Overcoming Barriers: The Perspectives of Aboriginal Women Attending the University
of Prince Edward Island

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my daughters, Erika and Esther Puiras, their dad, Jarmo

and my parents, Neil and Helen Oliver.

Mom and Dad, thank you for loving me and instilling in me a

value and appreciation for education.

Jarmo, thank you for everything.

Erika and Esther, you have made me become a better person,

and I hope I am doing the same for you. I love you all.

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Abstract

Education has been identified as having a positive relationship on health; those with more education tend to be healthier. In light of this, the markedly lower education level of Aboriginal Canadians is a significant concern, and the factors that influence Aboriginal retention and completion of post-secondary education deserve analysis.

To identify factors that positively or negatively affect the experience of Aboriginal students attending the University of Prince Edward Island (UPEI), four Aboriginal women pursuing undergraduate and graduate degrees provided their perspectives through interviews. The participants of this study shared rich detail resulting in some clearly identified desired supports, and barrier and supporting factors to their educational experiences. Negative factors that emerged include discrimination and a lack of positive Aboriginal academic role models. Financial challenges also were identified as stress inducing and distracting. Positive factors include family and advocates whose influences were often helpful to the participants in overcoming some negative effects. Some factors were both positive and negative. For instance, family responsibilities often proved the most stressful and time consuming; yet, it was the desire to improve their families' circumstances that motivated these women. Finally, an overarching theme of caring was identified. When the students felt cared for and understood, their grades and confidence improved.

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Chapter 1

Introduction to the Study

1.0 Background

Health, income, satisfaction, and other quality of life factors are positively related to one's level of education (Chacaby et al., 2008, Statistics Canada, 2005b). These factors are some of the social determinants of health, and they represent economic and social conditions that influence the health of individuals, communities, and jurisdictions (Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010; Raphael, 2004). The effects of these factors on health are stronger than behaviours such as diet and exercise (Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010). A crucial factor that this thesis looked at closely is education since there is a direct relationship between level of education and health. For Canadian Aboriginal people, rates of attendance and completion of post-secondary degrees are well below those of non-Aboriginal Canadians (Abele, 2004; Battiste, 2005; Timmons et al., 2009). Not attaining higher education has directly contributed to poverty rates for Aboriginal people that are more than double the rates for non-Aboriginal people (Abele, 2004). While education acted as an oppressive force under colonial rule, it is also clear that health status, employment income and satisfaction, and other quality of life factors are positively related to level of education with the power to change life circumstances for Aboriginal people (Aboriginal Roundtable, 2007; Chacaby et al., 2008; Timmons et al., 2009; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 1998).

1.0.1 Aboriginal Position on Education

The destructive legacy of the residential school system is common knowledge in Canada. Despite this knowledge, many Aboriginal Canadians hold education in general

and a post-secondary education in particular in high regard (Abele, 2004; Battiste, 2002; Stonechild, 2006). In fact, the pursuit of education is a commodity that has been, and still is, encouraged by many in the Aboriginal communities across the country for their people (Abele, 2004; Aboriginal Roundtable, 2007; Alberta Dept. of Education, 1987). Ron Laliberte and Priscilla Settee et al. (2000) share an apt analogy of what education means to Aboriginal people, an analogy used by many of today's elders. In the past, the buffalo represented food, shelter, and prosperity to North American First Nations people. In short, the buffalo provided for the needs of these peoples. Today, a post-secondary education stands in place of the buffalo as a means of survival. It is clear from this analogy, that many Elders place a high priority on attaining a post-secondary education.

1.0.2 Situation on Prince Edward Island and at the University of Prince Edward Island

According to the 2006 Statistics Canada Census, the Aboriginal population in Canada exceeded the one million mark at 1,172,785. Between 2001 and 2006, there was an increase of 20.1% within the Aboriginal population compared to an increase of only 5.4% within the non-Aboriginal population. In Prince Edward Island, there currently are 1730 Aboriginal people (Statistics Canada, 2010). During the same five-year period as mentioned above, there was an increase of 28.6% for the Island Aboriginal population compared with an increase of 0.6% for the non-Aboriginal Island population (Statistics Canada, 2010).

It is impossible to accurately assess how many Island Aboriginal people attend the University of Prince Edward Island. According to the Office of Institutional Research (OIR), it was only in 2009 that the undergraduate application forms put a voluntary

option on for the applicant to self-identify as an Aboriginal person. Any reports compiled and produced from the OIR (either before or since the voluntary option to self-identify) do not include racial or ethnic background of students; hence, any estimate of the number of Aboriginal UPEI students can only be based on an educated guess. However, given the Aboriginal population on PEI, it may be surmised that the numbers at UPEI are small, (Y. Gong, personal communication, November 2, 2010) being no greater than 1% of student population or approximately 40 people.

1.1 Rationale

Although educational levels are rising among Canadian Aboriginal students, secondary and post-secondary completion rates are still lower than for the general population (Richards, 2008; Stonechild, 2006). However, when higher levels of schooling have been successfully attained, Aboriginal people can reach employment rates comparable with non-Aboriginal populations, a reality that changes their circumstances significantly (Statistics Canada, 2007). For Aboriginal women especially, family responsibilities and economic factors are often the reasons for not completing at high school (Abele, 2004; Health Canada, 2000; Statistics Canada, 2005a, 2007). Aboriginal women are more than twice as likely as non-Aboriginal women to be lone parents at a rate of 19 per cent versus 8 per cent (Statistics Canada, 2007). Their participation and successful completion of a post-secondary education (PSED) would result in and health benefits not only for themselves but also for their children (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 1998).

1.1.1 Social Justice Issues and Aboriginal People

Disenfranchised groups, including Aboriginal people in Canada, are positioned within unequal power relationships in society (Abele, 2004; Battiste, 2005; Cummins, 2001; Ogbu, 1992). This inequality is a social justice issue where the equalizer is education. In general terms, the more educated one is, the better off one is in terms of health and financial stability (Chacaby et al., 2008; Public Health Agency of Canada, 1994; Raphael, 1999; Statistics Canada, 2005a; Declaration of Alma-Alta, 1978; Ottawa Charter, 1986). The fight against social injustice and poverty, then, begins with education, as learning informs and opens possibilities for people (Apple, 2007; Cummins, 2001; Friere, 1970; Lalonde, 1974; Raphael, 1999, 2003; Torres, 2009; WHO Ottawa Charter, 1986). Since those with lesser education tend to be poorer, sicker, and in need of more government assistance (Statistics Canada, 2005b, 2007, 2008; Ungerleider & Keating, 2002), our society would benefit from higher education for all members in an attempt to mitigate the power inequities which are costly in terms of health, progress or advancement, and economic stability.

Since most Canadian post-secondary institutions are Eurocentric in their pedagogies, often to the exclusion of Indigenous knowledge, the challenge for universities is, "how to balance colonial legitimacy, authority, and disciplinary capacity with Indigenous knowledge and pedagogies," (Battiste, 2002, p. 7). While this balancing act is still a work in progress in Canada, attaining a post-secondary education is becoming a priority for more Aboriginal people. The numbers enrolling in post-secondary institutions illustrate this trend (Abele, 2004; Richards, 2008; Stonechild, 2006).

1.1.2 Action at Some Canadian Universities

Recognizing these facts, representatives from Canadian universities are studying participation and retention issues of Aboriginal university students. Lindsay Marshall, of Cape Breton University attended the roundtable meeting, Sharing our Future: Improving Access and Success of Aboriginal students in Our Institutions, held in Winnipeg on November 2, 2007 and shared the draft mission statement which resulted from that meeting. The goal of this roundtable was to find ways to achieve a more equitable balance between Aboriginal university graduates and non-Aboriginal university graduates. Achieving this goal necessitates "ensuring that Aboriginal students have equitable access to attend and to successfully complete university degrees thereby strengthening their communities and enhancing the productivity and success of Canada as a whole" (personal communication, November 7, 2007).

Similarly, the Atlantic Association of Universities (AAU) Working Committee on Aboriginal Issues has a comparable mandate stated in its Draft Terms of Reference (2007). This mandate focuses on ways to improve university access, retention, and graduation for Aboriginal students enabling an improvement in the health and well being of Aboriginal communities through capacity building.

The Aboriginal population is the youngest and fastest growing segment in Canada with Aboriginal birth rates being more than twice the rate for non-Aboriginal people (Cappon, 2007; Statistics Canada, 2010). This growth means the future will see more Aboriginal youth needing education, both on and off reserves (Health Canada, 2000). With over 400,000 Aboriginal people entering the job market in the next twenty years (Human Resources Development Canada, 2003; Abele, 2004; Statistics Canada, 2007;

Wotherspoon & Schissel, 1998) it is imperative that these future workers are able to access post-secondary and complete their degree(s) (Abele, 2004; Statistics Canada, 2007).

1.2 Purpose of this Study

Given this stated information, there is a need for more Aboriginal people to attain post-secondary educations. In particular, few Aboriginal women graduate with university or college degrees resulting in negative implications for themselves and their families. This study looked at four Aboriginal women at the University of Prince Edward Island (UPEI) to consider the needs of these women who are statistically positioned as at-risk for dropping out of post-secondary institutions (Abele, 2004; Richards, 2008; Statistics Canada, 2005). The purpose of this research was to delve into the experiences of these four Aboriginal women currently pursuing post-secondary and explore their perceptions on (1) why they are attending university, (2) what barriers may affect their continuation at university, and (3) what the university can do to alleviate these barriers in an attempt to encourage retention and completion.

1.3 Significance of Study

Through enhancing an understanding of the nature and interconnectedness of factors that act as barriers and facilitators to the completion of a post secondary education, the results presented will contribute to a body of knowledge on specific retention issues common to Aboriginal students. Those in policy-making positions at UPEI may benefit from the experiences shared by participants in this study.

1.4 Definition of Terms

When working with an Aboriginal community, it is essential to acknowledge and understand the multiplicity of Aboriginal identity. This study uses the term "Aboriginal" to represent all Indigenous groups within Canada: First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people, and its usage in this paper is consistent with national usage and acceptance based on terminology found in Canadian government websites and documents

Aboriginal peoples is a collective name for the original peoples of North America and their descendants. These are three distinct peoples with unique histories, languages, cultural practices, and spiritual beliefs. More than one million people in Canada identify themselves as an Aboriginal person, according to the 2006 Census. (Statistics Canada, 2010).

Aboriginal population in Canada. Within the three distinct peoples, the label 'Aboriginal People' consists of many groups within varying socio-economic, demographic, and cultural realities. To illustrate, there are 615 First Nation communities, which represent more than 50 nations or cultural groups and 50 Aboriginal languages; approximately 45,000 Inuit live in 53 communities in Canada's north, regions that cover one-third of Canada's land mass; and close to 400,000 Métis (Statistics Canada, 2010). As such, there is no one group of 'Aboriginal People' speaking with one voice and/or hold one common identity; however, there are some commonalities among and across First Nations, Métis, and Inuit groups.

Chapter Two presents a literature review that includes background on barriers and enablers to Aboriginal education, followed by the methodology in Chapter Three that presents the methodological approach used in this study. Findings from the data

collection phase of the research project are presented and discussed in Chapter Four, and

an overall conclusion is presented in Chapter Five.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

This thesis is an examination of some of the issues relating to Aboriginal students

attending university, in particular, those that influence retention and completion of

degrees. Integral to the research are factors that either hinder or aid retention and

completion. I will also review literature that examines concepts influencing individual

behaviours as they pertain to retention and completion.

2.1 Barriers to Aboriginal Retention in Post Secondary Education

Aboriginal students face many barriers in the pursuit of a post-secondary

education (Abele, 2004; Ball & Pence, 2001; Battiste, 2002; Malatest & Associates Ltd.,

& Associates Ltd., 2004). Accessibility and affordability present difficulties largely due

to the capping of funding from the federal government at 1989 rates, rates that are over

two decades old. Further, many post-secondary institutions are far from native

communities which necessitates leaving the community and living, often on their own,

with little to no Aboriginal specific supports. These supports will be addressed later in

the thesis. Frequently, these difficulties prove to be too great a barrier to overcome and

result in students dropping out (Abele, 2004; Brade, Duncan & Sokel, 2003; Ryan, 1995).

Statistics from 2007 from the Atlantic Policy Congress of First Nation Chiefs

(APCFNC) First Nation students from the Atlantic region who are supported by Indian

and Northern Affairs Canada show an appallingly low rate of undergraduate degree

completions: New Brunswick 17.7 per cent, Newfoundland and Labrador 16.1 per cent,

Prince Edward Island 14.8 per cent, and Nova Scotia 6.1 per cent. New Brunswick and

Newfoundland & Labrador exhibit similar completion rates for this period. PEI is marginally lower, while Nova Scotia's numbers are abysmal. (APCFNC did not provide an explanation for the wide discrepancy between Nova Scotia and the rest of the Atlantic Provinces.) Furthermore, the 2006 Census shows only 9 per cent of all Aboriginal peoples completing a university degree compared to 23 per cent of the non-Aboriginal population (Malatest & Associates Ltd.,, 2008). These statistics highlight the need to identify supports that will enable Aboriginal students to be successful. The next section of this chapter delves into further detail about the specific factors affecting university retention and degree completion.

