

**IDENTITY DRUM: AN INDIGENOUS FRAMEWORK EXPLORING IDENTITY LOSS,
DISCOVERY AND RECOVERY THROUGH AUTOETHNOGRAPHY**

by

Shelly Niemi

B.A., University of Northern British Columbia. 2012

THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULLFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTERS OF EDUCATION
IN
MULTIDISCIPLINARY LEADERSHIP

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN BRITISH COLUMBIA

May 2016

© Shelly Niemi, 2016

Abstract

My thesis used an Indigenous framework to explore my Indigenous identity loss, discovery and recovery that I have experienced throughout my life. I have done this by braiding together the struggles of my own lived experiences of Indigenous identity loss, and identity recovery, with research that examines how Indigenous identity loss, and identity recovery can affect one's own personal identity as they grow up. The story work in my thesis explores the effects of colonization that Aboriginal children and youth may have experienced, and how historical trauma may be passed on throughout generations, affecting one's identity. I have done this by discussing my personal lived experiences of Indigenous identity loss from birth, and throughout my childhood. Further I examined the lack of opportunity, and the lack of concrete structures that were not in place for me to explore my Indigenous identity for who I was and from where I came. My thesis further demonstrates how the social systems of which I was a participant, including but not limited to; education and social welfare oppressed my Indigenous identity throughout my childhood, and adolescent life.

Throughout my thesis research I have incorporated personal stories, pictures, memories, and journals. They are used to demonstrate how these significant pieces of my life have aided in my identity discovery, and recovery. I wove together my personal stories regarding my current place in the world, and how my worldview has shifted through my personal process of decolonization. My thesis research may be used to assist with cultural competency training, and reconciliation practices in the fields of education, social welfare, and healthcare.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Definition of Terms	v
Dedication	ix
Acknowledgements	xi
Chapter One	1
Conceptualizing Autoethnography Through an Indigenous Framework	1
Methods.....	9
Indigenous Methods.....	9
Changes Time	10
Vulnerability	11
Empathy	12
Epiphany	13
Creativity and Innovation	15
Elimination of Boundaries	16
Credibility	17
Literature Review.....	17
Chapter Two: Childhood	26
Trauma and the Effects of Colonization.....	26
Birth – twelve years old, Indigenous identity loss and confusion	30
Systemic oppression of Indigenous identity loss	31
Education –‘F’ is for Indian	31
Social Welfare: Adoption	42
Family Group Conference.....	52
Chapter Three: Adolescence.....	54
Adolescent Trauma.....	54
Thirteen – Nineteen Years Old, Identity Loss, Recovery and Confusion	60
Systemic Oppression of Identity Loss	64
Education: Attendance and Sense of Belonging.....	65
Social Welfare: Sexual Fear and My Youth Agreement	68
Chapter Four: Adulthood	79
Developing a Stronger Sense of Self Through Identity Recovery	79
Twenty – Thirty-Four Years Old, Identity Recovery, Memory and Confidence	80

Aboriginal Headstart Program	82
Education and School Readiness	83
Health Promotion	84
Nutrition	85
Parental / Family Involvement	86
Social Support	87
Culture and Language	87
Systemic Response to Identity Recovery	92
Post-Secondary Education	93
Employment	100
Chapter Five	106
Conclusion	106
Weaving the Braid	109
Childhood	110
Adolescence	110
Adulthood	111
The Way Forward	112
References	114
Appendix A: Research Ethics Board Approval Form	121

List of Tables and Figures

Figure 1. "Identity Drum" Framework, Shelly Niemi	2,7,26,54,79,107
Figure 2. Shelly Niemi Personal Hand Drum	8
Figure 3. Duncan Campbell Scott – Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs	29
Figure 4. –P’ is for Indian Alphabet Border	33
Figure 5. Model of Adoption: Shelly Niemi	48
Figure 6. Genogram Shelly Niemi	51
Figure 7. Model of Being a Bystander as interpreted by Shelly Niemi	63
Figure 8. Shelly Niemi Model of –Belonging”	78
Figure 9. Shelly Niemi’s Son’s Hand Drum from Aboriginal Head Start Graduation	89
Figure 10. Shelly Niemi’s perspective of the Aboriginal Education Head Start Program	91
Figure 11. Shelly Niemi Model of Weaving the Braid	109

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this thesis the following terms have been defined to create a basis for better understanding of my research within this Autoethnography. The terms are defined as:

Aboriginal Peoples: In Section 35(2) of the Constitution Act (1982) it defines Aboriginal peoples as ~~including~~ the Indian, Inuit and Métis peoples of Canada.” It is important to understand that these are three distinct peoples with unique histories, languages, cultural practices, and spiritual beliefs and that diversity also exists within these groups as well. I will be using the term Aboriginal throughout my research as potential allies could be working with any or all of three of these different groups and I want this term to become familiar to them as they navigate through their practice (University of British Columbia, 2016).

Adolescence: Chapter three discusses the adolescent part of my life and the lived experiences that I had at this time growing up. I found that the Merriam-Webster Dictionary provided me with the best definition of what I was referring to when writing about this time in my life.

Merriam-Webster Dictionary states that adolescence is ~~The~~ state or process of growing up, the period of life from puberty to maturity terminating legally at the age of majority, A stage of development (as of a language or culture) prior to maturity” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2016).

Autoethnography: My thesis is qualitative research using Autoethnography as my methodology. Because this methodology is relatively new in qualitative research I have chosen to define what autoethnography is for the reader by the definition provided by some of the world’s most well-known Autoethnographer’s Carolyn Ellis, Tony Adams and Arthur Bochner (2011).

These qualitative researchers state that:

Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural

experience. This approach challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others and treats research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act. A researcher uses tenets of autobiography and ethnography to do and write autoethnography. Thus, as a method, autoethnography is both process and product (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2010, p. 1).

Epiphanies: As I wrote about my personal lived experiences throughout my thesis I used “epiphanies” that have had significant impacts on my life. Autoethnographer’s Arthur Bochner and Carolyn Ellis describe how “epiphanies” are used in autoethnography by allowing the researcher to examine these “epiphanies – remembered moments perceived to have significantly impacted the trajectory of a person’s life” and connect them to research (Bochner and Ellis, 1992, p. 165).

Historical Trauma: My thesis examines my personal lived experiences from birth to adulthood, and how historical trauma has impacted my life in different ways. I felt that it was necessary to define this term for those that may be reading this research and/or working with people that have also been affected by historical trauma. The Aboriginal Healing Foundation (2004) defines Historic trauma as:

a cluster of traumatic events and as a disease itself, hidden collective memories of this trauma, or collective non-remembering, is passed from generation to generation. Historical trauma disrupts adoptive social and cultural patterns and transforms them into maladaptive ones, which manifest themselves into symptoms of social disorder. Historic trauma causes deep breakdowns in social functioning that may last for many years, decades, and even generations (Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2004, p. 13).

Identity Loss: My personal definition of ‘identity loss’ refers to the feeling of one’s sense of loss of one’s personal identity to a group or culture.

Identity Recovery: My personal definition of identity recovery refers to the feeling or experience of one’s recovery of one’s personal identity to a group or culture.

Indigenous Methods: My thesis weaves Indigenous methods throughout each chapter of my research. I feel that this term is not common and should be defined to assist others in better understanding what Indigenous methods are. Māori scholar Linda Smith (2012) describes Indigenous Methods as “a way for Indigenous researchers to give validity to Indigenous knowledge, language and culture in their research through the use of Indigenous knowledge in their research” (Smith, 2012).

Intergenerational Trauma: As I examined my personal lived experiences throughout my life I realized that my life had been impacted by the effects of Intergenerational trauma. And in order for me to better understand what this meant I needed to define it for myself. Peter Menzies, Clinical Head of Aboriginal Services in the Centre for Addition and Mental Health in Toronto, Ontario defines Intergenerational Trauma as:

If we do not deal with our trauma, we inadvertently hand it down to the next generation. We often take out our pain and hurt on those we love the most—which is ourselves, and those closest to us—our family and friends. So, intergenerational trauma is trauma that is passed down behaviourally to the next generation (Menzies, 2007, p. 67).

Racism: Throughout my research I examined racism that existed within social structures; Social Worker Carlos Hoyt Jr. (2012) defines racism as:

the belief that all members of a purported race possess characteristics, abilities, or qualities specific to that race, especially so as to distinguish it as inferior or

superior to another race or other races. Racism is a particular form of prejudice defined by preconceived erroneous beliefs about race and members of racial groups (Hoyt, 2012, 9. 225). .

Worldview: Throughout my research I have explored my own personal lived experiences and the lens in which I viewed them is known as my worldview perspective. I found that this is a word I would need to define so that readers would better understand what I meant when I was referring to my worldview, or the worldview of others. Indigenous scholar Michael Hart (2010) nicely describes what a worldview is by stating:

The concept of worldviews has been described as mental lenses that are entrenched ways of perceiving the world .Worldviews are cognitive, perceptual, and affective maps that people continuously use to make sense of the social landscape and to find their ways to whatever goals they seek. They are developed throughout a person's lifetime through socialization and social interaction. They are encompassing and pervasive in adherence and influence. Yet they are usually unconsciously and uncritically taken for granted as the way things are (Hart, 2010, p. 2).

Dedication

I would like to sincerely thank my loving husband Jason Niemi for being one my biggest supporters of furthering my education. Jason has walked beside me on this journey of exploring who I am and where I come from. Jason effortlessly loves, supports, and encourages the work I do personally and professionally. This love and support allows me to travel, push for system reform with confidence and celebrate the successes achieved by the work I am doing in Aboriginal Education. Jason has taught me patience, perseverance and humility and through these life lessons I have become a stronger, more confident Cree / Métis Woman that now has a strong sense of belonging for who I am, where I come from and the innate passion and dedication about the work I get to do.

I would like to sincerely thank my only child, my son Landen Niemi who is thirteen years old at the time that I am writing this. He is such a strong, confident, loving young man that reminds me every day of why I continue to do the work I am in Aboriginal Education. He shows me that one can successfully live in both worlds confidently and that by shifting practice within public education systems for current and future generations they too will be able to walk confidently in both worlds. Landen has taught me to lead with your heart, be resilient and that unconditional love and humor strengthen relationships. Landen has taught me to become stronger in difficult situations and to be thoughtful in building and maintaining relationships and because of these lessons that I have learned from Landen; I have become a more confident Cree / Métis Woman, mother, nurturer and educational leader.

I would like to thank my mother who raised me Alvina Lestage; she is one of my respected Elders that I look to for guidance and support when I need affirmation. She has always encouraged me to pursue education. Her unconditional love and support has allowed me to believe in myself, take risks and have confidence in the decisions I make. I truly believe because

of this parenting I am a strong, confident, humble Cree / Métis Woman who is pushing to shift practice in Public Education. She has taught me humility and confidence and because of these lessons I am actively engaged in sustainable education reform for Aboriginal Education.

My extended family is very important to me and I would like to thank them for the unconditional love and support during my personal and educational journey. The Love, Laughter, Support and Humor have kept me going on very difficult days during this self-exploration of identity loss and recovery, Cheryl, Kelly, Carrie, Amanda (Chris), Melissa (Ken, Ainsley, Blake), and Shawn.

My work family Holly, Angela, April, Victor and the numerous Principals and Senior Public School Administration I raise my hands in thanks, love and respect. Holly you hold a very special place in my heart and life and I am better mother, friend and sister for having known you. Angela –Meegwetch” you are like a sister to me, someone that I respect and that I am proud of.

I would also like to thank my two best friends that I am so very fortunate to have in this life, Jennifer and Melissa. Melissa, your friendship, love and care is amazing and I am grateful to have you in my life. I have become a better person because of our conversations over these last few years thank you for your friendship. Jennifer, our friendship is like sisterhood you met me when I was vulnerable and needed that friend in my life that would just support me and our friendship has lasted over fifteen years. Your love and support for me while I was conducting this research will never be forgotten as you helped me have the strength that I needed get through writing about my personal lived experiences.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge my Ancestors and Elders from who I come from as I now know who I am and where I come from, and the rich culture and traditional knowledge that is within our family. I would also like to acknowledge Lheidli T'enneh First Nation on whose land the University of Northern British Columbia is situated, and for the opportunity to complete my two degrees there.

To my committee words truly cannot express my love and gratitude for you; you have all walked beside me in research and have kept me strong as I navigated through my personal lived experiences. You will forever be a part of my story. I would like to express my gratitude and appreciation to my thesis supervisor Dr. Peter MacMillan for his commitment and dedication to my research as he always found the time to discuss my research with me and has been a mentor and guide to me throughout my thesis process. My committee members Māori Scholar Dr. Tina Fraser and Tahltan Scholar Dr. Edōsi Judy Thompson, you have been my Indigenous mentors and guides as I walked through this process as an Indigenous researcher. They have been so giving of their time and support as I proceeded through my research. Your assistance with Indigenous knowledge, perspectives, and worldviews was paramount to my thesis research and has modeled for me the true meaning of Respect, Relationships and Reciprocity. A heartfelt thank you to my external examiner Kwakwaka'wakw Scholar Dr. Trish Rosborough your deep understanding of Aboriginal Education, Indigenous Pedagogy, Culture and Identity allowed me to challenge and position myself within my research. These mentors and guides have given me greater confidence in myself as an Indigenous researcher and scholar and because of this lived experience I will continue to grow into my identity with the strength I need to continue moving forward in my education.

Chapter One

Conceptualizing Autoethnography through an Indigenous Framework

—The drum has been called the heartbeat of Mother Earth, the heartbeat of nations, the heartbeat of all life. Its sound evokes natural imagery, awakens the senses, and stirs the soul”.

– Elder Howard Walker, James Smith Cree Nation

I use the Times New Roman Italics font throughout my thesis to highlight certain personal stories that I am sharing around my own lived experiences of Indigenous identity loss, discovery and recovery.

The awakening of the drum does not come into my life until motherhood. I never knew that it would become such a profound symbol that connected me back to my culture, who I am, and who I continue to become. As an infant I was relocated from my home community and Cree Nation to a new territory where my Ancestors did not have their stories in the landscape that surrounded me. „Isolation“, and „trapped“ in my own childhood are the words that I could use to describe how I felt as I never had my Ancestral teachings, stories, traditional knowledge, or language immersed around me. I was forced to grow up disconnected in world that was riddled with racism, poverty, stereotypes, and colonial thought. Who was I to become? Or expected to become by the adults who had influence over me at such a young age? In writing this autoethnography I have been able to go back in time and examine significant moments in my life that have helped shape me for who I am today. I have been able to explore how resilience and culture were the tools that I used to assist me in decolonizing my worldview and reclaim my Indigenous identity for who I was born to be.

In this chapter I explore and write about autoethnography and the various methods that I have used to assist me in writing my thesis. In this chapter you can expect to read research

woven in with my personal narratives as I explain autoethnography as a research process. I also explain what my “*Identity Drum*” framework is, why I chose to create it, and how I use it throughout each chapter of my thesis to help guide my research. I used all the methods found within my “*Identity Drum*” framework throughout Chapter One. This is done with purpose and intent to provide a better understanding and definition to the readers of my thesis of what each of these methods are and how each one of these methods relate to my autoethnography research.

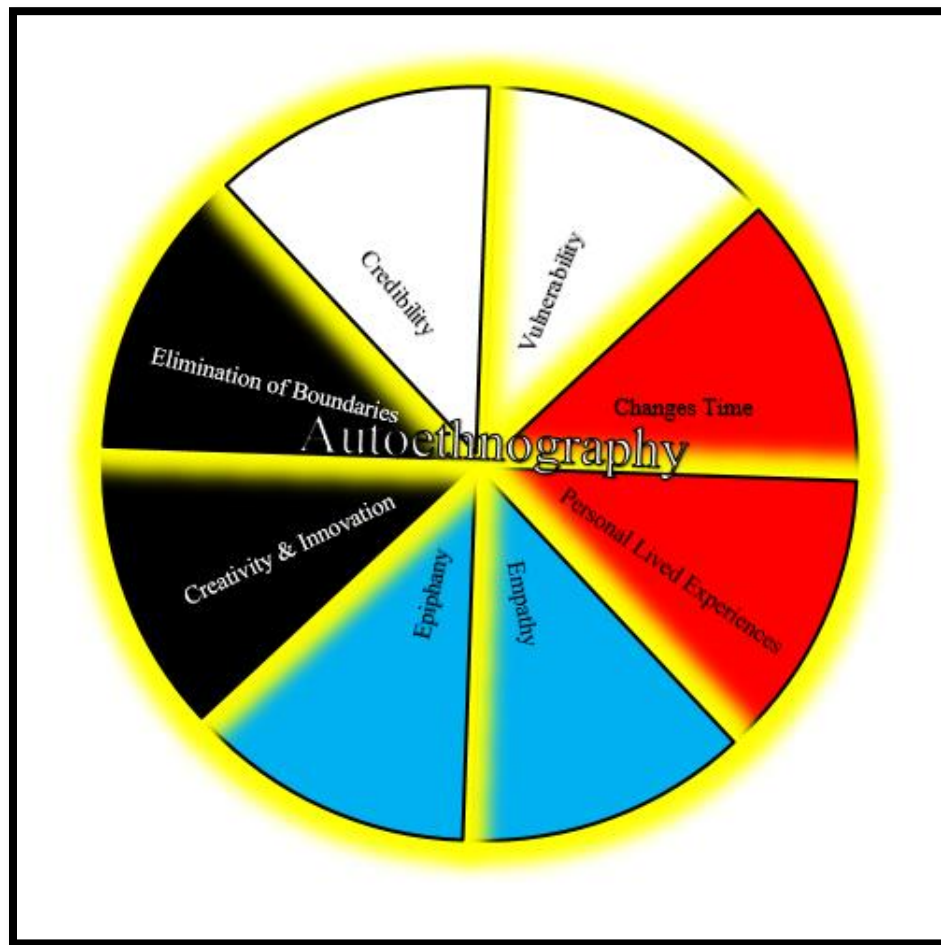


Figure 1. Identity Drum Framework, Shelly Niemi

Auto-(self), -ethno- (the cultural link), graphy (the application of a research process) (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 746) Autoethnography is one of the methodologies used in qualitative research. It has the ability to change time, requires one to become vulnerable through self-examination, fosters empathy, embodies creativity and innovation, eliminates boundaries, honours subjectivity, and can provide therapeutic benefits (Custer, 2014). This style of autobiographical writing allows the researcher to explore his/her personal lived experiences, and then connect those experiences to research.

Autoethnography is not simply a way of knowing about the world; it has become a way of being in the world, one that requires living consciously, emotionally, and reflexively. It asks that we not only examine our lives, but also consider how and why we think, act, and feel as we do. Autoethnography requires that we observe ourselves observing, that we interrogate what we think and believe, and that we challenge our own assumptions, asking over, and over if we have penetrated as many layers of our own defences, fears, and insecurities as our projects require. It asks that we rethink, and revise our lives, making conscious decisions about who, and how we want to be. And in the process, it seeks a storey that is hopeful, where authors ultimately write themselves as survivors of the story they are living (Jones, 2013, p. 10).

Passing on what we know is an act of love (Battiste, 2013, p. 190). Indigenous Methodology gives the researcher the permission to explore his/her identity, culture, language, and traditions, and view them through personal story (Battiste, 2013). By sharing my personal lived experiences of Indigenous identity loss, discover and recovery within my thesis research. I was able to examine my experiences and look at how colonization, and decolonization processes are a part of my identity. My hand drum is used as my framework within my thesis research to

help guide me through this inquiry process in each chapter. I have chosen to call my framework “*Identity Drum*”. My Identity Drum Framework represents for me Indigenous culture and specifically why I have chosen the Drum as my framework is because it holds cultural significance for me as an Indigenous Woman, mother, daughter, researcher, and community member. The drum is what connected me back to my culture and what has assisted me through my Indigenous identity recovery beginning in the Aboriginal Head Start Program.

Figure 1 is my Indigenous framework that I have created to explore my Indigenous identity loss, discovery and recovery through autoethnography. I chose to call my framework “*Identity Drum*”. The framework has my eight method sections that I used within my autoethnography. I have represented these sections in my Personal Drum and reflected them onto my “*Identity Drum*”, my “*Identity Drum*” then acted as my cultural guide throughout my research. I use glowing shades of yellow to highlight the various methods the reader can expect to experience in each chapter throughout my thesis. My intentions with my “*Identity Drum*” are to allow the reader to be visually aware of the themes and methods that they can expect to read and/or experience throughout my research in each chapter. Having this visual of the “*Identity Drum*” framework at the beginning of each chapter gave me as the researcher a visual cultural guide to my research so that I could have my methods visually present to assist me in what I wanted to achieve in sharing through research in specific chapters. This allowed for me as the researcher to keep my methods intact and strong like the sinew does when tying together a drum. This also gave me the ability to navigate through my research with intent, purpose and cultural guidance. I chose to use the Colours; white, red, blue and black for my “*Identity Drum*” framework as they are connected to the Medicine Wheel from my territory.

My “*Identity Drum*” framework can be used to address various topics and themes that represent all different parts of one’s identity. This can include story work, personal narratives, linear timelines, epiphany moments, etc. The colours may change to represent the theme of the “*Identity Drum*” Framework and the purpose for which it is being used.

Figure 2 is a personal picture of my hand drum. When you deconstruct a hand drum it has many components: raw hide, sinew, a wooden frame, and the drum stick, often made from a wooden stick that is covered in cloth. I chose to use my hand drum as my framework within my autoethnography to guide me within each chapter of sharing my personal lived experiences in a safe way that has kept me connected to Indigenous methods. My framework assisted me as I wrote about my personal lived experiences helping me to incorporate the various methods of autoethnography that I used throughout my research to examine who I was in the past and connect those significant events in my life to who I am today.

The methods that I used within my autoethnography acted like the sinew I used to construct my hand drum. Sinew is a long piece of hide; used as lace, and its purpose is to hold the hand drum together, keeping it intact, and strong. The way that you weave your sinew around your drum as you tie it together is what gives the drum its unique beat that connects us back to Mother Earth and her heartbeat. The sinew in my autoethnography wove together my methods that I required to help me shape the research of my personal lived experiences. It delicately brought together my past, my present and my future. Autoethnography gave me as the researcher the opportunity to interpret and reinterpret the fabric of my life’s memories. The methods that I chose to use allowed me to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct my identity (Anderson, 2001). The sinew in my hand drum formed eight sections, these eight sections represented the following methods within my thesis to help shape and guide my research:

Personal Lived Experiences, Changes Time, Vulnerability, Empathy, Epiphany, Creativity and Innovation, Elimination of Boundaries, and Credibility.

Tahltan scholar Edōsdi Judith Thompson (2008) suggests that Indigenous researchers do not necessarily follow the same continuum of research that western paradigms do when conducting research. Explaining that Indigenous research paradigms do not always start from a beginning and have an ending, rather Indigenous researchers must be viewed as conducting and contributing to the academy by conducting research all along the continuum of learning. As Indigenous scholars and researchers continue their work they must be able to continue to ~~Push~~ the boundaries of research in the academy in order to give our people the opportunity to choose a research methodology along that continuum that is respectful and useful” (p. 26).

My research is based in autoethnography as a way for me to retell my past lived experiences with Indigenous identity loss, discovery and recovery. Autoethnography was the methodology that allowed me as the researcher to push the boundaries within qualitative research and contribute in a meaningful way to the academy. As an Indigenous researcher I made the choice early in my research development to incorporate both Indigenous and Western methods into my thesis. I did this so I could go back in time and examine the western worldview I grew up in and how I was able to decolonize my perspectives as I began to reclaim my identity. This allowed me to weave together my personal lived experiences with research and better understand for myself how one can be affected by Indigenous identity loss, discovery and recovery.

Autoethnographer scholar Sarah Wall (2006) describes autoethnography as:

Autoethnography is an emerging qualitative research method that allows the author to write in a highly personalized style, drawing on his or her experience to extend understanding about societal phenomenon. Autoethnography is grounded in postmodern

philosophy and is linked to growing debate about reflexivity and voice in social research. The intent of autoethnography is to acknowledge the inextricable link between the personal and the cultural and to make room for non-traditional forms of inquiry and expression (p. 41).

