

**Successful Transitions to Post-Secondary School:
Perspectives of Indigenous Students**

A Thesis Submitted to the
College of Graduate Studies and Research
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Education
in the Department of Educational Psychology
and Special Education
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon

By

Chelsea M. Seymour

PERMISSION TO USE

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a graduate degree from the University of Saskatchewan, I agree that the libraries of this university may make it freely available for inspection. I further agree that permission for copying of this thesis in any manner, in whole or in part, for scholarly purposes may be granted by the professor or professors who supervised my thesis work, or in their absence, by the head of the department or the dean of the college in which my thesis work was done. It is understood that any copying or publication or use of this thesis or parts thereof for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission. It is also understood that due recognition shall be given to me and to the University of Saskatchewan in any scholarly use which may be made of any material in my thesis.

Requests for permission to copy or to make other use of material in this thesis in whole or in part should be addressed to:

Department Head

Educational Psychology and Special Education

College of Education

University of Saskatchewan

28 Campus Drive

Saskatoon, SK S7N 5X1

ABSTRACT

Basic interpretive qualitative research design (Merriam, 2002) was used to explore the experiences and events that Aboriginal students reported during the transition from a rural to an urban setting and attend post-secondary school. Three participants, who were both Aboriginal and successful in completion of their first year of post-secondary education, were interviewed. Data was analyzed and five common themes emerged that contributed to their success. These were academic, family and community, culture, financial and social. These findings are discussed in relation to the current research in the area of Aboriginal education, including the First Nations and Métis Lifelong Learning Models. As well, recommendations and implication for future practice are included.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing this thesis has been a journey, to say the least.

Thank you so much to my supervisor Tim Claypool, for the support that you provided during this journey. Your knowledge has been an inspirational. Thank you for your patience, motivation and time. You truly made this experience enjoyable. Thank you.

To my committee members: Dr. Tim Molnar – Thank you for your contributions. Your knowledge of the subject matter and the process of qualitative research was very much appreciated. Dr. Janet McVittie – You challenged me to look at my research in ways that I never thought of, and this made it better. Thank you both for your help.

Finally, thank you to my daughters, Bryn and Layla, for being so quiet and self-sufficient when mommy was ‘in the zone’. You’re the best.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PERMISSION TO USE	I
ABSTRACT	II
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	III
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
THE PRESENT STUDY	4
DEFINITION OF TERMS.....	4
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW	8
INTRODUCTION.....	8
FUTURE IMPLICATIONS.....	11
TRANSITIONS: CHALLENGES	12
TRANSITIONS: COPING STRATEGIES AND SUCCESS THEMES	20
POST-SECONDARY INSTITUTIONS	21
SUMMARY	22
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY	25
QUALITATIVE RESEARCH	25
ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS	26
PROCEDURES AND PARTICIPANTS	27
THE FIRST NATIONS AND MÉTIS HOLISTIC LIFELONG LEARNING MODELS	28
DATA ANALYSIS.....	30
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS	32
THE PARTICIPANTS	32
RESEARCH FINDINGS	37
<i>Research Questions</i>	37
<i>Themes</i>	37
SUMMARY	52
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION	54
SUMMARY	54
INTEGRATION WITH THE LITERATURE	58
STRENGTHS OF THE CURRENT STUDY.....	61
LIMITATIONS OF THE CURRENT STUDY	61
IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH.....	62
RESEARCHER REFLECTION.....	64
CONCLUSION.....	64
REFERENCES	66
APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS	71
APPENDIX B: LETTER OF CONSENT	73

APPENDIX C: INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE 76
APPENDIX D: TRANSCRIPT RELEASE FORM..... 77

Chapter 1: Introduction

Growing up in Northern Saskatchewan introduced me at a very young age to Aboriginal culture and the experiences of living in a semi-isolated community. I, myself, made the transition to a large, urban centre to complete my first years of post-secondary education. Returning to the North, as a teacher, I worked in communities that were primarily made up of and Aboriginal population. Working with this population is what led me to my research in Aboriginal education and specifically the transition years from secondary to post-secondary schooling. My unique opportunities have allowed me to adopt both an emic (first person or insider) and etic (observational or outsider) perspectives of Aboriginal culture (Morris et al., 1999).

As a grade seven teacher in a Northern Saskatchewan city, I have had the luxury of keeping in touch with former students as they continued their journey through secondary and for some, post-secondary schooling. I was confounded by the number of Aboriginal students who left school before graduation, who failed to attend post-secondary schooling and who returned home before completing their first year of post-secondary schooling. This made me wonder what traits that students who showed success felt that they had that led to their achievement. Many students begin their first year of post-secondary education every year. What is it that makes the difficult transition easier for some students?

Previous research completed on attrition in post-secondary education focused mainly on the reasons that students leave school, ranging from academic challenges, to social and familial pressures. The highest rate of attrition happens in the first year of study (Arthur & Hiebert, 1996). Statistics also tell us that Aboriginal students in our country have higher rates of attrition and are more likely to leave post-secondary school without completion (Statistics Canada, 2010).

However, there are many Aboriginal students who deal with these challenges and prove to be successful in completing their first year and subsequent programming.

As I reflect on my own life, I think of the things that led to my successful graduation from high school, completion of a diploma, and undergraduate degree and work in a graduate program. My life experiences also motivated me to address the topic of this research. I shared some common traits with those students that I was most interested in including in this study. I was born and raised in a small town, which was quite isolated from any urban centres, and post-secondary institutions. Relocation was a necessary part of continuing my education past high school. I was raised in a very close-knit family, and separation from them was one of the biggest challenges of moving away to go to school. Another challenge was of the financial kind. The program I chose to take directly out of high school was a college course. The time constraints and workload were quite heavy. Employment at this time was out of the question. Although my parents were financially stable, there wasn't enough extra money to pay for tuition, books, rent and the cost of living in a large city. At the age of seventeen, I had no other option but to take out a large loan from a financial institution at high interest rates (I did not qualify for Canadian or Provincial student loans). Another challenge I faced was academic. After graduating near the top of my high school class I felt as if college should come easily to me. In retrospect, the leap from very small class sizes, and teachers who were also coaches, mentors and in some cases, family friends, due to the nature of a small town, left me feeling isolated in the large scale of a typical college setting. During my first semester of college, I failed a course, and achieved much lower grades than I had ever seen in my entire academic careers. Needless to say, by the time Christmas came, I was feeling discouraged and was ready to give up and move home. Fortunately, I persisted and remained in my college program.

Upon reflection, I realized that there were several things that contributed to my persistence in post-secondary education. My parents had both attended post-secondary school and valued post-secondary education. They had some financial means to assist me in my transition from high school to University. Additionally, most of my high school friends were also attending post-secondary schooling. These themes definitely stood out as contributing factors to my successful completion of high school as well as post-secondary schooling.

There are many factors that may lead to a student failing to complete their high school education. There are future implications for leaving high school, including the inability to further one's education in post-secondary training. I wondered if those students of Aboriginal heritage experienced similar things during their transition to post-secondary. According to the Chiefs Assembly on Education, Aboriginal students have a much lower rate of graduation. In fact the Chiefs Assembly states that between the years of 2004 and 2009, only 36% of First Nations students completed their high school education, compared to 72% overall Canadian graduation rate (2012). Even those students who graduate from high school and enrol in post-secondary studies often do not complete these studies. Reasons for this failure to complete post-secondary programs are various. Some students showed persistence in school, working hard to complete high school and attending post-secondary schooling. Of these students, most completed their first year of post-secondary without a hitch, even when facing academic and financial challenges. I began to wonder what traits these students had that contributed to their persistence, and what themes would emerge when questioned about their success.

The Present Study

Purpose and Research Questions

This research study intends to look at the success stories of Aboriginal youth in their transition to post-secondary school. Its goal is to expand on the present literature, specifically the First Nations and Métis Holistic Lifelong Learning Models, in order to identify the positive themes that exist for Aboriginal students who were successful in their transition to post-secondary school and in their completion of their first year of studies. Students who do not attain completion of post-secondary education may face many challenges, including difficulty finding suitable employment and maintenance of their financial independence. The goal is to identify the supports that are present in the lives of those who successfully make this transition and do well in post-secondary school. Additionally, I hope to detect themes and develop subsequent recommendations that will help to provide similar supports for all students. Subsequently, this could lead to an increase in the number of Aboriginal students who graduate from high school and post-secondary school institutions.

The present study asks the following question:

- How do successful Aboriginal university students explain their positive transition to post-secondary schooling from secondary school?

Definition of Terms

Aboriginal

The term Aboriginal, for the purposes of this study includes Métis, Inuit and First Nations people. Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (2012) defines Aboriginal peoples as “The descendants of the original inhabitants of North America. The Canadian

Constitution recognizes three groups of Aboriginal people – Indians, Métis and Inuit. These are three separate peoples with unique heritages, languages, cultural practices and spiritual beliefs.” This study will include participants who are both First Nation and Métis, however no Inuit participants will be included. It is important to note that the terms Aboriginal, First Nations and Indigenous are used interchangeably and are incomplete categorizations. Certain terminology is used for certain purposes, and by certain groups, in certain time periods.

Secondary schooling

Secondary schooling refers to high school, or the years of education following elementary and preceding post-secondary school. The Free Dictionary (2014) defines secondary school as “a high school or a school of corresponding grade ranking between a primary school and a college or university”.

Post-secondary schooling

Post-secondary school refers to any educational program completed after the completion of secondary schooling (high school). Statistics Canada (2010) defines post-secondary education: as:

“...an apprenticeship or trades certificate or diploma (including 'centres de formation professionnelle'); college, CEGEP or other non-university certificate or diploma; university certificate or diploma below bachelor level; or a university degree (bachelor's degree; university certificate or diploma above bachelor level; degree in medicine, dentistry, veterinary medicine or optometry; master's degree; earned doctorate).”

Persistence

In a study done by Berger, Motte and Parkin for the Canadian Millennium Scholarship Program, persistence is defined as “the ability of students to continue their post-secondary studies from one year to the next and ultimately to proceed to the completion of their program.” (2007)

Place

The concept of place is mentioned many times throughout this document. Place can be defined in many ways, and for the purpose of this study, place is defined best by Relph (1976);

“There is for virtually everyone a deep association with and consciousness of the places where we were born and grew up, where we live now, or where we have had particularly moving experiences. This association seems to constitute a vital source of both individual and cultural identity and security, a point of departure from which we orient ourselves in the world. (p. 43)”

Place attachment/ place identity

Place attachment/identity is defined as “an individual’s strong emotional attachment to a particular place or environmental setting... [that] help to defined who and of what value the person is both to himself and in terms of how he things others view him” (Proshansky, Fabian & Kaminoff, 1983, p. 74). Different studies have defined place attachment and place identity differently, and others use the terms interchangeably. For the purposes of this study, the terms will be used interchangeably.