2.1.1 Assimilation

Many barriers affect higher educational attainment of Aboriginal people. One of these barriers is that of assimilation attempted through various means of government interventions including enfranchisement - enforced relinquishment of Indian status – and residential schools, (Kirkness, 1995; Malatest & Associates Ltd.,, 2004). Lavallee & Clearsky (2006) assert that assimilation continues to directly affect Aboriginal health, which includes attaining an education as education is considered a social determinant of health. Past Canadian governments attempted to incorporate Aboriginal culture, language, and traditions into the mainstream Eurocentric culture. The 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) found the legacy of the residential school system to be a main cause of today's issues in the Aboriginal community including violence, alcoholism, and loss of pride and spirituality (1996). This brutal legacy furthered distrust already present among Aboriginal Canadians towards non-Aboriginal Canadians and is considered one of the main barriers facing post-secondary education.

On Wednesday, June 11, 2008, the Canadian government finally publicly acknowledged this injustice. Prime Minister Stephen Harper apologized to Aboriginal survivors and their families with the following statement:

> Two primary objectives of the residential schools system were to remove and isolate children from the influence of their homes, families, traditions and cultures, and to assimilate them into the dominant culture. These objectives were based on the assumption aboriginal cultures and spiritual beliefs were inferior and unequal. Indeed, some sought, as it was infamously said, to kill the Indian in the child. Today, we recognize that this policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm, and has no place in our country.... The government now recognizes that the consequences of the Indian residential schools policy were profoundly negative and that this policy has had a lasting and damaging impact on aboriginal culture, heritage, and language.... The legacy of Indian residential schools has contributed to social problems that continue to exist in many communities today... The government of Canada sincerely apologizes and asks the forgiveness of the aboriginal peoples of this country for failing them so profoundly. We are sorry. (Prime Minister Stephen Harper's statement of apology, CBC online retrieved on June 18 from http://www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2008/06/11/pm-statement.html.)

Indeed, previous assimilation policies have produced marginalization (RCAP, 1996; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 1998). Until other forms of assimilation are addressed, institutional racism as an example, retention of Aboriginal students in post secondary education will continue to be an issue.

2.1.2 Discrimination

A second factor hindering Aboriginal people from attaining a post secondary education is discrimination. Researchers Kirkness and Barnhardt (2001) argue that the greatest problem Aboriginal university students face is discrimination from some students and professors, as well as the very culture or atmosphere of the university setting. They state that discrimination is a significant disincentive to higher learning. To Aboriginal people, the university often represents an impersonal and hostile environment in which their culture, traditions, and values are not recognized (Malatest & Associates Ltd.,, 2004). Kirkness and Barnhardt (2001) write that Aboriginal people: "...are expected to leave the cultural predispositions from their world at the door and assume the trappings of a new form of reality, a reality which is often substantially different from their own" (3rd section Respect of First Nations Cultural Integrity). Statements from Aboriginal youth from across Ontario echo the belief that discrimination is a fundamental barrier to post secondary education (Chacaby et al., 2008). Similarly, Timmons et al. (2009) uncovered racism and discrimination as significant barriers to success of Aboriginal students attending nine different post-secondary institutions in Atlantic Canada.

Discrimination can come in the form of personal attacks, derogatory comments, alienation, and institutional discrimination in the lack of Aboriginal curriculum and pedagogical methods, in particular, taking into account the different approach to learning and what is considered knowledge (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 2001; Ryan, 1995). Aboriginal scholars who successfully complete their degrees and attain employment in an academic setting continue to feel this racism (Deloria Jr., 2004).

2.1.3 Academic Preparation

A weakness in academic preparation also acts as a barrier to successful completion of a post secondary education (Chacaby et al., 2008; Malatest & Associates Ltd., & Associates Ltd., 2004). Being uninformed of their options concerning accessibility and availability of courses and programs at university is the greatest concern of Aboriginal high school youth from across Ontario according to Chacaby et al., (2008). For instance, 54 out of 56 youth interviewed in Thunder Bay claimed their schools did not provide information that would help them make choices about a college or university education. Fourteen youth from Scarborough made similar claims. Thus, they had formed opinions about post secondary education based on very limited information. Aboriginal youth in Thunder Bay understood the importance of attaining a diploma or degree in order to get a good job, but they knew nothing about the application process, the post secondary environments, their options for support, nor possible programs of study. Since these youth did not have a clear understanding of how to access their options, they made assumptions that college, and especially university, "was not for Aboriginal youth—that they were situated outside of the institution and could enter only under special circumstances," (p. 6). The high rate of Aboriginal students who drop out of high school to return at a later age is also a factor in being academically prepared for college or university (RCAP, 1996; McMullen, 2005). Attending post-secondary programs as mature students necessitates attaining the basic educational requirements before even starting at this level of study (RCAP, 1996; McMullen, 2005).

2.1.4 Lack of Role Models

A team from the University of Manitoba conducted interviews with Aboriginal university graduates for the purpose of a 1992 report on a transition program. Respondents felt that one of the key factors that dissuaded Aboriginal people from entering university was the lack of role models who had undertaken university programs (Malatest & Associates Ltd., 2004) as Aboriginal role models were considered integral to aiding success of newer students (Smith-Mohamed, 1997). Research that is more recent shows that this lack of role models means Aboriginal people do not see university as a viable option (Malatest & Associates Ltd., 2004; Mihesuah, 2004). Participants in the study by Chacaby et al. (2008) also identified the lack of role models as being a deterrent for them to consider attending post secondary institutions.

A strong identification with one's own minority heritage may have positive effects, provided, of course, that this identification is a positive one, a situation that happens all too rarely with minorities (Cummins, 2001). Cummins also notes that those who identify strongly and positively with their heritage, even in the face of the dominant society's devaluation, are likely to perform better with their studies than those minority people who identify less positively with their heritage. Anderson (2008) notes that it is imperative to implement programs that encourage Aboriginal students to aspire to further studies through activities such as mentoring programs.

2.1.5 Financial Barriers

Inadequate funding for Aboriginal students is a key theme in the literature on Aboriginal access to a post secondary education (Chacaby et al., 2008; Malatest & Associates Ltd., 2008; RCAP, 1996; Ryan, 1995; Timmons et al., 2009). Chacaby et al.

(2008) found that less than half of the First Nations student respondents received band funding for their post secondary education (PSE). John-Jerome Paul, executive director of Program Services for Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey, Nova Scotia, cites accessibility and affordability as being of great concern as government capped federal funding levels for post secondary tuition at 1989 rates. For example, in the community of Eskasoni, Nova Scotia, there were 172 students in college or university; yet, funding only covered 80 students. The community had to use other social services to pay for the remaining 92 students (personal communication, November 9, 2007, Atlantic Association of Universities Working Committee on Aboriginal issues, Charlottetown). Furthermore, the number of Aboriginal post secondary students falls well below the per capita ratio to the general population (personal communication, John-Jerome Paul, November 7, 2007). Finally, for many, the expenses for daycare, transportation, housing, food and family expenses are additional and sometimes overwhelming burdens (Malatest & Associates Ltd., 2004; Timmons et al., 2009).

2.1.6 Geographical Barriers

For many Aboriginal students geographic/demographic barriers, such as family responsibilities, often keep them from staying in school. In 1997–98, 66 per cent of Status Aboriginal post-secondary students were women. Aboriginal women are more likely to have dependent children, a spouse or partner, be older than the general population, and to be living far from their home community and supports (Malatest & Associates Ltd., 2004; RCAP, 1996; Ryan, 1995). This obstacle of geographic distance from home lends to feelings of isolation and contributes to attrition. According to

Timmons (2009), respondents cited feelings of isolation due to "entrance to a new and different environment," (p. 4) as being significant barriers to their educational experience.

It is therefore critical for governments, educational institutions, and communities to address and reduce the barriers that interfere with Aboriginal student retention and completion. Efforts to increase retention should be based on understanding the reasons behind attrition by addressing some of the above-mentioned barriers (Grayson & Grayson, 2003).

Aboriginal students find the above-mentioned barriers to be consistently problematic. While there is no one pan-Aboriginal culture, and indigenous people have unique experiences depending upon where they live and what policies their respective governments have implemented, research shows a number of surprisingly similar issues both nationally and internationally. What is at issue for this research is the specific situation at UPEI. The next section will look at factors that aid in retention for Aboriginal students.

2.2 Facilitators to Aboriginal Retention of Post Secondary Education

The literature identifies various supports as a means of providing services and aid for Aboriginal students. These supports, some of which are specific to Aboriginal needs, include the following: more visible and accessible resources, Aboriginal student counselors to offer peer support and a sense of community, financial support, and the integration of western and Aboriginal knowledge (Cappon, 2007; Cummins, 2001; NWT Department of Education, 1998; Doyle-Bedwell & Farrimond, 2005; Seidman, 2005; Timmons et al., 2009). Seidman has developed a formula that he advocates post-secondary institutions adopt to promote retention of minority students:

Retention = Early Identification + (Early + Intensive + Continuous) Intervention

Successful retention is a result of early identification of support deemed necessary to help with retention coupled with intensive and continuous intervention (availability of support) throughout the university experience. Seidman (2005) puts the onus on the universities saying the institutions must be proactive in approaching its students rather than assuming students will initiate and seek help. Documents prepared by the Aboriginal Roundtable (2007), Axworthy (2006), and Grayson and Grayson (2003) echo the thinking that the onus needs to be on the university. Universities need to look at their programs and services and ask the following questions: Do they help students bond to other students and the university? Do they identify areas in need of social or academic assistance? If so, do they remediate areas in need of assistance? Finally, do these supports continue throughout the post-secondary experience (Seidman, 2005)? Some universities offer Aboriginal specific supports, those mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph, along with the more common student services supports. However, not all universities offer distinct Aboriginal specific supports.

Accommodating Aboriginal students in Canada's post-secondary institutions is an ongoing process. The literature has identified an abundance of theories and best practices that purport success in determining how to best promote retention of this group. However, very few universities can truly claim to have solved all of the problems that have hindered Aboriginal academic achievement within Eurocentric influenced institutions. Much of the literature (Doyle-Bedwell & Farrimond, 2005; Hampton & Roy, 2002; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 2001; Timmons et al., 2009) identifies that the success of retention programs depends on recruitment, mentoring, counseling, adequate financial

aid, housing accommodation, child-care, and an integration of Aboriginal culture into universities' policies.

When examining how to construct the supports for Aboriginal students, it is best to examine the topic from the perspective that Aboriginal students are a distinct group with specific needs from non-Aboriginal students. This perspective is similar to the specific needs that international students or students with special needs would have and for which accommodations are made. Recognizing Aboriginal students as a unique subgroup within the university setting is necessary as more people who are Aboriginal are beginning to enter post-secondary institutions. Any supports created and made available to Aboriginal university students need to consider the Aboriginal vision of learning "...[which include] shared principles and values that shape and influence how they see themselves in relation to the world, and that form the foundation of their learning," (Cappon, 2007, p. 5). Unfortunately, Canadian universities inconsistently offer the above-mentioned supports that aim to encourage retention and completion of university degrees (Holmes, 2006).

2.3 Approaches to Addressing Aboriginal Educational Experiences: Action at Some Universities

Battiste (2002) asserts that Canadian Aboriginal people have their own epistemology and pedagogy distinct from the non-Aboriginal population. Aboriginal theory of knowledge and successful processes by which learning or knowledge is acquired involve observing and doing, instruction based on prior experiences and individualized instruction, learning through songs, ceremonies, symbols, stories, and Aboriginal artwork. According to Battiste (2002), Canadian educational institutions need

to consider the following: (1) Aboriginal knowledge and pedagogy when developing supports aimed at improving success for their Aboriginal students, (2) elders, knowledge keepers, and workers who are competent in Aboriginal languages and knowledge as living educational treasures should be used in the educational experience, and (3) a blending of Aboriginal knowledge and ways of learning with the mainstream in an attempt to improve the success of Aboriginal students by respecting their epistemology and pedagogy, thereby engaging these students in their post-secondary education.

Richardson and Blanchet-Cohen (2000) explain three approaches to addressing the Aboriginal experience in post-secondary education: 1) add-on approach, 2) partnership approach, and 3) First Nations controlled approach. The add-on approach attempts to make pre-existing methods and curricula more culturally appropriate. This approach is the one most used in Canadian schools and university courses as it takes the least amount of change at the institutional level and it demands minimal resources to implement. Adding on is the least beneficial of the three and is dependent upon support services offered to the Aboriginal students.

The partnership approach is supported by the belief in the necessity of combining community involvement in generating curriculum that addresses the needs of the community with the support, experience and accreditation of a formal institution (Axworthy, 2006; Kirkness, 1999; Lafreniere, Diallo, Dubie & Henry, 2005; Richardson & Blanchet-Cohen, 2000; Timmons & Walton, 2006). This approach is feasible from the university standpoint providing members from an Aboriginal community are accessible to aid the university.

Finally, the First Nations Control approach means Aboriginal communities break from the mainstream educational institutions to reclaim their self-determining practices in education. The aim of this approach is "cultural reintegration in and through education and collective self-actualization for First Nations people" (Richardson & Blanchet-Cohen, 2000, p. 172). The Saskatchewan Indian Federated College and The Nunavut Sivuniksavut Program in Ottawa are two examples of this approach (Richardson & Blanchet-Cohen, 2000). This education model must be grounded in the wisdom of Indigenous knowledge and reinforced with the teaching of language and culture which requires community input, appropriate academic content, collaboration of federal, provincial and territorial governments with Aboriginal governments, and adequate professional and fiscal resources. Parents, Elders, education leaders, native organizations in the field of education in urban and non-reserve areas, and other members of First Nation communities would be responsible for identifying the goals and objectives of their people's education (Bird & McKinnon, 2004).