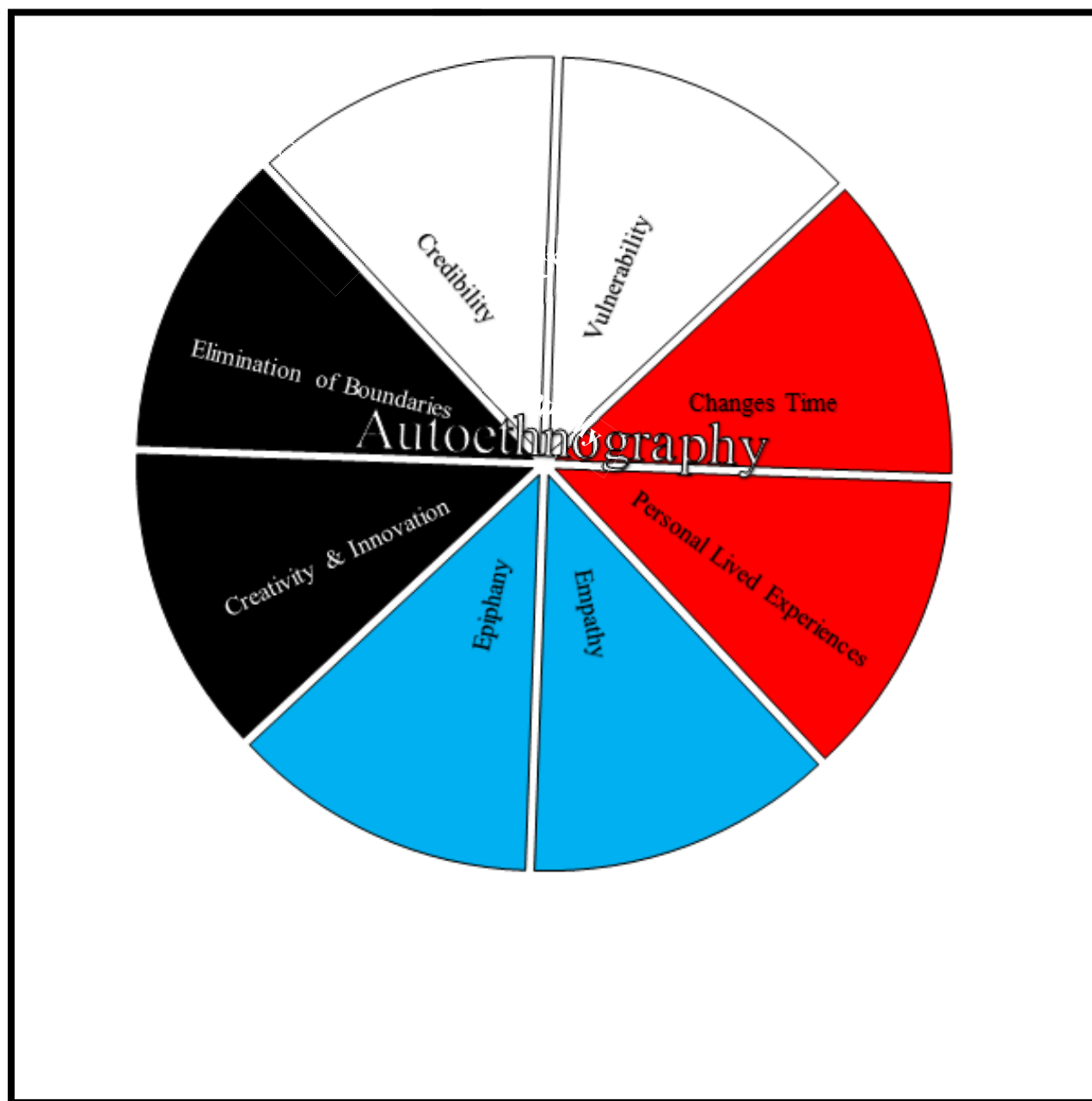


Figure 1. Identity Drum Indigenous Framework, Shelly Niemi



Figure 2. Shelly Niemi Personal Hand Drum

Methods

In this section I explore the eight different methods I used to guide my research within my Autoethnography.

Indigenous Methods

Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) explains Indigenous Methods as a way for Indigenous researchers to give validity to his/her Indigenous knowledge, language, and culture. With my own personal narratives as part of my thesis research, I chose to use Indigenous Methods to bring Indigenous knowledge, thought and perspective to my personal experiences of identity loss and identity recovery.

I wish that I could describe in my own language how frustrating it feels to have language loss. This feeling I experience is like having the word or thought on the tip of your tongue, and not being able to recall or bring it out. I search my mind for what these words or sounds could be like, and nothing comes. I close my eyes, and try to imagine a time of long ago of what this would sound like, and nothing Nothing comes to my mind besides this overwhelming feeling of something being stuck inside my body, not knowing how to make its exit.

Indigenous methods allow the researcher to explore his/her culture, language, and traditions in a safe way and link them to research. By doing this allows the researcher the ability to better understand the impacts in their lives that have shaped his/her lived experience(s) (Wilson, 2008). Indigenous methods further allow the researcher to explore his/her role, and obligations that he/she has as a researcher in the research relationship; this includes the accountability that one has to one's relations. Accountability demands that the researcher has a personal vested interest in the integrity of the methods that he/she is choosing to use, and the usefulness of the results for future use in the Indigenous community. Métis scholar Weber-

Pillwax (2001) suggests that Indigenous methods should; have three key factors known as the 3 R's of Indigenous research: Respect, Reciprocity and Responsibility. As I explored my personal lived experiences throughout my thesis I carefully chose to follow the 3 R's. This ensured for me as an Indigenous researcher that I upheld my ethical responsibility in a safe way, for myself, my relations and the Indigenous community.

Changes Time

Autoethnography is fluid, has the ability to shift through time, and allows one to weave from present day, to past, with the ability to shape the future based on one's own experience and what he or she has constructed as his or her reality and identity. Time and Space within autoethnography share a binary fusion that travel parallel with you as you deconstruct, and reconstruct your personal narrative. Autoethnographer Dwayne Custer (2014) suggests that:

Time within autoethnography acts as a linear keeper of the events in your life, and space in autoethnography is associated with all the objects, and manifestations that give you your fundamental view of who you are, where you come from, where you belong, and what you have constructed as your personal identity (p. 4).

When I close my eyes, and listen to the drum beat of my drum, I can envision time. To me it looks like softly walking down a path in Nature, and each time I take a breath I am given the privilege to see my life. I get to witness my past lived experiences; they feel so real that I can almost smell the environment that surrounds me in these moments. Space is vivid, and I see in color with clarity. I take inventory of what is around me at the time as I am recalling the event. Not all my memories are like this, just the significant ones that have somehow shaped my life positively or negatively.

Space-time dimensions allow the researcher within autoethnography the ability to enter back into his/her personal narratives, and write, research, and share them with the world. For some researchers moving through time and space can have therapeutic benefits and provide them with a sense of healing and closure (Rowe, 2009, p. 118). I chose to write an autoethnography for my thesis because it allowed me to look back at my personal lived experiences and the epiphanies that I have had over the last thirty-four years of my life. I like the flexibility autoethnography gave me to be reflexive and research how these social structures that were part of my life contributed to my Indigenous identity loss, discovery, and recovery.

Vulnerability

Autoethnography promotes vulnerability within one's research and the nakedness, courage and fear that one is comfortable in displaying and sharing with the world through one's personal lived experiences (Brown, 2012). Writing an autoethnography is a test of one's ability to be vulnerable with themselves as he/she is sharing with the world his/her inner most; thoughts, experiences, fears, shame, hurts, love, compassion and empathy (Custer, 2014).

As I am writing this I can already feel my heart beating faster as this is a vivid memory that I have from my childhood that I have never disclosed honestly. What do I remember? The hospital, blue hanging curtains, the smell of cleaning detergent, four children to a room, bland coloured floors, fluorescent lights, kind nurses and a young girl running from her social problems. I was admitted to the hospital at the age of eleven for having Asthma. Sure I had breathing problems, but they were self-created as I had started smoking and was stealing cigarettes from my mother's purse I can even remember the brand Players Filter. I actually even stole about five of them before my mother brought me to the hospital to be admitted and had them on me in my overnight bag. Why did I bring them with me? Because I thought I would

sneak off the children's floor and smoke them under the smoking gazebo on the hospital property. I did not need to be admitted for breathing problems to the hospital, I asked my doctor to be admitted to the hospital because I thought I was having breathing problems, he agreed, and off I went. What did I really want; attention and a way out of school? This lasted until my doctor caught me smoking under the gazebo, I was quickly discharged, and given a lecture on asthma, and the risks associated with smoking. Nobody ever addressed my social issues, so I had no reason to disclose how I was feeling; I just buried them, and moved forward with running away from my issues for many years following this incident.

Qualitative researcher Rosemarie Anderson (2001) suggests that:

Embodied writing brings the finely textured experience of the body to the art of writing.

Relaying human experience from the inside out and entwining in words our senses with the senses of the world, embodied writing affirms human life as embedded in the sensual world in which we live our lives (p. 86).

Within my thesis research I have been vulnerable with myself as I explored some of the significant events in my life that have helped shape me into who I am today. These events move through the discourse of time to reflect my Indigenous identity loss as a child and youth, and how vulnerability and courage led to helping me discover and recover my identity in my adulthood. As I reflected, researched, and wrote about my personal narratives I allowed myself to become vulnerable, but in a safe way in what I was comfortable sharing with the world.

Empathy

Autoethnography fosters empathy not only for the researcher as he/she explores moving through time and space within his/her own narratives, also the readers of an autoethnography can be impacted by empathy by reading about the researchers personal lived experiences. Readers

may associate part of the researchers' autoethnography to some part of their own lived experiences and this can trigger empathy and emotion (Anderson, 2001). When the autoethnographer writes his/her narratives they write in a personal way that allows his/her writing to connect with the onlookers, bringing them in and transforming their preconceived ideas and biases (Custer, 2014).

Sitting in that room I had to keep my head held high. "She"s the wrong kind of Indian" "She"s uneducated" "She"s not from here" I had to bite my lip so hard that it would bleed on the inside of my mouth, as a way to not have the tears roll down my face in front of this group that was purposefully trying to break me. I stayed focused on the rusty taste of blood as they ripped away parts of my life, my identity, stomped on my successes, and chewed up my sense of belonging. Parts of my life flashed before my eyes, my childhood, the word "Indian", and my son, and how I was told "Take the high road; do not let them break you, as that is exactly what they want to do". So, what is resiliency then? Feeling sorry for myself, or feeling sorry for them?

Epiphany

Within my thesis research I chose to share the significant moments of my personal lived experiences that have impacted me around my Indigenous identity loss, discovery and recovery. As I shared my experiences I used Cree pseudonyms at any juncture in my personal narratives for individuals who have been part of my lived experience. Part of the methods I used within this thesis to assist me with my research and data collection were: epiphanies that have significantly impacted my identity loss and identity recovery. These epiphanies have been incorporated throughout my thesis as they have had a significant impact on my journey of self-discovery. University of Illinois Professor, Norman Denzin (2014) best describes an "epiphany" as a key

concept or a turning point in a person's life that allows them to make sense of our fragmented lives. I also used personal pictures, personal journals, personal poetry, personal documents and my drum to assist me in recalling my memories of events that have happened to me throughout my life that have directly impacted the loss of my Indigenous identity or identity recovery.

Autoethnography scholar Heewon Chang (2008) gives context to personal memory as a building block within autoethnography, and that one's personal memories are not only rich and act as key informants to one's personal research, but we are privileged as researchers to have access to such rich information.

We all have memories from our childhoods that we can associate to nursery rhymes; one that comes to me when I think about my Indigenous identity loss, is when I was in early grade school, sitting on the carpet, cross legged learning how to count and we sang this counting song:

One little, two little, three little Indians, four little, five little, six little Indians, seven little, eight little, nine little Indians, ten little Indian boys. Ten little, nine little, eight little Indians, seven little, six little five little Indians, four little, three little, two little Indians, one little Indian boy.

The original version of this song was written in 1868 by Septimus Winner and it went like this: Ten little Injuns standing' in a line, one toddled home and then there were nine; Nine little Injuns swinging' on a gate, one tumbled off and then there were eight. One little, two little, three little, four little, five little Injun boys, Six little, seven little, eight little, nine little, ten little Injun boys. Eight little Injuns gayest under heaven. One went to sleep and then there were seven; Seven little Injuns cutting' up their tricks, one broke his neck and then there were six. Six little Injuns all alive, one kicked the bucket and then there were five; Five little Injuns on a cellar door, one tumbled in and then there were

four. Four little Injuns up on a spree, one got fuddled and then there were three; Three little Injuns out on a canoe, one tumbled overboard and then there were two. Two little Injuns fooling‘ with a gun, one shot the other and then there was one; One little Injun living‘ all alone, He got married and then there were none (Jennings, 2012).

This song plays over in my head at times, and it has an impact on me. It’s one of those epiphanies; when you look back at yourself as a young child, as I clearly remember associating this song to an unhealthy image of a young native boy. As I look back at this lived experience in my life, I can deconstruct it, and think about the significance this nursery rhyme had on me, and what I need to do to heal from its impact.

Creativity and Innovation

Autoethnography is a personal sharing of the researcher’s lived experiences, and how the researcher shares those experiences with the readers is a creative process that delves into deep inquiry (Custer, 2014). University of Houston, Social Work Professor Brené Brown (2012) suggests that the innovation in autoethnography actually comes from the ability to “Think outside the box” when you are sharing your narratives and epiphany moments that have helped shape your cultural identity. The way in which methods are used within autoethnography, is what allows the researcher the ability to evaluate, reevaluate, have retrospection, and introspection relative to their personal stories they have chosen to share with the world. This requires the researcher to have creativity and innovation, as he/she relive those narratives, over, and over, capturing the experience of that specific life event.

Within my thesis my drum is used as my framework that keeps me connected to Indigenous methods. Creativity and Innovation have come to me as the researcher as one of the methods as to how I was going to deconstruct my personal hand drum and view it as part of my

research. I needed to become innovative in my ability to see my drum differently and as part of my research. This has been a thoughtful process as I wove between an Indigenous lens and Western lens to construct my autoethnography. Sometimes, my mind got stuck between the two worlds and I got lost searching for the words that I wanted to use to describe the process that I was experiencing.

According to Wall (2006) –The goal of postmodernism is not to eliminate the traditional scientific method, but to question its dominance and to demonstrate that it is possible to gain and share knowledge in many ways” (p. 34).

Elimination of Boundaries

The intent of autoethnography is to acknowledge the inextricable link between the personal and the cultural, I am the world, and the world is me (Wall, 2006, p. 8).

Autoethnography allows the researcher to use metaphors, symbols, pictures, poetry, journals, and memory to communicate knowledge between an individual, and culture (Custer, 2014).

The ability to shift through time, and space, and pull up the vulnerability, and share the nakedness of the truth with themselves, and the world allows for the process of reflexivity within the research. Ultimately autoethnography communicates –Self” to the world, and the world is deeply augmented (Ellis, 1999).

Looking for Pieces of Me

Look Deep, Deep Inside of my Soul. Do you see the stitched up pieces of my spirit? My mother always said that the eyes were the mirror to the soul. Is that why I have such beautiful eyes? There was a time that spirit would walk behind me, far far behind me. This was not a choice that I made it was because of the structures in place that would not allow spirit to walk

with me. Today my spirit is walking with me But look deep, deep inside my soul. Do you see the stitched up pieces of my spirit?

Credibility

Within autoethnography research it is important to discuss credibility, as this form of research is qualitative in nature, and relies heavily on the researchers' personal narrative (and not quantitative data). This can be seen as problematic for some as autoethnography does not adhere to traditional notions of objectivity, reason, data, and truth (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Wall (2008), best describes how autoethnography can be more marginalized than other research methods because of the emphasis on the researchers' self as the subject, and the ability to authenticate the data which they provide from their personal narratives.

When one has a better understanding of the autoethnography process and the methods used within autoethnography, one can better determine the validity and credibility of the researcher's autoethnography. Autoethnography has also been gaining strides in sociological research where it has been used to assist undergraduate students in stimulating their critical thinking on the relationship between their lived experiences, and the social contexts in which they live their lives (Cook, 2012).

Literature Review

Literature reviews in research allow the researcher the ability to explore multiple sources of information that will assist them within one's own research in the topic they have chosen to inquiry. As my thesis research is based on an autoethnography of my personal lived experiences with Indigenous identity loss, discovery and recovery I chose to seek out the sources that would assist me in writing my research from a blend of Indigenous and autoethnography sources.

Rosemarie Anderson, Qualitative researcher (2001) writes about the experience that the body reveals in writing personal narratives. Anderson claims: Relaying human experience from the inside out, and entwining in words our senses with the senses of the world it affirms human life as embedded in the sensual world in which we live our lives (p. 91). Embodied writing connects well with writing an autoethnography as it allows the researcher to connect with his/her personal narratives, feel, and examine the significant stories in his/her life, and relay these narratives in their research to allow the reader to feel that they are with the researcher during the discourse of their sharing of the story. Embodied writing also allows the researcher to use his/her senses of how the body feels during the sharing of the story, and encourages language to capture the reader to bring them into the story with you.

Dr. Marie Battiste, University of Saskatchewan, Mi'kmaq scholar (2013) included in her book *Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the Learning Spirit* an article from the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples from 2007. This article suggests that: Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons (p.128). This article supports Indigenous researchers in using Indigenous methods to conduct his/her research.

Arthur Bochner and Nicholas Riggs (2014) research assist other researchers in better understanding Narrative Inquiry as a method that can be used in the social sciences to explore ones' own place in the world and the world around them. His research allows one to better understand how to explore his/her personal narratives, become reflexive, and link his/her personal experiences to research. Narrative Inquiry seeks to humanize the human sciences

placing people, meaning and personal identity at the center, inviting the development of reflexive, relational and interpretive methodologies and drawing attention not only on the actual but also to the possible and the good (Bochner & Riggs, 2014, p. 218). When researching autoethnography methods Arthur Bochner has significantly contributed to this style of research, and one could say that he is one of the grandfathers of Narrative Inquiry assisting social science researchers in extending their boundaries within the academy.

Bréne Brown, University of Houston, Social Work Professor (2012) walks one through how to be vulnerable within one's research when sharing one's personal narratives. She examines the fears, anxiety, and shame that can come with being vulnerable with oneself, and others. Reading Browns' own reflections on being vulnerable allows the researcher to explore what this could be like for oneself, and to become reflexive in what one is willing to share with the world. Brown describes an experience in her own journey of vulnerability as:

The morning after the talk, I woke up with one of the worst vulnerability hangovers in my life. You know the feelings when you wake up and everything feels fine until the memory of laying yourself open washes over you and you want to hide under the covers (p.1)

As a researcher exploring vulnerability and how to safely disclose this in my autoethnography research I appreciated Browns openness of how vulnerability can affect oneself as the researcher. This insight allows one the awareness needed to navigate safely through one's personal narratives to better understand what one is willing to share with the world, and how to share it in a safe way to protect oneself from becoming too vulnerable.

Heewon Chang is an autoethnography scholar (2008) who writes about autoethnography as a method and the process that autethnographic researchers should explore when beginning one's own autoethnography research. Chang (2008) states that:

Personal memory is a building block of autoethnography because the past gives a context to the present self and memory opens a door to the richness of the past. As an autoethnographer, you not only have a privileged access to your past experiences and personal interpretations of those experiences, but also have first-hand discernment of what is relevant to your study. What is recalled from the past forms the basis of autoethnographic data (p. 71).

Throughout Chang's book, she describes and challenges the researcher to work on some writing exercises that allow the researcher to first self-explore what it means to collect personal data, external data, and how to analyze this data for one's own autoethnographic research. I found this book extremely helpful as I began to construct my personal research for my autoethnography and the ability to give myself permission to dig deeper into my personal data that would become part of my research.

Peta Cook, Sociology Professor at the University of Tasmania (2012) discusses the way she uses autoethnography with her undergraduate students as a method to give them experience in using their critical thinking skills within sociological research. She wants her students to examine various autoethnographies ideally to give them something relational to stimulate their personal critical thinking on the relationship between their own lived experiences, and the social contexts in which they live their lives. As a researcher writing an autoethnography this is

hopeful, as it allows me to see how my research of self can be used within the academy to further move forward social science learning, and research.

Dwayne Custer, autoethnographer (2014) helps other autoethnographic researchers break down the methods used within writing an autoethnography. Custer allows the reader to experience his/her vulnerability, and view the various dimensions that intertwine with each other when writing a personal narrative. Custer states: “Autoethnography is a qualitative, transformative research method and has a style of autobiographical writing, and qualitative research that explores individuals’ unique life experiences in relationship to social and cultural institutions” (p. 8). Autoethnography research is then a transformative process that allows the research to shift through time, and space to recall personal narratives, and link them to the research in which they are writing, this process is not only transformative, but requires vulnerability, and empathy.

Carolyn Ellis, interdisciplinary scholar and qualitative researcher (2009) is one of the grandmothers in autoethnography; her research seeks to push boundaries to further develop social science research. As a researcher writing an autoethnography, I turn to Ellis’s work often as she has an eloquent way of describing what Autoethnography is:

Autoethnography is an approach to research, and writing that seeks to describe, and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience.

This approach challenges canonical ways of doing research, and representing others, and treats research as a political, socially-just, and socially-conscious act. A researcher uses tenets of autobiography, and ethnography to do, and write autoethnography. Thus as a method, autoethnography is both process, and product (p. 1).

Pamela Palmater is a Mi'kmaq lawyer, associate professor and the academic director of the Centre for Indigenous Governance at Ryerson University (2011) her insight into how Indigenous identity loss is still prevalent for many children, and youth today. A natural process for a child to receive their identity, and culture, is from their parents. However, if this process is blocked for some reason then identity loss can occur, and result in a child or youth not having the ability to find a proper context in which to live their lives. Palmater explains that:

Not only in addition to the regular pressures that every youth in Canada must deal with, Aboriginal youth in particular also have to deal with stereotypes, low expectations and incidents of outright racism in their encounters with the non-Aboriginal society (p. 23).

This further suppresses trauma, and Indigenous identity. Palmater's writing allows me as the researcher writing an autoethnography the ability to be reflexive and vulnerable within my own life experiences as I recall my memories as an Aboriginal youth struggling with my own identity loss.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Māori scholar (2012) discusses the process of how to decolonize methods within research to incorporate Indigenous knowledge. Smith explores how Indigenous peoples historically have experienced a colonized approach to being researched, and not part of the research process. Smith explains that Indigenous scholars hold a responsibility to decolonize the western methods of research, and to do that they need to incorporate Indigenous knowledge, personal story, oral story, and the link to culture. Smith further explains that the academy needs to shift their own research practices and processes as there is still a strong influence in colonization processes that Indigenous scholars and students are susceptible too.

Academic knowledges are organized around the idea of disciplines and fields of knowledge. These are deeply implicated in each other and share genealogical foundations in various classical and enlightenment philosophies. Most of the 'traditional' disciplines are grounded in cultural worldviews which are antagonistic to other belief systems or have no methodology for dealing with other knowledge systems (p. 86).

Indigenous methods allows you to use a decolonized approach within your research methods as it honours your ability as an Indigenous researcher to share your language, your history, your personal narrative, your culture, and your traditions within your research. This method was fitting for my autoethnography research as I explored my personal narratives of Indigenous identity loss, discovery and recovery. Having the ability to use decolonized methods as an Indigenous researcher allows my research to be authentic from my worldview perspective.

Sarah Wall, autoethnographer scholar (2008) describes autoethnography as an intriguing and promising qualitative method and offers a way to give voice to personal experience to advance sociological understanding within the academy. She claims that writing an autoethnography is both a challenging and rewarding process as it can be criticized by others in the academy because they can question the reliability of using personal memory as data, indicating that unless data about your personal experience is collected and transformed by another researcher it is not legitimate. Sarah explains this argument by stating:

That instructor Andrew Sparks at Leeds Beckett University introduced his undergraduate class that his autoethnography was research and they disagreed with him and contested that his autoethnography was not research. However, when he asked whether it would be research if someone else had interviewed a man named Andrew Sparkes; collected his

medical records, diary excerpts, and newspaper stories; analyzed the collection, and written it up, the class indicated that yes that would indeed be research. Yet the research is set on the same set of memories (p. 44).

Wall explains that because of the challenging and intimate process that autoethnography encompasses is why it makes writing one, one of the most difficult qualitative approaches to attempt. Weaving together personal narratives and research can also be one of the most rewarding, and therapeutic processes that a researcher can go through as they examine their personal lived experiences through a lens of vulnerability.

Shawn Wilson, Cree scholar and director of research at Southern Cross University (2008) informs us that Indigenous people in Canada recognize that it is important for storytellers to impart their own life, and experience into their retelling of a story, and that the listener or reader of the story will filter the story being told to make it relevant to their life, and personal experiences. This is also true for autoethnography as the retelling of the researcher's lived experience becomes part of the critical thinking of the onlooker or reader of the research. This often evokes vulnerability and empathy not only with the researcher, but the onlooker as well. Wilson affirms that Indigenous researchers often have to explain how their perspective is different from that of the dominant culture. As I continue to write my autoethnography, and blend Indigenous methods throughout it, I will follow the three R's (Weber-Pillwax, 2001, p. 9) as my guide; Respect, Reciprocity and Relationality and by doing so myself as the researcher will be honouring Indigenous worldviews in an ethical way. Wilson affirms for me that Indigenous Research is then a Ceremony and must be respected as such.

Dave Ziegler (2011) explains the purpose of memory, and that memory does have an important role to play in survival, and adaptation in one's life. Memory has the ability to store both emotion, and the emotional experience that one feels during an event. Ziegler suggests that numerous researchers have identified at least six types of memory: behavioural, perceptual, emotional, factual, autobiographical, and body memory. Understanding these variances that memory has is helpful for me as the researcher when writing my autoethnography as it will assist me in better understanding what type of memory I am recalling when sharing my personal narratives.