Attrition (also drop-out, leavers, wastage, fall out, withdrawal, failure, non-persistence)

All of these terms are used interchangeably in the literature and mean the leaving of school. Whether this leaving happens in high school, or in post-secondary school, the definition is the same. “While student attrition may be more specifically defined within a particular field, it is generally characterized as the departure from or delay in successful completion of program requirements.” (Ascend Learning, 2012)

At-risk

Finn and Rock (1997) define the concept of at-risk as:

“...the notion that exposure to particular conditions, or risk factors, increases the likelihood that an individual will experience certain adverse consequences. In terms of academic outcomes, well-established risk factors include group status characteristics associated with academic difficulty or dropping out of school, for example, being a minority student attending an inner-city school, or coming from a low-income home or a home where English is not the primary language.” (p.221)

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Canada is a culturally diverse nation. One of the largest cultural groups in Canada is the Aboriginal population. Approximately 1 172 785 people in Canada identify themselves as Aboriginal (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2012). The term Aboriginal refers to the First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples of Canada (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2012). Of this group, 30% of people are under the age of 30, with a growing young population. The Aboriginal population of Canada is very culturally and linguistically diverse, with 633 First Nations communities speaking over 11 different languages and 60 different dialects. Culturally, Aboriginal people are a diverse group. There are many different language, learning styles and ways of interacting that are different those individuals from majority cultures that can make the transition to post-secondary education more difficult (Bear Spirit Consulting, 2007).

Graduation from high school and continuing on to successful completion of post-secondary education is a key component to future success. The Association of Universities and Colleges (2011) affirms that in Canada, more education equates to higher wages and higher employment rates over the course of a lifetime. This is a forbidding thought when considering the statistics surrounding Aboriginal education in Canada. The Chiefs Assembly on Education (2012) stated that the First Nations graduation rate is only 36% compared to a total Canadian rate of 72%, and that even after 5 years (ages 20-24), 60% of Aboriginal people still do not have a high school diploma as compared to 13% of non-Aboriginal population in the same age demographic. Additionally, the report states that “a First Nations youth is more likely to end up in jail than graduate from high school.” (Chiefs Assembly on Education, 2012). After high

school, those who do graduate have the option to move on to some form of post-secondary education. In 2006, 43.7% of Aboriginal people had no post-secondary, degree, certificate or diploma compared to 23.1% of Canadians overall. In addition, only 4% of First Nations people living on-reserve hold a degree from a University and only 8% overall hold a degree. This is in comparison with a total of 23% Canada-wide (Mendelson, 2006). The Assembly of First Nations Education cited a study completed by Merrill et al in 2002, which surveyed grade 12 students finding that only 70% of First Nations High School students aspired to attend post-secondary institutions to continue their education compared to 90% of their non-First Nations peers. Finnie, Childs and Qui (2012) found that of those students who do attend post-secondary school in Ontario, the Aboriginal population had the highest rate of leaving University programs (32%) prior to completion.

There are several factors that help explain these statistics. The Chiefs' Assembly reported that poverty and infrastructure could be to blame for the lack of interest in Education. A quarter of the population that lives on-reserve lives in poverty and half of that population experiences worries about food security. Aboriginal youth have higher suicide and incarceration rates and half of the population lives in a home with no internet connection. In addition, almost half of the reserves in Canada are in need of a new school and 74% of the existing schools are slated for major repair, citing problems such as unusable gymnasiums, playground equipment, kitchens, science labs, libraries and a lack of technology. (Chiefs Assembly on Education, 2012) “ Significant investments in education are required to realize the full potential and economic impact of Aboriginal youth, particularly given Canada’s labour shortages and increasing need for a highly skilled and competitive workforce. (p.4)”

While previous research into the effects of the transition to post-secondary school and lowering attrition rates of students who do attend has been completed, there has not been a lot of attention paid specifically to the Aboriginal population. The longitudinal Youth in Transition Survey, completed by Statistics Canada since 1999, studies persistence, and tracks students entering and leaving school in post-secondary programs. The Millennium Research Program, used this information and did several in-depth studies and investigations into the reasons for failure to persist and the challenges that face Canadian youth as they make the transition into post-secondary school. Parkin & Baldwin, as part of this study states that

“the most important immediate outcome of entry into post-secondary education is graduation. Colleges and universities typically put considerable effort into the recruitment of new students, while governments have made facilitating access to higher education a priority. If these efforts are to bring maximum benefits in the long run, however, the students brought in post-secondary education must be successful in their studies” (2007, p.65)

The following literature review will discuss the future implications of not completing secondary and post-secondary education, both from personal and social points of view. It will look into some of the challenges that face students when transitioning from secondary to post-secondary education and being successful in their first-year of studies, including academic and social challenges, finding employment, finances, relocation to a new geographical setting and cultural issues that may arise during this transition. It will also examine positive and successful coping mechanisms that have been identified for those students who were effective in managing the transition and some of the policies and suggestions that have been recommended for universities

and other post-secondary institutes to look at in order to ease the transition into post-secondary school.

Future Implications

Success in high school and in post-secondary studies has implications for the future, both personally (higher income, higher employment rate and less disruption in labor over the course of a person's career) and socially (impact on tax and social benefits systems). Bradshaw, O'Brennan & McNeely (2008) state that students who leave high school are at higher risk for developing social and emotional problems and are more likely to engage in criminal behaviours, use drugs and alcohol, and participate in other health risking behaviours such as risky sexual behaviour. This demographic may also have limited economic opportunities and have difficulty with adult responsibilities such as working full time, and achieving financial and familial independence.

The Association of Universities and Colleges (2011) compared the average income of Aboriginal people with different levels of educational attainment. It found that as educational attainment rises, so does income. The average income of a high school graduate is \$36 000 per year. Those with a university graduate degree average \$55 000 per year, with a university master's level degree earn an average of \$67 000 and those with at a doctorate level \$71 000. Rates of employment increase with educational level as well. Approximately 45% of people without a high school diploma are employed, 67% of those with only a high school diploma are employed, 75% of those with college diplomas are employed and 84% of those with bachelor's degrees are employed. The employment rate for Aboriginal people with bachelor's degree is on par with the national average of 83% employment for the entire Canadian population (Association of Universities and Colleges in Canada, 2011).

The report lists many public benefits to education. Higher levels of education have been linked to leading healthier and longer lives, lower rates of smoking and drug and alcohol abuse, and a population that is more engaged in the political system and provides more volunteer work. Those with higher levels of education also are more likely to pass these values onto their children, and therefore increase the educational values of future generations. (Association of Universities and Colleges in Canada, 2011)

As educational level increases, the population contributes a larger share of income tax, and pull less from social benefits. College graduates in Canada generate 22% of all income and contribute 20% of taxes. They use only 22% of social benefits. This even distribution puts no strain on the financial system of the country. University graduates contribute to a surplus in this financial system by generating 44% of income tax revenue and using only 16% of social benefits. In contrast, those without a high school diploma contribute only 5% of the income tax revenue and use 22% of government social benefits, creating the largest strain on the country's social programs. (Association of Universities and Colleges in Canada, 2011)

Transitions: Challenges

Once the decision has been made to attend post-secondary school, and the application has been accepted, new challenges face those moving into a this new role of post-secondary student. These new challenges can be social or intellectual, or emotional, in terms of identity issues. The transition to post-secondary schooling is a time where adolescents become adults and gain independence. It can be difficult for these students to move from a controlled environment to an uncontrolled environment. Typically, the excitement of a new adventure will override the anxiety, but sometimes it creates lasting issues, even causing the student to leave school entirely (Chow & Healey, 2008). Kantanis articulates that “the first year university experience of a

significant number of students is neither satisfying (in terms of personal fulfillment) nor successful (if academic achievement is the measure” (2000, p. 1). Arthur and Hiebert studied the transition from high school to post-secondary school, tracking the demands and coping strategies of students throughout their first year of post-secondary studies. The major themes in terms of demands were Academic (too much work, work is hard, poor achievement, poor instruction, general), Relationship and Family (parents, spouse/significant other, children, general), Finances (paying bills, supporting family, affording education, affording luxuries, general), Employment (obtaining qualifications, job availability, other) and Other Demands (2006). These demands were most prevalent in the first year of academic education. In fact, the highest rate of post-secondary attrition happens between the first and second year of study (Tinto, 1993). Therefore students who make it to second year are more likely to complete their program of study.

Academic

Bridging the gap between levels of academic pressure in high school and the first year of post-secondary school can be difficult. Academic demands were listed as the most common cause of attrition in Arthur and Hiebert’s 2006 study and Finnie et al cited “marks too low” as the reason that 6.9% of Canadian college students and 3.9% of Canadian university students leave post-secondary school in the first year (2012). Grades and learning styles that are exhibited during secondary school are often good predictors of who will succeed and who will discontinue (Parkin and Baldwin, 2007). They state that “learning habits are developed early and often persist with progressive levels of education (p.73).” In contrast to non-Aboriginal students, Bear Spirit Consulting (2007), found that Aboriginal students overall were less academically prepared for post-secondary education.

There are many facets of the educational experience that contribute to the difficulties experienced by the students. Kantanis, in her 2000 study, found that demands and time constraints adversely affected approximately 40% of the students interviewed. Her study followed a group of post-secondary students enrolled in an Arts program in an Australian university and interviewed them throughout their first semester of university. At the end of the semester, more than one third of the students stated that they were not accustomed to the teaching styles and 38.6% of them did not believe that they had adapted into independent learners. Common complaints in her study included that academics in post-secondary school put a low emphasis on the process of completing assignments, and that there was little guidance provided on the expected tasks. Emphasis was placed on the final product, and marks were given prior to receiving feedback from the professor. These things, coupled with the volume of independent reading expected from professors, and the heavy coursework weighting towards the end of the semester left the students unsure of expectations. Kantanis maintains that this is unacceptable and that independent learning has to be developed over time. These were unrealistic expectations for first year students. Students in Kantanis's study felt that they did not develop rapport with their professors due to high class sizes. This may have an even greater effect on students who are moving from rural areas, because of the fact that they are used to lower class sizes and stronger connections with teachers.

Social Relationships

Social relationships are incredibly important to all human beings. Lack of a friendship group undermines self-confidence and self-esteem and prevents the ability to discuss coursework and analyse material outside of class. It also is difficult when you have nobody to provide

clarification and communicate about resources. This makes learning lonely, and makes socializing and getting used to the university lifestyle more difficult.

When students enter post-secondary school, they have certain expectations about what the experience may entail. In Kantanis's Australian study, a survey was delivered to students prior to their entrance to post-secondary school in order to gauge these expectations. Meeting new and different people and having fun were ranked more importantly than being mentally stimulated and learning new material (2000). Unfortunately, many of these expectations were not realized. Students revealed that making friends was not as easy as they had thought, and that the university lifestyle was not as exciting or interesting as they had expected. Staff at the university were not accessible for advice, and the workload that they were given was intense. Due to large class sizes, few contact hours, and no cohort group, almost half (49.1%) of the students failed to make any significant friendships by the end of the first semester.

The transition to university also signifies a movement from adolescence to adulthood and can be compounded by personal, sexual, social and academic challenges during the adjustment to this newfound freedom (Kantanis, 2000). Moving from a controlled to an uncontrolled relationship with parents can lead to stress, particularly with students who are moving geographically away from their parents and are physically experiencing independence for the first time. Chow and Healey interviewed first year students in the United Kingdom who had relocated from a rural setting to an urban setting to attend university. They found that with these relocated students, one of the key components of making a successful transition was creating a social circle (2008). `Kevin`, one of the participants in the study stated ``I think if I did not have friends at University, I would consider not coming to university`` (Chow & Healey, 2008, p. 7)

SIAST (2009) found that a lack of Aboriginal staff in Canadian post-secondary institutions is limited and role models may be lacking for Aboriginal students.

Employment

Uncertainty about career goals can lead to attrition. If a student's program of study and intended career path have a clear connection, they are much more likely to complete their program of study (Parker & Baldwin, 2007).