More recently, Cappon's (2007) research shows similar findings by identifying key attributes to the Aboriginal learning experience that need recognition when developing supports. Any approach attempting to support the Aboriginal educational experience must take into account that their learning is a holistic, lifelong process that is experiential in nature and rooted in their languages and cultures. In addition, Aboriginal learning is a spiritually oriented, communal activity involving family, community, and Elders. Finally, Aboriginal learners succeed when there is an integration of Aboriginal and Western knowledge rather than an either or situation.

It is important to not only offer supports but acknowledge, respect, and take into account Aboriginal culture and their distinct way of learning to avoid undermining Aboriginal identity as often occurs in the western school system (Asante, 2005; Harris, 2000). While it is imperative that Aboriginal people achieve academic success in order to participate fully as members of their larger society, this success must not be at the cost of their Aboriginal identities. According to Battiste (2002), the main reason for blending Aboriginal knowledge with western knowledge is not only to increase capacity-building of Aboriginal students but, also, to help these students "get more in touch with their Indigenous consciousness and the traditions that inform and animate their intimate and spiritual selves," (p. 29).

The next section delves briefly into theory around intrinsic motivation and what, if any, effect it has on persevering through challenges. The findings demonstrated a type of motivation that transcended the many challenges faced by these students, challenges that defeated other students in similar educational situations. Taking a brief look at intrinsic motivation was an attempt to explain why some persevered while others did not. Intrinsic motivation focuses more closely on the individual rather than the institution, although, as will be explained, the two interact and affect the other, especially from the direction of the institution onto the individual.

2.4 Intrinsic Motivation

Ryan and Deci (2000), who postulate one theory on intrinsic motivation called self-determination theory, refer to intrinsic motivators as being an innate condition with an "inherent tendency to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one's capacities, to explore, and to learn" (p. 70). They conclude that intrinsic motivators are

rather dependent upon "supportive conditions" (p. 70) and can be diminished by non-supportive conditions.

Studying the conditions that facilitate rather than undermine intrinsically motivated tendencies would produce an understanding of that which hinders or facilitates positive behaviours and attitudes. Some facilitating conditions include the following: productive and constructive feedback, feedback that is free of demeaning comments, challenges that are realistically achievable and yet push the subject to succeed, perceived competence, and self-determined, autonomous choices and behaviours (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Factors that undermine intrinsic motivation include the following: "rewards, threats, deadlines, directives, pressured evaluations, and imposed goals." (Ryan & Deci, p. 70).

Another factor that facilitates intrinsically motivated behaviours include parents who support autonomy and encourage curiosity in their children as opposed to controlling parents (Lumsden, 1994; Ryan & Deci, 2000). This is also relevant in the school setting where teachers who use a controlling style in the classroom diminish student initiative (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Furthermore, teachers who expect their students will learn have students who share that expectation (Lumsden, 1994). Both of these assertions are consistent with what Cummins (2001) has found in what he terms collaborative versus coercive educational settings affecting student identity. Overriding these factors is a condition of caring where intrinsic motivation is likely to flourish over a lifespan when interpersonal relationships foster feelings of security and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Closely tied to intrinsic motivators is the interest factor. More specifically, intrinsic motivation directly relates to "activities that hold intrinsic interest for them, activities that have the appeal of novelty, challenge, or aesthetic value" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 71.) Changing needs that occur over a lifespan will necessarily influence interests (Wigfield, Eccles, Roeser, & Schiefele, 2009). The following section addresses the notion of identity in general and Aboriginal identity in particular. It also examines the challenges of respecting and accommodating Aboriginal identity while furthering their education.

2.5 Identity

Identity is a powerful concept that influences individual and collective behaviours. On an individual basis, the definition of identity is "sameness of essential or generic character in different instances; the distinguishing character or personality of an individual" (http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/identity). From a collective perspective identity is defined as "sameness in all that constitutes the objective reality of a thing; the relation established by psychological identification" (http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/identity). Another online dictionary reference provides a clearer definition for collective or group identity: "the set of behavioural or personal characteristics by which an individual is recognizable as a member of a group; the collective aspect of the set of characteristics by which a thing is definitively recognizable or known, the quality or condition of being the same as something else" (http://dictionary.reference.com). The following sections briefly present various theories related to the effects of power and identity in an educational context.

2.5.1 Group Identity

Tajfel and Turner (1986) theorized that identity is developed based on membership in a group or groups, and different social contexts influence how the individual thinks and behaves based on his/her personal, familial, or group identification. Closely linked to this social identity theory is self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) that focuses on social categorizing where the group influences behaviour based on the individual's acknowledgement of being part of the group. Influence may occur even if the individual is not in direct contact with other members or does not know any other members personally.

A key factor of social identity theory is the comparing of self both within the shared group and with other groups different from one's own (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). "Because group membership contributes to self-conception and (presumably) to self-esteem, the individual is motivated to maintain a positive social identity by engaging in social comparisons that preserve the favourability and distinctiveness of the in-group relative to relevant out-groups" (Cameron & Lalonde, 2001, p. 60). Hogg and Abrams (1988) speak to the effect power between groups has on social identity where the entitled or dominant groups in society have the power to impose their value system and ideology over the less powerful or subordinate groups. The result of this imposition is to perpetuate the status quo. If comparisons between groups are positive, the individual and group feel good about their membership in that group; however, if the comparison has one's group appear in a negative light, there is a desire to improve the negative status or remain mired with low self-esteem or self-concept (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

2.5.2 Negative Social Identity

Tajfel and Turner (1986) suggest three strategies used by those dealing with a negative social identity: social mobility, social competition, and social creativity. Social mobility refers to three options for those dissatisfied with their status: individuals leave their group to join a better group, identify less with their own group, or choose to focus on their personal rather than social identity. Social competition occurs when the individuals attempt to improve their group or attack the other group. Finally, social creativity refers to any type of thought adjustments on behalf of individuals in an attempt to feel better about their group; often this occurs through the process of making their group distinct from the dominant comparative group.

Group identity is an important concept when dealing with issues involving Aboriginal people. The strong identification with their culture needs recognition when addressing the problem of Aboriginal people attaining a post secondary education.

2.5.3 Power and Identity

Freire (1970) argues that few experiences are free from oppression. While race, gender, and class are the most conspicuous forms of dominance, he recognizes that power also can be based on other factors, some of which include religious beliefs, political association, nationality, and age. All of these factors influence personal and group identities. Friere believes education improves self-identity and the human condition, and higher education, in particular, plays a huge role in citizenship, democratic freedom, and full participation in one's community and the larger society. Similarly, Apple (1996) recognizes the connection between power and knowledge and education and how this

affects identity. He argues that this connection accounts for and be central to any policy making in formal education practices.

Lavallee & Clearsky (2006) looked at the effect assimilation and having little or no power has on Aboriginal health. Cummins (2001) takes a similar approach but with a specific focus on education. He describes the role of identity and power relations within educational settings as "culturally diverse students are disempowered educationally in very much the same way that their communities have been disempowered historically in their interactions with societal institutions" (p. vii). The experiences of Canadian Aboriginal people historically are well known and documented. These same peoples and their progeny are experiencing similar issues within the Canadian school system at all levels of education. Similarly, Ogbu (1992) found students with the most difficult and persistent educational problems tend to come from disenfranchised communities that have experienced discrimination over generations. While Cummins' (2001) work aims at primary and secondary educators, the same argument can and should be applied to post-secondary education. Early successes tend to increase the chances of later successes; unfortunately, the opposite is also true.

Cummins' (2001) concept of negotiating identities "recognizes the agency of culturally diverse students and communities in resisting devaluation and in affirming their basic human rights" (p. viii) and how struggles within a social context affect identity. While acknowledging that power affects identity, he differentiates between coercive relations of power which are negative and disempowering and collaborative relations of power which are positive and empowering. "Coercive relations of power refer to the exercise of power by a dominant group to the detriment of a subordinated

group" (Cummins, p. 14). If one does not have the means to fully participate in public discourse, one is in a position of inferior power. Discursive power comes from education and Aboriginal people are without question disadvantaged with respect to mainstream education. Keeping voices silent means keeping those voices out of the way. Conversely, Cummins argues, collaborative power relations refer to educational settings where students are able to participate in an atmosphere where their ideas and experiences are listened to and respected and their cultural differences are celebrated rather than devalued or ignored. "Power is created with other rather than being imposed on or exercised over others," (p.16). When the above-mentioned atmosphere is absent in an educational setting, Aboriginal people tend to leave.

Policies such as Employment Equity in Canada are attempts at redressing the power imbalance existing in societies and emphasizing the diversity of their citizens (Torres, 2009). This sentiment applies to Canada's Employment Equity Act that was enacted in 1986 whose purpose was to achieve equality regardless of advantage (Human Resources & Skills Development Canada, 2003).

Issues around identity, such as power (Friere, 1970), affirmation (Cummins, 2001), and disenfranchisement (Ogbu, 1992; Tajel & Turner, 1986) are significant factors in human development, healthy or otherwise. Therefore, acknowledging and addressing Aboriginal identity is important to ensure the positive side of identification with one's culture is being encouraged when looking at possible solutions for the problem of low levels of Aboriginal Canadians attaining a post-secondary education specifically in gender related identity issues.

2.5.4 Aboriginal Women and Identity

The main purpose of a study by Asante (2005) was to show that ethnic identity is dependent upon a combination of factors: birth, heritage, socio-economics, and demographics. This idea is similar to the thinking of feminist Audre Lorde whose work preceded Asante's work. Lorde (1984) claimed that the reality of one's struggle not be reduced to a single factor, such as gender, as no one lives that one dimensionally. Each factor is important and influential, and all contribute to the individual's identification along with their Aboriginal heritage. Therefore, all factors need accounting when developing a policy such as self-government or other policies attempting to redress Aboriginal marginalization. If the focus is only on ethnic heritage while ignoring social, economic, and demographic realities, the idea of integration is overlooked. "The ideas of nation and social integration need to be joined" (Asante, 2005, p. 6). Asante (2005) further showed that social integration is a significant factor in identification. Developing policy to redress marginalization certainly cannot ignore this. Identity is as much based on social realities as on those inherited factors. Social and economic realities, including education, earnings, and status, all impact identity which, in turn, influences relationships between and among groups. There is no one group of 'Aboriginal People' speaking with one voice and sharing one common identity. Rather the label consists of many groups within varying socio-economic, demographic, and cultural realities.

To further explain and illustrate the diversity of identity and how social categories shaped identity, Asante looked specifically at Aboriginal women using data from the 1991 Aboriginal Peoples Survey (APS). There is a tendency to universalize the social categories, such as age or marital status, and to focus only on one ethnicity or race -

which interfered with seeing the important differences within each category. Asante

refers to other studies that show the following factors influence identity: access to power,

nationality, ethnicity, gender, family, social class, marital status, and levels of education.

"There is nothing universal or natural about identity," (Nicholas & Seidman, 1998, p. 10).

The many positions women hold come with their own many identities based on above

factors. Solidarity among women is based on "various social positions or

identities...depending on the issue" (Chhachhi & Pittin, 1996, p. 11). Furthermore, a

1998 study found "distinct patterns in self-identification among older and younger

Navajo women occupying different socio-economic, political, and cultural positions"

(Shultz, 1998, p. 11). The implication of this information on my study is as an important

reminder to not generalize or reduce the experiences of my participants to their ethnic

culture.

Ethnic identity is determined by the relationship between the individual in the

group, other members of the group, and the power involved in the relationship, that

power coming from differences in the individual's access to economic, social, and

political resources. Contact with European ways exacerbated inequities for Aboriginal

women as evidenced in the sexism found in the *Indian Act* and other rules established

under the influence of ideas of patriarchy and race. Aboriginal women were not allowed

to vote in band elections, were not allowed to own property, were treated as their

husband's property, and lost status if married to a non-Aboriginal. Moreover, Aboriginal

women differ within their own group in the following ways: urban Aboriginal women

tend to be more highly educated than non-urban women, and both fair skinned Métis and

Aboriginal women married to non-Aboriginal men face discrimination within their communities.

Focusing on only one category of ethnicity, as the policy of self-government does, overlooks important and emerging representations of identity and developing new categories. If this limited focus occurs, how can a policy address the differences presuming one voice represents all? "Doing away with racism [by bringing about self-government] does not automatically eliminate sexism, class, or other forms of oppression" (Asante, 2005, p. 14). Any university policy attempting to improve retention of Aboriginal university students needs to address these factors. The following section will look at the concept of a single identity for all Aboriginal peoples or a pan-Aboriginal identity.

2.5.5 Myth of Pan-Aboriginal Identity

While it is justifiable to recognize the Aboriginal community as being distinct, as previously stated, there is an inherent danger that doing so will reduce Aboriginal culture to a one-size-fits-all or a pan-Aboriginal identity. Asante (2005) identifies the danger of such an assumption. While the intentions of self-government were good, the policy implies that Aboriginal people of Canada have a collective identity. The danger in using a single term for a collective made up of varied participants is the loss of those individuals and their varied identities that exist outside of the collective. There is no one group of 'Aboriginal people', speaking with one voice and sharing one common identity. Rather the label is attributed to many groups within varying socio-economic, demographic, and cultural realities. The idea of a pan-Aboriginal identity is a fallacy. While a catchall identity may simplify any reference to the group, as seen in RCAP's

attempts to help restore justice to the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada, its perpetuation increases the danger of not finding an all-encompassing solution(s).