Chapter Two Childhood

Trauma and the Effects of Colonization

"Oki asotamákowihona namowihkac tá-kí-wanikiskisíyak. ki-cawasimisiniwak pohko tá-kiskisimówakicik.". –The treaties must not be forgotten. We must remind our children of this”.

– Cree Elder Edward Okanee, Thunderchild First Nation

In this chapter I write about trauma, and the effects that colonization can have on a child. I explored my own Indigenous identity loss within this chapter from birth to twelve years old, the assimilation policies that were in place in Canada during this time in my life, and how the social structures that I was a part of assisted in the disconnect from my culture and identity.

Throughout this chapter my “*Identity Drum*” framework used the following methods; vulnerability, personal lived experiences, epiphany and credibility to guide my research within this chapter.

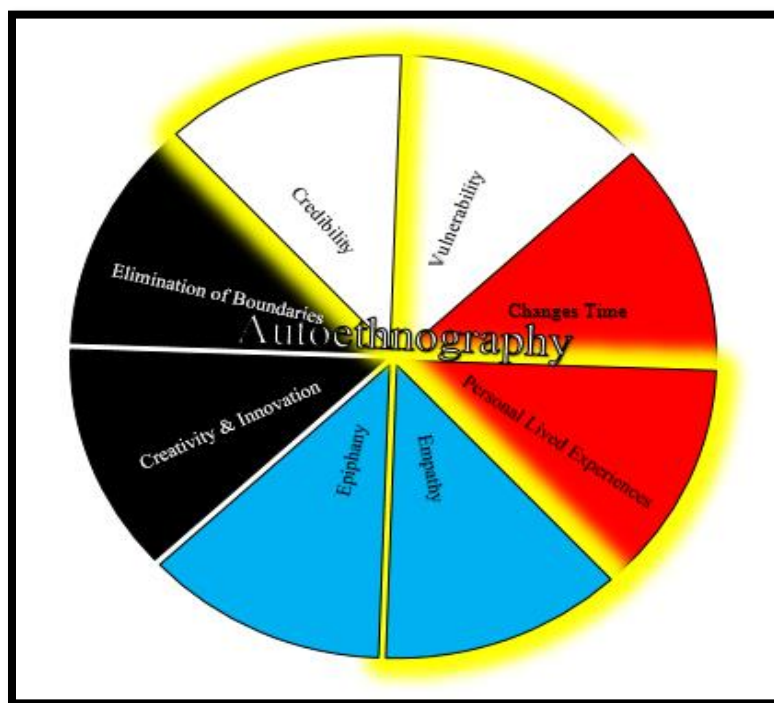


Figure 1. Identity Drum Framework, Shelly Niemi

A significant memory was shared with me about my birth mother. Her aunt remembers back to a time when my birth mother was about four years old, all the trauma that was happening in this little girl's life, and how the Native people in the community where she lived were being treated around her. This young girl was growing up with the effects of colonization, and the impact was traumatic on her family. The experiences she had lived, and witnessed at such a young age would weigh heavy on her spirit for a very long time, and have lasting impacts on her children. Her parents were both alcoholics and they drank daily, because of their addiction; they were not able to be active role models, or parents in her life. The lack of parenting and abuse that she would experience in her early childhood, led her to run away at twelve years old. She felt that this was her way out, and her escape from the abuse, and trauma. Alone, and living on her own at twelve years old she became pregnant, and was surrounded by a world in which she had no sense of belonging. She was simply surviving, surviving in a world that was riddled with trauma. She was isolated and scared as she had no idea of how she was going to bring a baby into this world, when she herself was living with the effects of trauma and abuse from her own childhood.

Indigenous communities in Canada from time immemorial have had a strong sense of connection to their traditional lands, plants, animals, ceremonies, languages and traditional knowledge. Although culture and traditional governance have universal values in many ways across Indigenous nations, both can also be diverse from nation to nation. These diversities between nations are a means for these Indigenous communities to protect themselves and their uniqueness, while passing down their traditional knowledge from generation to generation as an act of Indigenous identity formation (Battiste, 2002). Losing any one of these factors that form Indigenous identity; culture, language, traditional territory, ceremony, or traditional knowledge

can have traumatic effects on an individual's Indigenous identity, their sense of self, the way in which they view the world, and the world around them (Fiske and George, 2006). The colonization process in Canada has historically had many negative impacts on Indigenous communities for generations. These colonization processes have contributed to the effects of intergenerational trauma with the loss of Indigenous identity, culture, language and traditional knowledge.

Figure 3 is a picture of Duncan Campbell Scott; he was the former Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs Canada (1913-1932) whose decisions had significant impacts on the design of the Indian Policy in Canada. Mi'kmaq lawyer and scholar Pamela Palmater (2014) suggests that:

Duncan Campbell Scott felt that: The Indians were a real menace to the colonization of Canada. As a result, he decided that the happiest future for the Indian race is absorption into the general population, and this is the object of the policy of our government. Scott had hoped that the great forces of intermarriage and education will finally overcome the lingering traces of native custom and tradition. In this way, not only would Indians disappear culturally through education in the European tradition, but would also disappear biologically through the encouragement of intermarriage and the corresponding legal disentanglement to Indian status (p. 83).

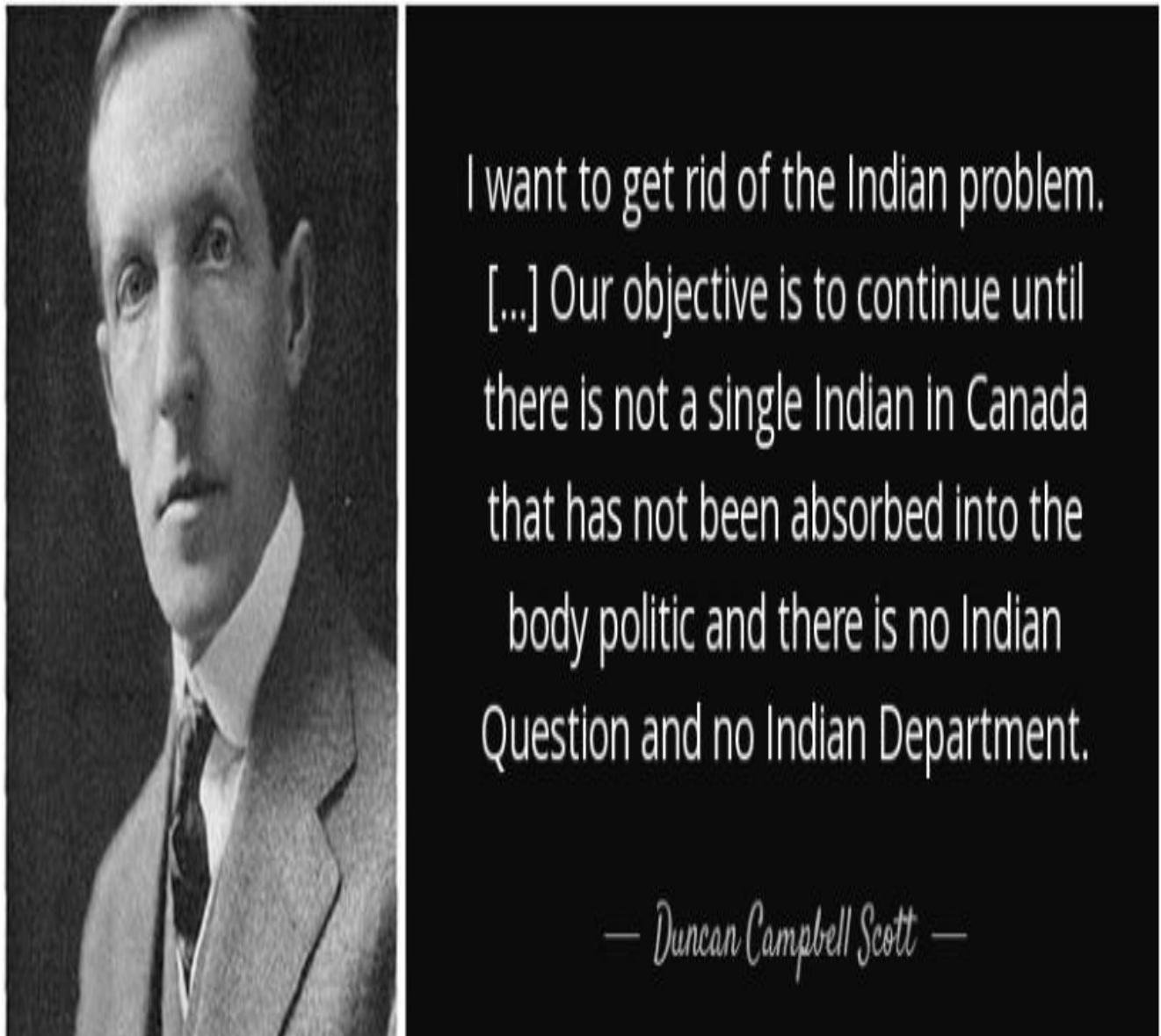


Figure 3. Duncan Campbell Scott – Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs 1913-1932

As a result, the colonization process, policies that supported these processes, and the continuation of Canada's lack of acknowledgement regarding the colonization attempts that were made, has resulted in decades of cultural genocide for Indigenous communities across Canada today. Intergenerational cultural genocide has stripped away the identity of many Indigenous children, families, and communities with the effects still prevalent and real today.

In 1946 the United Nations declared that genocide is a crime under international law and following this declaration The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime was held in 1948 and they defined genocide as:

Any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group, as such: Killing members of the group; Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group (United Nations, 1948).

Birth – twelve years old, Indigenous identity loss and confusion

I have this envelope holding five pieces of paper from 1982 that has been yellowed by age. The documents inside are my adoption papers; they give guardianship from my birth mother, who was thirteen years old, to my adoptive parents, my great aunt and uncle. When I look at these papers they are simple, yet complex, as nowhere are my Indigenous rights, or identity discussed or referenced within these documents. These documents simply represent a process by which my legal guardianship would be transferred, and my new legal name would be granted. For me, this was the first act of colonization that I would experience; a colonial process by which the social institute responsible for me would fail me by ignoring my Indigenous inherent rights, and my cultural identity, in the transfer of my guardianship. This failure in the system for children in care would lead me through a series of traumatic events during my early childhood of trying to discover who I was, where I came from, where I belonged, and how my worldview would be shaped given the lack of my Ancestral knowledge, and traditional teachings.

Systemic oppression of Indigenous identity loss

Systems such as Education and Social Welfare had an impact on affecting, and oppressing my Indigenous identity as a child and youth. Acts of racism, stereotyping, and western ideologies were present, felt real, and used towards me to oppress my Indigenous identity. During my early childhood I would not have been able to identify what these acts were. However, my memories of those moments that I can remember of how I felt during these significant experiences in my life, now allow me to see them for what they were; racism and systemic oppression.

Education “I” is for Indian

In grade school I can specifically recall two stories that had an impact on me regarding how I felt about my Indigenous identity. The first memory that I have was at the start of grade two, and it was about the third day of school. I remember being so excited to begin my new grade with my new teacher, and new classmates. I remember showing up to class with my long hair in a French braid, I loved how my mother would braid my hair this way. More specifically for me on this day I can remember how the teacher said to the class “There has been a report that one of you Aboriginal girls has head lice, and that you will need to go outside to have your head checked”. Did she just say my name? This is the first time that I think I really noticed the color of my skin, cause when my name was called I remember looking down at my arm, and then looking up at the class, and counting 1,2,3. There were only three of us Aboriginal girls in my class, at this exact moment I felt; isolated, and ashamed. Not only because I was singled out in front of the class, but also because I now had to have my head checked for lice.

The shameful feeling, I had watching my peers watch me get up, and leave the room as I had to go outside and have the assistant check my head for lice. She made me stand directly

outside the classroom so she could comb through my long hair. This made me feel vulnerable, alone, and ashamed. I remember thinking what if she finds “Lice”, what do they look like? It was how she took my braid out that made me feel ashamed, and dirty. The tone, the touch on my head, the look she gave me as if I was interrupting her day. All of this body language made me feel insignificant and less than the rest of my classmates. Coming back into the classroom I was asked to immediately take my place on the carpet as the class was in the middle of reading a story together.

*When I think about that moment, I remember how my hair was now down, and no longer in the french braid my mom did for me. I no longer had my hair tie that was used to keep my braid in as the assistant checking my head threw it away. I remember the two girls that I sat beside on the carpet, and how they moved away from me in disgust, or fear as if something was wrong, and different with me. I remember how angry and hurt this made me feel, I was angry with my teacher for doing this to me, calling me out in front of the whole class to have this done. I remember scanning the classroom in anger, and hurt, then seeing the alphabet letters that my teacher had up as a border in the classroom. “I “is for Indian. **Figure 4** is a picture of the border that I saw in my classroom that day.*



Figure 4. "I" is for Indian Alphabet Border (Native American Books, n.d.)

I remember focusing on these letters, and images, and wondering about them, and then feeling shame about my own identity. Is this how my peers would see me now that they knew I was Aboriginal? Did they think that this was how we dressed when we were not in school? Did they find me different? What did these pictures make my classmates really think about me? This experience made me attach my identity to an image, and this image stayed with me throughout my elementary experience.

The second significant memory from my childhood education experience happened in grade four, it was something that made me feel shame, and guilt for who I was. On days that it would snow too much, my mother would drive me to school, I enjoyed these times we got to spend together in the mornings on the way to school, probably it was because she worked nightshift often and these morning moments were important to me. On this particular day it was different as she needed to accompany me to my classroom to sign a field trip form. My mother stood in line with me waiting for our class to go inside after the bell rang. During these few moments while we were standing together in line, you could hear the whispers, and comments that some of my classmates were making about her. They were calling my mother an Indian, and talking about her in a derogatory way; they spoke of her skin colour, and even called her a squaw.

Those words, those horrible words continued in front of my teacher. Could the teacher not hear this? I looked at my mother in that moment, and saw the shame that those words brought her by the children saying them. Sadness, shame, and anger grew inside me for having my mother come with me to class that day. I was angry with my peers for what they were saying, but I did not know how to respond to those comments. I was angry that my teacher allowed my mother to be treated in such a hurtful way that brought shame, and hurt to her, and to me. Why

did my teacher not address these comments? Why did my teacher allow my mother to leave that day with her head hanging low? Why was my teacher being a bystander in this situation? Why did my teacher not apologize for the unacceptable behaviour of the students, or have them apologize for the racial comments that they were making? Why was I allowed to be harmed by my peers' comments, and why did they not have to acknowledge their wrong doing, or harm that they caused? All these questions formed for me that day, and because they went unanswered, and unaddressed, I developed shame, and guilt for who I was, and how my identity was viewed by the world around me.

I grew shame for my mother that day as well, as I no longer wanted her to drive me to school. I formulated the opinion in my mind that it was better to have her hidden away from my peers and school community, so neither of us would have to experience this again. That moment in time still haunts me: I feel sadness, and disgust that this happened, and because of that experience, I was forced to develop a shield against racism at such a young age as an act of protection. This was a form of resiliency but it came about in a very negative way.

Assimilation processes jeopardized the Aboriginal way of life by forcing a Eurocentric agenda upon Aboriginal communities Battiste and Barman (2008) state:

For a century or more, Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development Canada (DIAND) attempted to destroy the diversity of Aboriginal world-views, cultures, and languages. It defined education as transforming the mind of Aboriginal youth rather than educating it. Through ill-conceived government policies and plans, Aboriginal youth were subjected to a combination of powerful but profoundly distracting forces of cognitive imperialism and colonization. Various boarding schools, industrial schools, day school, and Eurocentric educational practices ignored or rejected the world-views,

languages, and values of Aboriginal parents in the education of their children. The outcome was the gradual loss of these world-views, languages, and cultures and the creation of widespread social and psychological upheaval in Aboriginal communities (Battiste & Barman, 2008, p. viii).

The beautiful thing about autoethnography as a method is that it allows you to travel back in time, and space, and recall your personal narratives, become reflexive with them, as you move forward into the future. Reflexivity gives you permission to deconstruct, and reconstruct your personal experiences and link them into research that can assist you or others in better understanding a particular lived experience that you have had? As you apply research to your lived experiences, you may be assisting in reducing the harm for people who may be at risk of living through similar experience(s). When reflecting back on my early education in grade school, and the not so positive experiences that I lived as a student, I recognize that many of them are formed around my Indigenous identity, and the racism that existed in the system in which I was growing and learning in. I can acknowledge that there were some missing pieces within the system that could have protected my Indigenous identity from harm, hurt, and shame.

Educators in Canada need to better understand Cultural Safety, when working with minority groups of children, youth, families, and the community. Educators who garner this understanding allow for culturally safe practice to occur in the transmission of their teaching practice with their students.

Developing cultural safety in public education, allows educators, and practitioners of education to better understand cultural differences between themselves as educators, their students, families, and community that they are servicing. Students are then given the opportunity to determine for themselves if they feel that they are receiving culturally safe

education, one that honours, and respects their cultural identity, the curriculum that they are learning, and that they are seeing themselves respectfully as part of the education system.

To achieve cultural safety when working with Aboriginal peoples, there is strong agreement that culturally safe practice necessitates an understanding of colonization, and post-colonial forces and their effect on the lives of Aboriginal people (Smye, V; Josewski, V & Kendall, E, 2010, p. 5).

Colonization can be a difficult topic to understand and discuss in education. However, in order to become a culturally safe educator, one must be provided with the opportunity to learn, explore, understand and dialogue this information. Education systems need to create the space to have these open discussions so they can ensure that their teaching staff, administrators, and support staff become aware of what it means to be culturally safe, or culturally unsafe.

Many Native students will be taught by non-Native teachers with limited training in cultural competency. Cultural competency in this context refers to teachers' knowledge of, and ability to incorporate their students' cultural, social, and linguistic backgrounds into curriculum, and instruction (Williams, 2013, p. 25).

As Canada's demographic of Indigenous children continue increase the public education system is shifting its curriculum to mirror more Indigenous knowledge, and Indigenous ways of knowing. Now is the time for Canada's educators to step into the river with us, even if it's at different entrance points, as this learning, and self-exploration will produce more culturally aware, safe, and competent educators who better understand how to reflect on their own bias, and educate their students using a culturally safe lens. In *Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the Learning Spirit*, writes about confronting, and eliminating racism in education, and moving

towards an education system that has constitutional reconciliation with Canada's Indigenous population (Battiste, 2013, p. 126).

As I prepared to write this section in my research I have to acknowledge that I felt some fear, and anxiety that is associated with guilt. Guilt, not because I feel guilty that this should not be included, but guilt because those who read this may not understand racism, or white privilege or that these issues still exist today in our systems. Part of autoethnography is being vulnerable, not only as the researcher, but as the reader within your own thoughts. The aim of this section is to guide thoughts and discussions of racism, and white privilege as they still exist within social structures today.

Confronting one's own bias, even if it is in the privacy of your own mind, can be difficult. This is reflective work that one must do on oneself and it requires that one needs to begin to acknowledge that white privilege and racism still exist today. This can and will be very difficult as these topics take time to understand. However, once you know what you don't know, you cannot unlearn the information. With knowledge and understanding comes a level of responsibility to share that knowledge. This responsibility can take many forms, and can be very personal; people might work on better understanding oneself personally, and where they are situated in the world, and the world around them. The responsibility may be moving from bystander to advocate, or the responsibility may be in truly accepting that racism, and white privilege do exist. As systems we need to acknowledge that these are not dirty topics to discuss; in fact we need to begin to create safe spaces within our systems and social structures to enable talk and education on these actual topic(s).

Racism is one of the indicators of oppression that many Indigenous people had to endure, often times throughout their education. Talking about race and racism are very difficult topics for

teachers, students, and others that are not willing to confront Canada's history with it. Mi'kmaq scholar Dr. Marie Battiste states that:

Yet, racialization is well known to all those targeted under the imaginary line of Social Justice. Whiteness and privilege are less evident to those who swim in the sea of whiteness, and dominance. Confronting racism, then, is confronting racial superiority, and its legacy, not only in history, but also in contemporary experience (Battiste, 2013, p. 125).

Although teaching, and learning about whiteness and racial superiority can be uncomfortable and difficult, it is necessary to understand these concepts in order to be effective as educators. This understanding allows one to examine their own biases and blind spots so they can move towards explicit attempts to be reflective in their findings. Many educators are white, and many white people believe that being white is a neutral raceless identity (Carr, 2016). In Canada, classrooms are becoming very diverse with many different races, and cultures, and in order to best meet the needs of learners, one must first understand how their own identity, lived experience, and privilege can affect their learners. This cannot be done without some training in self-examination, and theoretical knowledge of racism. Battiste (2013) suggests that:

There is danger in Canada's thinking of itself as a fair and just society. The fact that many notions of racism are no longer formally acknowledged does not lessen their contemporary influence in Canada, and in the policies that are still unfolding (Battiste, 2013, p. 129).

Educators hold power and privilege in shaping the worldviews and perspectives of young people. Explicit work must be done to increase their own awareness of racism, so they can confront their own biases when supporting diverse numbers of students. White Privilege is still a

significant systemic issue that must be discussed in a safe way to support all educators so they can better understand how this privilege has, and can continue to affect the education system from all facets; employees, educators, students, and families. In the book *Cultivating Social Justice Teachers* I was introduced to 5 principles of better understanding white privilege and they are:

Principle 1: The backdrop of colonialism, imperialism, and racial discrimination is a shared experience, even for those who have never met anyone from another racialized origin, and we as White People must be concerned and implicated, despite the fact that White Privilege has diminished the role of White People (in their minds) when it comes to historic wrongs.

Principle 2: Neoliberalism enhances racial (and other) cleavages that are necessary for economic growth and wealth accumulation for the few at the expense of the many. It is increasingly difficult to critique racial problems because of the mythology that “we are all equal” and that “we are responsible for where we end up,” thus further entrenching and protecting White Privilege.

Principle 3: Critiques of race and racism often have been diluted and diminished because other inequities, such as sexism, classism, homophobia, religious persecution, and others exist, further allowing us to avoid White Privilege as a central concern

Principle 4: Many white people maintain that racism and White Privilege cannot exist because “some of my best friends are Black/Indian/Jewish” and also because they can point to individuals (e.g., Carey Price) to justify their belief that all members of a particular racial group have the same opportunities, which underscores that individual experience needs to be understood apart from collective experience.

Principle 5: One can be simultaneously good and racist, as evidenced by much of the U.S. and Canadian history, in which many good programs, policies, initiatives, and events have taken place at the same time as dynamics that perpetuated disenfranchisement, marginalization and great harm (Gorski, P., Osei-Kofi, N., Zenkov, K., & Sapp, J. 2013, p. 36).

These principles were used as a way to highlight that many people in our society including white people have been taught, and encouraged to believe that white people are no different from anyone else (we are all the same), that they have no special privilege, advantage, or power; and that even discussing racialization should be avoided (Gorski, P., Osei-Kofi, N., Zenkov, K., & Sapp, J. 2013).

Educators carry a level of responsibility to reflect on their own bias, so that they can support the diverse needs of learners, including racial, and cultural differences. Education is still a system in Canada that does not have diversity within its teaching cohort, members of the minority groups still struggle with equity, racial, and cultural inequality in this profession. Education systems can do better but need to explicitly create the space to discuss these topics as a way to reduce harm caused from racism, white privilege and cultural unsafety for all educators, students, and families.

Thinking back to twenty years ago, and the personal lived experiences that I had as a student makes me now reflect and question that if my teacher was more aware of racism, white privilege, and cultural safety then maybe there would not have been racist Indian cartoons used in the classroom to identify the letters of the alphabet. This may have also impacted the way my mother experienced harm based on her race, and skin colour. Or maybe if my teacher was more aware of racism, white privilege, and cultural safety I may not have felt so ashamed of my own Indigenous identity as a student. I possibly could have felt safe to discuss my feelings, and the ultimate disconnect that I was struggling with because of my Indigenous identity.

Reflexivity allows you to really examine these moments in your life. Today, I can acknowledge that there likely was little to no training in racism, white privilege, or cultural safety. This missed opportunity for educators in their teaching education program, or

professional development days, was a missed opportunity to provide cultural safety for me as a student, and my Indigenous identity was formed based on what my lived experience was when I was in school.

As systems and social structures continue to examine themselves and step forward into this era of reconciliation and responsibility, they will need to explicitly create space for true discussions and training in white privilege, racism and cultural safety. I too in my personal and professional life share that responsibility, and will not be a bystander when I witness these injustices, and will do my part in advocating, training and educating those around me.

Social Welfare: Adoption

Social Welfare in Canada has had a long legacy of rendering its practice on an assimilated approach that was oppressive, specifically to those in minority; this includes Canada's Indigenous population (Bennett, Blackstock & De La Ronde, 2005).