Financial

Post-secondary school can cause financial burden for many students. 4.8% of students who left a college program and 6.7 % of students who left a university program in the first year, did so because they did not have enough money (Finnie & Qui, 2012). The Government of Canada website states that in 2013 and 2014, the average cost of a year's tuition at a Canadian university was \$5,772. This estimate does not include the cost of books and the cost of living expenses (2014). Statistics Canada (2004) estimates that the average amount of debt from student loans is \$13,000 for college students in Canada and \$20,000 for university students, and that 14% of graduates owe in excess of \$25,000 in student loans alone. This creates a situation where educational attainment is related directly to financial situation.

Student loans, grants and scholarships can help to ease the burden of the high costs of tuition and textbooks by alleviating the stress of not having enough money. Parkin and Baldwin, in their 2007 study on the cost of education in Canada found that although having a loan or grant can improve persistence, if it is not enough to cover all the student's expenses or if it is a repayable loan that will contribute to debt on the part of the student, students actually become less likely to

complete their studies. This may be the reason that youth from higher income families are less likely to drop out of college programs (Finnie & Qui, 2002).

Although funding for Aboriginal students in Canada is provided, the rising number of students who are attending post-secondary schooling means that there is less money for each person. Also, the individual First Nations are responsible for deciding who gets the money, so selection is inconsistent across the nation. In addition, this funding is only available for status Indians and Inuit people and not for the Métis (Association of Universities and Colleges in Canada, 2011). In addition, Aboriginal students are more likely to be parents than non-Aboriginal students (Holmes, 2005) and therefore be in need of childcare, which creates yet another financial demand.

Relocation

Distance from university is a factor in university participation rates (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 2011, p. 20) as students in rural areas must leave their family and social networks and incur the financial stress of moving and living costs as well as the emotional stress of being isolated from their support group (family, friends and extended family. Casey (1993) states that;

“As to *who*, it is evident that our inner most sense of personal identity (and not only our overt public identity) deeply reflects our emplacement. It follows that threats to this emplacement are also threats to our entire sense of well being.” (p. 307)

First year students generally find university intimidating and these feelings of alienation are amplified when home is not easily accessible and visits are difficult (Chow & Healey, 2008).

In Saskatchewan, 52 % of population lives more than 80 kilometres from a university compared to 19% of the entire population of Canada. The University of Saskatchewan and University of Regina enrollment is equally divided with 49.75% of students who live further than 80 kilometres away and therefore had to relocate to attend the university. When grade 11 and 12 students were surveyed in 1999, it was found that less rural (54%) than urban (70%) students planned on attending university for this reason (2008). Many Aboriginal students are from remote locations and for 1 out of 3 Aboriginal students enrolled in a post-secondary program, home is over 100 km away from campus (Holmes, 2005).

Home can be described as more than just a geographical place or a structure or building. It can be a `key element in the development of people`s sense of themselves as belonging to a place` (Proshansky, Fabian & Kamimoff, 1983). Leaving home can be equated to other losses and can result in a grieving period, felt by homesickness, dislocation, distancing and alienation. Although 60-70% of first year students report having these feelings, most of them disappear. There are however, those students for which the feelings persist, possibly leading to depression (Chow & Healey, 2008).

In Chow & Healey`s 2008 study of first year undergraduate students, they discovered that most students chose the location of their post-secondary studies based on places that were close enough to visit their homes. Many First Nations communities are isolated, and at a great distance from the campuses of Universities and Colleges.

Cultural

Ethnicity can play a role in post-secondary school attrition. Ethnic minorities are more likely to depart school without a degree, due to pressures facing ethnic majority students, such as

racism and historical, financial, cultural and educational barriers (Malatest & Associates Ltd., 2004).

Finnie, Childs and Qui (2012) identify eight groups who they state are “disadvantaged both in terms of entering PSE and, in the present context, advancing in their studies through to completion” (p. 4). These groups include what they term as “first-generation” students (those being the first in their families to advance to post-secondary education, those students who are Aboriginal, students with disabilities, students who live far from University or Colleges, those students coming from low-income families, students with single parents, those students who are first or second generation immigrants, and francophones. The study used data from the YITS (the Youth in Transition Survey), which is a longitudinal survey undertaken jointly by Statistics Canada and Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (Statistics Canada, 2010) to study youth in Canada as they transition from high school, into education and the work force. In this study, Aboriginal youth are self-identified as part of the survey. The study showed that Aboriginal college students have the highest rate of leaving programs, both within Ontario (where the study was focused) and in the broader context of the rest of Canada. 32% of Aboriginal college students left their program in Ontario, and 33.1% left their program before completion in the rest of Canada. Graduation rates for these Aboriginal students were also lower. (Finnie et al, 2012) The persistence rates for Aboriginal students are lower than of their non-Aboriginal counterparts. Parkin and Baldwin (2007) attribute this lower educational participation and attainment rate to obstacles such as distance from campus, and a more negative attitude towards education and graduation. Aboriginal students face cultural barriers, as well as often being the first in their families to attend post-secondary school, and higher rates of single parent and low-income families.

Transitions: Coping Strategies and Success Themes

Adults will experience considerable and constant change throughout life, therefore the skills used and gained to deal with transitions in life will be very important. Arthur and Hiebert studied the transition to post-secondary school at the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology in Calgary, and tracked the perceived demands that the students reported and the coping mechanisms they used. Three different age groups were studied, including direct entry students (aged 18 and 19). They found that the direct entry students were most likely to cope using venting of emotions, whereas the older students were more likely to use the suppression of competing activities mechanism (1996). This may indicate that younger, direct entry students are more focussed on the social aspects of university and the older students may have more competition for their role demands.

The coping strategies of the participants were logged at four different times throughout the year. Participants generally tended to use the same coping strategy at each time throughout the year, even though the entire group reported less stress in September and more towards the end of the year. This suggests that students continue to utilize familiar ways of coping with stress even though the stress continued to increase, which suggests that the strategies used were inadequate. (Arthur & Hiebert, 1996) Direct entry students may benefit from a program to help them with problem solving and social skills designed to manage transition demands.

In another study, done by Bradshaw et al on persistence, 5 core competencies for showing persistence were found. They are positive sense of self, self-control, decision-making skills, a moral system of judgement and pro-social connectedness (2008). Poor performance will lower self-esteem which is a contributor to attrition. Having a positive sense of self also prevents a lot of behavior problems, including delinquency and substance use. Regulating self and having

impulse control is critical to allow for success in school. Entering university is a time for newfound freedom, such as what may be the first time away from parents. Showing maturity in judgement is very important during this time. Having empathy and a social perspective is another factor in avoiding deviant behavior. Also, a connection to parents and attachment to the home is cited as a crucial part of keeping students school. Parent involvement and engagement will promote achievement and attendance. Having role models, such as parents or professors will help cement a connection to the school which the student is attending.

Post-secondary Institutions

The Chiefs Assembly (2012) outlines Section 35 (1) of the Constitution Act of 1982 that “recognizes Aboriginal and Treaty rights and affirms FN inherent right to self-government including the creation of laws and systems for the provision of lifelong learning for FN populations” (p. 5). So why are Aboriginal youth the highest demographic in Canada for leaving University before completion? Kantanis (2000) blames high schools. She states that lack of preparation is the key reason for attrition in first-year University students and that the high schools prep “an elite group of students” (p. 2) to be prepared for University. She states that Universities must look at their expectations for first year students and provide more services such as counseling, disability, language and learning services and most importantly, increased contact with academic staff. She also suggests that the Universities make an effort to assist in relocation and alienation problems, take a look into teaching and learning styles between high school and University and the transition students are going through, such as the adjustment to having more freedom and independence and helping students cope with the balance between the competing demands of paid employment, social life and University study. She states that more focus should be put on the development of opportunities to create social networks and developing University

curriculum to enhance interactive and social experiences and foster the development of learning communities, along with managing the diversity of students coming from high school. Parkin and Baldwin (2007) feel that institutionally, the poor levels of persistence in the first-year signal a poor use of resources.

Summary

Access to post-secondary education and the tools needed to succeed and complete that education are not distributed fairly amongst our people. Although post-secondary education can increase chances of future success, not all people are getting access to it. Aboriginal people in Canada have lower post-secondary entrance rates, and graduation rates. Some of the reasons for this could include poverty, infrastructure, family situations and distance from college and university campuses (Chiefs Assembly on Education, 2012).

The transition from high school to post-secondary schooling can be difficult. Socially, academically and financially, there are new pressures awaiting first year university students, coupled with the fact that they are moving from dependence to independence at the same time. This causes a high rate of attrition in first year university students. Academic pressures, including meeting deadlines and differences in learning styles have a great effect on this high first year drop-out rate. Larger class sizes and lack of a fixed cohort in many first year programs can cause some students to feel a social disconnect from their school. Add to that the fact that many students attending post-secondary school are accumulating large debts due to the high financial burden that higher education demands, particularly for students who do not have the option to live in their family home and it is easy to see why many students do not complete their first year of studies, or do not return to their programs for the second year.

Finnie et al (2012) identify the Aboriginal population as being disadvantaged in terms of completing their studies. This may be due to cultural learning differences, relocation, sometimes from very remote locations, financial burden or lack of family support.

Although transitions in life can be stressful, it is important for adults to learn to cope with these transitions. Arthur and Hiebert found that there were themes among the use of different coping strategies with first-year students in post-secondary school. Because direct entry students were more likely to have less competition for their time, the main coping mechanism found for these students was the venting of emotions, which highlights the importance of social relationships. Bradshaw et al found that there were five core competencies for persistence (2008). These were positive sense of self, self-control, decision-making skills, a moral system of judgement and pro-social connectedness. They found that students possessing all or most of these traits were more likely to persist and be successful with their education. They also found that parent involvement and engagement, both from parents and professors, help to promote achievement.

Mainstream universities and colleges are not doing their job to assist first-year students in their transition to post-secondary schooling. Aboriginal graduation rates are much higher at Aboriginal-controlled institutions. (Malatest et al., 2004) Kantanis (2000) blames lack of preparation from high schools, a lack of services for first-year students, and most of all a lack of understanding from institutions of the educational and social demands that are being placed on first year students. Parkin and Baldwin (2007) state that institutionally, there is a poor use of resources in order to assist first-year students and increase persistence.

Aboriginal students, among other groups, are at a higher risk than the general population for attrition in first-year studies. There are many possible reasons for this, and many possible reasons that certain students succeed. This project will look at three Aboriginal students who were successful in their transition to post-secondary school, and discuss challenges, and the personal traits and themes that allowed them this success in order to help identify how to better prepare Aboriginal students for the transition to post-secondary education.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter explains the methodology that was used in this study. Qualitative inquiry was used, specifically basic interpretive qualitative research (Merriam, 2002). Participant recruitment, data collection and analysis of data is explained. Finally, the ethical considerations of this study are discussed, including trustworthiness.

Qualitative Research

“The key to understanding qualitative research lies with the idea that meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world” (Merriam, 2002, p.3). Thus, information occurs through interactions with people, places and situations and then is interpreted by individuals. Qualitative research tends to focus on context and the data collected is open to interpretation, and the researcher becomes instinctive, and uses their worldview and experiences to help them to interpret the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

Basic Interpretive Qualitative Research

Merriam (2002) describes basic interpretive qualitative research as learning how individuals experience and interact with their social world and the meaning it has for them at a certain point in time and in a certain context. Focus is on understanding the meaning and the way that people interpret their experiences. In basic interpretive qualitative research, “the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis”(Merriam, 2002, p. 5). This is because human beings can be immediately adaptive and respond in ways that will help enrich the data. Also, the researcher is able to respond to non-verbal cues. The study is inductive in nature, however based on the premise that there are features of coping and success that can be identified through the examination of the transition experiences of individuals. Also, the goal of

the study was to be richly descriptive (Merriam, 2002). Rather than gleaning information from many participants and skimming the surface, fewer participants are used and their stories are studied in depth.