RCAP (1996) concluded that the past assimilation policies of Canadian governments failed because "Aboriginal people had a sense of themselves as a people with unique heritage and rights to cultural continuity," (p. 2). This failure leads to an argument for self-government and other initiatives, social, economic, and political to redress the Aboriginal situation. However, self-government assumes that the Aboriginal community be considered one nation as opposed to small, separate communities. The problem with this assumption that the experiences of Aboriginal people are similar enough to form one identity is the fact that Aboriginal people of Canada comprise First Nations, Métis, and Inuit. While there are shared experiences of racism, each group has its own distinctive culture and identity. In addition, within each group there are cultural and other differences. Asante (2005) states any approach to redressing the marginalization of Aboriginal people needs to address the social and economic condition not just self-government initiatives in order to be successful arguing there is more to identity than birthright.

2.6 Determinants of Health

In its concern for improving the well being of all Canadians, the government of Canada commissioned the Lalonde Report of 1974 which linked different kinds of mortality and illness and their underlying causes while attempting to address elements of prevention. Investigating the links between the impact of environment and lifestyle has lead to the recognition that certain social determinants, in addition to medical ones, affect

health. These social determinants, including education, were further addressed in the World Health Organization's (WHO) Declaration of Alma-Ata in 1978, the WHO's Ottawa Charter of 1986, and in more recent research focusing on education (Chacaby et al., 2008; Canadian Centre of Policy Alternatives, 2007; Raphael et al., 2004; Ungerleider & Burns, 2004; Ungerleider & Keating, 2002). Despite the differences in the publication dates of these studies, all have similar findings: there are direct links between education and income, culture & identity, housing, food security, and employment, and all of these social factors affect health. Those with less education have poorer health. Improving the health of an individual or population means relieving the inequalities in health that are rooted in inequalities in the social factors that determinate health.

In Canada, on average, those who have not completed a high school education earn 57 per cent of those with a university undergraduate degree and less than half, or 47 per cent those with a post-graduate degree. In Prince Edward Island, the findings are reflective of national findings: 56% and 47% respectively (Statistics Canada, 2008). Furthermore, international studies show similar findings as seen in results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), an international, non-curriculum based test of student achievement, that illustrate students from higher socio-economic backgrounds score better than those from lower socio-economic backgrounds regardless of country (Ronson & Rootman, 2004). Additionally, children from lower income earning families are less likely to perform as well in school as those from higher incomes. In addition, lower income families often comprise single parents, usually women, and/or have parents with less education than those from higher income families, (Raphael, 1999; Statistics Canada, 2005). Therefore, raising education and literacy levels

has the potential to improve health including social and economic status for the individual and larger society (Green & Riddell, 2007).

Since economic inequality and poverty are linked in direct proportion, distributing wealth more evenly among the members of any group contributes significantly to the creation of a healthier society overall (Raphael, 2004; Wilkinson, 2005; Wilkinson & Marmot, 2003). Conversely, nations with high economic inequality have higher rates of poverty. The less educated tend to be a heavier burden on societies. For instance, 85 per cent of income assistance is spent on people who have not completed high school, and 33.6 per cent of those who do not graduate from high school receive income assistance compared to 6.7 per cent of those who do graduate (Ungerleider & Keating, 2002).

The implications of increasing education levels include a decrease of the economic burden of those less educated and less healthy and an increase in the economic benefits of having more people in society with higher wages and more secure jobs. Further implications are a decrease in the waste of untapped human potential, and an increase in the overall health of a marginalized group. Although not all governments will see the relevance of eliminating inequities in health, all are interested in economic growth. The WHO contends health is the key to decreasing poverty and to increasing development (Leon, Walt, & Gilson, 2001) and education determines health; thus, raising the levels of education in a population is a move towards improvements in health both economically and socially.

Yet, despite this knowledge of the relationship between education, health, and economics, the situation in Canada concerning the relationship between education and health, generally, and the Aboriginal population and their educational attainment,

specifically, is still unacceptable. While decades of research have shown the effect of education on health and society, implementing measures to aid in furthering education are very slow in coming.

Arguably, education can be a great equalizer; it is therefore of utmost importance to me to seek the answers to the following questions around my study's particular group of Aboriginal students: Why are these women attending university? What are their perceived barriers to continuing and completing their education? What can the university do to alleviate these barriers? It should be noted that while it is a generally accepted and documented understanding that Aboriginal-controlled institutions achieve higher success rates for graduating students than mainstream universities (Abele, 2004; Battiste, 2005; RCAP, 1996; Stonechild, 2006) the scope of this research is not to address this approach. Rather, the question pertaining to what UPEI can do to help retain and graduate Aboriginal students needs answering from the point of view of UPEI being a mainstream university. This university has supports in place for international students, as do they for students with special needs. It would logically follow that the decisions behind implementing these supports should therefore cover supports needed by other vulnerable groups, in this case Aboriginal students attending this institution. These are the questions listed previously that this research will answer. I explain the method employed to respond to these research questions in the next chapter.

Chapter 3

Research Design and Methods

3.0 My Understanding of Reality

To best answer the research questions of this study, I used a qualitative approach.
All forms of qualitative inquiry come with their own sets of assumptions and perspectives
regarding what is knowledge or epistemology. Looking through a social justice lens has
influenced my perspective and my theoretical position. A social justice perspective
"seeks not just to study and understand society but rather to critique and change society"
(Patton, 2002, p. 131). In this study, interpretive phenomenology has informed my
exploration of the phenomena experienced by the women participants and helped answer
the following:

(1) Why these women are attending university,

(2) What barriers are affecting their continuation, and

(3) What the university can do to alleviate the barriers in an attempt to encourage
retention and completion.

To get a better understanding of the population of Aboriginal university students I
explored, I used in-depth interviews as they allow for discovering rich data (Polit &
Beck, 2004) and uncovering participants' lives and experiences (Kvale, 1996).

In this chapter, I will discuss my theoretical framework, participant selection, data
collection, site selection, data management, data analysis, trustworthiness, and ethical
considerations.

3.1 Theoretical Framework

Since the purpose of my research was to explore the experiences of Aboriginal women at UPEI, it was of utmost importance that I attempt to understand and appreciate the perspectives of these women in order to examine adequately the successes and barriers they experience. Since one's reality is constructed by one's perceptions in interaction with self and others (Patton, 2002), giving voice to the perspectives of those who are vulnerable or outside the majority is necessary for those perspectives to be acknowledged, respected, and ultimately, addressed. My theory of knowledge or epistemology is constructivist in that data are within the perspectives of the individual. Individual perceptions can vary and yet still be the reality for the one perceiving even if this perception differs from the perception of others. In this research, I was interested in the perspectives of Aboriginal women studying at UPEI, and I engaged with the participants in collecting the data through interviewing them. Since the intention was to gather data regarding the perspectives of the lived experiences of Aboriginal students at UPEI, I decided a phenomenological approach would be most appropriate. Therefore, I looked more closely at the two main approaches to phenomenology – descriptive and interpretive - to see which would match my philosophical underpinnings.

Husserl's descriptive approach assumes that the experience as perceived by the individual has value and should be studied by those "seeking to understand human motivation because human actions are influenced by what people perceive to be real" (Lopez & Willis, 2004, p. 727). However, Husserl believed it was essential for the researchers to bracket or to strip themselves of their biases. While I was aware of my own biases, I did not intend to actively strip them from my consciousness nor would I

know how to do this. Therefore, my phenomenological approach does not strictly fit Husserl's tradition – describe without explaining and start without bias (Husserl, 1970).

Lopez & Willis (2004) summarize the tenets of Heidegger's interpretive or hermeneutic approach to phenomenological study as (1) the focus of this type of inquiry should be in "relation of the individual to his life world" (p. 729), (2) the individual's experiences are subjective and "are inextricably linked with social, cultural, and political contexts" (p. 729), and (3) the researcher's bias or prior knowledge is valuable and "makes the inquiry a meaningful undertaking," (p. 729) and, as such, should not be bracketed; this position fits my own. This interpretive approach goes beyond description to look for meanings; "these meanings are not always apparent to the participants but can be gleaned from the narratives produced by them," (p. 728) and any act of interpretation is based on a blending of the experiences and meanings of both participant and researcher (p. 730).

A more specific approach to interpretive phenomenology is called critical hermeneutics, the objective of which is to give voice to those who are disenfranchised (p. 730). Because I looked beyond the narratives of the Aboriginal students in my study to learn about how their experiences linked with power, identity, and determinants of health issues, I believe my approach is more closely informed by Heidegger's interpretive approach.

An interpretive framework supports the belief that there are multiple realities (Laverty, 2003) and that realities are either more or less informed (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). This approach allowed me to use the theoretical framework guided through a social justice lens to focus the research where the inquiry was needed - the needs of

Aboriginal women in academe – and upon which to base the research questions and sampling of participants. Therefore, a critical, interpretive, phenomenological approach informed how I answered the research questions.

3.2 Participant Selection

Phenomenological research lends itself to purposive sampling in order to study a phenomenon (Polit & Beck, 2004). This type of sampling allows for a selection of participants who have the lived experience and understanding to address the specific research question(s). These participants' unique characteristics and experiences are relevant and valuable which is why I used purposive sampling. Participants were eligible for inclusion in this study if they were Aboriginal and attending the University of Prince Edward Island. As long as these were met, there was no exclusion criteria defined. This type of sampling fit the methodological approach used to answer my research questions.

I had previously worked on a Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) funded research project for Dr. Vianne Timmons called *Retention of Aboriginal Students in Post-Secondary Institutions in Atlantic Canada: An Analysis of Supports Available to Aboriginal Students* (June, 2009). The research team created flyers and distributed them around UPEI (and other participating Atlantic universities). The initial intention was to ask those agreeing to participate in this larger research project if they would be willing to also participate in my thesis project; however, no volunteers came forward. I knew one participant from being in the same graduate program, and two participants came to me through that participant in what is referred to as a snowball or network effect (Polit & Beck, 2004). The other participant came through a professor. I did approach another potential participant on a recommendation from a professor. Unfortunately, the

arrangements for an interview did not work out. On two different occasions, appointments were made for interviews at her place of work and home. She was not available at work at the agreed upon time, which necessitated the second arrangement of going to her home. The home visit did not work out as she had been up all night with a sick child and was not able to answer questions. I suggested the option of answering my questions via email, but that was not possible either. Due to logistics and time constraints, I decided not to pursue this participant any longer. So in total, four women agreed to participate in this study and share their perspectives. While this number is small, it is reflective of the overall population of Aboriginal people on PEI and the estimated 1% of student population (approximately 40) that Aboriginal students represent at UPEI. My sample size of four was somewhat smaller than the recommended 10 as indicated in Polit & Beck (2004); however, they also indicate that fewer than 10 is adequate in a phenomenological study and place more emphasis on the fact that the participants must have experienced the phenomena under question, which clearly all my participants did.

3.3 Data Collection Methods

Interviews are a very popular and common method of data collection for qualitative researchers in the social sciences (Lofland, Snow, Anderson & Lofland 2006; Mason, 2002; Nunkoosing, 2005; Sandelowski, 2002). Silverman (2000) goes even further by referring to interviewing as the "gold standard" in qualitative research (p. 291). Furthermore, Smith (2006) asserts that interviews are appropriate when researching with an Aboriginal population as the interview process disrupts the historical pattern of colonization by giving participants their voice. Kvale (1996) describes interviews as

conversations, "attempts to unfold the meaning of peoples' experiences, to uncover their lived world" (p. 1). Therefore, a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews was the most logical choice for eliciting rich information from my participants. I met with all of the participants one time for approximately one hour each, and I met two of the participants a second time at their request.

While a true interpretive phenomenological approach favours unstructured interviews (Polit & Beck, 2004) with no set questions prepared as "they do not yet know what to ask or even where to begin," (p. 340), I did know where I wanted to begin and had some specific questions that I wanted answered. However, I made sure that the participants had the opportunity to share thoughts outside the set questions. I asked participants two main questions concerning availability and usefulness of supports at UPEI and had numerous subsequent queries and probes to elicit rich data (see Appendix I). Also, I took the advice of an experienced researcher who indicated it was necessary to avoid questions that would require only a 'yes' or 'no' answer. The semi-structured interview approach allowed each participant to expand on her thoughts and feelings as we talked (Patton, 2002). As there was no set time limit for the interview, I was able to explore and follow-up information that was shared with me. I believe this is consistent with an interpretive phenomenological approach where what is critical is getting a description as accurately as possible of the participant's experiences (Giorgi, cited in Groenewald, 2004). I informed each participant that the interview would be between half an hour to an hour depending on her level of comfort. When they agreed to participate, I sent them a copy of the questions before we met because I felt it was important for them to know what kinds of questions they would be asked. I did so because I am aware of the

pressure one can feel while participating in an interview and how hesitant some people are to refuse to answer a question even when given permission to do so. Advanced notice of the questions would also give participants time to think about their answers.