Recent reviews of the current discourse on child welfare in Canada have revealed a striking lack of attention to the voices of mothers and children. This silence has been linked to the marked failure of the system to address the systemic drivers of child abuse and neglect (Killington, 2002). Moreover, the absence of personal stories has contributed to a lack of insight into the lives of mothers, into the needs of children, and into the social variables that have led to their encounters with the child welfare system (Killington, 2002). These concerns are particularly relevant in the Aboriginal context, where the effects of the residential school system and assimilationist child welfare policies have led to profound social grief, trauma and dislocation (Ordolis, 2007, pp. 30-41).

With large disconnects between the provincial and federal governments over the funding for child welfare, many Indigenous children have become lost, forgotten or adopted out of the child welfare system. Indigenous communities recognized that this was happening to their children upon the demise of the residential school system, and happening at alarming rates. Indigenous communities contested that government authorities were using assimilationist colonial models in child welfare to further perpetuate the governments assimilation policies. These policies appeared to assume that Indigenous people were culturally inferior, and unable to properly plan, or care for their children (Sinclair, 2007).

As a child, I was unaware of how my legal adoption was impacted by the child welfare system in Canada. The child welfare framework in place in 1981 reflected colonial patterns of the dominant cultural values, in regards to child-rearing practices (Kline, 1993, p.306). I was not able to acknowledge, or understand that my Indigenous identity suffered significant impacts until I was older and capable of understanding what it meant to have Indigenous inherent rights. This story has been told to me at various times throughout my life, so I could better understand my place in the world and the world around me. The process was quite simple in 1981 as I deconstruct it; I am able to identify the hidden impacts that were involved with my legal adoption.

My birth mother Okawimaw¹ was thirteen years old when she gave birth to me. She had been travelling with the carnival during the six months of her pregnancy. During the last three months of her pregnancy she returned back to Prince Albert, Saskatchewan to give birth to me. Okawimaw was alone, and isolated from her family during her pregnancy. She was not in care of child welfare, and had no legal guardians truly protecting her and keeping her safe from

¹ Okawimaw: Cree pseudonym that I will use to represent my birth mother.

harm. Her legal guardians were alcoholics, and had been absent from her life at any early age. She was uncertain about the world around her, and what her rights were as a soon to be teenage parent. Okawimaw knew that she was unable to care for me, but was also afraid of me becoming a ward of the child welfare system. Okawimaw had seen many of her family members absorbed, and lost in the child welfare system, and not return. Okawimaw was encouraged by the hospital's social worker in Saskatchewan to call her aunt Nisikos² who was living two provinces away, and ask her if she would assume guardianship over me after I was born.

Nisikos agreed, under the condition that Okawimaw would need to sign over legal guardianship to Nisikos. Nisikos wanted to provide me with a stable home to grow up in, something that Okawimaw never had the privilege of experiencing herself. Verbal agreements were made that day, and shortly after I was born, I was released from the hospital into the care of thirteen-year-old Okawimaw. Okawimaw then boarded a bus with her newborn baby bound for British Columbia.

As I reflect back to this moment in my life, I think about the risks that faced me as a baby in the interim care of this thirteen-year-old girl. Why did the child welfare system not set up better plans for either me or her upon my release from the hospital? Why was child welfare not more involved with the transition and relocation from the province of Saskatchewan, to the province of British Columbia 1300 km away?

After days on the bus in soiled clothing, and sour milk I arrived in British Columbia and was greeted by Nisikos, whom would become my new legal guardian. Nisikos says she can still recall the moment that Okawimaw, this thirteen-year-old little girl, handed over this newborn baby. She said it was such a bittersweet moment that they exchanged. Over the next year,

² Nisikos: Cree pseudonym that I will use to represent my adoptive mother, my great aunt.

Nisikos has explained to me that she lived in fear of me being taken away from her by either my birth mother Okawimaw or my birth father. The Public Guardian Agency was responsible for holding my guardianship until the legal adoption could be finalized. However, both of my birth parents had one full year from the time of my birth to reclaim their guardianship of me. That year came and went. Nobody came to claim their guardianship over me, so my legal adoption proceeded, and was finalized on my first birthday.

I was now a new resident in a community that did not have my Ancestral knowledge, traditions, culture, or language. I did not come with any literature or supporting documents from my birth mother that would confirm who my Ancestors were or what First Nations band I had belonged to. Honestly, when I reflect back on this, this should not have been the responsibility of a thirteen-year-old child; she would not have known that this missing information would later impact my Indigenous identity as I grew up. I believe that through the adoption process and the social workers involved in the transfer of my guardianship should have secured this information for me.

Developing a distinct identity and crafting a sense of purpose are key elements in healthy youth development. However, many adopted children face damaged self-esteem and identity confusion as they continue to grow in their adolescent lives (Sinclair, 2007). My adoptive family loved, and adored me, and the feeling was mutual, and still is to this day. They loved me, nurtured me, cared for me, and supported me as any child growing up should have the opportunity to experience. Yet at about ten years old, something felt empty inside of me, like a piece of me was still missing. Could this have been the sleeping Ancestral knowledge hidden within my body? At ten years old, I was still unaware that I was adopted, so I had no way to

communicate this missing feeling to anybody, as I had no idea where these feelings were coming from. I just recognized that these feelings were there, and chose to bury them for many years.

Adolescent pregnancy often involves numerous consequences for adolescent mothers, their children, and society. Studies have indicated that adolescent mothers are ~~less~~ likely to complete their education, more likely to experience isolation, and homelessness, less likely to develop good parenting skills, and more likely to transfer their own history of childhood abuse, and neglect to their children” (Canadian Institute of Child Health, 2000, p. ix). So if

Intergenerational trauma can be passed on from one generation to the next; were my cells remembering my sleeping Ancestral knowledge that I did not have the privilege to learn? Was my traditional language trying to surface? I wondered, yet I had no context in which to connect these feelings to so I dismissed them.

Being reflective, my adoptive parents were never given the opportunity to build a support plan for me that would assist me with my Indigenous identity as I grew up. In my adoption process, I can recognize that part of my Indigenous identity was lost, or forgotten in the legal paperwork. Unlike many other adoptive children, though I did have the ability to grow up in kinship, and I am very grateful for this. Growing up, I found out about my adoption when I was seventeen years old. My adoptive family was very supportive and explained to me that they chose to keep this information from me until I was older as they felt it was best for me at the time, as they did not want me to feel less than, or not a part of their family. Once I knew and had questions they did their very best to share with me stories about Métis traditional knowledge, and who we were as Métis people from my paternal side of my Indigenous identity. When, I would ask about my grandmother, from the maternal side of the family my family had limited information as she had died at 49 years old from alcoholism and diabetes, shortly after I was

born. Now, that I knew of my adoption, I was able to affirm my suppressed feelings that I had of something missing as part of my Indigenous identity. This was my understanding and connection to my maternal part of my Indigenous identity, my birth mother and grandmother.

Figure 5 is my "*Model of Adoption*" that I built for myself to help me better understand the ages, and stages, and struggles that I went through, to better understand who I was, where I belonged, and the work that I needed to do to heal from my Indigenous identity loss.

Understanding this model of adoption for me as an adult allows me to better understand where the Indigenous identity loss occurred for me as an infant, and adolescent. I was raised by my great aunt, from the paternal side of my family; this was my grandfather's sister.

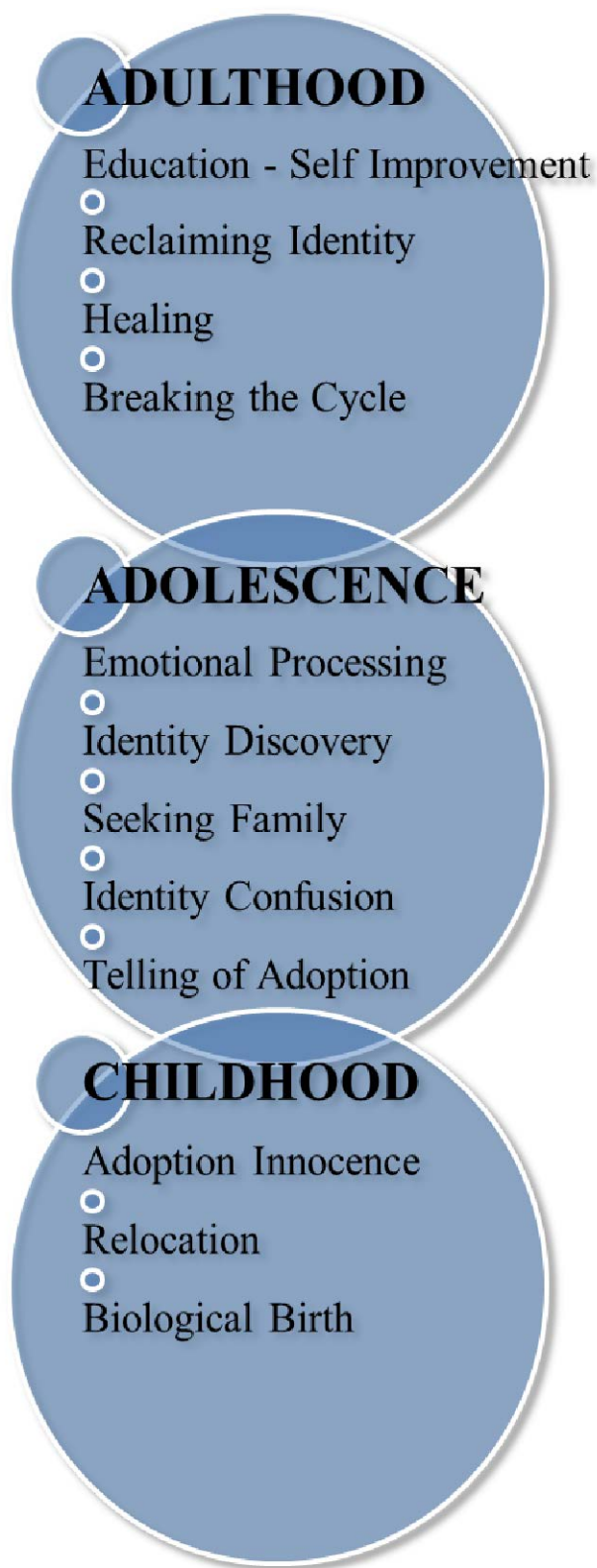


Figure 5. Model of Adoption, Shelly Niemi

My First Nations Cree community is a matrilineal society; we follow our mothers. My legal adoption therefore, did impact my Indigenous identity, and has altered my understanding of who I am and where I belong. I have gaps in the understanding of my traditional knowledge, culture, and language. Being reflexive, and understanding the research around social welfare, and assimilation policies in Canada in 1981, my adoption may not have been seen as a danger to the loss of Indigenous identity. Social Welfare likely viewed my legal adoption as a best case scenario, being adopted by an extended family member. This to a certain extent is absolutely correct; I am a better person today because of this decision that was made for me.

I need to take a moment to deconstruct the social welfare processes that affected me in such a profound way and the vulnerability I experience in remembering this part of my life. My belief is that in 1981, the assimilation policies in Canada at this time was to remove Indian status, that there was not a push, or a forethought into the type of impact leaving out my Indigenous identity in my adoption could have, or would have in my life, my child's life, or the lives of my grandchildren in relation to Indigenous identity and sense of belonging of who they are.

This missing piece in my adoption process has changed the discourse of time for my lineage of my Indigenous identity. As I grew up I took on my adoptive parents' last name, their culture, and Indigenous identity as my own. I began identifying as a Métis woman even though I felt something was still missing as a part of me. Looking back now, and reflecting on this process, I should have had documentation that was secured for me in my adoption to follow my birth mother, and for her to follow her mother. If this process had been accounted for in my legal adoption, I would not have had a loss of Indigenous identity today, instead I would have a

connection to my First Nations Cree community in Saskatchewan. My children, grandchildren, and their future generations would also not be impacted through their Indigenous identity, and sense of belonging for who they are by this process that was missed in my legal adoption. Part of my responsibility now, knowing what I know, is to reclaim this identity for myself, my son, and my future generations so they can better understand who they are as Cree people.

Figure 6 is “My Genogram” which was based on my Indigenous identity of who I am today, and where I have yet to discover who I am. Once you know what you don’t know, you cannot unlearn that information. So, I now carry the responsibility to reclaim my Indigenous identity for my children, my grandchildren, and my future generations yet to come, so they can understand who they are and where they come from.

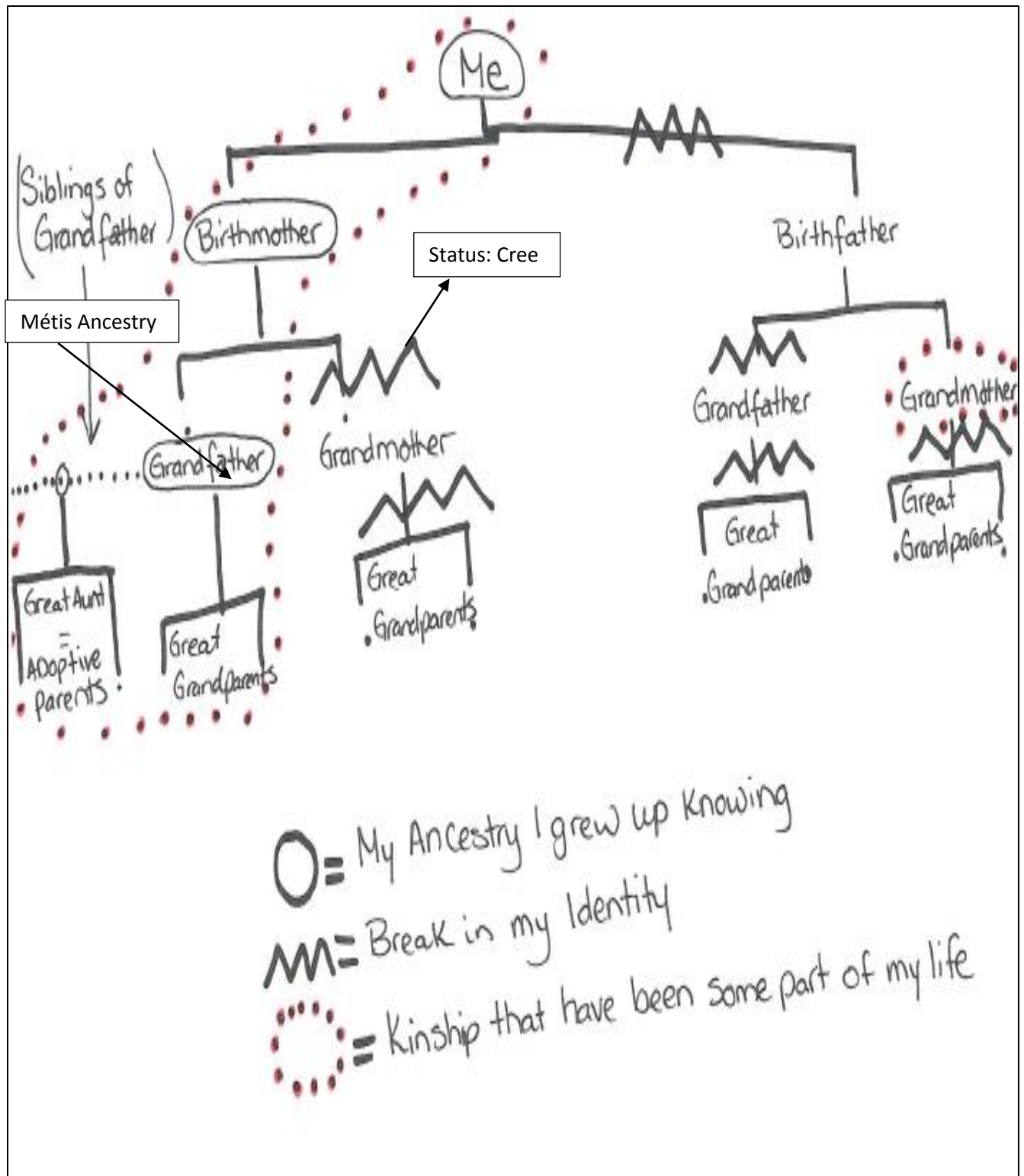


Figure 6. Genogram Shelly Niemi

Part of autoethnography allows you to eliminate boundaries, travel through time, and space. If I could go back in time to inform the social welfare system, and the social workers responsible for the processing of my legal adoption, I would bring with me the process of Family Group Conferencing (FGC), as outlined by the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) in 2005. MCFD provides the definition, the history, and the process of a Family Group Conference. This model of collaboration, and consultation, is what I would bring back in time for me as an infant, so I could have a support plan documented for me, to assist me in my Indigenous identity discovery of who I am, and where I belong.

Family Group Conference

Definition of Family Group Conference According to Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD, 2005):

In the British Columbia child welfare context, the family group conference (FGC) is a process of collaborative planning in situations where decisions need to be made for children or youth. It is a formal meeting where members of a child or youth's immediate family come together with extended kin and members of the child's community who are, or might be, involved to develop a plan for the child. It is a process designed to promote cooperative planning and decision-making and to rebuild a family's support network (MCFD, 2005).

History of the Family Group Conference According to MCFD (2005):

The family group conference has its roots in Aboriginal cultures, where the care of and the decision making for children are the responsibility of the extended family and community. In 1989, New Zealand incorporated the model into Child Protection legislation, following extensive consultation with the public and Aboriginal Māori groups.

In 1992, the B.C. Community Panel that reviewed the legislation recommended that the family group conference be incorporated into the Child, Family and Community Service Act.

In preparation for proclamation of the Act, work on policy and regulations was undertaken on the family group conference, in consultation with New Zealand, Newfoundland and other jurisdictions.

The Purpose of the Family Group Conference According to MCFD (2005) Section 20 (1) of the Child, Family and Community Service Act states:

The purpose of the family group conference is to enable and assist the family to develop a plan of care that will:

- protect the child from harm
- serve the best interests of the child
- take into account the wishes, needs and role of the family
- take into account the child's culture and community

The Family Group Conference According to MCFD (2005):

- Facilitates the involvement of the child's family, extended family and other community members in decision-making about child welfare issues;
- Can be used to support placement decisions, including, but not limited to, out of care placements, planning for permanency, and reunification of a child with family;
- Provides a non-adversarial alternative to court to develop plans in child protection situations;
- Refers families who choose the conference to an impartial 'coordinator' responsible for organising and facilitating conferences;
- Gives families the right to decline the conference in favour of court, mediation or other dispute resolution process; and,
- Supports the intent of Child and Family Service Standards 4 & 18: Cooperative Planning and Dispute Resolution Processes and Developing and Implementing a Plan to Keep a Child or Youth Safe

Having this process would have ensured that my extended family from both my maternal and paternal sides were involved in the decision making of my adoption and assurance that I had access to information about who I was, where I came from and access to my culture.

Chapter Three Adolescence

Adolescent Trauma

"niya namwawika ni-ka-ohci-pakitinín néhiyawascikiwin! oki oskiyak wiyawáw ni-kostamowáwak. kéhté-yawa ta-kí-mamisi-pakoséyimowacik". —I will never let my culture go! I fear for our young people. I hope they have enough sense to seek spiritual guidance from the Elders." – Elder Edward Fox, Sweetgrass First Nation

In this chapter I explored my adolescent life and the effects that colonization had on impacting my Indigenous identity. I researched mental health, education, social welfare, and the residential school system. My research wove my lived experiences through personal narratives to better understand my own Indigenous identity impacts. Throughout this chapter my *"Identity Drum"* framework used the following methods; vulnerability, epiphany, personal lived experiences, changes time, and empathy to guide my research within this chapter.

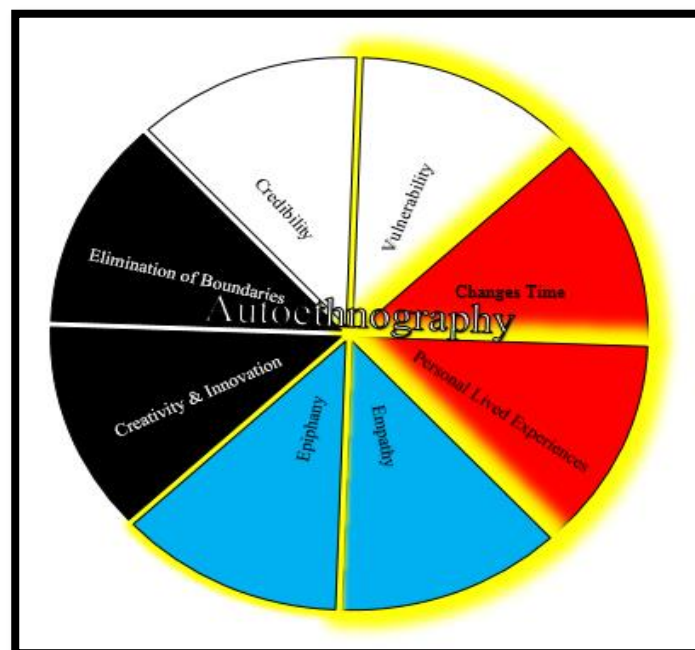


Figure 1. Identity Drum Framework, Shelly Niemi

Looking down at the pink eraser and re-mem-bering, re-mem-bering the words like Concrete Indian, Apple, Urban Aboriginal, Light Skinned, Indian Princess, Squaw, Uneducated, Useless, Get over It. Anger, shame, and sadness filled my teenage body and I just started scrubbing that eraser against my skin. The heat of the friction burnt my arms as I started to peel away the layers of skin. Long sleeved sweaters and Band-Aids hid the pain from the outside world. I never let anybody know that I was trying to shed a layer of my skin, the skin that had absorbed all those words still trying to burrow their way into my soul. I walked the halls, and community as if I was invincible, I was disconnected from my spirit and disconnected from my identity.

When examining adolescent trauma, and mental health, we first need to better understand what adolescent trauma is, and how the impacts of trauma can affect the mental health of young people as they grow. Co-founder and former director at the Centre for Global Mental Health Dr. Vikram Patel (2007) suggests that “mental health disorders begin in youth between the ages of 12-24, and poor mental health can affect development conditions of young people as they grow. This can include; lower educational achievements, substance abuse, violence, poor reproductive and sexual health” (Patel, Flisher, Hetrick & McGorry, 2007, p. 1302).

As I discuss adolescent trauma and mental health within my research this chapter will be from an Indigenous perspective. I will examine some of the significant events that have happened historically to Indigenous communities in Canada, and link how these events have had traumatic impacts on Indigenous people throughout Canada. Intergenerational trauma still continues because of these historic events and they affect the mental health of many Indigenous children, youth, adults, and Elders today. These events in Canadian history are colonization and

the Indian Residential School System. There impacts have affected me and caused me to have my own struggles with Indigenous identity loss and my sense of belonging.

What is a Residential School? In 1879, the new Canadian government commissioned the Davin Report, which reviewed the American system of educating Aboriginal people. The report explains that in the United States, Indian children were best prepared for assimilation into the dominant society if they were removed from the influences of home, family, and community. This report was accepted by the federal government of Canada, and their action item was to create and finance Residential Schools that would be isolated away from the reservations. This would then give over the responsibility of education of First Nations children to the missionaries who would become staff in these new schools. The federal government then aligned their laws to make it mandatory for all Aboriginal children in Canada to attend the Residential School System. These new laws aligned with the assimilation policies that Canada had in place at this time (Barman, J., Hebert, Y., & McCaskill, D., 1996).

This new paternalistic, one-sided relationship received its legal justification in the British North America Act, which in Section 91 took away Indians' independent status by making them wards of the federal government. As consolidated in the Indian Acts of 1876 and 1880, Indian self-government was abolished, and finance and all social services, including education, were placed under federal control (Barman, 1986; p. 5).

The sole purpose of the Residential School system was to remove the Aboriginal children away from their communities, infuse Christian education and values, remove Aboriginal culture, language, and traditions and to fit the Indian for civilized life in his own environment. If a child was caught not following these indoctrination practices, they would be punished, abused, harmed, neglected, or beaten (Barman, 1986). The Residential School system tore apart

Aboriginal families and communities for over one hundred years. This practice in Canadian history has created social problems, and trauma that continue to be present today in Indigenous communities such as; Poor health conditions, mental, and psychological effects, lack of parenting skills, intergenerational trauma, abuse, addictions, and family violence (Wilson, 1986).

My family has struggled with addictions, abuse, and lack of parenting skills because of their struggles with trauma. This was passed down to me, and took the form of Indigenous identity loss and my sense of not belonging. I did not know where I belonged, who I was, or who my relations were. I did not have a birth father named on my birth certificate.

Consequently, I was not in a good place between grade eight and grade ten. As a youth, these mixed feelings and emotions weighed heavy on my mental health. I started to isolate myself away from everybody, I felt depressed, and turned to food for comfort, began smoking cigarettes, and I quit school.

Writing about this time in my life makes me feel vulnerable, the kind of vulnerability that comes with fear of judgement. Being reflective as to why I am feeling vulnerable brings me back to language that I heard from the outside world at this time in my life. Autoethnography allows you to be vulnerable, and empathetic with yourself, so as I feel this vulnerability, I am going to write about it, and share with the world how language affected my mental health. “Why can’t you natives just get over it”, “that was so long ago, it’s not like it was my family that did this to native people”, “Residential Schools were so long ago, it’s not like it happened to you”, “Being adopted is not so bad, you have a good home, and a family that loves you”, “It could be worse you are not in foster care or a group home”. Words like that pack a punch; they did affect me, and my mental health. They affected how I felt about my Indigenous identity, my sense of belonging, and where I fit into the world.