Ethical Considerations

There were ethical considerations for this study. As all of the participants were of legal age for consent, they were able to provide informed consent (see Appendix B) as part of their letter of invitation (see Appendix C) to be a part of the study. As part of this informed consent was the option to leave the study at any time. Each participant was offered a \$15 iTunes gift card in recognition of their time.

There was the possibility that sensitive information may be divulged during the study by the participants. Pseudonyms were used in the final report to protect the identity of the participants.

There was no physical threat to the participants or to the researcher during the course of this study.

Aboriginal people are considered ‘vulnerable’ by the Behavioural Research Ethics Board (Bio-REB) at the University of Saskatchewan and as such, the ‘Recommendations for Ethical Research with Indigenous Peoples’ document was established. This document outlines the steps that must be respected in terms of dealing with Aboriginal populations.

Participants were offered the opportunity to review and sign off on all transcripts of interviews to ensure that the meaning was authentic and that there was nothing they feel was lost in the transcription.

The Behavioural Research Ethics Board (Bio-REB) at the University of Saskatchewan was responsible for the review of this research project. The data from this project will be stored at the University of Saskatchewan for five years, at which time it will be destroyed.

Procedures and Participants

Participants consisted of second year undergraduate students from the University of Saskatchewan (U of S) and were recruited using purposeful sampling. There were two criteria for selection a) that the student had successfully completed their first year of undergraduate studies, in that they have successfully passed the classes that they intended to and re-enrolled for their second year of studies and b) that the student was of Aboriginal ancestry. I contacted three students who I know are Aboriginal and returned to their second year of studies and distributed an invitation to participate (See Appendix C). Generalization was not the intention of this study. The small sample group was used to explore a deeper understanding of the rich experiences of the participants. The First Nations and Métis Holistic Lifelong Learning Models (Appendix E) will be used as an interpretive instrument to help frame and interpret the participant's experience.

Data Collection Strategies

Individual interviews were completed with each of the participants on a one-on-one basis. The interviews were guided (see Appendix A), and included questions about the participant's perceptions of their first year of post-secondary school and the experiences that they had. Interviews were completed in a neutral, quiet coffee shop. I audiotaped each of the interviews, and then fully transcribed them. Once the interviews were transcribed, they were returned to the participant in order for them to take the opportunity to clarify any questions they had and to clarify meaning. At this time, I also took the opportunity to follow up with two of the

participants on some of the points that were raised during the interviews and had them sign a data release form to confirm that the transcripts adequately reflect the interview (See Appendix D).

The First Nations and Métis Holistic Lifelong Learning Models

The First Nations and Métis Holistic Lifelong Learning Models are used to represent the connection in learning and the community of First Nations and Métis people. The Canadian Council of Learning, along with University of Saskatchewan, in connection with the First Nations Adult & Higher Education Consortium (2009) are in the process of developing this model in order to create a framework that is able to assist in measuring the success of learning among Métis and First Nations peoples.

The First Nations Lifelong Learning Model specifically describes the purpose of learning for First Nation's people as being to "honour and protect the earth and ensure the long-term sustainability of life." (The Canadian Council of Learning, 2009) The model uses a diagram of a tree in order to show the influences on individual learning and well-being. It is important to take into account the cyclical nature of the model, and the lack of cause and effect, rather the interconnectedness of the facets of learning. Depicted in the tree's root system is the grounding of experiences, both from Indigenous and Western ways of life. The "Sources and Domains of Knowledge" include other nations, nation, clan, community, self, family, ancestors, natural world, traditions and ceremonies, and languages. These roots form the trunk of the tree. A cross-sectional diagram of the tree's trunk shows the "Learning Rings of the Individual". These include a split between Indigenous and Western knowledge along with the four dimensions of the medicine wheel (spiritual, emotional, physical and mental) at the core of the tree. The rings show the lifelong process of learning, from birth through to adulthood and include early learning,

elementary/secondary education, post-secondary education, workplace learning, adult learning and intergenerational learning. These rings depict both informal and formal learning. Examples of informal learning would be in the home, or on the land. Examples of formal learning include school, and will be what this research focuses on. The branches of the tree represent the “Collective Well-Being” of the individual and represent the cultural, social, political and economic facets of individual learning. Finally, the leaves of the tree represent the “Learning Guides”; mentors, counsellors, parents, teachers, and Elders, who provide support throughout the lifespan of the learner. (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009)

The Métis Holistic Lifelong Learning Model is similar in nature. The Métis people look at learning in this model as the “Sacred Act of Living a Good Life”, and focuses on the connection between the community and the world, with the Creator at the centre of this relationship. The Métis Holistic Lifelong Learning Model also uses a diagram of a tree as it’s basis. In this case, the diagram of the tree represents the similarities between Métis learners and a living tree, and the needs for certain conditions in order to thrive. The roots of the tree represent health and well-being (social, physical, economic, political, spiritual, health care and balance and harmony). These roots of learning refer to the conditions that foster lifelong learning. The cross-sectional view of the trunk’s “Learning Rings”, as in the First Nations model, show how learning occurs over a lifetimes. At the core of the truck is the identity of the person as a Métis person (the spiritual, emotional, physical and mental dimensions of self). The first two rings depict the learning from family and social relations and focus on informal learning. The final four rings mirror that of the First Nations model and depict the stages of learning from childhood to adulthood; early childhood learning, elementary education, secondary and post secondary education and adult learning. These rings encompass both formal and informal learning

modalities, but represent mostly the formal learning processes of the school system. The branches of the tree represent “Sources of Knowledge and Knowing” (self, people, land, and languages and traditions), and the leaves represent the domains of knowledge (imagination, family, traditional practices and language). The leaves are shaded different colors in order to indicate the levels of knowledge each represents and as leaves fall to the ground, these domains of knowledge will serve to enrich the knowledge and values at the root of the tree. (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009)

These models have been the basis in informing myself in order to discover and organize the themes found in this research project. The interviews done with the participants have been carefully analyzed, through coding the transcripts and identifying phrases, statements, and ideas that align with the what I came to understand through examining the models. The models were used primarily as a tool to educate the researcher so as to better understand and become more sensitive to cultural influences and identity, so that in identifying the themes became a more trustworthy and believable interpretation of the experience of the participants. Important features of the model align with the experiences of the participants’.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed thematically. Data from the interviews was coded to identify different categories and common subjects, by identifying common phrases, words and ideas. Identification of consistent themes throughout the participants’ interviews were identified. This data was compared between the interviews and coded into different categories. The researcher, in this case, serves as the interpretive instrument.

Trustworthiness

Marshall & Rossman (2011) identify four main categories for determining the trustworthiness of a qualitative research study. These four categories are social validity, subjectivity and reflexivity, adequacy of data and adequacy of interpretation. Social validity refers to the idea that a study must be relevant to society (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). This study has social validity due to the statistics presented earlier regarding attrition of Aboriginal students from University and other post-secondary programs. Subjectivity and Reflexivity refers to the question of researcher bias (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Researcher bias is assumed in qualitative research, however through self-reflection and openness to participants perspectives, it can be minimized (Morrow, 2005). I worked collaboratively with my thesis supervisor, who provided a check on unreasonable assertions and error regarding how the information being considered was interpreted.. Adequacy of data and adequate amounts of evidence refer to the potential limitations in the quality of data collected (Morrow, 2005). In this study, the depth and detail of the interviews helped increase the quality of the data collected, as the reliability, clarity and believability of the participants' responses was carefully considered. This, along with the follow-up interviews to clarify meaning, helped to increase the variety and quality of the evidence collected.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the results of this study. The participants will be introduced and the themes that became apparent through their interviews will be presented. Any names, and distinguishing information about the participants were changed. Some omissions and additions were made to quotes to ease readability and these are notated by ellipses (for omissions) and square brackets (for additions).

The Participants

Naomi.

Naomi is a second year postsecondary student. She attended a Midwestern Canadian university in order to complete her first year in the College of Arts and Sciences and then in her second year transferred to a polytechnical institution in the same city to a nursing program. Her goal is to eventually become a pediatrician. Naomi grew up in a small town approximately 350 kilometres from the nearest University. She is from a tight-knit nuclear family. Naomi's parents have had a happy marriage of approximately 25 years and are still together. Naomi has two younger brothers, who are twins, one of which is her current roommate.

Academically, Naomi retained a GPA above 80% in high school and found the classes to be a bit more challenging in University, however has completed all of her courses successfully.

Her family is very supportive of her and has always had expectations that she would obtain a post-secondary education. Naomi chose the most viable option for her post-secondary schooling because the midwestern city was relatively close to her family.

Naomi is from a Métis background, and identifies that she suffers from culture confusion due to the fact that she "looks white". Although this "culture confusion" does not seem to affect

her daily life, it becomes very relevant when faced with institutional guidelines such as the following. Naomi related a story regarding her application process to the polytechnical institution, in which she decided to self-identify her Métis culture. A friend of hers (who was also Métis) did not self-identify, and made a flippant comment to Naomi that she had gotten in on “white man’s standards”, which Naomi felt was an insult due to the fact that a limited number of spaces at the polytechnical institution’s nursing program are held for students of Aboriginal descent.

Financially, Naomi funds her education through Provincial and National student loans, as well as by working throughout the summer in her hometown. She has lived in an apartment, with various roommates over the past two years, and pays rent. She has received some scholarships. She does not indicate that money is a source of stress and also points out that her parents will help her out if she really needs it.

Naomi’s roommates have changed over the past two years and she currently lives with her brother. She indicated that she was lonely when she first moved to this midwestern city, but that her friends from home were her support system and a source of comfort. She lived with one of these friends and had another close friend who lived in residence on University campus. Naomi stated that her friend on campus was very crucial in mitigating the feelings of loneliness that she had in leaving home. She stated that class sizes in the Arts and Sciences program and differences in urban and rural life were two of the main reasons for her isolation during her first year. Classes in the undergraduate programs at this particular University ranged in size from approximately 100-150 students, according to Naomi, and this made interactions with professors and other students more difficult on a personal level. She found that the lack of support that this created from professors and peers made the academic portion of her first year of studies more difficult.

During Naomi's first year at the University, she found that although there were many orientation and other events taking place on campus, she frequently did not know they were happening. Rather than attend orientation, she decided to explore the campus on her own. This decision was made due to avoiding social situations where she might potentially feel uncomfortable. She found that living off campus made it difficult to feel engaged in campus life and the activities happening on campus. One of the stated reasons for this was due to transportation and the bussing system, of which Naomi was unfamiliar and had difficulty getting used to. She felt that it was easier to stay home than to figure out transportation to campus. This did not effect her attendance in classes, but rather any social events that she may have attended in the first few months of school.

Serena.

Serena is in her second year of a program designed for First Nations and Métis students at a Midwestern university. Her goal is to finish her Bachelor of Education and to secure a job teaching upon graduation. Serena grew up in the same community as Naomi, but spent time living on and off the reserve there. Her parents remain together and her 2 younger siblings both live with them in their hometown, approximately 350 km away.

Academically, Serena did very well in high school. Her parents had expectations that her marks remain in the 80's, so she kept them there, although she admits she probably could have done better. Her family was initially unsure about her decision to go to post-secondary school, but were more supportive once they realized how much it meant to her. Like Naomi, staying as close to home as possible was important to her and she does not think she would have attended school if it meant moving further away than the city where she resides.