In addition to finding appropriate questions to ask, it is important to establish a positive relationship between interviewer and interviewee in order to gain the participant's trust to share information that is underlying the topic of interest (Nunkoosing, 2005). Given the busy schedules we all had, there were varying levels of rapport developed between my participants and myself. I did convey my sincere appreciation for their time and willingness to share some very personal parts of their lives with me. I also explicitly told them I respected them for what they were doing and attempted to assure them that I would give them opportunities to read my write up. I reinforced their right to reject anything that I transcribed or wrote, as indeed happened. This right to refusal was part of the informed consent document that I went over with each before the interview began and which was necessary for ethical approval (Appendix II).

The interviews were digitally recorded as Patton (2002) advocates, and while he stresses that a recording does not substitute for note taking, it does eliminate the need for extensive note taking during the interview. I found it uncomfortable to be looking at my notes to review the next question. I sensed I might lose a participant's expression and body language while she was speaking. Taking copious notes would have interfered with maintaining appropriate eye contact and non-verbal encouragement throughout the interview. When the interview was over, I made field notes on points that I wanted to address from the recordings. Bodgen (1998) states "Treat every word as having the

potential to unlock the mystery of the subject's way of viewing the world" (p. 96). By recording the interview, I was able to listen more attentively than if I were taking notes. Since I had two digital recorders with me and tested them twice to ensure they were actually working, I felt confident I could focus my attention on listening.

3.4 Site Selection

Since the participants all attend UPEI, I gave them the option of having the interview take place on campus at UPEI. In the event they were not comfortable with the degree of privacy an interview at a university may involve, I offered to go to their home or meet at a location of their choice if preferred. Three of the four agreed to be interviewed at the university. The fourth found it more convenient for me to go to her home.

3.5 Data Management

After each interview, I downloaded the recording to my computer and stored it in a password-protected file. I made hard copies of the interviews and kept electronic copies. I kept both hard and electronic copies in a safe place in my home to ensure privacy. I sent the transcripts to the participants for their review to verify the information as a form of member checking.

Throughout the research process, I observed ethical requirements; participants received information about the steps I would take to protect their identities by: assigning pseudonyms, removing identifying indicators, and properly storing transcripts and recordings. I assured them of their right to remove parts or all of their data without adverse consequences. One participant held me to that promise, making it necessary for

me to take a different approach to the analysis and presentation of the findings as explained in the next section.

3.6 Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis

Analysis, approached from a constructivist framework, is a process that allowed me, the researcher, to deconstruct and reconstruct the text in search of patterns and relationships in perceptions and interpretations. Initially, I used narrative analysis to present the data in the form of personal stories of each participant. However, because of a participant's wishes, that approach had to change to thematic analysis which is a flexible approach not only appropriate given the above mentioned circumstance but also for a new researcher like myself (Braun & Clark, 2006).

Thematic analysis often uses a constructivist method to explore perceptions, experiences, meanings, and their emergence from discourse (Braun & Clark, 2006). Thematic analysis is a foundational qualitative method of analysis, incorporating the core skill of "thematising meanings" (Holloway & Todres, 2003, p. 247). Boyatzis (1998) sees thematic analysis as a tool used across different methodologies, and Braun and Clark (2006) define it as a method "in its own right" (p. 78). A lack of agreement around the definition and process of thematic analysis is shared among authors such as Attride-Stirling (2001), Tuckett (2005) and Boyantzis (1998); Braun and Clark (2006) believe much analysis is thematic, but is reported as something else such as content analysis or simply referred to as qualitative analysis. The flexibility of thematic analysis is in its generic nature. The trustworthiness of the thematic analysis method is in the recording and reporting what the researcher did, why and how. Themes emerging from the data should not imply a passive process when, in reality, researchers are actively engaged in

identifying patterns and focusing on those of the greatest importance and value in the research (Braun & Clark). This active engagement and many-staged approach to interpretation that allows the patterns to emerge is consistent with an interpretive phenomenological approach (Laverty, 2003).

3.6.1 My Approach: Four Phases

I was very aware of not wanting to force the emergence of themes, which would imply an imposition of myself onto the data, rather than letting the data speak for itself. As such, I relied heavily on literature to guide me through the steps of thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006; deWet & Erasmus, 2005; Tuckett, 2005). Braun and Clarke's framework, "Phases of thematic analysis" (p. 87), was an important tool that I used in the transition from transcripts, to codes, to themes. The table below is a pictorial description of the steps taken in the analysis.

Table 1

PHASE 1 – familiarizing the data	Step 1 – transcribing the data
	Step 2 – reading the data
PHASE 2 – organizing the data	Step 3 – colour coding initial themes
PHASE 3 – developing the themes	Step 4 – naming initial themes
	Step 5 – creating visual/graph representations
	Step 6 – reviewing and merging themes
PHASE 4 – defining developed themes	Step 7 – examining relationships

3.6.1.1 Phase 1 – Familiarizing the data: transcribing and reading. Step one involved transcribing the taped interviews verbatim; this provided the opportunity to become more familiar with the data set. I transcribed three of the four interviews on my own within a few days of the interviews to ensure accuracy, and between the time of the

interview and the time of transcribing, I found myself spontaneously thinking about some of the answers the participants gave. I engaged a fellow graduate student who was working on the larger retention research project to transcribe the final interview. I had previously worked with this person on Dr. Timmons' retention project where we both transcribed those interviews. For consistency in that project, we collaborated on how the transcriptions should look. We both followed this approach with my research transcribing, and as a result, I was confident in the consistency of the transcript I outsourced. I reviewed this transcription and made some additions and corrections to the document. All four of these transcribed documents formed an important part of the audit trail. Repeated readings of these transcripts enhanced rigour by strengthening my familiarity with the data, improving my recall, and deepening my understanding of what was shared. All transcripts were numbered line by line in order to make later references easier; this is a standard part of data reduction (Seidel & Clark, 1984).

Step two involved reading the data. This step in my analysis is what deWet and Erasumus (2005) describe as a "close reading of the data" (p. 29). I focused on reading each document as an individual entity to get a sense of what issues arose from that particular document, to gain a "sense of the spirit of the text before imposing codes" (p. 30).

3.6.1.2 Phase 2 – Organizing and coding the data. Step three involved generating initial codes, (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 87). I did this by adding colour to the transcript document while reading through it a second time. Similar themes were given similar colours. I chose to use a line-by-line method following the example of how it was done on the larger joint university retention project, as this method helped me

communicate with other researchers on that project. From this experience, I could see the value in using it with my data if for no other reason than to simplify later references between the four transcripts. In Polit and Beck (2004), Van Manen describes the line-by-line method as a way of identifying themes where researchers analyze every sentence and reflect and interpret with follow up interviews (p. 586). I did not have any follow up interviews but did use member checking so the participants could offer feedback. The line-by-line approach I used was a logical fit with my understanding of analyzing any written document. I read through one time for a holistic sense of the meaning of the text followed by an examining or scrutinizing of what was relevant.

3.6.1.3 Phase 3 – Developing the themes: naming, representing, reviewing and merging.

Step four involved naming initial themes. Braun and Clark (2006) advise identifying the themes by recognizing interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion. The line-by-line analysis allowed me to make connections of similarities between the four transcripts. It was through the process of recognition of these connections that I was able to move on to naming initial themes. The themes were then named when something emerged from the data that was related to the research question(s) (Braun & Clark, 2006).

Step five involved visually depicting the above activity. When a theme appeared, I gave it a colour to indicate possible naming of a theme that would apply. A different colour was given to different features, while similar features were given the same colour. I also noted lines where the feature was found in order to review it at a later stage of the analysis. I have included a partial example of steps 4 and 5 In Table 2 of Appendix III. While I had some experience colour coding in a course on qualitative research, I

consulted the literature to inform myself on the appropriate use of colour coding to develop themes. I found that colour coding is intended to "facilitate recognition of the data" (p. 2) across the data set and has been previously used to analyze data on student experience (Symons, 2008). Based on this and Braun and Clarke's (2006) use of colour coding, I was reassured that that an appropriate method for data organization was used.

Step six involved reviewing and then merging themes. Marshall & Rossman (2006) suggest giving yourself time with and away from the data to allow your unconscious to be engaged and think about it. I set a time limit of one hour for the first "round" of thematic development before stepping away from the data. This was an attempt to ensure that I was appropriately grouping into themes and respecting the emotional involvement that is required in bringing the codes to themes (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). When I thought I had covered the themes from a transcript, I merged similar themes together. For example, the themes of exclusion and discrimination were merged together into a broader theme of barriers. Fourteen initial themes were merged into four. I have included a partial list of some of the merged themes from one of the transcripts that can be found in Table 3 in Appendix III.

3.6.1.4 Phase 4 – Defining developed themes: examining relationships. Step seven involved examining relationships between themes found in all the transcripts. After repeating the above process with all four transcripts, I then looked at the common themes and at those standing alone. I also looked for the most important examples providing answers to the research question. It was clear that barriers were common among all participants, and many of those barriers were shared despite the differences

between the participants themselves. The broader themes are presented in the Findings chapter, and I use quotes from the transcripts to support these themes.

3.7 Trustworthiness

Patton (2002) asserts that rigour is crucial to conducting research that can be informative to other researchers, policy makers and general public. Rigour and trustworthiness go together. Lincoln & Guba (1985) suggest that the four parts of trustworthiness are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

3.7.1 Credibilty

To enhance credibility in qualitative research, Patton (2002) indicates the need to address bias. Not only is there bias involved from the participants' points of view, but also researcher bias. Since people view the world through their individual lens, their bias is based on their experiences and outlook on life. This bias is often what is valuable in qualitative research. Researcher bias, or more specifically, interviewer bias, is described by Bowling (2003) as potentially affecting respondents' answers; "The interviewer can subconsciously, or even consciously, bias the respondents to answer in a certain way, for example, by appearing to hold certain values which can lead to a social desirability bias, or by asking leading questions" (p. 154). Bowling (2003) cautions an interviewer to be aware of her own biases; I have acknowledged these in chapter four. While a true descriptive phenomenological approach involves the researcher bracketing or stripping away her biases, as previously discussed, my approach can be described as being informed by an interpretive phenomenological approach that assumes researcher bias and prior knowledge is valuable and should not be bracketed.

Beck (1993) and Lincoln & Guba (1985) see credibility achieved in how faithful the description is to the lived experience. In my study, member checking involved sending participants my writing for their comments and feedback. I felt confident this process ensured that I recorded participants' words as they were intended and allowed for the possibility of revising if necessary.

Furthermore, peer debriefing also enhances credibility. Not only did I discuss emerging themes with my supervisors, I also had the opportunity to consult with former and present graduate students who are further advanced in their respective studies, similar to my own, and who were able to offer relevant input in the development of themes.

3.7.2 Transferability

Polit and Beck (2004) explain transferability as "the extent by which findings can be transferred to other settings or groups" (p. 734). Transferability is enhanced through a rich description of research assumptions that allow others to then determine if the findings are transferable or applicable to their context. Patton (2002) suggests extrapolation be used as a method of determining this. Extrapolation is "the applicability of findings to other situation under similar, but not identical, conditions...Extrapolations can be particularly useful when based on information-rich samples and designs..." (p. 584). The varied responses from each interview affirmed the value of a flexible, semi-structured interview and the basic truths of social constructivism. Truth is consensual between co-constructors rather than an objective reality, phenomena should not be generalized from one setting to another but rather understood within the context in which they are studied, and data elicited from constructivist inquiry "represent simply another construction to be taken into account in the move toward consensus" (Patton, 2002, p.

98). Gaining the perspective of female Aboriginal students in academia at UPEI by extrapolating the findings from my interviews can provide valuable information for policymakers, educators, and other Aboriginal students.

I read through the literature both before and after analyzing the data from my interviews and discovered similar findings in other populations not only in Canada but also with Indigenous populations around the world. This confirmed for me that my approach was indeed transferable as the provision of thick description would allow my reader to judge transferability.

3.7.3 Dependability

Polit & Beck (2004) refer to dependability as the "stability of data over time and over conditions" (p. 435). My use of an inquiry audit trail documenting the interview and analysis process and potentially allowing for future research use (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) furthers dependability and also confirmability.

3.7.4 Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the degree to which results can be determined to come from the participants and the research context as opposed to researcher bias (Polit & Beck, 2004). In addition to an inquiry audit trail, (documentation allowing an independent auditor to make conclusions from data) being reflexive is a technique to establish confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Polit & Beck (2004) define reflexivity as "critical self-reflection about one's own biases, preferences, and preconceptions" (p. 730). Using a journal, emails to myself, post-it notes and other forms of memo writing, I kept track of the logistics or activities of my research and my thoughts, concerns, and perceptions. This exercise not only aided my own conducting of the research process but

also enhanced confirmability. How I reflexively incorporated myself into the research strengthens trustworthiness of data from the participants even though a small sample was used.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

The University of Prince Edward Island's Research Ethics Board granted ethical approval on October 16, 2008. All the participants agreed to volunteer their time to participate in the study. Using gatekeepers to recruit participants helped to establish the trust factor with my participants, since historical grievances have made many Aboriginal communities reluctant to participate in research led by non-Aboriginal researchers. I also sent participants information about the purpose of my research study and included questions I would be asking prior to our interview in an attempt to address the issue of free and informed consent. Before beginning the interview, I asked if participants had any questions or concerns about the research or the questions. Everyone indicated they were comfortable with the nature of the research and questions and agreed to proceed with the interview. Before recording anything, I gave each participant an information letter and had him or her sign the consent form, stressing that anything they said would be kept confidential.