As I examined colonization and the Residential School System, it's important to acknowledge that this occurred in Canada over many generations. The experiences and effects from these events are still being experienced today by, Elders, adults, youth and children. The Grandfathers in our Indigenous communities have always said that things that occur now will have an impact for seven generations, and Aboriginal people in Canada are experiencing the impacts from the past three hundred years of change in their education due to European contact. "The current marginalization that Aboriginal people find themselves in today is no recent event, but rather rooted in historical circumstances" (Frideres & Gadacz, 2001, p.3). So, in order for us to better understand, we must learn, and explore together how these historical events in Canadian history have impacted Aboriginal People.

In 2004, The Children's Mental Health Policy Research Program released a report called: The Mental Health and Well-Being Aboriginal Children and Youth: Guidance for New Approaches and Services (Mussell, B., Cardiff, K., & White, J., 2004). This report provides great insight into the historical events in Canadian history that I believe affected, and continue to affect Aboriginal children, youth, adults, Elders, and their communities. These events have contributed to Indigenous identity loss that many Indigenous people continue to face today, including myself. These events are Colonization and the Residential School System.

The Mental Health and Well-Being Aboriginal children and Youth: Guidance for New Approaches and Services report (Mussell, B., Cardiff, K., & White, J., 2004), helps practitioners examine these events and how they have impacted Nations, and generations of Indigenous communities in Canada. Practitioners of Healthcare, Social Welfare, and Education do need to be aware of these events, so they can better understand the impacts these events have had in their clients, and extended family members.

The Mental Health and Well-Being Aboriginal Children and Youth: Guidance for New Approaches and Services States:

One cannot talk about strategies to promote the mental health and well-being of Aboriginal children and youth without engaging in a discussion about the serious impact of both colonization and the residential school experience on Aboriginal families and communities. The chaotic conditions that exist within many First Nations communities are commonly traced back to colonization and the residential school experience, which are both known to have actively and intentionally suppressed Aboriginal knowledge and cultural values. In particular, residential schooling interfered with the Aboriginal family structure and its cultural foundation. The experience has been both highly disruptive and responsible for creating a generation of individuals who, having been removed from their families, often no longer understood what it meant to be part of their family of origin, let alone how to create a healthy family of their own. It should come as no surprise that the day-to-day existence of many Aboriginal children and youth is frequently marked by shame, uncertainty and significant stress. The problems associated with colonization in First Nations communities have been well documented. These include disintegration of the social fabric of Aboriginal communities; destruction of self-respect and self-esteem; disruption of family life resulting in problems related to alcohol, drug and solvent use, as well as physical, sexual and emotional abuse; and suicide. Canadian policy makers now acknowledge the historical context and continuing impact of colonization on First Nations Peoples, and numerous government reports have echoed a solemn commitment to support initiatives that promote the health and well-being of Aboriginal peoples. In many jurisdictions significant resources have been invested in supporting innovative

strategies and recent reports indicate there is some progress in terms of improvements in health status. Nonetheless, the disintegration of the family continues to plague many First Nations communities with serious impact on the community at large, as well as the physical and mental health and well-being of children and youth (Mussell, B., Cardiff, K., & White, J., 2004, p.23).

Bettering understanding of these impacts and how they can affect mental health allow practioners of education, social welfare, and healthcare an opportunity to practice in a culturally safe, informed way ultimately with the aim of helping to reduce harm, and trauma. When practioners have a theoretical understanding of history, and the historical impacts of a marginalized group in Canada, they should be able to provide the client with cultural safety, so they can best teach, support, and guide using a holistic service lens.

Thirteen – Nineteen Years Old, Identity Loss, Recovery and Confusion

Being Native, nobody my age wanted to be known as being Native, Indian, or Aboriginal. Well, at least all of the friends that I had when I was going to school. Typically, this was because if you associated your identity to being Native, Indian, or Aboriginal, practiced your culture, language, or ceremonies you became a target. Yes, a target for racism.

Being a young person, the experiences of transitioning through puberty, hormones, independence, and sexuality, are already complex, and heavy. When you add racism to this list, life becomes traumatic. Traumatic, because the general population actually avoids acknowledging that racism exists, they make excuses for why racism occurred. Neither of these actually brings resolution; all it does is further oppress a minority group and marginalize the adolescents who are experiencing this. Was it real for me? Yes, of course it was real for me.

Were there adult bystanders that could have protected my identity, and assisted in reducing the harm that racism causes? Yes, there were. However, racism was this dirty word that nobody wanted to hear. Acts of racism were deflected as if they did not occur, and they definitely were not taken seriously. As a young person, the shame you were made to feel when discussing acts of racism that you experienced, definitely did not make you feel safe. This unsafety further affected my sense of Indigenous identity, and my sense of belonging, making me feel confused about how to feel about the world around me, and my place in it.

It was so confusing. Safe people that you trusted did not want to discuss racism with you as it was too uncomfortable, so they became bystanders.

Bystanders still exist within social structures today, thus the importance for systems to better understand what it means to be a bystander when witnessing social injustices. Once you know what you don't know, you cannot unlearn this information. This is why it is critically important to identify what it means to be a bystander. Social structures, such as education, and social welfare have a responsibility in teaching and for creating space to discuss and understand what it means to be a bystander. Once these systems have the language, and understanding they then must explicitly create space to navigate through these topics.

Practitioners within these systems can then be reflective with their personal bias, and position in where they situate themselves within such topics. If we truly want to reduce harm, stigma, stereotypes, and racism, we need to do this from an authentic place, and explicitly create training, and professional development to assist those working with marginalized groups within our societies.

Had bystander training been offered to the practitioners or educators that were a part of my life when I was struggling in isolation, they may have been able to identify with me, and the

trauma that I was experiencing, thus resulting in a different lived experience for me during this time in my life. Bystanders are best described as the “*supporting cast in a play*” whose role is to aid and abet the incident through acts of commission, or omission (Mestry, R, Ven Der Merwe, M & Squelch, J, 2006, p.48).

Figure 7 is a framework that I created regarding being a bystander, I chose to name this “Model of Being a Bystander” I have done this as a way to share my own interpretation as what it looks like to me to be a bystander. This framework explains what it can look like when someone witness an act of racism, or discrimination occurring to an individual, or group of individuals that may be marginalized. The circles found within my framework are defined as:

Circle No.1: is the act of racism or discrimination occurring, and harm being done.

Harm can be physical, social, emotional, and intellectual (e.g. –Don’t all Indigenous people get everything for free”), or (–No way, you’re Native, you don’t look Native”).

Circle No.2: the bystander witnesses the act and internally makes a decision on how to respond to what they have just witnessed.

Circle No.3: the bystander is then faced with two choices to respond, and assist in reducing the harm, or to standby, and deny that any harm has occurred. These choices will be both internal based on their own biases of how they see the situation, and second external dependent on who else is present and witnessing this act.

Circle No.4: the bystander makes their decision, the effect of their decision will then be felt by the individual that is being harmed, and this effect will either be safety or unsafety causing both parties to have a personal lived experience based on the action taken.

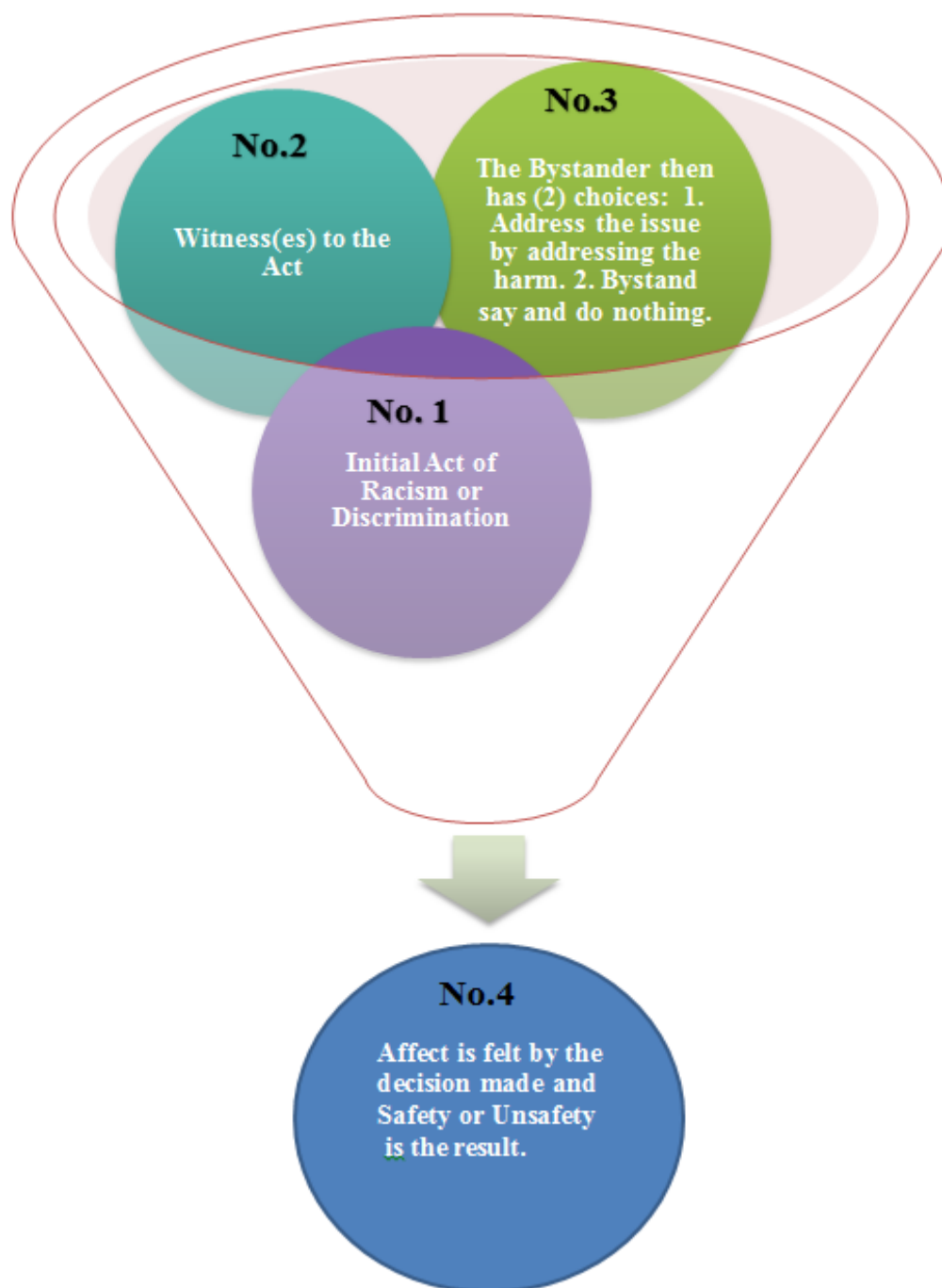


Figure 7. Model of Being a Bystander as interpreted by Shelly Niemi

Systemic Oppression of Identity Loss

Systems such as Education, and Social Welfare all had an impact on oppressing my Indigenous identity as a young child. Acts of racism, stereotyping, and western ideologies were present, felt real, and used towards me to oppress my Indigenous identity. This created confusion for me in my adolescent years as I tried to self-advocate for these injustices I experienced. I was alone, isolated, confused, and trapped in my own mind, feeling like I was drowning in a world that did not understand what I was experiencing. I did not believe that I had any safe people to assist me in my struggles. So, I was doing what I had learned to do best, which was to run away from the issues that I was experiencing. American author, feminist, educator and social activist, Bell Hooks (2003) discusses the importance that education can have in a way to reduce oppression but to also be aware that it can and does exist within this system. She describes the role that relationships, power and media can play in oppression and how education can be an opportunity to overcome oppressive practice stating that:

Within the teaching and learning relationship, more often than not, the question of power and authority raises its head. In an conversation she had with Gary Olson, she said that what she tries to do is acknowledge her authority and the limitations of it and then think of how both teacher and students can learn together in a way that no one acquires the kind of power to use the classroom as a space of domination. She also makes the point that this domination is not restricted to the teacher/student relationship but where there is diversity amongst the students particularly around the issues of race and gender and sexual practice [sic], it is possible for everyone to engage in power struggles and, in fact, for certain students to have potentially the power to coerce, dominate and silence. In order to create a learning environment within the classroom she aims to diffuse hierarchy

and create a sense of community. Hooks maintains that the classroom should be a place that is life-sustaining and mind-expanding, a place of liberating mutuality where teacher and student together work in partnership (hooks, 2003, p. xv).

Education: Attendance and Sense of Belonging

I had developed a learned behaviour in about grade six of running away from my social problems, these included racism, and bullying. In my head I knew that I was smart and could succeed, but I struggled with fitting in. I was overweight because food made me happy, and when people would call me names, or be mean to my face, I would replace my anger and sadness with food. Food for some reason made me feel good; it made me feel privileged, and gave me a deep feeling of self-satisfaction. At this time in my life, I also started to smoke cigarettes. In the beginning it was the head rush that I would get, the fear and excitement I felt when I was stealing them from my mother's purse, so it was overall a rush for me to smoke a cigarette, and a way for me to replace my negative feelings, with something risky, and that made me feel good. However, smoking pushed me further away from my peer group, as most of them did not smoke, and really did not want to hang around an overweight, smoking, Aboriginal girl.

These habits that I started to pick up, and the feelings of racism that I was experiencing, pushed me into adolescent depression. I did not see myself belonging in education, I had few to no friends, I was not connected to any adults in the building, and I did not believe in myself, or thought that anybody believed in me. I felt alone. I was enrolled in high school, but not attending. When my attendance got too bad, I was forced to leave the school, and be enrolled in another one. This cycle continued for me until I finally dropped out in grade ten, having attended most high schools in my community. I had huge learning gaps in my education, and was viewed by my peers and the education system, as a student that was destined for a school

leaving certificate, or an adult dogwood obtained through alternate education. I had no idea where I fit, where I belonged, or what I was even capable of doing.

This autoethnography takes me back through time and space to deconstruct my high school experience. As I look back over the past twenty years, I can identify the social structures that were not in place for me as an Indigenous student. I recognize that I did not see myself as part of the education system; rather I viewed education as something that was being done to me. There was little to no curriculum being offered in Aboriginal related topics. The topics that were offered were minimal, and not the authentic truths about Canada's history with Indigenous people. In 2001 the Aboriginal six-year completion rate in British Columbia was below 40% (Ministry of Education, BC, 2001). This meant that 60% of the Aboriginal students, who entered kindergarten with me, were not making it through the education system, for a variety of reasons. In 1997, I too was on the path to become a statistic of an Aboriginal student that did not make it through the public education system. Marie Battiste (2000) asserts that: "No force has been more effective at oppressing First Nations culture than the education system" (p. 163).

The National Aboriginal Health Organization (2008) describes:

Developing culturally safe learning environments benefit students, educators, educational institutions, and education systems. Students are more likely to respond positively to the learning encounter when they feel safe, respected and able to voice their perspective... High retention rates of an Aboriginal population can be interpreted as a reflection of an educational institute's commitment to such an environment, as well as their commitment to human rights and race relations. Such institutions produce more graduates, which attracts more students and thereby increases enrolment. (p. 13)

Today in public education, there is the opportunity to create safe environments, and to move towards culturally responsive education systems. There is more teacher education training around Indigenous perspectives being embedded within curriculum. The Ministry of Education in British Columbia has revised its curriculum in 2015 to further embed more Indigenous perspectives across all aspects of the curriculum, including the effects of the Residential School System, and Aboriginal ways of knowing (Ministry of Education, 2015). First Superintendent of Aboriginal Achievement in British Columbia Dede Deroose states that: “District staff must also commit to providing educators with strategies to address barriers where students do not feel safe at school, and do not have a sense of belonging” (Deroose, 2014). With the shift in public education to be more inclusive, culturally safe, and responsive to the needs of Aboriginal students within the education system, one can be hopeful that there will be an increase in Aboriginal six year completion rates and an overall sense of belonging to their school community. With the teacher education training and awareness now being provided on the historical impacts that have affected many Aboriginal children and families for generations one should see more cultural sensitivity being used when responding to Aboriginal student needs. This should also include the supports that they require to keep them connected to school throughout their educational journey.

I am very hopeful for the future of education, for Aboriginal and non- Aboriginal students. I believe that these developing structures will result in reduced racism, and that we will see more and more Aboriginal students graduating, and attending post-secondary education training. With this break in the cycle, social systems will begin to shift with a more diverse workforce positively shifting the outcomes for Indigenous peoples in Canada for generations yet to come.

Social Welfare: Sexual Fear and My Youth Agreement

I left the community I grew up in at seventeen years old, with a half grade ten education, and no money, I was destined to start my life in a new community. My relocation brought me to a community one-thousand kilometers away from where I spent my childhood. I had no money, no relations, and, an apartment that cost me four hundred dollars a month situated next door to a strip club. No, it was not perfect, nor safe for all that matter. I needed money if I wanted to stay here in this new community, so I went to the social welfare office to apply for income assistance until I could find a job. Applying for social welfare at seventeen is not all that easy; I was sent to first meet with a social worker to discuss the reasons for my relocation to this new community. Prior to being able to receive any funding, they needed to speak with my legal guardian; as the social worker said that they needed to better understand why I moved away from my home community. After their investigation, I was put onto a youth agreement. A youth agreement in British Columbia is a legal agreement with youth between the ages of sixteen, and eighteen years old, and the Ministry of Children and Family Development. Its purpose is to help, and assist youth to live independently, attend school, find employment, attend counselling, and protect them from harm, neglect, or abuse. MCFD recognizes that not all youth that leave home are eligible for a youth agreement, and that an investigation will be conducted into the situation, prior to having a youth set up on a youth agreement plan, and being offered financial assistance (MCFD, 2016). Going through this whole process was intrusive; and I could still feel the familiar acts of racism, and discrimination occurring towards me from within this social structure. This time though, they were masked to make you feel like you were being a defiant teenager. I wasn't defiant, I was just lost, and naïve in the big world around me. I had lost my connection to my community, to my family, and to myself. I felt shame that I had quit school, I felt frustrated that I

was poor, and I felt alone because I did not know where I belonged. Travelling back to this moment in time, I wish that I was offered counselling, or for that matter a safe adult to just deconstruct my life with.

Would counselling have helped? Possibly, as maybe it would have made me more reflective of my life, and to better understand the risks that I was taking in being isolated and alone in a world that I was not yet prepared for. My family loved me dearly and worried about my health, and well-being. Yet, I was doing what I knew best, running away from my personal issues that I was struggling with; identity loss, racism, failure in myself in not succeeding in school, being overweight, and not having a sense of belonging to my place in the world.

Why could I not just be honest with the people that cared so deeply about me? Maybe, I was too stubborn and did not want to hear the truth. Or maybe I was not prepared to hear the truth, and do the work on myself to heal from my hurt. At that moment in time, I felt that I could be independent when really; I think I was just being selfish, and causing hurt and sadness to those that cared deeply about me. I was pushing them away and isolating myself, when what I really needed, was them closer than ever.

I stayed in my new community for about 6 months, and had a love hate relationship with myself while I was there. I had the freedom to come and go as I pleased, but was I really ready for that? No. Reflecting back on this time in my life, I was far from ready to be on my own, I was just running from my pain, and burying deeper the issues that I had not yet confronted. As I was busy burying these feelings, and not confronting my life as I lived it, I became desensitized, and numb to the world around me. I never truly realized the dangers, harm, and risks that I was putting myself in, living independently at seventeen years old.

Autoethnography research allows you to explore these Epiphany moments in your life that impact you significantly, deconstruct them, and analyze that moment in time. One of my epiphanies came for me while I was living independently; and this experience provided me some clarity, in recognizing that I was not ready for this world alone. Thinking back to the day, I can remember it so clearly: it was raining outside; you could smell the fresh rain on the pavement, and see the pink cloudy sky just about to turn into darkness. This would be the day that I was vulnerable, and put myself into a very risky situation. I had just finished working for the day at a fast food restaurant in the mall, I walked to my car, and it would not start. I had nobody that I could call that could come and help me, I had no money if it needed to get it fixed, and no money to take the bus home if my car would not start. It was after 5:00 pm, and starting to get dark outside.

A construction worker walked over to me to offer his assistance. He said that he could see that I was struggling, and he offered to boost my car to see if that would work. It did, and I was very grateful for that. As I thanked him for his help, he suggested that maybe I could just bring my car over to his place that night to see if there were any further pressing issues that needed to be fixed.

Excellent I thought, this older man in his mid-forties was offering me assistance; this was very kind of him. I took his address, and confirmed that I could be there in about an hour, but I just needed to head home to change out of my work uniform. When I showed up, I had this feeling. It was a gut feeling, like maybe I should have told somebody where I was going, or left his address somewhere in my apartment. That feeling washed over me as I approached his house, but I just shook it off. He answered the door with a smile on his face, and he was very friendly. I remember looking at him, and then looking at his dog standing beside him, and feeling

intimidated. I just shook those feelings off too, because I am sure that it was just the anxiety of my previous thoughts just creeping in.

His house was small; it was one of the older kinds that still had wood panelling on the walls. I can remember that it was painted blue on the exterior, and it was weathered, with the paint starting to flake away. His dog was large, and looked mean. I remember my heart pounding, and thinking to myself, “maybe it’s best if you just leave. No car is worth the feeling that you are having right now, you are not feeling safe”. Yet, my seventeen-year-old, naïve brain decided to ask “Can I use your washroom?” Huh, what was I thinking? “Can I use your washroom?” If my body was in fight or flight mode, why the heck did I ask to go inside his house?

“Of course” he said, so into the washroom I went. Honestly, it’s not like I could have crawled out of the bathroom window like they do in movies. I was in a real life situation and I was feeling super unsafe. As I looked around the bathroom, there were naked pictures of women pinned up everywhere, the kind of pictures from dirty magazines, like the ones that you saw on the top shelf of magazine racks at corner stores. This was the first time that I had ever seen images like this. My heart was pounding, I was feeling anxious, my palms were sweaty and all I wanted to do was cry, and leave. All I kept thinking was, how am I going to make a respectful exit, from this situation that I had put myself into? No need for an excuse I thought, I was just going to leave. I built up my confidence while washing my hands in the bathroom; deep breath in, deep breath out. I opened up the bathroom door to make my exit and there he sat, naked on the couch. This mid forty-year-old man was masturbating. Yes, masturbating. I remember looking at him in fear and disgust as I made my exit to the door.

Tears started to roll down my face as I jumped into my car. Please start, please start, I was thinking. Yes, it did, and I cried as I was driving away, feeling fear, sadness, and panic, washing over me. I must have smoked a half pack of cigarettes thinking about the risky situation that I had put myself into. I could have become a statistic. The “what if” thoughts started to creep in, “what if” I hadn’t escaped, “what if” I had been harmed, “what if” I became a missing person? This raw emotion of being young, and recognizing that I was not ready to be in this world alone, became crystal clear that night. I made it back to my apartment close to 10:00 pm. I was scared to be alone in my apartment now as I realized it was not in a safe neighbourhood. My anxiety grew. I missed my family; I just wanted to be home, safe, and surrounded by the people that loved me. I only had two hundred dollars to my name, but I was done, I needed to go back home.

That night I could not sleep, because every single little sound had me vibrating in fear. With about two hours sleep; I woke up as the sun was starting to rise over the mountains. I was up, and packing, packing everything that could fit into my car. No goodbyes were necessary, because I had no friends here either. I made it to the ferry terminal for 7:00 pm, this would get me into Vancouver at around 9:00 pm. I had planned that I would just spend the night driving the 900 km home, as all I wanted now was to feel the safety of my family. It was 1998, and there were no smart cell phones that had navigation maps, so you had to really pay attention to the road signs as you drove. I left the ferry terminal, and got lost in downtown Vancouver until about 11:00 pm. I became emotionally exhausted, and tired. I just kept telling myself drive until you get to Hope then you can pull over and rest. So, that’s exactly what I did, I drove until I made it to Hope, found a truck stop, and parked between the large transports. I thought to

myself, this would be the safest place to park, and sleep in my car for a few hours. However, I could not really sleep all that well, as I was too scared of the darkness that surrounded me.

I had no cell phone minutes, no extra money, and a half broken car. I was done! 5:00 am came, and I told myself, if you get tired just pull over again, and try to sleep, sleeping in the day is better than at night, when you're a young Indigenous woman travelling this highway alone. This situation was significant for me, as it was the turning point for me to journey back home, confront my issues, and begin to piece my life back together. Coming back to my community, and rejoining my family felt fantastic. I felt safe, secure, and loved. My mother though had some very strict conditions for me, so the choice was to go back to school full time, or get a job. She was very clear that I had to do one of those two choices, or I could not be living at home for free. Fair enough, this seemed reasonable, and actually I now wanted both, but what school was going to enroll a seventeen and half year old, high school dropout? Where would I get a job?

