be conflicts of interests among myself and participants. If so, these will be handled seriously, made aware to my supervisors and ethics boards, and navigated in a manner to avoid such.

How long is the data collection period?

Upon signing a consent form, 2 sharing circles of approximately 2 hours duration will be conducted. It is my hope to complete these sharing circles in the month of **March 2023.** If there are questions you do not want to answer while participating in the sharing circle that is completely acceptable as your participation is voluntary and you can withdraw at any time.

What will happen if I withdraw from the study?

This research is completely voluntary, and participants can withdraw at any time. The participant should contact the researcher via email (kianacress@trentu.ca) to withdraw from the research and to request their information be removed from transcripts. All such requests will be automatically granted without any repercussions. These requests can be made until the stage of final reporting.

What types of support will be offered during and after the data collection?

As discussions of Indigenous identities, cultures, and languages can be personal and may trigger discomfort, a list of cultural appropriate mental health resources will be provided to participants. Additionally, each sharing circle will also begin and end with a smudge.

Your signature below indicates that you have read this consent form, are voluntarily agreeing to participate in this research, and had the opportunity to ask questions regarding your participation. By signing below, you are providing your written consent. You will receive a copy of this form for your records. Please be advised that this project has been approved by the Trent Research Ethics Board.

_____ I give permission to have my audio taped.

_____ I give permission to use quotes with a chosen pseudonym or first name.

Name of Participant and Email: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Further questions

If you have any additional questions about the study or your participation, please contact:

Kiana Dagwa'ging Cress, Graduate Student
kianacress@trentu.ca

or

Anna Kisiala, Coordinator, Research Conduct and Reporting (3rd party for information)
annakisiala@trentu.ca

Chii Miigwetch.