Chapter 4

Results and Discussion of Themes

In this chapter, I present and discuss the themes that emerged from the interviews. A brief introduction to the four participants is included here followed by the voices of the participants. Since researchers are guided by world views (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), it would be remiss to not include in this section my personal story that shows the lens through which I see the world and how this lens influenced my approach to the research and subsequent analysis of data.

4.0 Researcher's Story

When I began my master's program, I believed researchers needed to maintain impartiality throughout the research process keeping their worldview or perspective out of the equation. However, I learned that researchers view of the world, the lens through which they see the world, does play a part in the research when it is used to contribute to finding valuable, relevant information about that which is being studied (Polit & Beck, 2004).

Human nature does not allow for the suspension of one's beliefs, or more accurately, the suspension of the effect one's beliefs have on one's thoughts and actions. Patton (2002) states there can be no interpretation free of the researcher's viewpoint and that the "researcher's own perspective must also be made explicit, as must any other tradition or perspective brought to bear when interpreting meanings" (p. 129).

My own view of the world has everything to do with my research. I believe in a society where social justice for all citizens is expected. As an educator, I also believe in the value and necessity of education. Furthermore, a specific belief I hold is thinking that

educational institutions are responsible for implementing that which is needed for students to be successful regardless of the size of the population in question. My desire to draw attention to the experiences of Aboriginal women at university is due to my desire for social justice between genders, cultures, and socio-economic levels. A social justice perspective looks at "those with less power and privilege in order to 'give voice' to the disenfranchised, the underprivileged, the poor, and others outside the mainstream" (Weiss & Greene, 1992, p. 145 as cited in Patton, 2002, p. 98). Seeing the lack of social justice in this small population at one small institution is the driving force behind this research.

4.1 Introduction to Participants

This research involved interviewing four Aboriginal women who are all full-time students at the University of Prince Edward Island. All four are studying for professional degrees; two are at the post-graduate level, and two are at the undergraduate level. Names used here are pseudonyms in an attempt to maintain privacy which two of the four participants requested; two participants were not concerned with privacy and did not ask me to avoid any identifying markers.

Brenda is a young First Nations woman from PEI. She is the mother of two pre-school aged children and is completing an undergraduate degree. Tina is also completing an undergraduate degree. She comes from the same First Nations community as Brenda and is the mother of two young children, one of whom has a degenerative disease that will dramatically reduce her life expectancy. Marie's experiences are unique from the others in that she is older; she came to UPEI as a mature student having already completed a program at Holland College and working for many years. She has also been

at UPEI longer than the other participants and is now completing her first graduate degree. She is in her thirties and is the mother of one adult and two high school aged children. These three women have children, and at the time of the interviews, none had a full-time live-in partner to share in the parenting, although the children's fathers are active in varying degrees with their children. The fourth participant, Kristie, is completing a PhD degree. She is in her mid-twenties, a single, Inuit-Métis women from Newfoundland and Labrador.

I met with Brenda and Tina for over an hour each on two different occasions. Both agreed on holding the interview at the university. Brenda and Tina asked to be interviewed together. However, this scheduled meeting did not go as planned due to Brenda's work demands, so I met with Tina alone in one of the campus lounges. While not effusive, Tina was forthcoming with answers and offered information willingly. I rearranged another time for an interview with Brenda and met her later. Brenda's interview was more personal, in that she shared more details related to the challenges she faced in her life. This proved to be an emotionally difficult experience for her, and for me, as her story moved me to tears. We cried together which I initially found disconcerting, thinking I was showing a lack of professionalism. However, in retrospect, I think this was positive. Sharing tears created an understanding between us and showed Brenda I cared enough to feel for her. I was able to meet and interview Marie at her home. Kristie arranged for an interview at the university in a public yet quiet setting.

Several themes emerged from the data common to all four women. These themes include: academic role models and advocates, financial challenges, reserve life, family, discrimination, and intrinsic motivators. While I have presented the themes separately on

paper, in reality, they are not at all mutually exclusive. Additionally, many of these experiences, expressed in themes, were both negative and positive experiences. For example, family acts as both motivator and challenge to these women, depending on the circumstance. The fact that the experiences labeled with a theme can act as both a positive and a negative experience created a challenge for me in presenting the data. I concluded there was a common theme arching over most of the other themes. All participants desired someone to show an interest or care for them on a personal level. This desire was evident in their descriptions of most of the experiences shared by these women. This theme of caring encompasses most of the other themes as an umbrella encompasses that which is underneath it. Where caring was shown, these women were able to use the negative experience to create something positive. The two themes that acted only as barriers were the stresses caused from reserve life and financial challenges.

In my attempt to be reflexive and at the same time give voice to the experiences of these women, I have consciously attempted to share as much "rich description, thoughtful sequencing, appropriate use of quotes, and contextual clarity" (Patton, 2002, p. 65) as possible. It should be noted that during the period of this research, there were changes at UPEI concerning Aboriginal specific supports offered. For example, grant monies were secured to fund the Mawi'omi Aboriginal Student Centre and a full-time co-ordinator position for this centre. Although this grant funding is no longer available, the university has agreed to fund a half time Aboriginal support person in order to keep Mawi'omi operational.

In the following sections, I interweave my analysis with the participants' words.

4.2 Presentation of Themes

4.2.1 Caring: An Overarching Theme

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, an overarching theme emerged from the data. Timmons (2009) describes a similar theme as being "enablers to success" by providing "sources of assistance" (p. 22). These sources provided caring in the form of mentors and safe places that offered educational and emotional support. Battiste (2002) and Abele (2004) use the term respect, asserting when Aboriginal students are shown respect the result is positive self-identity that translates into academic success. Cummins (2001) refers to motivating teachers and identity negotiation. I describe this theme as one of caring. All the participants desired someone to show an interest or care for them on a personal level. When they experienced personal interest and caring, they reacted positively, demonstrating an increase in self-confidence and academic success. Therefore, I would argue, caring is a desired, if not necessary, component of a successful, completed education.

4.2.2 Aboriginal Academic Role Models

Tina grew up in an environment where schooling was not a priority for many of her peers. There were few successful graduates of high school let alone post secondary studies. Tina felt this lack of Aboriginal academic role models cultivated low expectations for higher learning within herself. These low expectations in turn created or further supported feelings of exclusion from higher learning and thinking that advancement at school was not possible.

Because whenever I was in high school, I didn't think that I could finish high

school.... I was a young mom...and everyone dropped out of school, you know,

so it was hard to graduate... I never even thought about going to university.... because in high school, nobody really graduates. Just a couple people graduate, and then I didn't know [anyone] going to university...if there was a lot of people...who went to university, then I probably wouldn't [have] been as intimidated and scared. But since it's still uncommon, then it was really scary.... when I was younger, it was not like, "Oh, I want to be like that person. I am going to go to university." .... You just do not see it. It is not common. You do not think it is something that you can do yourself. And that was my biggest problem. If I apply, I will just get rejected. So why even try?

Certainly, the lack of Aboriginal academic role models indicates that education in general and a post secondary education in particular may not be an expectation for Aboriginal people. This lack of expectations or low expectations stated by participants in this research is consistent with findings in the literature (Anderson, 2008; Chacaby et al., 2008; Malatest & Associates Ltd.,, 2004).

Tina would value an Aboriginal academic role model in her university setting as an example of what she, too, is capable of doing. Whether it is an Aboriginal professor(s) or a student(s) ahead of her, their presence would demonstrate that university is a real possibility. Tina could look to them and say, "Oh, I want to be like that person. I am going to go to university." For Marie, the value in a role model is not so much to be an example showing her that she belongs or is entitled to attend university. Rather, Marie would value the role model's ability to offer support and understanding through the struggles that occur and are unique to a minority in a dominant setting.

Marie sees herself as a role model for her children both educationally and personally. As such, she has chosen to play an active role in an Aboriginal organization. Being a role model for her children and those native youth involved in the community is a priority for her.

> I am Board of Director for [name of organization]. Every Thursday they have a youth drum night. I am down there supervising on that. Any time they have an Elder-Youth weekend, I am gone during the summer. I am actively involved with the [organization]. In addition, for me, it is important to stay linked because I need to be that positive role model for the youth. I can be me. I can be struggling and I can be, you know, whatever I am used to being, and they understand that. They understand the struggle.

Marie carries over into the university setting her desire to act as a role model for the younger, Aboriginal students. While she recognizes the necessity of being a role model and is happy to help other, younger Aboriginal students in this way, she also feels a void from not having a role model at the university to whom she can turn.

> I would also like to see...more mature students [at UPEI]. I love the ones that are there, like the younger ones. But, again, the young moms.... My baby is 16. I am not a young mother. I have been doing this for quite a number of years. Um, I know [prof] says "Be a role model." But role models need support themselves, too. So, it would have been nice to have other mature students, Aboriginal students with kids.

Marie's belief that role models need support echoes what Smith-Mohamed (1997) found in students in post-secondary institutions. Participants from Smith-Mohamed's

research considered role models as being integral to providing academic, emotional, and motivational support. While Marie's age and experiences make her a role model for others, she too needs the support that could be provided from those who have gone before her - Aboriginal mothers of similar age with children closer in age to her own. Marie's need for this is also consistent with Anderson's (2008) findings that assert the imperative need for mentoring type programs to be available for Aboriginal students at post secondary institutions to facilitate success.

Marie's time spent in Aboriginal organizations speaks to her pride in her heritage and desire for her children and other Aboriginal youth to identify positively with their culture and roots. Cummins (2001) has shown this type of positive identification has positive effects on school success, where students identifying with positive role models from their minority heritage tend to do better with their studies than those minority people who have less positive identifications.

Furthermore, in education, the research clearly indicates that expectation shapes the way learners respond, and where there is a lack of expectation, there is often a negative impact on learning (Anderson, 2008, Chacaby et al., 2008, Cummins, 2001, Kirkness & Barnhardt, 2001). Having no role models in an educational setting for an Aboriginal person to emulate creates the perception that furthering one's education is neither applicable nor accessible (Malatest & Associates Ltd.,, 2004; Mihesuah, 2004); therefore, expectations tend to be low.

Tina's statement about the detrimental effects of having few role models to emulate illustrates her low expectations concerning schooling, a type of thinking which too many disenfranchised women internalize. It involves the internalization of the

attitudes that are present in both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal society. It is what Tina accurately describes as a "continuing cycle."

> In [name of reserve] there are a lot of young moms, and they all dropped out of school. We all kind of stayed home and worked instead, and it was a very common thing. [Even] before I had my daughter, I dropped out. Then I went back and it just was a continuing cycle, like continuously: drop out, go back, drop out, go back. When I did get pregnant and stuff, it was like, I just gave up. Everyone else was young...had a child and they stopped going to school. They stayed home on reserve. It was just a common thing. You get pregnant, and you stay home, you know? And then eventually [I] stuck it out and graduated.

Brenda also shared her doubts and low expectations when first attempting to go to university. When speaking with her high school guidance counselors about the possibility of going to university for the program of her choice, she was not encouraged to do so. "They didn't make me feel like I was [program name] school material." She internalized this sentiment, and as a result, her first two years were in general arts as opposed to what she really wanted to take. It did not occur to her to challenge the counselor's suggestions. The fact that Brenda and Tina are currently in university and in their chosen programs despite their past experiences indicates that they have risen above the low expectations they had for themselves to attempt something they previously thought was inaccessible for them.

One reason for Brenda's success at UPEI was finding a role model, an Aboriginal graduate student who was not present before attending university. The co-ordinator of the newly formed Mawi'omi Aboriginal Student Centre at UPEI is a graduate student role

model for Brenda. Brenda saw a successful Aboriginal student who was capable of navigating her way around the university world without any affiliation with a particular band. It was extremely empowering for Brenda to have a relationship with this co-ordinator/graduate student who offered mentoring and practical advice with many aspects of university life, from reviewing Brenda's assignments to supporting her developing self-confidence and providing an extremely successful role model of what is possible for any disadvantaged Aboriginal woman to achieve.

> I really look up to her because she's definitely a mentor, and she's somebody that should stay here cause I'm really impressed with how she paid for her education and gets around town with no car, and can pay for her living and to eat and dress herself and you know, have no assistance from no, like not affiliated with any band.

As previously stated, identification with positive role models can break this negative cycle of low expectations by providing examples of success. For an Aboriginal student, being a disenfranchised minority makes the university setting that much more difficult. However, as Cummins (2001) found, a strong, positive identification with one's heritage, even in the face of the dominant society's devaluation, can produce success in school, by countering the negative effects low expectations have on school success.

4.2.3 Advocates

The literature shows how valuable advocates can be especially to those from a marginalized group in a majority setting (Anderson, 2008; Cappon, 2007; Cummins, 2001; Farrimond & Doyle-Bedwell, 2005; NWT Dept of Education, 1998; Seidman, 2005; Timmons et al., 2009). The value comes in the offer of care and concern. This is

true even if the advocate is from a different heritage or cultural background. The positive results from the actions of those who advocated for Brenda and Tina support what the literature has found concerning care shown by an advocate.

An example of one such positive result derived from Tina's experience at the alternative school and came from the actions of the staff that advocated for her. This experience was among the first support that Tina felt in her academic life, helping her to complete her high school, despite the many interruptions.