Serena is Métis. Her family participated in many cultural traditions, such as sweats, powwows and other events in the community, as well as collecting and braiding sweetgrass with her aunt, while she was growing up. Although her own nuclear family was not as traditionally cultural as some other in the extended family, the fact remains that extended family itself was very important to them, and she spent a lot of time with aunts and cousins immersed in the Métis culture. She identified that the whole sense of extended family being close-knit was cultural in itself, and that she considered extended family members such as cousins, to have a closer role, almost like that of a sibling. Through the Métis focused program that she is enrolled at university, Serena has gained more knowledge of her culture and what it means to be of Métis descent.

Financially, Serena depends on student loans and the money she makes working in the summer and over holidays from school for her living expenses, however her tuition and textbooks are paid in full through a grant that she received from a Métis organization in her province. She lives on campus in residence so living costs are less than for those living off campus. Serena stated that she could receive help from her parents if she needed it but that she did not really feel right taking money from them now that she was living outside of their home.

In residence, Serena lives with a good friend who she went to high school with and who moved to the city at the same time. Her roommate is her biggest source of support, and she spends the majority of her time with her and other people who moved from her hometown. Although she felt initially that she may have a hard time making friends, she found that the small class size associated with the Aboriginal-focused program in which she is enrolled made it easy to connect with classmates. She identifies her classmates as being a tight-knit group, who help each other out with assignments and spend time together socially.

Jess.

Jess is in her second year of the nursing program at SIAST. She grew up in a different small town than Naomi and Serena, about 400 km north of the city in which they now reside. She grew up living on reserve and moved back and forth between the reserve school and “town” school throughout high school. Jess maintained an average in the lower 90’s during her high school career and the goal of obtaining a high school diploma was never questioned by Jess or her parents. The goal was always obtainable. She is the first person in her family, immediate and extended, to attend post-secondary school and her family did not expect her to attend. She found the schoolwork intimidating at first, but persevered and succeeded, as her self-doubt decreased due to gaining familiarity with the city, her home, the people in her program and the program itself. These changes from her small town high school to her large city campus were intimidating for Jess.

Jess is of First Nations’ descent. She grew up in a place where she never felt like a minority and said that racism was rare. Her family practices many traditions associated with First Nations culture and she grew up attending many traditional events and consequently learned a lot about her culture. Her band fully funds her tuition and pays for her textbooks, however she works for the family business during the summer in order to make ends meet. Jess rents an apartment with a roommate at the present time, but had some difficulty finding a place to live when she first moved to the city. She originally moved to an area of the city associated with lower socio-economic status (SES) and a higher crime rate and she felt that it was too dangerous so she eventually moved in with a friend she had met prior to moving. Jess feels that her roommate is her biggest social support. Due to her living situation, she was very lonely when she

first moved to Saskatoon and missed home a lot but feels much more settled now that her living situation and social situation have improved.

Research Findings

This section will present the findings of this research, as well as identify themes generated from the participants' responses. These results pertain only to the participants' from this study and cannot be generalized to the population. However, these findings can provide insight into why such students are successful and this can be used by the reader to deepen their knowledge and understanding in regard to their own situations

Research Question

The following question framed the study:

1. How do successful Aboriginal university students explain their positive transition to post-secondary schooling from secondary school?

Themes

The following themes were identified in the interview data and are presented in this section in response to the research question in order to identify factors that help contribute to the success of Aboriginal university students to make a positive transition to post-secondary school from secondary school. The findings are consistent with established literature that relates to attrition in post-secondary education as well as with the Lifelong Learning Models introduced in the previous section. The following themes were found through analysis of participant's responses.

1. Academic – Students who do well in high school, with the support of their high school teachers, mentors and counsellors may find school more challenging in post-secondary school, and may initially achieve lower marks, but will be capable of success.
2. Family and Community – Students with a family who values education, both throughout high school and into post-secondary school, and who maintain contact with their families throughout the transition will be capable of success. This may include other mentors, such as Elders in the community. The concept of family may also refer to extended family, community members (clan) and other supports close to the individual.
3. Culture – Students from First Nations and Métis backgrounds who had the ability to sustain spiritual connections, including language and traditional knowledge-seeking as part of the post-secondary experience will be capable of success.
4. Financial – Students who receive money through student loans, scholarships or private funding, with help from their family and viable summer employment will be capable of success. The financial experience of many First Nations and Métis individuals has much to do with the political situation of the band and the economic funding structure available for First Nations students.
5. Social – Students may experience loneliness and isolation during the transition, but with smaller class sizes, orientation to new school situations and connections from their homes will be capable of success. This social experience for First Nations and Métis learners comes often from a sense of community, and a connection to spiritual and cultural opportunities.

Academic.

The mental domain of an individual's health and well-being is one of the four main facets of a individual's personal development, according to First Nations and Métis culture. In both of the models, these four main facets make up the core of the trunk of the tree, therefore representing the core of the person (Canadian Council for Learning, 2009).

All three participants indicated similar things in terms of academics having an effect on their success in post-secondary school. All three girls succeeded in high school academically, yet found the classes more difficult in their first year post-secondary, as is common with university students in their first few years of post-secondary struggles. However, all three participants reported feeling that their teachers in high school had prepared them for this, and that post-secondary school classes were not as difficult as they had worried it might be. All participants found continued support from their high school teachers into their post-secondary studies, both in terms of the continuing influence of those teachers and often, in the continuing contact with their students into their post-secondary studies. These teachers seemed to be a key factor in their motivation to be successful. Mentors, teachers and counsellors were indicated to be examples of "Nurturing Guides" in the First-Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning Model (Canadian Council for Learning, 2009).

The level of success the students showed in high school in terms of grades seems to be an indicator for success in the first-year of post-secondary school. Jess stated "...I was always like, smart, and good at school, like it was always easy for me to get answers right and do good... [my marks were] pretty good, high. I never really had to try". It seemed that lack of effort characterized all three of the participants in high school. Serena echoed Jess' statement. "I kinda

didn't really care... like my parents expected me to get 80's so I got 80's but like I easily probably could have got better... I didn't really try to excel, ya know."

Once in post-secondary school, however, the participants found their classes more challenging, albeit easier than what their expectations were. Naomi stated;

"[I was nervous about] how difficult the classes would be, because high school really psyches you out about it. Like 'it's gonna be so hard! It's gonna be so hard!. It's hard, but not as hard as they make it seem... [I] expected to get... not the 90's I got in high school. I got mostly the mid 60s and 70s. I failed my Physics almost. I got a 50 in that. That was so hard."

Serena agreed, saying;

"I thought it was going to be an overload but it wasn't as bad as I thought it was going to be. I thought I was going to struggle a lot, but I think my first University English class, I got higher than I did in my grade 12 English classes and again, too, I think it's from more the one on one like at the high school that we went to... people would always come to me for advice... I did a lot better than I thought I would, like in high school they amp you up, like it's gonna be so hard, and so stressful and like... I expected... lower grades that I got..."

Jess echoed their thoughts regarding expectations and performance;

"It was hard, but not really hard. Maybe I spent a lot of time working on it. I really wanted to do good. I had to like, work way harder than in high school but I expected that because of how they told us when we applied, like it's gonna be so much harder... My

marks were lower than they were in high school, but I like, expected that... my teachers in high school warned me..."

Teachers in their high schools had warned them and prepared them for what to expect in post-secondary school. This seems to have fostered a sense of determination that translated into a strong work ethic in the research participants. This resulted in them performing better than they expected in their respective classes. Additionally, their high school teachers also were a support for the participants throughout the first year of post-secondary school. These teachers acted as mentors and guides for the participants'.

Participant's reports of a positive and supportive relationship with their high school teachers helped to explain their relative success in high school but also served to explain some of their initial success in post-secondary schooling. These relationships were undoubtedly important to the participants, and were contradictory to their experiences beginning post-secondary school, where large class sizes seemed to prevent the development of these relationship. Jess says "I still talk to all my teachers from high school when I got home and like, they actually care and are like, interested... in where I am and what I do". Serena, as well, indicated a strong relationship with her high school English teacher. Naomi went as far as to contact her teachers for help in her first year;

"I actually got help from Mr. Smith (pseudonym) a couple times. I'd take pictures of my questions and say like, did I even do this right because it's not adding up and he'd be like, no, you're horribly wrong (laughs)... [it was easier] probably that because there was a small town, we had like, teachers phone numbers so I could text _____ and be like, he, I need help on this. Or, if I went home, I could just go and talk to Ms. _____ or

whatever about English, so that made it easier, just being able to keep talking to the teachers and have them guide me.”

Overall, in terms of academics, the strong support that the participants received from their high school teachers, both while they were in their classes, and throughout the first year of post-secondary, coupled with their achievement in high school, were pieces that assisted in their academic success in the first year of post-secondary school.

Family and Community.

The clan, community, family and ancestors are all based at the roots of the First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning Model. Learning from family is based at the core of the trunk of the Métis Holistic Lifelong Learning Model, and also occurs in the leaves, signifying knowledge transmission (Canadian Council for Learning, 2009). Family was identified as a very critical avenue of support for all of the participants in succeeding in their first year of post-secondary school. Family support in completing high school, staying close to home, and remaining in contact during the transition and throughout the first year were the key themes that emerged from interviews with the participants.

All the participants had families that were supportive of obtaining a high school diploma as well as a post-secondary education. The strength of family relationships have a great effect of the Educational outcomes of Aboriginal children (Canadian Council for Learning, 2009). Naomi’s family was always supportive of her graduation from high school. Both of her parents are high school graduates, as well as her two younger brothers. Her mom has “...always expected us to go past high school. Just completing high school was like, not acceptable. We had to get some kind of post-secondary”. Serena’s parents also are both high school graduates. Her

dad completed post-secondary schooling and her mother started but didn't finish due to her decision to raise a family. They had high expectations for Serena and her siblings while they were in high school, however raised some concerns when Searena mentioned going on to post-secondary but "...[her] mom was supportive after [she] figured out that it was what [she] wanted to do...". A high school diploma was also a family value in Jess' family. She stated "...it just wasn't a thing... like we were gonna graduate no matter what... so I guess... my parents always kind of put that in us.... like a value". Jess was the first person in both her mother's and father's families to attend post-secondary school and feels that her parents were "proud, I guess... everyone says they brag about it all the time, but like in a good way".

Staying close to home was important as was maintaining frequent contact and regular home visits with their families was very important to all of the participants. This is consistent with Proshansky et al.'s definition of place attachment and identity (Proshansky et. al., 1983). As well, this connection to land and community is unsurprising, as both the models cite land and community as being integral to the lifelong learning process (University of Saskatchewan, 2007). One of the major stressors for Jess when she first came to the city was that her parents were not used to travelling and did not help her move, or visit often. She also did not have a vehicle to go home, and although she was able to obtain rides home with friends at first, she did not make it back very often. She was able to FaceTime on her phone "for like hours", but she was still very lonely, which reiterates a "strong emotional attachment to a particular place or environmental setting (Proshansky et. al., 1983, p.74). Both Jess and Naomi chose to attend the university that was the least distance from their homes. Naomi said "... I went back almost every weekend for the first month and a half. I would go watch my brothers play football or just go home... I called them lots...". Serena also never considered anywhere but the midwestern university she attends

to complete her studies. She had had a lot more independence in high school for example, being able to join an international travel group and felt that she was used to being away from her family more than others that she knew, however she said "... I kinda knew if I missed them on the weekends, I could just go home. It's like, three hours...".

Support from family during high school and the expectations of the family to graduate and attend post-secondary schooling, along with the ability to visit home and keep contact with family, community and land were major factors in the success of the participants in this study.