I began calling the high schools that I had previously attended in my community, and they were very honest with me. I had been away from school for too long, and had huge educational gaps in my learning, and because of my age, and how far behind in my learning I was they could not enroll me. „Ouch, nothing like a blow to the stomach, what have I done to myself?“ The last high school I called, provided me some hope; they suggested that there were really only two options that I had based on my age, and learning gaps, and they were; 1.) Attend the college to do upgrading, or 2.) Attend their alternate education program they had within the college to complete my grade twelve.

After thought and contemplation I decided on Option 2, I went to the intake, and was asked some personal questions, and what my availability would be like to attend school?

Interesting my availability? At that moment I knew this was going to be a very different educational experience for me. The program realized that some students were living independently; trying to juggle work, life, and education. This program was designed to assist in accommodating the needs of the learner. For the first time in a very long time, I felt hopeful, and was excited about learning again; because I knew that this program was going to be a fit for me. I entered into the program feeling a sense of belonging, feeling supported, and even feeling that I was capable of graduating from high school. During this program I was given many opportunities to explore my Indigenous identity safely. I had built a strong connection to the youth care worker, she helped me explore my social issues, personal issues, and identity issues that I had buried in the past, and learned to run from.

I was feeling like I had a sense of belonging to a place, a social structure that was part of my life. I was feeling safe, supported, and courageous to look at the deeper issues I had not yet confronted in my life, the ones that I had run from. I was ready to work through them, and come out on the other side of them with the support that was surrounding me. When I look back at this moment in time about how I was able to achieve this, it was because I had a safety person to help guide me through my trauma, and let me deconstruct all the impacts I felt I had experienced in my life. My teachers and youth care worker never gave up on me. They were supportive, non-judgemental, understood the complexity that trauma can carry, and walked with me as I self – explored, deconstructed, and reconstructed my lived experiences.

Beck and Malley (1998) define belonging for youth as: “To have a proper, appropriate, or suitable place, to which they can be themselves, and to be naturally associated with something, and fit into a group naturally” (p.133).

Education systems carry a level of responsibility to foster belonging, and resilience in youth. When youth feel that they positively belong to the school environment, this can deter risky behaviours including but not limited to; teen pregnancy, addictions, violence, and self-harm (Resnick, Bearman, Blum, Bauman, Harris & Jones 1997). A sense of belonging a youth feels can come from many different areas within the school community, however, it typically is from at least one healthy adult in the building.

In the article *Nurturing Resilience and School Success in American Indian and Alaska Native Students* (2002) has defined four factors that can foster resilience, and a sense of belonging in youth and they suggest that when a youth begins to feel that they belong, it's likely because one, or all four of these factors were felt by the youth from a healthy adult in their school community:

Factor 1 A Caring Relationship, that involves compassion, empathy, understanding, respect, and non-judgement.

Factor 2 High Expectations, assisting the youth in believing in themselves, and their future, supporting critical reflection, and critical resilience, never giving up on them even when they make poor choices that affect their behaviours.

Factor 3 Opportunities for Participation, this includes in all aspects of the school community, coming from a strength based approach, and offering many opportunities for them to become involved even when they cannot see themselves as part of the system. This may require asking numerous times, not just once, and this may include removing any barriers that they may face so they can participate.

Factor 4 Meaningful Involvement, this may include having the youth contribute in a leadership capacity, or way that is meaningful to them in their educational career, this

may require self-discovery, self-esteem building, confidence building, and overall listening to what interests the youth has, and how they feel that they can become more involved in a positive way (Strand, Peacock and Thomas, 2002, p.3).

I believe that I was successful, within my alternate education program, because I had experiences with all four of these factors, various different people were there to guide me, teach me, care for me, and they did this without judgement. Their actions fostered in me a sense of belonging, and this feeling is what kept me connected to the program. They helped me to invest in myself. It took me eighteen months, but I did it, I caught up, and graduated high school. I was nineteen and the first person in my family to ever graduate from high school. My program was proud of my success, and gave me a \$250 scholarship to attend college.

Truthfully, college was not something that I had even considered, but, this \$250 made me think that possibly I could become a post-secondary student. Who would have thought, not me? I never had seen myself as a post-secondary education student. First decision, what would I even take? Yet this \$250 made me envision the possibilities that my life could have, it allowed me to dream. So, I registered that September (2001) as a first generation Indigenous student in post-secondary education. Once again I was alone and isolated. But this time I felt stronger, more confident with my Indigenous identity and the journey I was on these last 18 months of self-discovery of who I was, and who I was yet to become. Indigenous scholar Gregory Cajete (2000) suggests that:

there is a shared body of understanding among many Indigenous Peoples around the world that education is really about helping an individual find his or her face, which means finding out who you are, where you come from, and your unique character (p.183).

Figure 8 is my model of “Belonging” which includes the four factors Strand, Peacock and Thomas (2002) describe that a youth may need to experience to build on their sense of “Belonging” to their school community. I have chosen added three more factors based on my own personal lived experiences to better describe how I see “Belonging” from an Indigenous researcher’s worldview perspective.

I believe children and youth who can be supported throughout all seven of these factors regularly should garner a better attachment to their school community, and the healthy adults in the building that are supporting them. My model includes the following seven factors; caring relationships, opportunities for participation, high expectations, positive feedback regularly, restorative education and the feeling of safety, culture and self-identity exploration, and meaningful involvement.



Figure 8. Shelly Niemi Model of "Belonging"

Chapter Four Adulthood

Developing a Stronger Sense of Self Through Identity Recovery

"ki-ká-nihta-néhiyawihinin ki-ká-sohki-téhiyan mina ká-kístéyimotín ki-t-aniskomakíwin."

—Knowing your language gives you an inner strength and pride in your heritage."

- Freda Ahenakew, Muskeg Lake First Nation.

In this chapter I discussed my experiences on how I was able to begin to recover my Indigenous identity. I looked at the following social structures; Aboriginal Head Start Program, Public Education, and Post-Secondary Education. I assessed the research around these social structures to affirm for me the shift in their policies, and practices on how they have moved towards becoming more culturally safe systems. I linked my discoveries to the impacts I felt as I was discovering and recovering my Indigenous identity.

Throughout this chapter my "*Identity Drum*" framework used the following methods; epiphany, personal lived experiences, creativity and innovation, credibility, and elimination of boundaries to guide my research in this chapter.

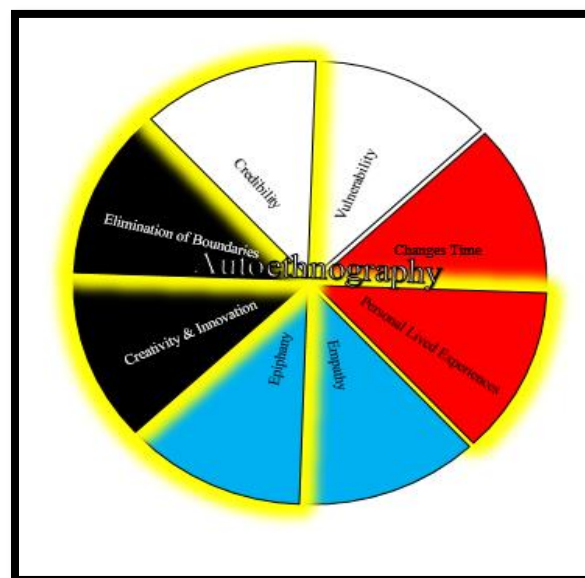


Figure 1. Identity Drum Framework, Shelly Niemi

Ten tiny fingers, and ten tiny toes. He was PERFECT! On December, 13, 2002 my son was born. Staring down at this beautiful baby boy, with dark brown hair, and olive skin. I remember bringing him close, and deeply breathing in. This must be what love smells like, because it filled my heart with a feeling that I had not quite experienced before. I was his mother; I was responsible for him. I was responsible for growing this little human into a kind, caring, compassionate, strong Aboriginal Man. I wanted him connected to his culture; I wanted him to know his language and his Ancestral teachings. I wanted him to not grow up in a world where he felt that he had to hide his identity and not be proud of who he was born to be. I didn't want the world around him to make him feel like he is less than his potential. I remember crying, and holding him tight, and making a promise to him that I would do my very best to grow him in a way that makes him a strong leader, connected to his culture, and an advocate for himself, and others. I would grow him in a way that racism would not scathe him, and that he would be strong enough to speak out against any injustices. I was going to break this cycle that was being passed on from generation to generation in my family. In order for me to do this, and take on this commitment I made to him I needed to know more, participate, and experience. We would begin this journey forward together, proud, fearless, and committed in speaking our truths, learning our truths, and living our truths. No more was I going to carry shame of a broken identity.

Twenty – Thirty-Four Years Old, Identity Recovery, Memory and Confidence

If education was going to be the way forward for us in my family, then where in education could we find culture and identity? As an infant, my son would attend college with me as I explored this new world as a first generation Indigenous student within this post-secondary education world. History, Geography, Social Work, Philosophy, Nursing, I took all these various courses and they all had very little literature, and discussion about Indigenous People in

Canada. I felt like I was surrounded in a world that was not inclusive of who I was as an Indigenous student. I was beginning to feel like I did not belong here, and that there was nobody within this social structure that could help me navigate through this system that was riddled with Western Ideologies.

Then it happened, I remember entering into the classroom on my first day of class. I was brought back to a childhood feeling that I had when I was in grade school. 1, 2, 3, I scanned the room, and was able to physically identify about three of us students as being Aboriginal. Why was that? As we received our course outline I remember thinking, will racism become a part of this classroom? Will my peers, these students around me, be able to confront their own bias as we explore this class on Canada's relationship with Aboriginal People?

Will these topics in our syllabus allow for deeper learning not only for me as an Indigenous woman, but for my non-Indigenous peers around me? Will stereotypes and racism be discussed or confronted? Will this class further suppress my Indigenous identity that was wanting to surface? All these questions! Was this because I was an Indigenous student in a class that was focused on Aboriginal topics? Was I just being hypersensitive because of my past experiences? I did not feel safe to approach the other Indigenous students in my class and discuss the vulnerability that I was feeling, so I buried those feelings and proceeded through that semester as a learner. Sometimes, it is fortunate how the stars align one might say, or that the Creator has a way of working. This particular semester, as I was in my first class in Aboriginal Studies, my son turned three years old, and was able to enter into a culturally focused early learning program called Aboriginal Head Start (AHS). I was excited for him, and excited for me as we both were going to be educating ourselves in Aboriginal perspectives, and experiencing Aboriginal ways of knowing together.

Aboriginal Headstart Program

The process was supportive from the beginning. To start, a home support worker came and met with our family, interviewed us as a way to find out more information about who we were as an Indigenous family, what our values were, how many children we had, and what our expectations as parents were for entering into this early learning program. Most, of this information we really did not know, as this was our first child, and we had no previous experience with early learning. I was still on the road of discovery for my own Indigenous identity, and was not sure how I could contribute, but we understood our expectations, and I was excited to begin this journey with our son. Transportation was provided, he was to be picked up on a school bus daily, and would be provided lunch and cultural programming throughout the afternoon. As a parent, I was invited to participate in the cultural teachings, parent support groups, and play activities. Entering into the Aboriginal Head Start location, you felt welcomed, you felt like it was family. There was no judgement on how you parented, how you dressed, what kind of car you drove, or what you did, or did not know culturally, and your social status in the community was irrelevant. It felt safe.

The Royal Commissions on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) states that:

If stresses interfere with the development of a child's capacity for health, self-esteem and intellectual growth before beginning school, the schooling experience soon accentuates the child's weaknesses. Once they have entered the formal education system, children may never recover the ground lost in these early years. The link between early childhood experiences and success in the formal schooling system has been studied intensively by researchers since the 1960's ... After three decades of examining early childhood interventions; there is strong evidence that such programs do make a difference,

particularly if they continue into the elementary school system. There is substantial research showing that children who participate in high quality early childhood development programs are more likely to finish high school and to become employed (Weikart, 1989 cited RCAP, p. 19).

Safety was important to me, especially because I wanted to provide our son with the strongest foundation he could have for his cultural identity. I did not want to have him experiences of racism and social injustices, like I experienced in my educational journey. The Aboriginal Head Start program had six core values that formed the foundation of the program and they were; education and school readiness, health promotion, nutrition, parental/family involvement, social support, and culture and language (Mashford-Pringle, 2008, p. 2). Over the next two years of our son being enrolled in this early learning program, not only was he becoming strong, and independent within in his own identity, he was beginning to speak his language, and practice his cultural traditions. In order for me to best describe how this infusion of knowledge occurred, I am going to deconstruct the six core values, and be reflective with each one of them, as each one of them not only impacted his life, but assisted me on my path to Indigenous identity discovery.

Education and School Readiness

As a young parent having had an unsuccessful experience in my own childhood education, I was not sure how I was going to navigate the education system with my son. The Aboriginal Head Start Program was there to support us while we navigated early childhood education together, and prepared us for the transition into public education. Over the two years within the program we were introduced to school routines that allowed us to restructure our lives around an education program. We were introduced to literacy and numeracy curriculum that was

culturally infused with relevant Aboriginal Education resources. As parents, we were made to feel safe when we entered into the school community and welcomed with positive, personal feedback about the growth and development of our son.

It was an expectation as parents to be involved within your child's school community, so you would volunteer your time regularly within the classroom, on field trips, and participating in the Aboriginal Parent Advisory Committee. The educational experience became natural, where not only you as the parent felt included in all aspects of the school community, but our son was developing a stronger sense of self, cultural identity, and sense of belonging and safety with education.

With Canada's history of poor educational experiences for Aboriginal people, this program was aiming to change that experience for families, so they could feel safe in early education, prior to being transitioned into the public education system. As a Aboriginal Head Start parent, I felt safe, supported, and positive about the educational experiences that my son was receiving. And because of my new lived experiences, I was beginning to re-establish trust within a social structure that once had failed me and the connection I had to my Indigenous identity.

Health Promotion

Janet Smylie, Professor at the University of Saskatchewan in the Department of Community Health and Marcia Anderson, Professor at the University of Manitoba in the Department of Community Health insist that urban Aboriginal children are still more likely to live in poverty, in a lone parent family, be disconnected from their culture, not have attended a quality childcare, and face overt racism and assimilation policies than mainstream or immigrant children. A strong sense of identity, clear understanding of physical environment, adequate

health services, employment opportunities, steady income, educational opportunities, and strong social support networks would help urban Aboriginal families to raise their children holistically and in a “good way” as traditional teachings often say (Smylie & Anderson, 2006).

The Aboriginal Head Start Program promotes health as one of its core values. The program formed many community relationships with healthcare practitioners. This allowed for early healthcare assessments for each child, prior to their transitioning into the public education system. These assessments included, oral health, so the children practiced brushing their teeth regularly at school, after meals, instilling a healthy routine for their oral health. A field trip was made to the dentistry program so the children could have their teeth cleaned, examined for any issues, and early detection of cavities or tooth decay. Another field trip was to see an eye doctor, to be examined for eye health and glasses. On our son's trip it was noted that he had a lazy eye, and that he would require surgery. This early detection allowed us to correct this issue for him, before it caused him lasting vision impairment.

Lastly, the Aboriginal Head Start Program connected parents with the Public Health Authority so they could participate in their early learning programs, and be welcomed to kindergarten public health fair. Without this early learning program, I would not have known about early childhood ages, and stages or growth development, because of this value I was able to be a more active parent role in our son's development because of the guided support we received as part of this program.

Nutrition

“We will raise a generation of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children, and youth who do not have to recover from their childhoods”(Blackstock, Bruyere & Moreau, 2005, p. 3). The Aboriginal Head Start Program recognizes that food and proper nutrition are imperative to early

childhood growth and development. This program also understands that not all families that have children attending can afford to send their children with a balanced lunch. Having a cook on site to prepare the meals for the children not only provides role models for parents, but teaches children about healthy eating habits. Our family appreciated, this component of the program, as we were living in poverty, when our son was attending the Aboriginal Head Start Program, and could not afford much. This assistance; helped us reduce our barriers that we may have been faced with. It also, modeled for us the importance that proper nutrition plays in childhood growth, and development.

Parental / Family Involvement

As a child, my experiences with early education were not positive. The Aboriginal Head Start Program, offered my son the most beautiful gift, the ability for his parents to feel safe, and be involved with his education. The sense of belonging that I felt when I entered the program, the extended family feeling, the genuine care, love, and respect that you were given as a parent, was also being given to your child. The program required your participation, and I really liked that. I liked it for various reasons, mainly because it created for me new lived experiences with education that were positive.

I was able to participate in parenting classes; which allowed me to better understand Aboriginal traditional ways of parenting, something that was new for me. This education I was learning, allowed me to become reflective in my parenting skills, and build a support network of Aboriginal parents that I could trust, and talk to when I had questions related to parenting, and culture. I was engaged in decision making that would affect my child's cultural education, and this felt really good, as I was also learning about cultural education with my son. Through this program I was introduced to Elders, and Knowledge Keepers and they helped guide, and support

my son's cultural identity and my own as we had many, many conversations over the two years within the program that developed into continued support for our family.

Social Support

Developing social literacy can be very difficult especially if your experiences are based in trauma. As, a new parent, I was not confident on how to navigate for myself, or my son through the social structures within our community. I was not sure how, these systems would respond to Indigenous children, or parents. The Aboriginal Head Start program, created an environment for you to feel safe, and with this safety you were able to ask difficult questions, and learn to become an advocate for yourself, and your child. Professional development was offered, along with the bridge to other safe community supports, so your family could have their needs met without judgement. The Aboriginal Head Start Program connected us to Métis housing, so we could try and get ourselves out of poverty. They also introduced us to various other Aboriginal social agencies that were able to assist us with travel for our son's healthcare needs.

Culture and Language

Over the two years, that our son was in the Aboriginal Head Start Program he was able to strongly root his identity into who he was as a Cree child. He was able to develop a strong sense of self, who he was, where he came from, and what some of his cultural traditions were. While he was learning about our culture, and forming his strong sense of identity, he was role modelling for me. I was able to begin discovering my identity with him. The Aboriginal Head Start Program was one of the most significant experiences in my life for Indigenous identity recovery.

When I look back at this time in my life, Aboriginal Head Start wrapped their supports around me, and my family. They engaged with us in a healthy way, made us feel safe, and gave us many opportunities to be engaged in cultural programming. Although my intentions for this program was to have our son learn about himself, our culture, and build a healthy relationship with education, it did that, and so much more, for our family. It brought me full circle in my journey of self-discovery of my Indigenous identity. We learned to be in ceremony together and we learned our language together. Witnessing a young child discover, without barriers or deficits is beautiful. It empowered me, and gave me the strength that I needed to continue on in bettering my life, for the better of our family's future.

At the end of the two years, there was a cultural graduation ceremony. This was a ceremony that honoured the children's experiences, and served as a rite of passage into public education. I was part of our son's graduation planning committee, and our committee decided to gift these young graduates with a hand drum. This is the first time, that the hand drum would come into my life, and I would learn about its teachings, and how to honor its gifts. Our committee decided to have our children's given Aboriginal name painted onto the drum, with their handprint. This was a way to capture their experience, and culture, and send them off to public education with their, identity, sense of belonging, and positive school experiences intact, and strong.

Over, the two years of being deeply rooted, and connected to culture your worldviews change, and your eyes become more open to the world around you. Culture, gives you the ability to choose your path, and discover who you are, and learn what your ancestral teachings are. We are an Urban Aboriginal Family, 1600km away from our Traditional Nation, so had the Aboriginal Head Start Program, not been offered, or was not a part of our family's life, our

connection to our Indigenous identity, may have stayed broken, or been very limited. The Aboriginal Head Start Program gave us as a family, the foundations, and connections to build upon our knowledge, and reach out to the Knowledge Keepers, and Elders that we had met within this program to further deepen our roots in our culture, language, and traditions. **Figure 9** is a picture of my son's hand drum from his graduation from the Aboriginal Head Start Program. This hand drum hangs on the wall in his bedroom, where he displays a part of his culture proudly.



Figure 9. Shelly Niemi's Son's Hand Drum from Aboriginal Head Start Graduation (2007)

When I think back to the Aboriginal Head Start program, and all the positive experiences that were brought into our lives, this program built a foundation for our son to be proud of who he is, where he comes from, and I am grateful for that. I am grateful, because I never had an opportunity like this as a child, to build a foundation for my own Indigenous identity. Our son will not struggle with Indigenous identity loss, like I have throughout my childhood, and adolescent life. This program came full circle for us, as I was able to begin to discover, who I

was, while attending this program with our son. When, I think about what this looks like in my mind, I think of a tipi, and how the tipi in my culture connects family, traditions, knowledge, language, ceremony, and kinship. And when I think of the Aboriginal Head Start Program, as a program I envision the core values inside the warm walls of the tipi, and while you are connected to the program you begin to breathe in these core values, and they soon begin to become part of who you are.

Figure 10 is my model of how I interpret the Aboriginal Head Start Program. I have included the six core values of the AHS Program; nutrition, health, parental and family involvement, culture, language, and social supports. As I believe it is these six core values of the program that truly provide the foundation for success and belonging for Aboriginal children and families. I see the six core values being held together by Tipi walls and I see the tipi poles as the structural support that is being provided to children and families by the program.

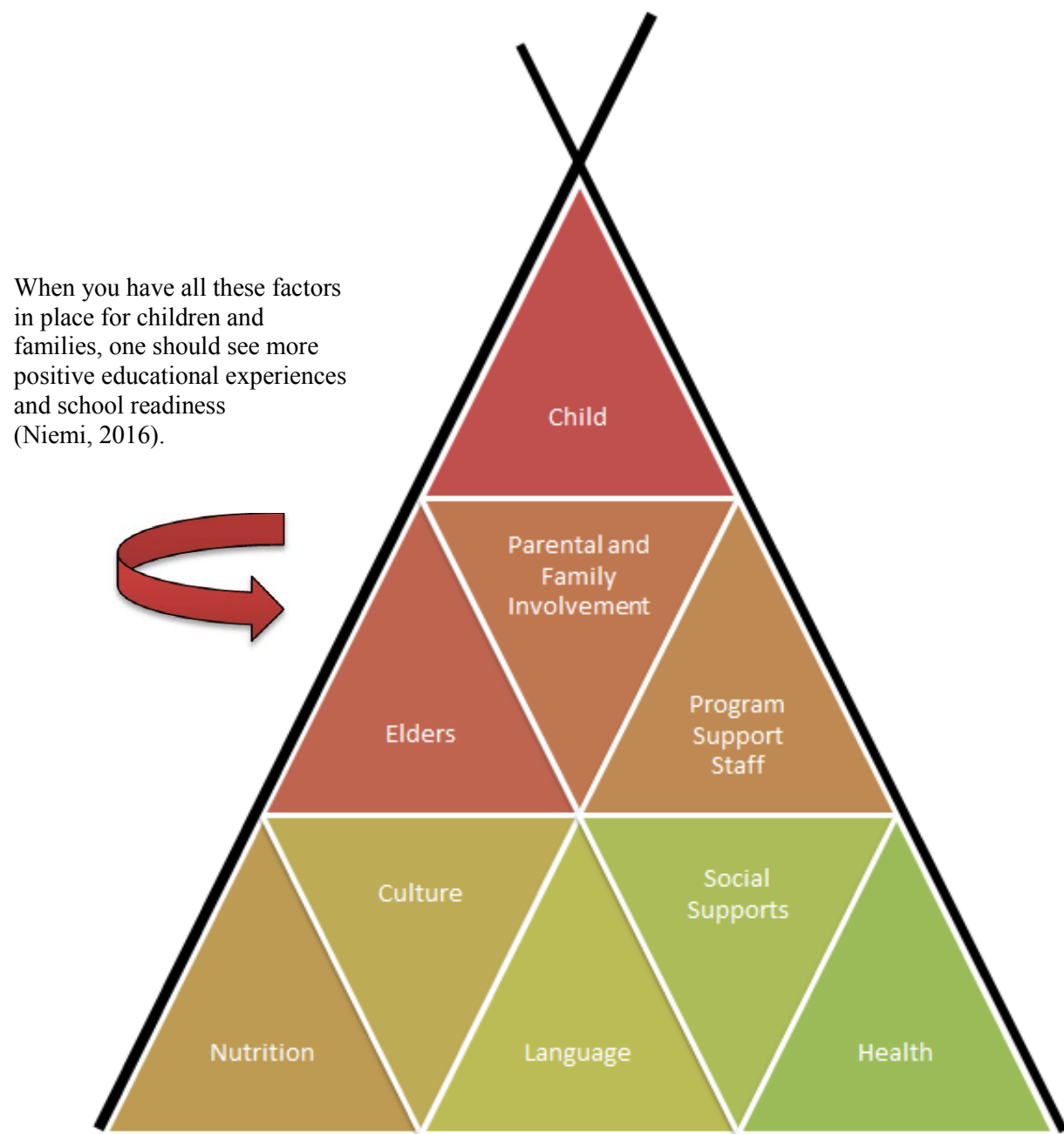


Figure 10 . Shelly Niemi's interpretation of the Aboriginal Education Head Start Program

Systemic Response to Identity Recovery

Systems such as Education, Social Welfare and Healthcare all had an impact on oppressing my Indigenous identity as a young child. Acts of racism, stereotyping and western ideologies were present, felt real, and used towards me to oppress my Indigenous identity and create confusion in my adolescent years as I tried to self-advocate for injustices. As I grew, systems were also growing, and starting to change. They were becoming more culturally safe for Indigenous people in Canada, and those that were in the minority group.