There was a teacher, and he taught various courses. And then there was just, um a youth worker girl, and she really, she was the best. And if it wasn't for them, then I probably wouldn't have graduated. She was everything. If I didn't go to school, she would bring my stuff home. Or if I had any issue while at school, she would address it, and like, you know, she was the best.

Ideally, these encounters with people who are prepared to step forward and act as advocates and helpers for students would occur on a regular basis in every school. This is important for all students but especially for those at-risk of quitting. Having a teacher or counselor make a connection with or show a personal interest in a student sometimes provides enough encouragement for that student to continue with her schooling (Cummins, 2001). The positive influence these advocates had on Tina contributed to her pursuing a post-secondary education and would benefit all Aboriginal students.

In Brenda's second year at UPEI, she met a professor who related to her in a very different way from most of her professors who, Brenda believed, thought she would fail. This professor provided compassionate advocacy, offering encouragement and guidance to Brenda on a more personal level.

She just kind of took me under her wing, and like, you know, takes time out of her busy day to talk with me about my problems and try to help me cope with things. And so that helped, learning how to cope with things was a big thing because, like, I didn't know how to cope...

Another professor provided invaluable practical support in securing grant money to help finance Aboriginal student positions, one of which paid Brenda's salary. This and other term positions on different research projects offered much needed income to Brenda as well as important experience. A significant consequence from this experience is gained confidence. An important additional benefit is an improvement in Brenda's grades. "[She] hire[d] us on to research projects and give that experience of working, you know, gave me the confidence, so that, this year my grades have gone up quite a bit. I feel like somebody believes in me."

The support from these two women was invaluable to Brenda's state of mind during different crisis-situations and when facing the daily grind of academia. All helped Brenda increase her confidence and self-esteem as a student and woman. The support from these people both encouraged and challenged Brenda. She was encouraged to believe in herself, despite the many years of facing discrimination and low expectations. They also challenged Brenda to achieve higher grades and to gain new work-related experiences through job opportunities. Having someone in the university setting care for her on an academic and personal level meant a world of difference to Brenda.

I don't give myself enough credit for what I do, and so they'd always encourage me or, you know, make me feel like I'm doing something good or that I'm smart. You know, just kind of believing in me. Having all of those professors on

campus...who are competent and strong and they're empathetic and they're compassionate, and they'll cry with you and you know, but yet they challenge you. Like if you don't make - they inspire you. I've done a lot better this year due to...having them believe in me. That made a big difference for me in my life.

4.2.4 Breaking the Negative Cycle

Low expectations often result from feeling ill prepared for university (Chacaby et al., 2008; Malatest & Associates Ltd.,, 2004; McMullen, 2005). Breaking the cycle of having low expectations in oneself is crucial to success as shown in Tina and Brenda's above mentioned shared stories. I would argue this is directly due to the positive effects resulting from having advocates. Those who advocated for Tina at the alternative school showed care for her that she claims helped her successfully complete high school. Brenda had advocates at the university who demonstrated concern and care for her welfare. The resulting success in her academic endeavors also broke the negative effects of low expectations. The increase in confidence that these two factors brought about shows a cycle of positive interconnected behaviours. The very fact that two of the participants refused to allow me to use their data when it was initially presented to them in a way that discomforted them is evidence of an increased level of confidence in them. The submission for ethics approval and the consent form state that participants have the right to withdraw at any time from the research process without any negative repercussions; however, it still takes strength to act on this permission. I see this step as a perfect example of breaking the cycle. They demonstrated courage to take the steps within their control that would force a change they could live with.

The example below from the Kristie's life shows how she is helping to break the negative cycle for others who will come after her. In being the first in her family to get a post secondary education, Kristie recognizes how role models can affect behaviours, and how important it is to have a role model to help break a negative cycle of behaviour. She wants Aboriginal university students to share their post-secondary experiences with Aboriginal youth to act as liaisons to help break the cycle of low expectations.

> The Aboriginal students that are on campus, because that's the thing too, there's no point in just thinking we can start off in university. Kids need to know from a younger age, when they're still [young], when you can still influence them a little better but when you get to high school it's a lot harder to influence them cause they've already kind of got into that mind frame. You need to get to those kids when they're at that 10-12 ages so that you can really say listen, like you don't have to go down that road. Just because your parents did, your grandparents—sure everybody in my family—I'm the first person to graduate high school so, and now I'm getting close to finishing my masters so I mean it can be done right, I mean people can break those cycles so all of the people who are in university right now should be able to get together and go to the schools. Do a presentation, talk about their life, talk about how they've experienced poverty or alcoholism or abuse or whatever the case might be, not everybody, not every Aboriginal person has experienced that, many have, but yet many are able to break free of that cycle or to change it and then start a new cycle so I think its important to teach people how to do that.

Kristie's continued drive to further her education is not only based on a concern for her own well being but also for the community she represents and the larger Aboriginal community. She recognizes the need to teach others that higher education and the ramifications resulting from it are indeed within the grasp of Aboriginal people despite the history of assimilation, discrimination, and racism that has had a profoundly negative effect on the prosperity of Aboriginal peoples. Kristie's desire to help her broader community is consistent with findings from participants in Timmons (2009) larger research. Some participants from that study also expressed the wish to get an education in order to provide a needed service in their community.

In terms of what the university can do to alleviate some of the barriers affecting minority student populations, these are powerful findings. While having Aboriginal professors on campus would provide successful role models, the reality of the small number of Aboriginal professors in Canada makes this difficult. However, as Marie's experience attests and research supports (Abele, 2004; Battiste, 2002; Cummins, 2001; Timmons et al., 2009), in the absence of an academic Aboriginal role model, mentors would also provide the support needed. These mentor role models could be other Aboriginal students or liaisons from the community and would provide support that would counter the barrier to retention that low expectations have on many Aboriginal students.

4.2.5 Financial Challenges

Common to the experiences of many university students, money is an issue for the participants in this study and a definite cause of stress. Marie points out that financial worries divert focus from her studies.

So even though you are covered by the band, it's not a lot to carry you over for the

month. You [have] extra expenses. And I think especially when you are doing

your thesis, because I am going to be working through the summer on my thesis, it

would be nice if there was funding there could help me just stay focused on it.

Sufficient funding would directly help Marie's school experience allowing her to

concentrate more fully on her studies and decreasing some worries caused by day to day

financial challenges experienced by mothers at school, such as clothing growing children:

It's that extra money that you got [have] to dig into that you don't have. You

know I need to buy new sneakers [for my son who grew] two sizes. I got him a

brand new pair at the beginning of September. I think it was like after Christmas

break he said, "Mom, you know there's a hole in my shoe. Can we go get another

pair?"

Brenda experiences similar challenges. In spite of a recently acquired bursary,

finances continue to act as a barrier and cause of stress in Brenda's university experience.

Her First Nation band provides funding; however there are time limits and academic

restrictions. In addition, the actual dollar value is low when trying to raise two children

and drive to UPEI each day. While these restrictions are understandable, unexpected life

events sometimes play a role in affecting the successful and timely completion of

courses. Brenda's life outside of school has had some negative effects on the completion

of her course work. Her comments below clearly demonstrate how every aspect of her

life is interconnected. Life affects school. Stress affects successful completion of school.

Last year, the first semester...[I] had some difficulties, and so had to work those

difficulties out. And it had taken a big toll on my grades. My prerequisite

grades were a little okay, but my electives, I let them go, so they were a fail, and

because if you fail two courses, then the next following semester, you're on

probation. So the next semester I was on probation. I hadn't known I was

pregnant, and by the time I had found out, the baby had stopped growing, so

then around the middle of my semester we had to take care of the issue. So I

was admitted to the hospital and we took care of the issue, but it took a long time

to get back up.... I ended up having to split my third year up, but because of

that, I was warned if I do not do exemplary in this semester and the next

semester my funding could be cut off. So that's a real issue for me.

Financial stress also brings daily pressures in Tina's life from juggling gas and

lunch money to funds for school and the out-of pocket expenses accrued from her child's

health situation.

And, of course, financial. Cause I live on the reserve, and the reserve is like 20

minutes in the country, and it's hard travelling. Like it's not far, but back and forth

every day and taking care of like childcare and everything else.... Because money

is tight, and you have to use your money to spend gas, and then you get here, and

you have to stay here all day, and you can't go for lunch or something.

A common misconception among Canadian society is that Aboriginal people have

everything paid for them including a post secondary education. This is clearly not the

case, at least in the lives of three of the women interviewed, nor has it been found in the

literature (Chacaby et al., 2008; Malatest & Associates Ltd.,, 2008; Paul, 2007; RCAP,

1996; Ryan, 1995; Timmons et al., 2009). While the federal government gives bands

money for college and university, the government capped the dollar value at 1989 rates

(personal communication, John-Jerome Paul, November 9, 2007). Since the actual dollar value is low when considering the needs of a family, stretching the money and choosing between needs is a daily necessity. The lack of money regularly forces participants to make choices about where they will spend their money. The woman with no children did not mention finances as a burden in her life, but she did acknowledge that it is a real and frequent stress for many other Aboriginal students. Relief from financial pressures would allow these women to focus more fully on their studies.

As I stated at the beginning of this section, financial challenges are not unique to the Aboriginal university population. What is more common to this particular study group is that Aboriginal women at university are most often mothers as were three of the four in this study. Furthermore, these familial responsibilities coupled with economic factors like childcare, transportation, housing, food, and other family expenses often prevent the completion of studies (Abele, 2004; Health Canada, 2000; Malatest & Associates Ltd.,, 2004; Statistics Canada, 2007). While both the provincial and federal governments provide

student loans, the dollar amounts are determined on income, and if a student receives income from another source, for example, Indian and Northern Affairs, she may not be eligible for more (http://www.gov.pe.ca/ial/index.php3?number=1000707&lang=E). However, with funding capped at 1989 rates (personal communication, John-Jerome Paul, November 7, 2007) the dollar value may be too little to provide adequate daily living support but too much to allow further governmental loans.

Part of the issue around attaining sufficient funding may have to do with an awareness of the different options that are available. Research conducted by Timmons

(2009) also found a lack awareness of available resources to be a barrier to retention and completion of studies. Based on some comments from my participants around funding, I surmise that many Aboriginal students are not aware of the options. Even within the participants in my study, there are differences around their financial situations. There may be various reasons why Kristie's financial situation is easier than the other three women's situations. For instance, Kristie has no dependents. Nor did she have the option of attaining monies from affiliation with a band; therefore, she needed to look elsewhere for funding. As a result, and because of her academic success, she has attained funding from scholarships throughout her academic career. Alternatively, Brenda, Marie, and Tina have children and funding through their bands. This funding may have affected their looking elsewhere for more or different funding. However, I did not ask any of the participants specifically about their knowledge of student loans. This could be a possible future research question.

4.2.6 Reserve Life

Life on the reserve is often fraught with unique stresses that directly influence participants' academic lives. Stories shared in this research describe drinking and fighting that occurs regularly on the days the welfare cheques arrive. These episodes entail police intervention, disturbed sleep, and added worries if siblings or other loved ones are involved. The added issue is the embarrassment and humiliation felt by participants simply because of where they live. The surrounding environment of living on the reserve provides stress that is worrisome and exhausting and has a direct impact on Brenda's schooling and daily life.

I don't know if people understand, like, stuff happens, every welfare day, they're

out drinking and the cops are out there and that's hard cause you're sleeping and

you, you hear the cops coming and you're like oh gosh you know, who, who's

fighting now? I hope my little brother or my little sister aren't involved. It can

be really stressful.

Similar reserve experiences, while of less significance than having a child with a

chronic illness, are nevertheless stress inducing and spill over into Tina's day to day life,

the effects of which she is hesitant to explain to her supervisors.

Sometimes in [name of reserve] it's not really, really, rough there, but it's not like

the nicest place either. And some days are worse than others. Like I had a clinical

at the hospital one morning, and I had to be there at 7:00 am, be on the floor at

7:00 so should be there at 6:45-6:50. So I had to get up to get ready and shower

and stuff by like 5 something. And then there was, um a lot of alcoholics and stuff

on reserve. So there was a young guy who got beat up in my front yard who just

was walking by and stopped and got in a fight and like, you know.... So that was

going on until like 1 [am] something. And then like, you know, having - that's not

something that I would like go and tell my instructor like, "Oh, I'm tired because

of this." It's kind of embarrassing. So things like that happen all the time. But it

isn't something that I would openly tell somebody, "I may be a little off today

because..." you know?

One participant expressed feeling embarrassed by the above-mentioned situation.

She felt embarrassed going to school late after this occurred even knowing no one in her

class would know what had taken place. She admitted still feeling embarrassed sharing

the incident with me even though it was long past. She shared her tendency to remain silent, resistant to explain this situation to a professor knowing that divulging this information would help explain why she was too tired or overwrought to be effective in class the next day but would also reveal truths that perpetuate stereotypes about life in First Nations communities. This embarrassment was from a fear of exposing herself to potential negative judgment and to possible discrimination and stereotyping. Brenda and Tina, who expressed feelings of not belonging, of being discriminated against, and of having low expectations of them, found sharing this negative aspect of their collective identities to be uncomfortable and disquieting.

These shared stories exemplify the constant and wearing stress that grinds these women down. Research acknowledges many Aboriginal people are exposed to stress that directly affects their mental and physical health (Iwasaki, Bartlett, & O'Neil, 2005). This stress is not only due to "immediate life circumstances but also to their historical, cultural, and political contexts" (p. 977). The chronic stress causes more health problems, and more financial worries. Larson et al. (2007) found those who experience negative racially based treatment that evoked an emotional or physical response were more likely to have poor health. Brenda and Tina's stress resulted from not wanting others to judge. As this and similar incidents are common, this is a stress that they feel routinely.