Culture.

Spirituality, as a core facet of an individual's development, is integral in the lifelong learning process of the First Nations or Métis learner. When studying the models, culture, as described as spirituality, balance and harmony, language, traditional practices, the guidance of Elders, the natural world and connection to ancestors is found in all parts of the tree, the roots, the trunk, the branches and the leaves, which represent the core sources of knowledge and values, the basis of learning and the supports and guides that nurture this learning (Canadian Council for Learning, 2009).

82% of parents or guardians living on-reserve stated the cultural events were "somewhat" to "very" important in their children's lives, and 54% of Aboriginal children living off reserves stated that they had someone in their lives who assisted them in learning about their culture and history (Canadian Council for Learning, 2009). Naomi and Serena are both of Métis descent, and Jess is of First Nations descent. Naomi grew up off-reserve, Serena grew up between the reserve and her small town, and Jess grew up on her home reserve. Naomi didn't feel that her culture had

much effect on her as a child in her family, or in high school, however she recalls being affected by racism in the community;

“Like when you’re in a grocery store or whatever and you’re in line, white people just walk up to you and say, ‘those Indians’... It’s like they think it’s ok to say that to me because I look white, then I’m like, well I’m Métis, and then they’ll just shut up and not say anything... I look white so like people don’t [identify me as] true Aboriginal. Like First Nations. If you look native or whatever, they don’t accept you as much if you have darker skin so I was like, I’ll just stay (laughs). I’ll just stay home [from activities put on by the Indigenous Centre at the University].”

Although Serena doesn’t identify her immediate, nuclear family as following cultural traditions, she feels that her extended family participated more in cultural events in which she would be included. She identified extended family members, such as her aunt, as being someone who taught her about the Métis culture. She also identifies the current Métis-focused program as being supportive of her cultural education;

“...I’ve taken four Native Studies classes now, like I’ve realized how much my culture has actually like embedded in me and like the way I was brought up so it makes me remember my family so it makes me miss them more. Or like, like some stuff, like I didn’t even know.... My grandpa would do the broom dance and I had no clue that was a Métis tradition or anything at all. I’m like, that’s so weird, like even some of the songs that we’ve been played or whatnot, I had no clue they had to do with the Aboriginal culture... all of us know how to broom dance and like jig and stuff...”

Jess grew up in a very cultural home;

“[I attended a lot of cultural things in high school] like powwows, yeah, my cousin dances, and that’s all there was to do like even at school. We’d have feasts and stuff. It was pretty into our culture. My family like, does stuff too, like my Kokum and stuff, and aunties, they like go to pilgrimages and stuff. It’s mostly for older people though. I’ll go when I’m older.”

Her culture sometimes made her feel like an outsider after she had moved;

“Most of the people where I’m from are Aboriginal so like, I guess it’s normal. White people were like the minority. Like, there was racist things, but like... both ways. Like I feel that we were racist to whites and they were racist to natives, but like I had friends who were white... It was different being somewhere with lots of whites. I felt like a target, like I don’t know, nothing happened and nobody said anything. I just felt, like different a lot.”

The racism that she experienced was also covert;

“Not like people saying mean stuff or physical or anything, just like people saying stuff about Indians around me, or like staring at me, or like when there was a drunk on the street and people would just say ‘fucking Indians’. That was different for me... sometimes I just thought it would be easier to not look like I looked, and like, I don’t know.”

The Métis-focused program, the Midwestern University and the Poly-technical institution all have support in place for Aboriginal students, including events, activities, groups, and liaisons, however all three girls declined to attend any of the events. Serena stated that she and her roommate were often too shy to attend the events, Naomi did not identify with her culture,

and although she later regrets it, Jess didn't attend because she didn't have anyone to attend with. Serena did find that in first year of the Métis-focused program she became more connected to her culture.

“I feel like [my connection to my culture effects me] in a way, but not in a really big way. I feel um, like more so now, again because I've taken four native studies classes now, like I've realized how much my culture has like, actually like embedded in me...”

Serena felt that the program that she was part of enhanced her cultural awareness, however the other participants did not feel that their programs were culturally relevant.

Language is a huge factor of Aboriginal culture. “Despite the widely recognized importance of language to Aboriginal learning and Canada's overall social and cultural well-being, there has been a long-term decline in the learning and use of most Aboriginal languages” (Canadian Council for Learning, 2009, p. 27). None of the participants in this study speak their native, Aboriginal language.

Financial.

One of the main stressors related to high attrition rates of post-secondary students is related directly to financial problems. Tuition, living expenses and the stress of working part-time can be difficult for new post-secondary school students. Loans, scholarships and funding can all be very helpful to make ends meet.

Jess' First Nation's band council paid her tuition, however she had to come up with living expenses for her time in school. She had a student loan which made things easier, but she still felt the financial pinch occasionally, especially in terms of travelling home, and going out with

friends. However, her parents were willing to help her out if it was needed, and she didn't find it to be something that stressed her out a lot. Jess supplemented her student loan by working for her parents during the summer months.

Serena's situation was similar. Her tuition (for the four years she attends the program) is paid by her home reserve's band council. She also has obtained a student loan to help her with her living expenses, however, since she lives in residence, these expenses are minimal. She knows that if she were to ask her parents for money, they would be able to help her out. She does not find money to be stressful. Serena also worked over the summer months, saving money to help supplement her living expenses.

Although Naomi was responsible for paying her own tuition, she was able to obtain a student loan to help her throughout her studies. Naomi also was the recipient of many scholarships which helped her to make ends meet as well as having the security of her parents' ability to help her out if needed. Naomi also worked throughout the summer months in order to supplement her time in school.

All three of the participants were eligible for Canada student loan, worked throughout the summer months and were able to receive financial help from their parents if needed. Two of the participants were not required to pay their tuition. This support and aid helped the students to focus on classes and not need to work during the school year. Due to the number of studies that cited finances as being a major concern (Finnie & Qui, 2002; Statistics Canada, 2004; Arthur & Hiebert, 2006; Parkin & Baldwin, 2007; Holmes, 2005), it is surprising that those participants in this study seemed to have an absence of financial issues.

Social.

The emotional facet of one's self, in terms of social relationships, can be integral in finding your place in a new setting. Connection to land, community, clan, and the physical environment in which you have been raised is full of important relationships. These connections occur in all parts of the learning models. They appear in the base, knowledge gathering and support stages of the models (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009).

Loneliness is common when moving, especially for the first time away from your family. Naomi experienced some difficulty getting to know new people in the city.

“I was very, very nervous. I was like so shy. I would try to talk to people but then they like, wouldn't talk to me. I was like, whatever. I was like, they're such bitches...I would sit beside someone and be like, 'Hi, I'm [Naomi]' and they just wouldn't respond and I'd be like, 'Oh, that's cool'”.

Jess felt very disconnected from home as well.

“...I was miserable here. Thank god I had [my roommate] cause [I missed] like my boyfriend, and my friends and my whole family and like everyone, even like people I didn't like and my teachers and stuff. I just missed all of it.”

The participants in this study identified friends from home and smaller class sizes to be the main factors in getting used to their new social lives.

All three of the participants had roommates that they were familiar with from their time in high school during their first year. This may represent a family and/or mirror a small sense of community for the girls. Jess identified her roommate as being the most important social support

that she had during her first year, stating "...She knows what it's like, and like, what I was going through... yeah, she was like my only social thing, support thing... having a friend from home was like, what got me through especially since she was like, doing the same thing, moving out for the first time and stuff...". Serena was lucky enough to room with a friend from home in residence.

"having the same people around [is important], so you like gain comfort in them, it's like a big deal. And I also like living and being close with people from my hometown. It's like when your family isn't there, it's like the closest thing you have to family... keep [ing] your friends from home close as like, it's just as important as making new friends and making new connections."

Social support is also needed within the classroom. Naomi completed her first year at the Midwestern university in Arts and Sciences and commented that "it was like 300 people in a class, and it's like too many people, I think". Serena was in a smaller program within the Midwestern University, attending a Métis-focused program and found "the first couple days was a bit scary, but then you open up because I guess there is only 30 people, like 20 people, like whatever in my year and then they're all like close, so then it started being easier... you gain comfort in them, it's like a big deal." Serena also found the smaller class sizes at the Poly-technical institution comforting.

"I liked that I only went to school with mostly the same girls every day, and that like, our instructors all know us. I don't know, like I guess it's good to have a small group, like some people like big crowds, but I'm from a small place, so I think I was just comfortable with a small group."

Naomi went back to her hometown a lot during the first year of school. She stated that that really “hindered her making friends” and held her back from making new friends in the city. Her advice to someone starting post-secondary school and moving from a small town would be to “[not] go home all the time. That really ruins your social experience.”

Keeping your old friends and having that connection to home was a factor in the success of the participants. However, it was important to meet new people, and that seemed to be much easier for those in smaller classes.

Although there are events offered for first-year students on campus and these events are targeted to new students to help them to socialize and meet people, often times these events are not attended, due to many different reasons. Sometimes, it’s due to lifestyle. Serena reported not attending much because she was not of the legal drinking age in the province and many of the activities included drinking and Jess said that “there was lots to do [at SIAST]... at the beginning, like socials and bar stuff and pub crawls but we don’t really drink, or like like that stuff, so we most hung out at [my friend’s] apartment.” However, she regrets it now, stating “it’s like I didn’t know people so I didn’t want to go, but now I wish I did, because like, I know people now and I might have known them sooner.”. This self-inclusion strategy was unfortunate for her. Naomi attended the orientation sessions offered, but didn’t find it helpful, stating “I learned more just walking around by myself.”

Change.

Several issues were indicated by the participants’ responses.

First, smaller class sizes were identified as being conducive to achievement and comfort. Additionally, programs specifically engineered with the Aboriginal learner in mind were more

conducive to learning. As well, students who were given the opportunity to learn in an atmosphere that was enriched with Indigenous ways of learning alongside Western ways felt more at ease.

Summary

Through conversations with these three young women, I was able to understand some of the themes that may have contributed to their success in their first year of post-secondary education, their return to continue school, and their ongoing achievement. These themes were evident and outlined in terms of the Métis and First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning Models in terms of their sources and domains of knowledge and their lifelong learning journey, specifically in the role that post-secondary education in the first year effects that lifelong learning journey and in affected by the sources and domains of knowledge evident in the First Nations and Métis cultures (Canadian Council for Research, 2009). The participants emphasized the positive experiences that they had in their first year, as well as discussed some of the challenges they faced and how they overcame these challenges.

Their perceptions were similar. Academic achievement (a piece of the mental component of self) in high school was an important factor, and the encouragement and support of their high school teachers and mentors, into their first years of post-secondary was of tremendous value. Although their marks dropped in their first year of post-secondary from high school, this was attributed to the classes being more challenging. Family support, including expectations to graduate and attend post-secondary school, as well as contact with family, community and the ability to visit home were contributing factors to their shared success. They noted that programs targeted specifically for Aboriginal students were beneficial for them in terms of the small class sizes, and keeping in touch with their culture. Financially, access to students loans, and grants

and scholarships from their specific band councils, along with the ability to find summer employment all eased the burden and stress of having to work along with attending school, as well as pay for their living expenses. Finally, socially, having a network of friends from home eased the loneliness that is a normal part of moving away from home. In addition, attending school orientation events, and meeting new people, preferably in smaller classes was helpful in getting accustomed. The students spoke candidly about their experiences acclimatizing to a new city, and these experiences help to shape a picture of a successful transition into post-secondary school.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this chapter is to consider the research completed in this study, specifically regarding themes for coping and transition, and to compare it to the current literature. It focuses on the challenges and points of resiliency during the transition to post-secondary schooling. In addition, the chapter will consider the strengths and limitations of the study, and the implications for future research and practice. This chapter will report the conclusions and recommendations that have resulted from this study.