These social structures that were once responsible for aiding in my identity loss, were now becoming part of my journey in my identity recovery and the vast knowledge that they were sharing assisted me in beginning to discover who I was, where I came from, and where I belonged in the world around me. This transition was not easy; it was filled with fear from past experiences, so I was cautious in the way that I was weaving Indigenous Knowledge into my life. I sought out many guides to assist me along this journey of self-discovery; these guides included instructors, educators, Elders, community members, and my family. I asked many questions, that would often lead me down a path for a while as I shaped my worldview perspectives, and gained new knowledge. I was inquisitive, and humble. I was learning that Indigenous people in Canada were not all the same, and that our culture, language, traditions, and ceremonies, were very diverse. How, could I not know this as an Indigenous person? I truly, was not aware that ceremonies were different amongst nations. What were unwritten protocols? I was experiencing Indigenous knowledge at a rapid pace, and felt overwhelmed at times, but I stayed humble, listened, learned, and witnessed this hidden knowledge that has been around me since time of immemorial, I just did not have the right eyes to see it with.

Post-Secondary Education

My post-secondary education was a mixed experience, it had many positive, and negative experiences. However, it is within post-secondary education, that I was able to overcome adversity, strengthen my resilience, and affirm my Indigenous identity. I was a first – generation Indigenous student to attend post-secondary from my family. I did not have family members that could help me navigate through this system, or provide me with insight as to what my experiences may look like, or where to go for help, and assistance should I require some.

Signing up for courses and reading a college calendar was even complex as the language and terminology in post-secondary was not something that I was familiar with. There was little, to no evidence that Indigenous students were a part of this institute as there was no cultural representation within the building, classrooms, or literature provided within the college calendar. When you do not see yourself within the system, you can feel isolated, alone, and detached.

In Indigenous communities there is a shared value that learning, encompasses the life time. The Assembly of First Nations (AFN) First Nations Post-Secondary Education: Access, Opportunity, and Outcomes Panel (2010) states:

First Nations vision of lifelong learning encompasses learning from the pre-natal to Elder level and includes systems that are holistic, high quality, linguistic, and culturally- based. All First Nations learners require a wide variety of opportunities, and learning systems that will nurture their learning, and allow them to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to actively, and positively participate in, and contribute to, their families, communities, Nations, society, and the global community (Assembly of First Nations, 2010, p. 12).

Reflecting on why I chose to attend post-secondary education, it was to advance my life, and break the cycle of trauma, and poverty that had existed in my family for generations. I was given a \$250 scholarship when I had graduated, and that bought me two classes in my community college. I had no idea of what two classes I wanted to take, what type of programs were available, or what the difference was between a certificate, diploma, or bachelor's degree. I was not even sure how any of these types of programs would assist me in finding meaningful employment if I chose to take one of them.

So, I went through the course selection calendar and took two courses that sounded smart; English, and Economics. I was excited, I told my family, and friends that I was enrolled in post-secondary education, taking English and Economics, this made me sound smart, and I felt prestigious. The reality was I had no idea why I was taking these two courses, besides the fact that they made me sound classy and educated in my mind. I did not know if they were part of a certificate, diploma, or bachelor's degree. It was not until the classes started that I realized, I was out of my element, and league in understanding this system. The language that the students were using made me feel isolated and dumb. I just played along like I knew what they were saying, to try and fit in. One time, I am pretty sure I said that I was enrolled in a 401 Psychology course, how was I to know that 300 and 400 level courses were not offered at the college, and only at the university. Honestly, I don't think that I even knew what 300 and 400 level courses were.

I barely survived my first semester, if it was not for meeting my future husband in my English class. He is the one that helped me navigate through this system that was very foreign to me, he was a second year and had a bit of previous experience. We hit it off right away, we had similar interests, enjoyed each other's company, and it was helpful that he had the same two

classes with me, so he could help me study, and better understand what expectations I had in passing the courses. What I don't think he realized is that he saved me at this time in my life. I was vulnerable and had come through some traumatic events that I was trying to navigate through. His compassion, kindness, and support of unconditional love allowed me to feel safe, protected and courageous to continue on in my quest in my personal learning journey, and discovery of self-identity.

Post-secondary institutes in Canada have not had a long history of having Indigenous students attend their formal education programs, mostly because of the restrictions that the *Indian Act* had on First Nations people. The *Indian Act* is defined by the University of British Columbia is:

The *Indian Act* is a Canadian federal law that governs in matters pertaining to Indian status, bands, and Indian reserves. Throughout history it has been highly invasive and paternalistic, as it authorizes the Canadian federal government to regulate and administer in the affairs and day-to-day lives of registered Indians and reserve communities. This authority has ranged from overarching political control, such as imposing governing structures on Aboriginal communities in the form of band councils, to control over the rights of Indians to practice their culture and traditions. The *Indian Act* has also enabled the government to determine the land base of these groups in the form of reserves, and even to define who qualifies as Indian in the form of Indian status (University of British Columbia, 2016).

One of the amendments to the Indian Act in 1876 was that any Aboriginal person wanting to obtain higher education, would be stripped of their Indian Status, and no longer be identified as having Indian Status (Aisaican, 2001). With this assimilation policy in place, many First Nations people did not want to risk giving up their identity, and inherent rights to obtain

higher education. With the Residential School era, and the affects that followed many Aboriginal children did poorly in public education, resulting in low graduation rates, so this combined with the enfranchisement of the *Indian Act* policy, post-secondary institutes had limited experiences with First Nations students within their academy within the last hundred years.

I did not know this information when I entered into post-secondary education; I had to learn this information. And, I did not learn about it until four years into my seven-year undergraduate degree. While I was navigating through my early experiences in post-secondary, I had both positive and negative experiences within this social institute, all of which helped shape me into who I am today, a strong, confident, Indigenous woman.

My Negative Experiences included; culture shock, isolation, racism, lack of support services, and funding. I will examine these experiences deeper to allow myself to be reflective in how my experiences have shaped my Indigenous identity.

Culture Shock: Mainly, from the simple fact that I had just left an education program that was wrapped in guidance, and support. I had a sense of belonging, and felt safe to be who I was. This was not the case in post-secondary education. The classes were different, very formal to a sense that learning only occurred one way, from the teacher to the student, you took notes, and engaged in very little dialogue, there were no youth care workers, or support services built into your classes, so I felt alone and isolated in this large institute.

Isolation: All of my friends that I had attended alternate education with, did not transition over to post-secondary with me, many went off to work full time, or became

stay at home parents. I had no friends in this new community, and was not sure where to reach out to make friends, or explore my culture.

Racism: It still existed, but it looked different. It would be in the comments that you would hear such as “must be nice for you to get free education, all Natives get free education”, or “low man on the totem pole”.

Lack of Support Services: In my post-secondary education institute there was an Aboriginal support centre, but it was not very welcoming, you did not know who was able to attend, what services they offered, or what support they could provide you with as a student. I never even knew that this centre existed until my second year in post-secondary. There were very limited cultural events, or publication of them within the school community

Funding: Although many people perceived that Indigenous students received free post-secondary education that was not the case. There was a process for applying for funding through your band, and if the funding was available you may, or may not have been able to access the funding. Well in the seven years that it took me to complete my undergraduate degree, my band never funded me once; I was on student loans, and working part-time to put myself through my education. This at times, caused me to live below the poverty line, and access places like low income housing, and food banks. Although I had negative experiences in Post-Secondary Education, I also had many positive experiences and they included; Personal Determination, Peer and Family Support, Teacher Support, Identity Discovery and Recovery.

Personal Determination: As a first generation Indigenous student, I felt excited to be working towards higher education for myself. I was excited to role model for my family,

and felt this overwhelming about of pride, and determination that I could make my life better, and break the cycle of poverty that my family had experienced. I felt determined, and proud of myself.

Peer and Family Support: My family was excited, and supportive for my journey in post-secondary education. They sat up many times with me while I read them my stories, about History, English and Economics. They have always encouraged me to keep going, even when things got tough, financially. “*Keep going my girl*” they would say, “*you can do it*”, ~~we~~ we are so proud of you”. These words, stuck to me and burrowed their way into my soul, and in those dark moments, when I thought that I could not go any further their words would give me the strength, and perseverance that I needed to push forward not only for myself, but for my son, husband, family and future generations yet to come.

Teacher Support: During my undergraduate degree, I met many great educators, who filled my worldview with many new ideas, and stretched my imagination to places that I never even thought were possible. I learnt about history, math, psychology, nursing, social work, computer science, biology, and fell in love with Aboriginal Studies. Some of my teachers became my mentors, and helped me discover who I was, what my own strengths were, and how I can become successful. They believed in me, and encouraged me to believe in myself.

Identity Discovery and Recovery: As I became rooted within this new community, and began to explore my strengths, I was introduced to a network of people that had similar struggles, and was able to witness their strengths and how they overcame diversity. I was introduced to Aboriginal Studies, and felt an immediate sense of belonging to this rich history. I wanted to learn more, and explore more; I wanted to find out more about who I

was, and what the true history of Canada was with Indigenous people. I was invited into a world of experiential learning. I participated in ceremony as part of my course work; I was given the opportunity to self-examine my thoughts, feelings, and connectedness to the world around me. During my self-exploration, I had safe people that would help guide me, and teach me about what I was experiencing. They created safety for me to come into my own Indigenous identity. This is when I found my calling, and it was in Aboriginal Studies. I proceeded onto an undergraduate degree in First Nations Studies, and through my coursework I was able to explore my own identity and deeper root my worldview in Indigenous knowledge. I was able to surround myself with guides, and mentors that had similar experiences. The Elders that were part of the First Nations Centre at the College and University really helped me through the difficult topics, and questions that I had, as I was growing. I was becoming me, who I was born to be.

Travelling back through time, and reflecting on my early adulthood, I am able to better understand the crossroads in my life, and where significant moments, and people came into my life to assist me in my discovery of self. As I was discovering who I was, I was able to dissect the harm, colonization, and impacts that my family experienced. Having a better understanding of these situations, allowed me to accept our family history for what it was, and look into the future as to how I can contribute to a different story for my generation, and relations yet to come.

Post-secondary education introduced me to my husband, and the gift of my son. The birth of my son resulted in my connection to the Creator, and the ability to shape the future. We were able to explore culture and identity together, and reclaim who we are as Indigenous people. Post-secondary offered me a path, and I was given the choice to choose it, I chose self-determination and hard work to secure a better future for me and my family. This choice, although hard at

times, resulted in the best case scenario for my family, and the future that we would experience. Knowledge is powerful, however, how you use that knowledge can also be harmful.

I determined early on in my post-secondary education, that as I learned, I would share that knowledge with the world around me in a respectful and humble way. Whatever, career laid ahead of me; I would take my knowledge, and combine it with those around me to shape the future for others. I was becoming confident, strong, reflective, and part of community that I never really new existed. My eyes were clear, and I now understood what it meant when people would say, I can walk comfortably in both worlds. I too, felt that I was beginning to walk, and weave between both of these worlds, with intention, respect, and purpose. I was doing this for myself, my son, my husband, my family, our community, and all my relations.

Employment

As I was growing up, I never visualized myself as having a career. When I was younger, I had the mindset that I wanted to be a stay at home parent, or maybe work part-time in a grocery store. Going to post-secondary education shifted, all of that for me. In my third year of my seven-year undergraduate degree, I saw a job posting, on the employment wall in my college. It was for an Aboriginal Education youth care worker. I remember thinking to myself, what could this job be like. It was working in an education setting, with Aboriginal children, and youth. I took the risk, and applied. A few weeks after my application, I had an interview, and was hired to work full-time at \$21/hr. This was money that I had never seen before in my life, I was excited of the potential that this could bring to my little family. I thought, maybe this would be our way out of poverty, and low income housing. I was excited to start my new position. As I have mentioned before, the stars have a way of aligning, my new position was working with Aboriginal youth in the alternate education program that I had graduated from three years ago.

I was so excited to find this out, I was going to be the youth care worker in helping students, just like the youth care worker I had. This position suited me perfectly, I was able to work with youth, and support them, and guide them through difficult cross-sections in their lives, and believe in them. I wanted them to see, and feel that they could succeed. I introduced them to culture, and the Indigenous community.

I worked hard to try and infuse, Indigenous knowledge into the education system, and most times it was welcomed with acceptance. In British Columbia, the education world was rapidly changing to try and incorporate Indigenous knowledge into their classrooms. It was beautiful to witness from a different perspective, as a colleague not a student. I wanted to do more and include more people into the conversation. I expanded my support network in the community, and began engaging more and more people into the conversation about Aboriginal Education. I spent two years in this position, growing the program, growing our students, growing our community of support in Aboriginal Education with Aboriginal, and non-Aboriginal allies. During this time, I continued with my post-secondary education in First Nations studies, the knowledge that I was learning, I was sharing, and the circle continued to expand.

In the summer of 2010, a position came up in education that was in management, it was the District Manager of the Aboriginal Education Department. I questioned myself if this was something that I could do? I felt like I was almost completed my undergraduate degree, which was one of the requirements of the job, and that I had built a strong foundation of mentors around me that could assist me with this transition, and responsibility. I had a good work ethic, and respect in the community for the work that I was doing. So, I applied, and was successful. I stepped into the 2010/2011 school year with a leadership role in Aboriginal Education; I was scared, and excited.

I felt like I was bringing with me, knowledge, passion, and experience of being an Indigenous student growing up in the same system. I took the role to make a difference in the lives of Aboriginal students, and families, to provide them with different outcomes, and experiences that I had as an Indigenous student growing up in the education system. This became my mission. Every decision that I was going to make was going to be in the best interest of students, families, and our community.

What I did not expect, and maybe that was because I was young, and naïve is that not everybody, had the same vision, and excitement that I did for Aboriginal Education, and that included Aboriginal and non- Aboriginal people. I had to step back, and look at this system, and community as a whole, and try to understand, and deconstruct why? This took over a year, listening to stories, and experiences that staff, and educators had with Aboriginal Education. Listening to the community, and students on what their experiences were with Aboriginal Education, and in that moment, and a year of listening I realized that I had inherited a fractured, system, and community that had little trust with each other, no relationships, and varied experiences. How could I, now responsible for Aboriginal Education weave all these pieces back together, with respect for all.

Relationships are fundamental in any system, they allow you to better understand each other, and support each other in the work that you need to do. I needed to create relationships with people; I needed to better understand how we could do this work together. I sought out my mentors, and they were senior leaders within our system, they wrapped me with love, and support, and provided me the opportunity to take risks, and move forward an Aboriginal Education agenda in our system. These educational leaders provided me with a sense of belonging, support, and guidance, and when I would fall they would pick me back up, and

encourage me to keep moving forward. Their leadership modelled for me, how to be a leader. I was not giving up, and I was not walking away, and I was not going to be pushed out either. I took this role to help shape the future, and shift the experiences that Aboriginal students and families had experienced. I was not going to do this alone, and needed allies, and staff to be committed in this process.

They were, based on the relationships that I had developed I had a strong foundation of people around me. We examined our roles and responsibilities together, and worked effortlessly at moving the Aboriginal Education agenda forward. Over the last six years in my leadership role in Aboriginal Education we have garnered more and more allies in Aboriginal Education.

We have created a sense of belonging for people to believe in themselves, and the work that they are doing to improve the outcomes for Aboriginal students, and families within our system. Through this leadership process, I have been able to explore what it means to be an Aboriginal Leader in my community. As a child growing up, and as a teenager if you were to ask me what my life would be like when I was an adult, I would not have been able to tell you as I had little to no expectations for myself of what I was even capable of. I had little confidence, and did not believe in myself. I never saw my potential, or even knew that I had any. In my childhood and adolescent life, I felt very negative being born Indigenous, I was angry, and upset with the world around me for the injustices that I experienced, and the social issues that I had faced. I felt very alone, isolated, and pity for myself. I was caught in a cycle of negative thoughts, and low self-esteem and could not see the way out. Education saved me, and was the way out of this cycle for me. The world around me changed as an adult, I was learning from leader who walked the path before me. They were my advocates that fought for a new way

forward for Indigenous people. Their strength and perseverance created a path for me to enter into a system in a leadership role. I now had the responsibility to continue their legacy of making things better for the current and future generations.

Over the last six years in this role, I have been able to strongly root myself in my Indigenous identity; I know where I come from, and why things were stripped away from me and the policies that contributed to it. I also know what role I can play in facilitating a new hope, and a new way forward for our children, their families, and future generations yet to come. This work has rooted me in Indigenous knowledge, and how we can weave Indigenous Knowledge into the education system, so all learners benefit from the truths. This new approach will help shift perspectives, and worldviews for all involved with the system. Being a part of this process, I can further carve the path for the next generation that will come to take over my place where I leave off. I am committed to walking in both worlds, so that way the path can be further cleared than when I entered onto it. When my grandchildren speak of my legacy, it will be with the passion that I had to create space in public education for Aboriginal Education. My work over the next thirty years will be to assist people in finding the confidence to participate in Aboriginal Education, with honesty, and respect. To examine their own bias, and move forward together as a system to respect diversity, and grow our community of learners with dignity for themselves, and others.

Post-secondary education has been the way forward for me and my family, as it has allowed me to gain an understanding of who I am as an Indigenous woman, where I come from, and deconstruct the injustices that my people have suffered over the years. With my knowledge, and education I have gained credibility in the Western world as it currently honors post-secondary education over traditional education, although we are seeing a shift in this practice and

acceptance now. I also understand this, and accept my responsibility within this. I am choosing to use my training, experience, and degrees to weave between both worlds, Western and Indigenous, to carve the path for the future generations of Indigenous leaders coming up behind me. To end this chapter in my research; I turn back to our Elders as to why I am here. They lived through our injustices, and have fought to see a different future for my generation. My role now is to seek their guidance, and continue to push forward for the future generations coming up, and those yet to be born. The Council of Ministers of Education Canada, Report on Strengthening Aboriginal Student Success (2010) states it best from the voice of Elder Walter Linklater:

I'm very grateful for the Elders who came before — our teachers, many of them are in the spirit world now — as we take over their responsibilities. The Elders always encouraged us to get the best education possible... Get your bachelor of arts and your master of arts and your Ph.D., *But* not at the expense of your culture (Linklater, 2010, p. 2).

The warmth of the blanket can hold you close like a story, A story that is full of rich knowledge, experience, insight and love. How do you know that you are safe? What are those feelings that you examine when you feel safe? How do you know that your knowledge is Safe? Elders can provide you with that safety. Let us not forget to connect with our Elders, our Knowledge Keepers, the Ph.D. holders in our communities. Can we learn more, or can we listen more? Can we be present more? Let us not take for granted what we have today that can be lost tomorrow

Chapter Five

Conclusion

ka-kí-kiskinétítan óma, namona kinwís maka acinowés pohko óma óta ka-hayayak wasétam askihk, ékwa ka-kakwé miskétan kiskénihtamowin, ininísiwin, kistínitowin, mina nánisitotatowin kakina ayisiniwak, ékosi óma kakina ka-wakotowak."

Realize that we as human beings have been put on this earth for only a short time and that we must use this time to gain wisdom, knowledge, respect and the understanding for all human beings since we are all relatives. – Cree Proverb

This Chapter concludes with personal narratives and my reflective writing about this autoethnography research. I weave together Chapters Two, Three, and Four from what I have learned by connecting my personal story to research. And conclude with my own thoughts and opinions on the way forward that I feel may be beneficial to those in the Education, Social Welfare, and Healthcare fields.

Throughout my final chapter of my thesis research I pulled upon all the methods within my *"Identity Drum"* framework to guide my research throughout this final chapter. As I pulled together my themes I allowed myself to deeply reflect about how I intended to tie them together like I did when I was tying together the sinew of my hand drum. I did in a way that was respectful of the three R's within Indigenous research; Reciprocity, Respect, and Responsibility to allow my research to remain strong and intact. This chapter has a strong influence of the methods; credibility, personal lived experiences, creativity and innovation and empathy as I tie together all of my research and recommendations for moving forward.

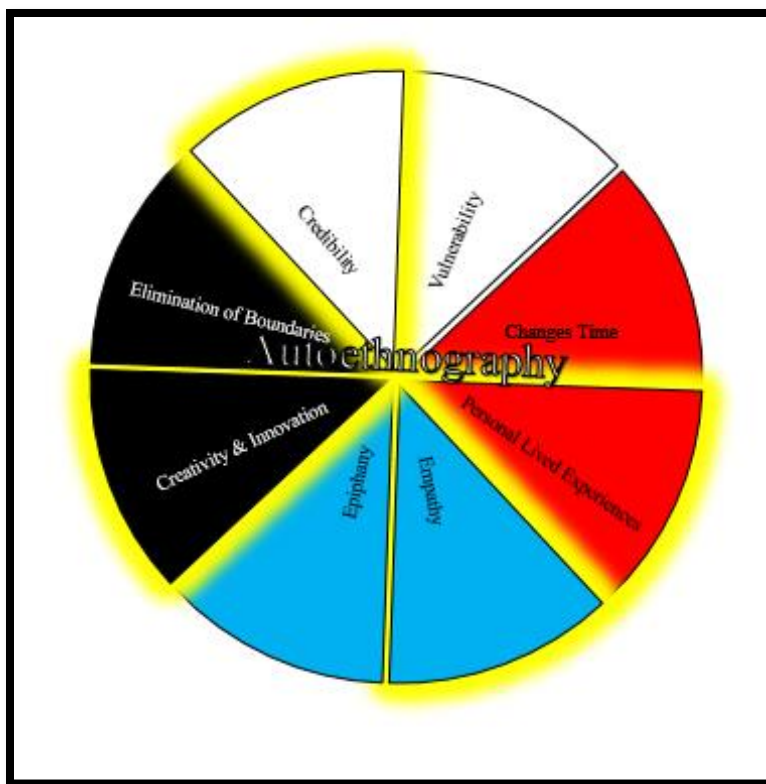


Figure 1. Identity Drum Framework, Shelly Niemi

Mom, do you know where we come from? “Yes” I do. Over the years I have been able to sit with my son, and tell him stories about Canada’s history with Indigenous people. I understand this history, and can explain to him why we didn’t grow up in our territory, and why I was relocated to British Columbia. Knowing this information, is simply beautiful, and such a gift. I feel privileged to grow up in this generation, where I can publically speak my truths, my nation’s truths, and engage people into the conversation with me about our truths.

I am a lifelong learner, and realize now that I have been put on this earth as an educator. I have come full circle in my understanding, of who I am, where I come from, and where I belong. I realize that it has not always been easy for me, and I had many struggles throughout my life. Many struggles within the social structures I grew up in as they pulled at my Indigenous identity, and many struggles with my own people at times, because as I would try to advance my

life forward, create change, or self-advocate my own people at times would try to pull me down, or try and hold me back. But, through these personal experiences I have learnt how to grow stronger, have resilience, and stay humble. Today, I stand here in this place and time for my children, my relations, the current generations, and the future generations yet to come. My promise to myself, and my creator is that I will use my voice to speak for those that can't, my eyes to see what is in the presence before us, my ears to listen to the Elders, and Knowledge Keepers, and my heart to take risks, and shape the future for positive outcomes for all learners in Aboriginal Education.

I have struggled with my own Indigenous identity loss in my early childhood, and my Indigenous identity confusion and discovery in my adolescent years and my identity recovery in my adulthood. I am grateful for all these experiences, as it was these experiences that have given me the ability to see, feel, and survive. I will always remember the feelings of; shame, anger, sadness, and guilt that I felt from those memories, and feelings, I can work towards shifting, and reducing those experiences for others living through similar experiences. I have come full circle, I know now who I am, and can speak this truth with confidence, and conviction. I have the ability to see who has stepped onto the path with me in a good way, to help me discover myself. Writing this autoethnography, has allowed me to travel back in time, connect my lived experiences to research and be reflexive with my emotions and experiences. From this process I can see people's faces, witness the things that they were doing to support me as I was discovering myself. Having, this awareness now, allows me the ability to thank them for being a part of my life, and staying as a part of my life, with genuine love, care, and compassion for me, and my family.

Weaving the Braid

When I think about what it means to weave the braid, I think of Sweetgrass, and I think about my traditional territory. In my nation we use Sweetgrass for ceremony, and weaving the braid for me is like ceremony. I am bringing together my childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, all of which have helped shape me into who I am today. When these strands are alone, and in isolation they can become weak, but when they are together, they are strong, and sturdy. As I weave the braid, bringing together my different life experiences from my childhood, adolescence and adulthood. I am able to have my collective knowledge, traditional teachings and the strength of the community surrounding me. **Figure 11** is my model of “Weaving the Braid”. As I weave the Sweetgrass together, I am able to strengthen my personal lived experiences of childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Woven together they become one story, filled with collective knowledge from all my lived experiences giving me strength and resilience to be who I am today.