Summary

There are many challenges facing Aboriginal students in their journey to transition rural to urban centres and from secondary to post-secondary school. By building on the strengths of these students, as well as the strengths and opportunities of institutions, we may be able to increase the success rate of these students during their first year of post-secondary schooling. The current study tells the stories of three Aboriginal females who successfully completed these transitions in order to pursue their studies and who persisted in completion of their first year of studies.

The First Nations and Métis Holistic Lifelong Learning Models were developed by the Canadian Council of Learning in 2009 and are used to represent the unique model of lifelong learning felt by the communities of First Nations and Métis people. This framework can assist in demonstrating the success of learning amongst this demographic. The cyclical models demonstrate that learning is interconnected with experiences, which may stem from Indigenous or Western ways of life and that these experiences, in conjunction with the “Sources and Domains of Knowledge” are what provide that basis for holistic Aboriginal learning. These “Sources and Domains of Knowledge” (nations, clans, other nations, community, self, family,

ancestors, natural world, traditions and ceremonies, and languages) meld with the four dimensions of the medicine wheel (spiritual, emotional, physical and mental) in order to illustrate how the progression from early learning to intergenerational learning is lifelong and immersed in culture-specific teachings and understandings. These models formed the lens through which the participants' transcripts were analyzed and the foundation for the identification of emerging themes while also providing a general framework for their interpretation.

The study served to answer the questions: 1. How do successful Aboriginal university students explain their positive transition to post-secondary schooling from secondary school?; and 2. What are some changes needed to ensure increased retention and graduation rates for post-secondary Aboriginal students?

The themes that emerged from the participants' explanation of their success were academic, family and community, cultural, financial and social.

Academically, all of the students were successful in high school and had support from mentors and community members, including teachers, who provided academic advice and encouragement throughout the transition. Post-secondary classes were identified as being more challenging, however the participants all felt that they were prepared for the challenge and had their high school mentors to thank for this preparation. The Lifelong Learning models support this in highlighting the importance of mentors, counsellors and teachers as 'Nurturing Guides' throughout the entire lifespan of the learner.

Family and community, along with the clan, ancestors and Elders are what make up the basis of the lifelong learning models. Family was identified by all participants as being a very

critical support for them during their transition. Family support for participants came in many forms, such as expectations for high school graduation, frequent contact during the transition time and remaining as close to home as possible in order to access this support. The actual physical presence of home was another factor that provided the participants with strength to persevere. All of the participants hesitated to move further than they did for school, remaining in institutions that were closer to them geographically. This “place attachment” (Proshansky et al, 1983) is aligned with the models grounding in land and tradition and identity.

This grounding in land and tradition can also be connected to the cultural component of the findings. Both the First Nations Lifelong Learning Model and the Métis Lifelong Learning Model cite spirituality as a core facet of an individual’s development and integral to their learning and subsequent maturing of the individual from a holistic perspective. Culture, in this case, is described as spirituality, balance and harmony, language, traditional practices, the guidance of Elders, the natural world and connection to ancestors and is found throughout the models. There were varying levels of cultural awareness amongst the participants, however the overarching theme was that even those living off-reserve whose family did not participate in cultural events had someone in their lives that assisted them to learn about their culture and spirituality. Of the three participants, one states that she had very little connection to culture as a child, one states that she had some connection to culture as a child, and the third states that she was very connected to her culture as a child. In addition, the participant who identified with some connection to culture as a child, stated that she felt more culturally attuned after attending a program geared specifically towards Aboriginal learners, culture and learning styles. Although there were events specifically geared towards Aboriginal culture at their respective institutions, none of the participants attended, although all regretted their lack of involvement.

Financial stress is often a stressor for first-year post-secondary students. The cost of living and attending school away from home can be very expensive. Two of the three participants had their tuition costs covered completely by their bands of origin. Two of the participants also mentioned scholarships as being helpful to them. All three of the participants worked over the summer months and saved money, obtained students loans and identified that their parents would help out financially if it was needed. It was a surprise that of the three participants none stated that finances were stressful throughout the transition. This is particularly interesting when studying the lifelong learning models and finding economics mentioned only once, in the context of the health and well-being of the community as a whole.

The final theme that emerged was the theme of social connectivity. Social connections occur in all aspects of the learning models. The emotional facet of oneself can be crucial in finding your place in a new setting. All of the participants stated that they experienced loneliness during the transition from home and family to post-secondary school in another place. Commonly, they experienced issues getting to know new people in the city, often due to shyness, and the unwillingness to involve themselves in institutional and other events happening in the community. In leaving their families, all three of the participants identified that they had roommates that they were familiar with. In all cases, these roommates were people they knew from their home communities. This may mirror a small sense of family and community for them, as they all stated that these roommates were their greatest source of support in the first year. Social support is also needed inside of the classroom. Large class sizes were cited by two of the participants as being the major reason they found it difficult to meet new friends in their new home. The third participant described her small class and attributed its' intimate size as being a factor in helping her to adjust to the move. Another factor that two of the participants found to

hinder their making of new friends was that they often travelled home, to the point where almost all of their weekends were spent in their home community visiting family. Not involving themselves in school orientation activities, large class sizes and frequent visits home hindered the participants' ability to make new friends, however the community felt by connecting with those from their home communities in their new situations helped to ease the transition and subsequent feelings of loneliness.

Integration with the Literature

Findings Inconsistent with Literature

Socioeconomically, all three participants grew up in homes that were financially stable. Although, they were not questioned about this directly, all three participants identified their parents as a source of financial support during their first year of University. Although, on the surface this may appear to be inconsistent with the literature from the Chiefs Assembly on Education (2012) that identified high levels of poverty, it does serve to emphasize the relative importance of socio-economic status and educational attainment. In addition, Bear Spirit Consulting (2007) found that Aboriginal students were less academically prepared for post-secondary education, however the participants in this study felt that they had the tools they needed to ensure their success in their studies.

When looking at the participants experience from a social perspective, there was consistent evidence that having friends from their hometown was a source of support during their first year, perhaps one of the most crucial avenues of supports. There is no research in the literature review to support this finding.

Findings Consistent with Literature

Many results of this study aligned with the current research. The first is the role that academic demands play in the transition to post-secondary schooling. Arthur and Hiebert (2006) found that academic demands and making a connection between achievement in high school and achievement in post-secondary was one of the major demands that effected the ability to cope in a post-secondary setting. This was echoed by the participants in this study, who felt that school was more difficult at a post-secondary level. All of the participants' did well in high school, which was one of the factors they attributed to their eventual success in their first year of studies post-secondary. This is consistent with Parkin and Baldwin's research (2007) that indicated that performance in high school is often a good predictor of who will succeed and who will discontinue.

Literature has found that often, first-year students, particularly those moving from rural areas have difficulty establishing rapport with their instructors due to large class sizes (Kantanis, 2000). The participants in this study stated time and time again that they were used to stronger bonds with their teachers and that the large class sizes made it difficult to establish these relationships. One of the participants happened to be in a program with a smaller class size and consistent professors, and she felt that this was one of the most positive things about her transition into post-secondary schooling.

One of themes identified in the findings was the difficulty that the participants' had in making new friends. The students felt that the large class sizes, in addition to the lack of activities on campus that interested them, compounded the difficulty in making new connections.

Studies show that 49.1% of students entering post-secondary education failed to make any significant connections by the end of the first semester (Kantanis, 2000)

Although there is much literature to support the difficulty that finances play in navigating post-secondary education, Parker and Baldwin (2007) found that student loans, grants and scholarships can help ease the burden, especially if all or some of this money is non-repayable. In the case of the participants in this study, all had won scholarship money, or received financial aid from their band or other organization in the form of tuition relief, and living expenses.

All of the participants discussed homesickness in their interviews. Distance from the post-secondary institution has consistently been a factor in participation rates and attrition (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 2011). Students coming from rural areas must leave their networks. Approximately half of students attending Saskatchewan universities move from greater than 80 km away (Holmes, 2005). Being able to visit home, and the lessening of these feelings of homesickness throughout the year were common themes found in this study, along with the fact that in choosing where to attend post-secondary schooling, proximity to home and family was a key component in making the decision.

The Chiefs Assembly on Education (2012) identified that almost half of the reserves in Canada are in need of a new school. Jess, who was the only participant who grew up on-reserve consistently stated that the school on-reserve was seen as inferior to the school in town. She moved back and forth between the two schools but eventually graduated from the public school.

Finally, Kantanis (2000) presented findings that first year students are in need of more services to help students cope with the transition to post-secondary school, along with fostering the development of learning communities and creating social experiences. In the current study,

the students reported feeling disengaged from the activities that were happening on campus. This was a key component of their integration into their new community. Perhaps if institutions were to assign mentors to new students, implement a buddy system, or take a look at creating cohort-style peer groups for first-year students, this transition would be made easier for those entering mainstream classes in University.

Strengths of the Current Study

The key strength of this study was my ability to build rapport and understand the viewpoints of the participants, having experienced similar situations in my educational career, and by being from a rural community and having to relocate to pursue my education.

Also, the participants in the study were examples of successful First Nations/Métis students despite the statistics around drop-out and retention rates for students of their demographic.

Limitations of the Current Study

There are several limitations to this study. First, the participants were largely homogenous in terms of socioeconomic background, gender and family dynamics. All of the participants were from families who, although not specified, were able to provide financial and emotional support to them throughout their transition to post-secondary schooling. Although they met the selection criteria for the study, it may have been beneficial to gain the perspectives of those students whose families were not as supportive.

As well, this study only included the perspective of the individual students. In retrospect, it may have been beneficial to gain the perspectives of the parents, and close friends of the participants in order to confirm their role.

Implications for Further Research

The current study served to fill the gap in research between the rates of high school graduation and the post-secondary success for Aboriginal students by looking at what themes and factors contribute to a successful transition from home to the city and from high school to post-secondary school. Most of the related research literature on this topic has focused on the entire population, and not focused at all on the cultural components of this transition.

First of all, this study was limited to a small sample. Doing a study with a larger sample, and expanding the perspectives to include that of family and friends, and teachers could be beneficial in order to provide greater depth.

It would also be beneficial to look further into the complexities of the on-reserve school system and the changes that may be needed at a high school level in order to better prepare students for post-secondary challenges. As a part of this, teachers' role in the transition should be examined more thoroughly in order to provide education for these teachers to help encourage high school students to continue with their studies. This type of study would focus more on the high school experience as a catalyst for post-secondary success.

Recommendations for Institutions

One of the most powerful implications for post-secondary institutions is the overarching theme that large class sizes are hindering social development, academic success and the fostering of relationships with professors and teaching staff for students who are transitioning into post-secondary school.

Further, it is important to note the discord between the experiences of the student who was involved in an Aboriginal-based program with those experiences of the students who were in

mainstream first year classes. The experiences were much different. Class size, connections with instructors, along with a renewed pride in culture and education of tradition created a much more positive experience for the student.

Another theme that was indicated was the lack of activities on campus for those students who do not drink alcohol. More experiences that are focused on kinship and making connections, rather than drinking, may be beneficial for some students transitioning.

Recommendations for Prospective Students

There are also implications for prospective students. First of all, the presence of a friend from home made the transition to life in the city, and in a new post-secondary community much more manageable. The participants spoke of having someone from home as being a great comfort to them.