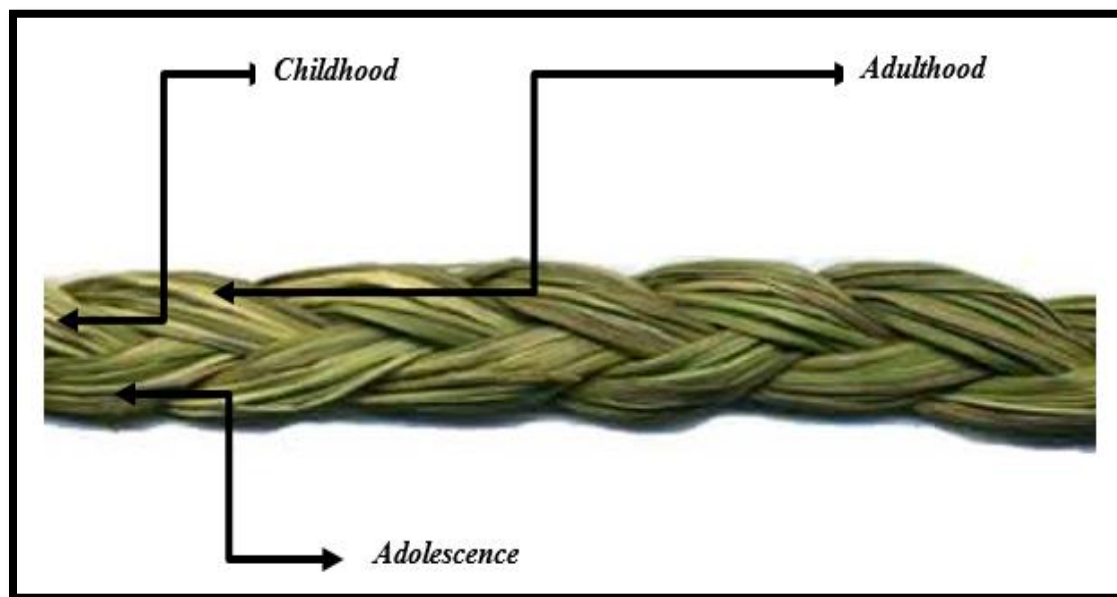


Figure 11. Shelly Niemi Model of Weaving the Braid

Childhood

Having the privilege to step back into my childhood, and examine my significant memories and deconstruct them, has been very awakening for me. I have been able to deconstruct these moments in time, and look at research to support those experiences. I now have a better understanding of what current policies, practices, and history were in place at that time in my life, and how those structures, caused harm to me, intentionally or not. I have been able to examine my adoption, through the lens of policy and practice to better understand what was occurring in the world around me that prevented me from knowing my Indigenous identity. Understanding my Indigenous identity loss is difficult, because it is personal. However, as I examined my lived experiences, and the struggles, racism, and sadness that I experienced, I have learnt from it, accepted it, and have moved forward with it as part of my story. Nobody can take your truths away from you, and once you know what you don't know, you cannot unlearn that information. For me, I choose to accept my childhood, acknowledge the injustices, and will share my story with truth, and conviction to hopefully bring awareness to how history, policy, and social structures can impact a child, and their ability to lose a part of their Indigenous identity.

Adolescence

Stepping, back into my adolescence was extremely difficult. As, I examined my life, and the significant moments that helped shape me for who I am today, I was able to realize that I needed to forgive myself for some of the risky behaviours that I put myself through. When being reflexive with my adolescent years, and linking my experiences to research, I was vulnerable, vulnerable with myself, and with the world. I wanted to speak my truths, to really examine my life in a linear way, to see what impacts led me to making the different choices I did in my life.

In some moments, as I was recalling my experiences, and looking at photographs, I was brought back to the sadness of this young teenage girl, feeling isolated, and alone.

I was able to deeply examine, racism, white privilege, being a bystander, and sense of belonging. And knowing what I know today, I just wanted to go back in time, and find a safe adult to talk to. However, as I examined this deeper, it clicked for me. If I had not had each one of these experiences in my life, I would not be the person that I am today. All of my adolescent experiences contributed to my strength, and resiliency.

Adulthood

I am proud of my adulthood. Although there were struggles of poverty, I overcame great adversity. I was the first generation Indigenous student in my family in post-secondary education. I was able to reach out on my own to break the cycle of trauma and Indigenous identity loss for my son (the next generation). I have been able to reclaim who I am, and where I come from, and stand strong, and confident as a Métis/Cree Indigenous woman. I have a meaningful career that I am passionate about, something that I was born to do, but needed to come full circle before I could step into it. I acknowledge and accept that I am a lifelong learner who can contribute to a better future for the current and future generations. I am humble and kind, and realize that I am smart, and can, and will succeed. I choose to walk in a good way, speak my truths, and work hard for our children and youth of this current generation. And when they are able to step onto this path, and take over from where I leave off, I want to leave them with a path that is lined with collective knowledge and stories to carry them forward. I have a purpose, I can see my purpose, I can feel my purpose, I have come full circle, and accept that I was born *Destiny Henry-Fiddler* and through my adoption I have become Shelly Leeanna Marie Niemi, a proud, confident and resilient Métis/Cree Woman.

The Way Forward

This autoethnography research has allowed me to examine my life of Indigenous identity loss, recovery, and discovery. I have been able to deconstruct why my Indigenous identity was lost, how I was able to discover it, and come full circle to reclaim it. In doing so, I have examined many articles and books that have taken my knowledge deeper. I have been able to deeply examine my personal lived experiences as a child, youth and adult and I have come up with some final thoughts and personal opinions on what I believe may assist practitioners working within education, social welfare, and healthcare.

Shelly Niemi's Final Thoughts and Personal Opinions

Opinion No. 1: Provide cultural awareness training, this includes theory, and practice. Do not just offer the course online for staff. Staff should have the opportunity to learn together, to experience rich conversations, and practice being culturally safe. Cultural awareness training must be a priority, and part of the hiring practice that all staff must experience.

Opinion No.2: Provide professional development in Racism, and White Privilege, this includes theory, and practice. Staff should have the opportunity to learn together, to experience rich conversations, and ask questions in a safe environment on topics, that they do not know or understand.

Opinion No. 3: Provide professional development training on what it means to be a bystander, and how to navigate through difficult conversations. This can include with their clients, peers, and other professionals. Having difficult conversations can be hard for people. Social structures should recognize this, and provide ongoing training, and support in this area throughout all levels within the organization.

Opinion No. 4: Social structures should dedicate a team of personnel that are responsible for reviewing the literature, and resources being used with the system to ensure that they are culturally safe, appropriate, and reflective of the cliental they service.

Opinion No. 5: Social systems, work collaboratively together to ensure that the proper social, emotional, and academic supports are put into place to ensure successful transitions of children, and youth so they are not lost, forgotten or left behind. This should include a plan for after graduation.

Opinion No.6: Social structures should create an Elder in Residence Program. This program would include having more than one Elder, possibly both male, and female Elders, as this will allow for children, youth, adults, and other Elders another option for wrap around support services.

Opinion No. 7: Set aside funding out of core operating budgets to support Indigenous knowledge, culture, language, and support. This funding should be a percentage basis that is consistent from year, to year, and not weighed on grants, or proposals from the provincial or federal government.

Let us not forget to involve our Elders in all the work that we do as we move forward in reconciliation within our systems. They are our teachers and have the ability, wisdom, and collective knowledge to guide us in our practice as we work towards moving forward together. In closing Elder Walter Linklater (2010) states:

“The Elders are put on Earth to do teachings and teach people, so that we can learn to live with one another in a good way” (Linklater, 2010, p. 2).

References

- Aboriginal Healing Foundation. (2004). Historic Trauma and Aboriginal Healing. *The Aboriginal Healing Foundation Research Series*, p. 1-121. Retrieved April 5th, 2016, from <http://www.ahf.ca/downloads/historic-trauma.pdf>
- Ahenakew, F. (n.d.). Saskatchewan Indian Cultural Centre. *Cree Elder Quotes*. Retrieved March 5, 2016, from <http://www.sicc.sk.ca/plains-cree-elders-quotes.html>
- Aisaican, R. (2001). *Aboriginal post-secondary education, a priority for Aboriginal women of Canada*. Retrieved September 7, 2010, from <http://web.viu.ca/firstnations/richard.pdf>
- Anderson, R. (2001). Embodied writing and reflections on embodiment. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 33 (2), 83-98.
- Assembly of First Nations. (2010). Taking Action for First Nations Post-Secondary Education: Access, Opportunity, And Outcomes Discussion Paper. *First Nations Post-Secondary Education: Access, Opportunity, and Outcomes Panel*. Retrieved April 18th, 2016 from <http://www.afn.ca/uploads/files/pse-dp.pdf>
- Barman, J., Hebert, Y., & McCaskill, D. (Eds.). (1996). *The legacy of the past: An overview. Indian education in Canada: Volume 1: The Legacy* (pp. 1-22) Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press
- Battiste, M. (2000). *Reclaiming indigenous voice and vision*. Vancouver: UBC Press.
- Battiste, M., & Barman, J. (Eds.). (2008). *First Nations education in Canada: The Circle unfolds*. Vancouver, BC: UBC Press.
- Battiste, M. (2013). *Decolonizing Education: Nourishing The Learning Spirit*. Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Purich Publishing Ltd.
- Beck, M., & Malley, J. (1998b). Research into practice: A pedagogy of belonging. *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, 7(3), 133 - 137
- Bennett, M., Blackstock, C., & De La Ronde, R. (2005) *Annotated Bibliography on Aspects of Aboriginal Child Welfare in Canada*. First Nations Research Site of the Centre of Excellence for Child Welfare. Retrieved, April 23rd, 2016 from https://fncaringsociety.com/sites/default/files/23.AboriginalCWLitReview_2ndEd-1.pdf
- Blackstock, C., Bruyere, D., Moreau, E. (2005) Many hands one dream: Principles for a new perspective on the health of First Nations, Inuit and Métis children and youth. Summary of the conference of the same title held in Victoria. B.C., Dec, 3, 2005. www.manyhandsonedream.ca
- Bochner, A. P. (2000). Criteria against ourselves. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 6(2), 266-272.

- Bochner, A. P., & Riggs, N. (2014). Producing narrative inquiry. In P. Leavy (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of qualitative methods* (pp. 195-222). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Bochner, A., & Ellis, C. (1992). Personal narrative as a social approach to interpersonal communication. *Journal of Communication Theory*, 2(2), 165-172.
- Brown, B. (2012). *Daring greatly: How the courage to be vulnerable transforms the way we live, love, parent, and lead*. New York, NY: Gotham Books. Kindle Edition.
- Cajete, G. (2000). "Indigenous Knowledge: The Pueblo Metaphor of Indigenous Education." *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision*. Ed. Marie Battiste. Vancouver: U of British Columbia p. 181-191.
- Canadian Institute of Child Health. (2000). *Monitoring Children's Health Profile*. Retrieved February 3rd, 2016, from <http://www.cich.ca/PDFFiles/Profile/CICH%20Profile%20Table%20of%20Contents%20and%20Introduction.pdf>
- Carr, P. (2016). Whiteness and White Privilege: Problematizing Race and Racism in a "Color-blind" World, and in Education, *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, 7(1), 51-73.
- Chang, H. (2008). *Autoethnography As Method*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press Inc.
- Chang, H., Ngunjiri, F. W., & Hernandez, K. A. (2013). *Collaborative autoethnography*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Cook, P.S. (2012). "To Actually be Sociological": Autoethnography as an assessment and learning tool. *Journal of Sociology*. 7(50), 266-282. doi:10.1177/14440783312451780
- Cree Proverb. (n.d.). Saskatchewan Indian Cultural Centre. *Cree Elder Quotes*. Retrieved March 5, 2016, from <http://www.sicc.sk.ca/plains-cree-elders-quotes.html>
- Custer, D. (2014). Autoethnography as a Transformative Research Method. *The Qualitative Report*, 19(How to 21), 1-13. Retrieved January 25th 2016, from <http://www.nova.edu/ssw/QR/QR19/custer21.pdf>
- DeRose, D. (2014). Making a difference in public schools. Is BC Getting it Right? Moving toward Aboriginal education success in British Columbia. *Education Canada*. Retrieved April 16th, 2016 from <http://www.cea-ace.ca/education-canada/article/bc-getting-it-right>
- Denzin, N. K. (2014). *Interpretive autoethnography* (2nd ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Entering the field of qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 1-17). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ellis, C., Adams, E. & Bochner, A. (2010). Autoethnography: An Overview [40 paragraphs]. *Forum: Qualitative sozialforschung/ Forum: Social Research*, 12(1), Art. 10, Retrieved April 18th, 2016 from <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:0114-fqs1101108>
- Ellis, C., & Bochner, A.P.(2000) Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity: Researcher as subject', in N K Denzin and Y S Lincoln (eds), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp.733-68). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Ellis, C. (1999). Heartful autoethnography. *Qualitative Health Research*, 9(5), 669-683. doi: 10.1177/104973299129122153
- Ellis, C. (2009). Revision: Autoethnographic reflections on life and work. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Fox, E. (n.d.). Saskatchewan Indian Cultural Centre. *Cree Elder Quotes*. Retrieved March 5, 2016, from <http://www.sicc.sk.ca/plains-cree-elders-quotes.html>
- Frideres, J. S. & Gadacz, R. (2001). *Aboriginal Peoples in Canada: Contemporary Conflicts*, 6th Edition. Toronto: Pearson Education Canada Inc.
- Fuchs, D. & McKay, S. & Brown, I. (2012). *Awakening The Spirit: Moving Forward in Child Welfare Voices from the Prairies*. Regina, Saskatchewan, CPRC Press.
- Gorski, P., Osei-Kofi, N., Zenkov, K., & Sapp, J. (2013). Introduction. In P. C. Gorski, K. Zenkov, N. Osei-Kofi, & J. Sapp (Eds.), *Cultivating Social Justice Teachers* (pp. 1-10). Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.
- Hart, M. (2010). Indigenous Worldviews, Knowledge, and Research: The Development of an Indigenous Research Paradigm, *Journal of Indigenous Voices in Social Work*, 1(1), pp. 1- 16.
- Hansen, J.G. (2014). *Exploring Indigenous Social Justice*. Vernon, British Columbia, J Charlton Publishing Ltd
- Heinonen, T. & Metteri, A. (2005). *Social Work in Health and Mental Health: Issues, Developments, and Actions*. Toronto, Ontario: Canadian Scholars' Press Inc.
- Hooks, B. (2003). *Teaching a Community. A pedagogy of hope*, New York: Routledge.
- Hoyt, C. (2012). The Pedagogy of the Meaning Racism: Reconciling a Discordant Discourse. *National Association of Social Workers Journal*, 57(3), pp. 225-234. doi:10.1093/sw/sws009

- Jennings, J. (2012). *The History of the Ten Little Indians*. Indian Country Today Media Network. Ten little Injuns. Retrieved March 18th, 2016, from <http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2012/10/11/history-ten-little-indians>
- Jones, S. H., Adams, T. E., & Ellis C. (Eds.). (2013). *Handbook of autoethnography*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, Inc.
- Killington, S. (2002). Missing Voices: Mothers at risk for or experiencing apprehension in the child welfare system in BC. Vancouver: National Actions Committee on the Status of Woman.
- Kline, M. (1993). Complicating The Ideology of Motherhood: Child Welfare Law & First Nation Women. *Queens Law Journal* 18(1), pp. 306-342.
- Kumar, H. (2015) Languages Perform Us: Decolonizing Options for Multilingual Identities. *The Journal of Qualitative Inquiry*, 21(2), 128-137. doi:10.1177/1077800414542707
- Landu, V. (2014). Connecting the dots: A review of Norman K. Denzin's Interpretive Autoethnography. *The Qualitative Report*, 19(18), 1-4. www.nova.edu
- Linklater, W. (2010) Strengthening Aboriginal Success, Summary Report on the Canadian Ministers Education Committee summit on Aboriginal Education. Retrieved April 5th, 2016 from http://www.cmec.ca/publications/lists/publications/attachments/221/aboriginal_summit_report.pdf
- Mashford-Pringle, A. (2008). The Impacts on Health and Education for Children and Families Enrolled in Aboriginal Head Start Urban and Northern Communities in Ontario. Thesis for the degree of Masters of Arts, University of Toronto. Retrieved April 5th, 2016 from https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/11153/1/mashford_pringle_angela_2008_06_MA_thesis.pdf
- Menzies, P. (2007). Intergenerational Trauma from a Mental Health Perspective. *Native Social Work Journal*, 7(1), pp. 63-85. Retrieved April 1st, 2016 from <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/obj/thesescanada/vol2/OSUL/TC-OSUL-384.PDF>
- Merriam-Webster Dictionary. (2016). Term Adolescence. Retrieved January 31st, 2016 from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/adolescence>
- Ministry of Children and Family Development. (2005). *Family Group Conference Process*. Retrieved February 18th, 2016, from https://www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/child_protection/publications.htm
- Ministry of Education. (2001). Six Year Aboriginal Student Completion Rate, Retrieved April 3rd, 2016 from http://www.aved.gov.bc.ca/student_transitions/documents/STP_aboriginal_report.pdf

- Ministry of Education. (2015). Building Student Success: BC's new curriculum. Retrieved April 8th, 2016 from <https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca/>
- Mussell, B., Cardiff, K., & White, J. (2004). Children's Mental Health Policy Research Program. *The Mental Health and Well-being of Aboriginal Children and Youth: Guidance for New Approaches and Services*. Retrieved April 8th, 2016 from <http://childhealthpolicy.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/RR-8-04-full-report.pdf>
- Mestry, R., Van Der Merwe, M., & Squelch, J. (2006). Bystander behaviour of school children observing bullying. *SA-eDUC Journal* 3(2), pp. 46-59.
- National Aboriginal Health Organization. (2008). Cultural Competency and Safety: A Guide for Health Care Administrators, Providers and Educators. Retrieved February 18th 2016, from <http://www.naho.ca/documents/naho/publications/culturalCompetency.pdf>
- Native American Books. (n.d.) *I is for Indian*, Native American Books Wordpress, Retrieved April 3rd, 2016 from <https://nativeamericanbooks.wordpress.com/tag/native-american-books/>
- Ordolis, E. (2007). *A Story of their own: Adolescent Pregnancy and Child Welfare in Aboriginal Communities*. First Peoples Child & Family Review, 3(4), pp. 30-4, Retrieved January 30th, 2016 from <http://journals.sfu.ca/fpcfr/index.php/FPCFR/article/viewFile/57/95>
- Okanee, E. (n.d.). Saskatchewan Indian Cultural Centre. *Cree Elder Quotes*. Retrieved March 5, 2016, from <http://www.sicc.sk.ca/plains-cree-elders-quotes.html>
- Palmater, P. (2011). *Beyond Blood: Rethinking Indigenous Identity*. Saskatoon, Saskatchewan: Purich Publishing Ltd.
- Patel, V., Flisher, A., Hetrick, S., & McGorry, P. (2007). Mental health of young people: a global public-health challenge. *Journal of Adolescent Health*. 3(369), 1302-1313. doi:10.1016/S0140-6736(07)60368-7
- Paul, D. (2006). *First Nations History: We Were Not The Savages*. Black Point, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing.
- Resnick, M. D., Bearman, P. S., Blum, R. W., Bauman, K. E., Harris, K. M., & Jones, J. (1997). Protecting adolescents from harm. *JAMA: Journal of the American Medical Association*, 278, 823-832.
- Richardson, L. (2000). Writing: A method of inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 923-948). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Rubinstein-Avila, E., & Maranzana, S. (2015). Dual Reflections on Teaching and Learning of Autoethnography: Preparing Doctoral Students Authentically for a Career in the Academy. *Qualitative Research in Education*, 4(3), 243-268.doi:10.17583/qre.2015.1328
- Rowe, N. (2009). The healing power of creative expression. In D. McCarthy (Ed), *Speaking about the unspeakable* (pp. 115-129). London, England: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Scott, D. (n.d.). Deputy Superintendent Indian and Northern Affairs Canada Quotes, Retrieved March 26th, 2016, from http://www.azquotes.com/author/43506-Duncan_Campbell_Scott
- Sinclair, R. (2007). *Identity lost and found: Lessons from the sixties scoop*. First Peoples Child & Family Review, 3(1), pp. 65- 82). Retrieved January 30th, 2016 from https://fncaringociety.com/sites/default/files/online-journal/vol3num1/Sinclair_pp65.pdf
- Sinclair, R. & Hart, M.A., & Bruyere, G. (2009). *Wicihitowin: Aboriginal Social Work in Canada*. Black Point, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing.
- Smith, L.T. (2012). *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London: Zed Books.
- Smylie, J., & Anderson, M. (2006). Understanding the health of Indigenous Peoples in Canada: Key methodological and conceptual challenges. *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, 175 (6), 602-605.
- Smye, V. & Josewski, V. & Kendall, E. (2010) *Cultural Safety: An Overview*, Retrieved April 3rd 2016, from [http://www.troubleshumeur.ca/documents/Publications/CULTURAL%20SAFETY%20AN%20OVERVIEW%20\(draft%20mar%202010\).pdf](http://www.troubleshumeur.ca/documents/Publications/CULTURAL%20SAFETY%20AN%20OVERVIEW%20(draft%20mar%202010).pdf)
- Strand, J & Peacock & Thomas, D. (2002). Nurturing Resilience and School Success in American Indian and Alaska Native Students. *ERIC Digest*. ED471488 4-9.
- Strega, S. & Esquao, S.A. (2009). *Walking This Path Together: Anti-Racist and Anti-Oppressive Child Welfare Practice*. Black Point, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing.
- Thompson, J.C. (Edōsdi). (2008). Hede kehe‘ hotzi‘ kahidi‘; My Journey to a Tahltan Research Paradigm. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 31(1): 26.
- United Nations, Convention on Prevention and Punishment of the Crime Genocide. (1948). *Report Defines Genocide*. Retrieved from http://www.un.org/en/preventgenocide/adviser/genocide_prevention.shtml
- University of British Columbia. (2016). The Indian Act. Indigenous Foundations Arts UBC. Retrieved on March 5th, 2016 from <http://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/home/government-policy/the-indian-act.html>

- University of British Columbia. (2016). Aboriginal Identity and Terminology. Indigenous Foundations Arts UBC. Retrieved on March 5th, 2016 from <http://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/home/government-policy/the-indian-act.html>
- Wall, S. (2006). An Autoethnography on learning about Autoethnography. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 5(2), 1-12.
- Wall, S. (2008). Easier said then done: Writing an Autoethnography. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 7(1), 38-53.
- Walker, H. (n.d.). Saskatchewan Indian Cultural Centre. *Cree Elder Quotes*. Retrieved March 5, 2016, from <http://www.sicc.sk.ca/plains-cree-elders-quotes.html>
- Weber-Pillwax, C. (1999). Indigenous Research Methodology: Exploratory Discussion of an Elusive Subject. *The Journal of Educational Thought (JET)*, 33(1), 31-45.
- Weber-Pillwax, C. (2001). "What is Indigenous Research?" *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 25(2): 166-74.
- Weikart, D.P. (1989). *Quality Preschool Programs: A Long-Term Social Investment*. Occasional Paper No. 5. New York: Ford Foundation.
- Wilson, J.D. (1986). No blanket to be worn in school: The education of Indians in nineteenth-century Ontario. In Barman, J. Herbert, Y. & McCaskill, D. (Eds.), *Indian Education in Canada*. (Vol.1, p. 64-87). Vancouver, B.C.: University of British Columbia Press.
- Wilson, S. (2008). *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*. Winnipeg, Manitoba: Fernwood Publishing.
- Williams, S. (2013). Outside Teacher/Insider Knowledge: Fostering Mohawk Cultural Competency for Non-Native Teachers. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, Vol. 40 (1), pp.25-43.
- Wharf, B. & McKenzie, B. (2004). *Connecting Policy to Practice in the Human Services*. Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press Canada.
- White, M. (2007). *Maps of Narrative Practice*. New York, New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc.
- Wilson, S., (2008). *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*. Winnipeg, Manitoba: Fernwood Publishing.
- Ziegler, D. (2011). *Traumatic Experience and the Brain: A Handbook for Understanding and Treating Those Traumatized as Children*. Gilbert, Arizona: Acacia Publishing Inc.

Appendix A: Research Ethics Board Approval Form

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN BRITISH COLUMBIA

RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD

MEMORANDUM

To: Shelly Niemi
CC: Peter MacMillan

From: Henry Harder, Chair
Research Ethics Board

Date: March 1, 2016

Re: **E2016.0210.011.00**
Indigenous Identity Loss, Recovery and Discovery

Thank you for submitting the above-noted proposal to the Research Ethics Board (REB). Your proposal has been approved.

We are pleased to issue approval for the above named study for a period of 12 months from the date of this letter. Continuation beyond that date will require further review and renewal of REB approval. Any changes or amendments to the protocol or consent form must be approved by the REB.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,



Dr. Henry Harder
Chair, Research Ethics Board