Secondly, although the participants reported a lack of participation in orientation and on-campus activities, they all regretted not making more of an effort in the first couple months of school. These activities included cultural and non-cultural activities and were designed by the institution to connect fellow-minded students.

Finally, there are opportunities to join cohorts of students that share similar cultural values, and it was found to be beneficial in regards to the participants in this study. The participant that studied in a smaller group, with the same students daily, and the same instructors had a much more positive experience earlier on in the year, reported less feelings of homesickness and reported making friends earlier and more easily.

Researcher Reflection

So many times throughout this study, I was struck by the similarity of the situations of the participants to my situation. In particular, I was struck by the importance of a small class size and a cohort of peers to connect with, as well as the importance of having a connection of some sort with instructors in post-secondary school. As an adult learner, after being involved in post-secondary education for half of my life, I am currently in a program with a small cohort of participants and a solid staff of professors. The depth of learning that is provided in this situation is unparalleled.

Speaking with these incredible participants gave me so much hope for the future and for my nieces, and friends and own children in their learning journeys. So often, post-secondary education is out of reach for people, and these reasons are not always financial. I strongly believe that completing post-secondary education should be attainable for all of our province's members. When considering the job opportunities and salary expectations for those attempting to navigate life armed only with a high school diploma, I feel that post-secondary education should be a right afforded to anyone who wishes to pursue it, rather than a privilege.

Conclusion

The themes identified in this study were academic, family and community, culture, financial and social. These themes aligned with the First Nations and Métis Holistic Lifelong Learning Models (Canadian Council for Learning, 2009). The participants were honest in their responses and their involvement in the first year of post-secondary schooling from their perspective. Their experiences have helped to shed light on some of the strategies and protective factors that Aboriginal students starting their post-secondary careers can build on for their own personal success. In addition, their responses and candidness revealed changes that could be

implemented institutionally, both at the secondary and post-secondary level in order to increase the success rates for completion of post-secondary education for this demographic.

References

- Arthur, N., & Hiebert, B. (1996). *Coping with the transition to post-secondary education*. Canadian Journal of Counselling. Volume 30:2.
- Ascend Learning. (2012). *Student attrition: Consequences, contributing factors, and remedies*. Retrieved from http://www.atitesting.com/Libraries/pdf/Attrition_whitepaper_ATI_2.sflb.ashx.
- Assembly of First Nations. (2012). *Supporting First Nations learners transitioning to post-secondary*. Jurisdiction and Governance.
- Association of Universities and Colleges in Canada. (2011). *Trends in higher education – Volume 1 – Enrollment*. Retrieved from www.aucc.ca.
- Bear Spirit Consulting (2007). *The consultation on improving post-secondary outcomes for First Nations and Métis students in southern Manitoba: Final Report*. Retrieved on October 1, 2010 from: http://www.copse.mb.ca/pdf/reports/bear_spirit_consulting_final_report_may_07.pdf
- Berger, J., Motte, A., & Parkin, A. (2007). *The price of knowledge: Access and student finance in Canada, 3rd Ed*. Montreal: Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation.
- Bradshaw, C., O'Brennan, L., & McNeely, C. (2008). *Core competencies and the prevention of school failure and early school leaving*. In N.G. Guerra and C.P. Bradshaw (Eds). Core competencies to prevent problem behaviours and promote positive youth development. New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development, 122. Doi 10.1002/cd.226

Canadian Council on Learning. (2009). *The state of Aboriginal learning in Canada: A holistic approach to measuring success*. Ottawa, ON. www.ccl-cca.ca/sal2009.

Canadian Council on Learning. Re: Holistic lifelong learning models. Retrieved from <http://www.ccl-cca.ca/CCL/Reports/RedefiningSuccessInAboriginalLearning/RedefiningSuccessModels.html>

Casey, E. (1993). *Getting back into place: toward a renewed understanding of the place-world*. Bloomington, In.: Indiana University Press.

Chiefs Assembly on Education. (2012). *A portrait of First Nations and education*. Retrieved from www.afn.ca/uploads/files/events/fact_sheet-ccoe-3.pdf.

Chow, K., & Healey, M. (2008). *Place attachment and place identity: First year undergraduates making the transition from home to university*. Hertfordshire, United Kingdom. Doi: 10.1016/j.jenvp.2008.02.011

Conway, John. (2004). *Improving access to affordable university education in Saskatchewan*. Canadian Centre of Policy Alternatives.

Finn, J. & Rock, D. (1997). *Academic success among students at risk for school failure*. Journal of Applied Psychology, Vol. 82, No. 2, 231-234.

Finnie, R., Childs, S., & Qui, T. (2012). *Patterns of persistence in post-secondary education: New evidence for Toronto*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Control Council of Ontario.

- Government of Canada. (2012). *Aboriginal affairs and Northern development Canada: Terminology*. Retrieved from <https://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100014642/1100100014643>.
- Grayson, J., & Grayson, K. (2003). *Research on retention and attrition*. Montreal: Canada. The Millennium Scholarship Foundation.
- Holmes, D. (2005). *Embracing differences: Post-secondary education among Aboriginal students, students with children and students with disabilities*. Montreal, QC: The Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation.
- Kantanis, Tanya. (2000). *The role of social transition in students' adjustment to the first-year of university*. Australian Institution for Research. Retrieved from <http://www.aair.org.au/articles/volume-9-no-1/9-1-the-role-of-social-transition-in-students-adjustment-to-the-first-year-of-university>.
- Malatest, R. A., & Associates Ltd. (2004). *Aboriginal peoples and post-secondary education: What educators have learned*. Montreal, QC: Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation.
- Marshall, Catherine & Rossman, Gretchen. (2011). *Designing qualitative research: Fifth ed.* California, USA: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Mendelson, Michael. (2006). *Aboriginal peoples and post-secondary education in Canada*. Calendon Institute of Social Policy. Retrieved from www.calendonist.org.
- Merriam, Sharan. (2002). *Introduction to qualitative research*. Retrieved from <C:\Users\unknown\Desktop\Introduction to Qualitative Research-Merriam 2002.htm>

- Morris, M., Leung, K., Ames, D., & Lickel, B. (1999). *Views from inside and outside: Integrating emic and etic insights about culture and justice judgements*. *The Academy of Management Review*, 24:4. pp 781-796.
- Morrow, Susan. (2005). *Quality and trustworthiness in qualitative research in counseling psychology*. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, Vol 52(2), Apr 2005, 250-260. doi: 10.1037/0022-0167.52.2.250
- Parkin, A. & Baldwin, N. (2007). *Chapter 2: Persistence in post-secondary education*. From *The price of knowledge: Access and student finance in Canada, 3rd Ed*. Montreal: Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation.
- Proshansky, H., Fabian, A. K. & Kaminoff, R. (1983). *Place identity: Physical world socialization of the self*. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 3, 57-83.
- Relph, Edward. (1976). *Place and placelessness*. London. Pion.
- Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology (2009). *Aboriginal student success strategy: Final report of the committee*. Saskatoon, SK: Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology.
- Statistics Canada. (2004). *The daily: National graduates survey: Student debt*. Retrieved on May 29, 2007 from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/040426/dq040426a-eng.htm>
- Statistics Canada. (2010). *Definition of post-secondary education*. Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/81-004-x/2010001/def/posteducation-educpost-eng.htm>.

The Free Dictionary. (2014). *Secondary school*. Retrieved from
<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/secondary+school>.

Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*
(2nd Edition). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Appendix A: Interview Questions

- What was your experience in high school? Think socially, academically, in terms of your family, culturally...
- Do you think that your culture (Aboriginal) had any effect on these experiences?
- Did you always want to attend University?
- What made you choose the school that you did?
- Tell me about the application and acceptance process?
- What were your feelings leading up to moving to a new city?
- Tell me about the move here.
- Tell me about the first couple weeks of school? Think socially, academically, home life... (Did you miss your family? Friends? Home?)
- Do you think that your culture had any effect on these experiences?
- Tell me about any supports that you had in the first couple of weeks that stick out for you? Family? Friends? Institutionally?
- Explain your financial situation, in terms of paying for University and the cost of living.
- Explain your first year of University from an academic perspective.
- Explain your first year of University from a social perspective.
- Explain your first year of University from a cultural perspective.
- What are some things that you think made your transition to post-secondary school easier or better?
- What are some things that you think could have made your transition to post-secondary school easier or better?

- What is some advice that you would give someone starting post-secondary school?
- What made you decide to return for your second year of school?

Appendix B: Letter of Consent

Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a study entitled “Successful Transitions to Post-Secondary School: An Aboriginal Perspective”. Please read this form carefully and feel free to ask any questions you might have.

Researchers: Chelsea Seymour, M.Ed. Candidate & Dr. Tim Claypool (Thesis Supervisor),
Department of Educational Psychology & Special Education, University of Saskatchewan
(email: cms322@mail.usask.ca)

Purpose and Procedure: The purpose of this study is to learn about the experiences of Aboriginal students who were successful in their first year of post-secondary education. The study will look at themes that present themselves in these students accounts of their experiences in their first year. Participation will involve on 45-50 minute interview, and a follow-up interview (times will vary, no longer than 60 minutes). Following the recorded interviews, the transcript will be provided to the participant for review.

Potential Risks: Any risk associated with this study is minimal. Participation is strictly voluntary and you have the right to withdraw at any time.

Potential Benefits: The opportunity to contribute to research on this topic.

Confidentiality: To protect your confidentiality and privacy, pseudonyms will be used in place of participants’ real names. The consent forms will be stored separately from transcription data so that it will not be possible to associate a name with any given responses. Although excerpts of the transcripts will be included in the final study, no direct identifying information will be used. As a participant, you have the right to request that portions of the transcripts not be included in the thesis.

Storage of Data: The digital recording, transcripts, and any hard copy materials produced as a result of these interviews will be safeguarded and securely stored in password [encrypted] protected files and stored in locked cabinets by Dr. Tim Claypool at the University of Saskatchewan. The data will be stored for at least five years after publication; if after that time the researcher chooses to destroy the data, it will be destroyed beyond recovery.

Right to Withdraw: You may withdraw from the study at any time or refuse to answer any question for any reason, without penalty or loss of services. You can also request that the recording device be turned off at any time. If you withdraw from the study at any time, any data that you have contributed will be destroyed. Your right to withdraw data from the study will apply until data has been pooled. After this it is possible that some form of research dissemination will have already occurred and it may not be possible to withdraw your data.

Questions: If you have any questions concerning the study, please feel free to ask at any time; you are also free to contact the researchers at the numbers provided below if you have questions at a later time. This study has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Sciences Research Ethics Board _____. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Office of Research Services (966-2084). Results of the study can be obtained by contacting myself at cms322@mail.usask.ca .

Consent to Participate: I have read and understood the description provided above. I have been provided with an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered satisfactorily. I consent to participate in the study described above, understanding that I may withdraw this consent at any time. A copy of this consent form has been given to me for my records.

(Signature of Participant) (Date)

(Signature of Researcher)

Appendix C: Invitation to Participate

Are you a second-year post-secondary school?

Are you of Aboriginal ancestry?

Would you be willing to discuss your experiences in confidential research interviews?

Under the supervision of Tim Claypool, I am a graduate student researcher in Educational Psychology & Special Education at the University of Saskatchewan. I am interested in the experience of Aboriginal students who have successfully completed their first year of post-secondary education and are continuing into their second year. I am seeking volunteers to participate in two individual 1 to 1.5 hour interviews.

For more information, please email Chelsea Seymour at cms322@mail.usask.ca