4.2.7 Family Responsibilities

As women, all the participants face gender prejudices, biases, and stereotyping. For instance, responsibility for children still falls primarily on these mothers regardless of their busy schedules. The daily tasks of completing housework, shopping, cooking,

helping children with homework, and transporting children to school, childcare, doctor visits and extra curricular activities keep mothers busy. Moreover, mothers are the ones who carry the majority of these responsibilities and the extra burden this involves. And in the Aboriginal community, women are more than twice as likely as non-Aboriginal women to be single parents (Statistics Canada, 2007). This is true in the cases of the three participants in this research who are single mothers. Their stories coupled with similar findings from other research, show how family responsibilities directly affect completion of studies (Abele, 2004; Health Canada, 2000; Statistics Canada, 2005a, 2007). In Tina's case, her child's chronic and debilitating health condition compounds the stress associated with childcare and household responsibilities that has made everyday circumstances such as day care and schooling problematic.

> When my child was young, they thought it best to not go in any type of child care service because of the risk of getting sick from being around other kids. From the beginning, I was back and forth between my mom and my baby's dad. When [doctors] thought it would be okay to attend day care, we did that for a bit. And then it wouldn't last because if a kid gets sick or if my child gets sick, we have to pull out of day care for while. And, so it's kind of always like, not up in the air, but it's not always set in stone thing.

This reality certainly causes stress as childcare is complex given the delicate health circumstances. In addition, there is the stress involved in the periodic need for hospitalization. "And then sometimes, when sick and in the hospital, then it would start to be like, okay, wait in the hospital, come here [UPEI] for school, and then go back."

Underlying Tina's whole life is the knowledge of what her child's chronic health condition means for their shared future.

Similarly, for Brenda, most family responsibilities fall on her. She shared an example of this when she had to bring her children to a meeting at the university because there was no else available to watch them. She worried about whether having the children with her in the meeting was appropriate or not. Her choice was either bring them or miss the meeting. Both options caused her stress, and while she chose to attend with her children, she admitted that she fretted about that decision long after the meeting was over, wondering if others in attendance had been offended.

When deciding which school to attend, Brenda visited another Atlantic university. She liked seeing the supports available there for mothers with children. This university permitted and encouraged children be brought to the lounge where they were watched by other mothers while the children's own mothers went to class.

> A lot of women had brought their kids to the lounge and they would have somebody, umm, like sit there and watch their kids, like uh oh I have to go to class. Do you mind watching him for like an hour or something. It was kinda interesting how that, how like, they, they managed to do that. Yeah it was pretty cool how they did that.

If this option were available at UPEI, the reduction in stress would be significant and cannot be overemphasized. Being able to bring her children to the university, would eliminate the back and forth driving between day care and campus, freeing up money spent on gas and making it available for other expenditures. Timmons (2009) found that increased awareness and use of student supports were directly correlated to the amount of

resources each institution directed toward Aboriginal students, and the use of said supports aided in the educational experience.

Marie shared similar experiences, but she also has the unique stress of helping her siblings through their academic journeys. Marie has three siblings who attended university and relied heavily on her help for their own successes. While emotional support came with this shared sibling experience, Marie also felt stress from helping, which negatively affected her own grades.

> Going through with my [siblings] was tough. Because, and they do say it, if it wasn't for me, they wouldn't have gotten through. The stress I felt was always put on me. I still feel that now. It has always been put on me to help someone else.

In regards to her children, family duties rest primarily with her and not her children's fathers. This was the case when the children were young and continues today when they are in their teens and older.

> Because, as I said, raising a family at that time for me, my husband and I weren't steady, weren't really [together all the time and] we were stressed. It was a stressful relationship. My middle son has Tourette's Syndrome and has OCD, and he has ADHD. [My other son] had ADHD as well. So at that time, you know, I had kids that were probably around, ah, six or eight – they are about a year and a half apart, almost two years. So I mean, you know, they're hyper. There is a lot of issues, a lot of doctor's appointments, school appointments and the stress...And then going to university as well was very difficult.... Especially if you are a single parent. There are times when your kids get sick, and in [middle child's] case was constant calling, "Come pick him up, he is having another rage." You know,

"Come take him out." And they think you can do everything at the drop of a hat. You're on call 24/7. So you know, when the down periods were down, they were down! They were really difficult, really stressful.

Marie is the primary caregiver in her family, with the children living full time in her home. While her ex-husband helps, he chooses to which duties he will tend.

If I go somewhere, my ex-husband will look after the house. When he gets back, I'll look after his house. It's easier to take them out into the country. Still I have to make sure the meals are cooked ahead of time for the kids. I have to make sure that someone – because he doesn't drive – that someone drives them into town where they need to be. The other day he's like, "Oh by the way, you have a parent teacher dah, dah, dah..." "Well what's wrong with you?" "No I don't do that stuff." Oh! Must be nice! To decide when you are going to parent.

Marie's big concern is to not have her children pay for the decision to continue her education. By pay, she means suffer the loss of her availability to them or of their options to take part in their community and extra curricular activities because her studies take up so much time. It takes time to transport her children back and forth to each extra curricular activity in which her children participate. In addition, Marie also volunteers with some of these activities which is a further time commitment.

So my biggest challenge is to be something to everyone, giving part of me to everything. That's the biggest challenge – your work, your family, your community, your volunteering. It's hard. Because everyone wants a piece of you....You don't want your children to pay. That's the most difficult – continuing to be a mom.... The rule in my house, with me and my kids, is when they are home,

my study goes down. My computer shuts down, and my papers shut down. I am their mom. When they are off doing their thing, I get a crack – I always have my thing ready for reading.... At some point, you got to make time for you, for your work....As I said, my life is so hectic with my kids, that I do things all day and stay awake all night. I go to 2, 3, 4 in the morning and then am up getting my kids ready for school.

While the above stories can be interpreted as being examples of hindrances or challenges, family is also a huge positive, motivating factor in these women's lives. For example, after the birth of Tina's child, there was a distinct change in her thinking regarding school.

When I was in high school, I didn't think that I could finish. It was never something I always dreamed about. After I had my child, I was like "I, I think I want to try. I don't want to be that person [high school drop out after having child]. I want to get an education. I want to finish school. I want to do something.

Due to the illness of Tina's child, both spent extended periods in hospital. As a result, Tina and the nurses became familiar with each other. Unfortunately, many of the nurses discriminated against Tina, letting her know she was "going to end up like everyone else. You're going to be nothing and just be on the reserve." Fortunately, as sometimes happens, Tina's negative hospital experience proved to have a positive effect on her life. Coupled with wanting a better life for her child, Tina shows her capacity for resilience by using these negative experiences at the hospital and turning them into

motivators and the driving force for her determination to finish school and to seriously consider a post-secondary pursuit.

> And then some [nurses] were great. They were, even though I was young and Aboriginal, they were not, they did not look down on me. They didn't like, I mean, they didn't like, they helped me, and they inspired me to be non-judgmental and help other people in similar ways. So then I thought, "Okay, I, I ought to be a nurse, too!" Because I remember two nurses specifically, and they were great! They were okay that I was young and didn't plan on going back to school and stuff. Spending so much time there you talk to each other and stuff because my baby was in special care nursery with one nurse, and the nurse only had one baby kind of thing. So she [nurse] always spent a lot of time right there. And she just really helped me a lot and was very non-judgmental and great. So when I came back here, because the hospital was off-Island, and I came back home, I decided to go back to school and finish and apply to university and things. I just did not want to end up how people – like the people who are judgmental – I did not want to end up like how they thought I was going to end up. I wanted to prove, prove them wrong. So then I just kind of set a goal, and then I just went for it. It took a long time, and it was really hard, but I did it.

Marie's children also have provided the motivating drive for her to continue the struggle with a post secondary pursuit. She credits them with providing incentive to complete not only an undergraduate, but also a graduate degree.

> I was lucky that [child] was like that saviour for me. I could focus my attention on him now. It wasn't about me anymore.... Now I've got to make a better life for

him. I've got to do this for him because I was not strong enough to do it for myself. So I have to do it for him. So my motivation is my kids.... My kids kept me in it.

Brenda also stated that wanting a better life for her children was a reason for going against the norm in her community and striving for higher education. For the three mothers interviewed, their children helped them to look at the expected path their lives were going to take and decide that that path was not what they wanted. Their children were the reasons why they were attending university. As Marie said, it was not only about her anymore. The responsibility of being a parent provided the impetus to encourage these women to break the negativity of low expectations and choose something different, wanting to provide something better for their families. Timmons (2009) found similar results.

4.2.8 Discrimination

Discrimination is certainly a significant barrier to higher learning (Abele, 2004; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 2001; Timmons et al., 2009) largely due to the resultant feelings of alienation and isolation. Many Aboriginal people feel the university setting devalues their culture and traditions by making them invisible (Malatest & Associates Ltd., 2004). All four participants experienced discrimination both in the university setting and in the community. A campus meeting that Tina attended revealed some of the issues Aboriginal students at UPEI have to face.

When we [Tina and friend] first heard about um, whatever Aboriginal – whatever it was called, we went to one of their meetings and it was just two people. They were like, "We tried to get people to know about us using flyers and stuff." We

saw them [flyers] ripped off the walls on the ground all like stomped on, you know.' They just did not know how to get people. You cannot go to, like, you do not identify yourself, so you do not know who is really here, if there is a lot, or if there is not.

Kristie started another organization to offer support for Aboriginal students and encountered the same issues.

When we had all of our posters and stuff up for the event that we're having here at UPEI and then we had a movie night and we had a couple other things, we put them up say on a Tuesday, by Wednesday the majority of them were torn down. The ones that were not torn down were written all over, like nasty remarks and…the posters were torn down, swear words written all over them like stuff like that saying that you shouldn't be here anyway, what's the point? So if you come to university and think you're getting away from that, you're getting away from the racism and discrimination cause people don't like those words. They don't like to think that people are still racist or that they discriminate against, but they do, constantly.

In an attempt to offer some support for their Aboriginal students, namely a student lounge, UPEI administration put Aboriginal students and international students together, as if they had the same needs and shared the same identity. Tina discovered this after working up the nerve to ask about the availability of a lounge for Aboriginal students.

Yeah, um, when I first came here, um like, you know, how there is a nursing lounge for nursing students. [I thought] it would be great if there was a lounge like this for Aboriginal students. And then I actually asked about it, and they said

that the International Lounge is considered our lounge. The lounge is for international people. [name of Aboriginal friend] and I got invited to an international dinner. And then we were like, "How come we're considered international? And we're not even … like – we're from here!" That was quite insulting.

Marie shared this insult not understanding why she was included as an international student, with respect to sharing the international lounge, and was asked to sit on an international panel. Not only did she not understand, she was offended by the invitation. "I found that a total insult because I am not an international student. I don't understand. The only logic I could come up with is that they are calling us indigenous, and indigenous is worldwide!"

Brenda and Kristie have similar perceptions. Brenda shared an incident involving her friend who was in a meeting with an administrator. The meeting was an attempt by the two to explain to university administration that Aboriginal students are not international students. The administrator told a staff member to leave as "I'm talking to an international student right now" interrupted the meeting. While this may have been a slip, the effect was insulting and contributed to the feeling that the Aboriginal students are not heard nor respected. The fact that all four women referred in their interviews to the university associating Aboriginal with international students speaks to the effect it has had on all of them.

The administrative decision to provide a space (lounge) and voice (panel participant) for Aboriginal students by putting them with international students may only have been due to very practical reasons such as numbers and lack of space. Perhaps no

discrimination was intended. However, the result, from the point of view of the Aboriginal students involved, was for this group of students to see once again their culture devalued and not recognized, perpetuating historical experiences. These women perceive what they see as evidence of discrimination and racism. This perception reinforces the afore-mentioned self-defeating attitudes they hold for themselves regarding their belonging in the university environment.

When referring to the supports available to international students through Student Services, Kristie points out what she sees as an error by administration in assuming that Aboriginal students would benefit from the same supports available to other students and not need any specific supports.

> Student Services have the international aspect and they do really well with that, but they try to clump the Aboriginal people in with the international students and think that that's sufficient in giving supports, but Aboriginal issues and international issues are not the same. In fact, I think they're often polar opposites of one another, so it's not appropriate to expect Aboriginal people to be comfortable to go get support from international student advisors. They're not there as Aboriginal advisors. They're there as international advisors so they understand how to help people get their visa, they understand how to help all that kind of stuff but they don't know, they're not trained in Aboriginal sensitivity, …people in Student Services should have an understanding. If they're not going to have somebody specifically there for Aboriginal people then all of them should have an understanding, they all go through training for how to counsel students

academically, personally, and all those other things. They should also have an understanding of Aboriginal specific issues that happen.

Based on what these women have shared, it is apparent that they feel they are not important enough to warrant certain separate supports and services consistent with those available to other student populations.

Discrimination creates and furthers feelings of not belonging and isolation, feelings that contribute to insecurity, self-doubt, and other effects as pointed out by Kristie.

> Anyway, yeah, so discrimination is a huge one, people not believing in someone. Everybody wants to be believed in right, and if you've lived a life where you've never been believed in before and you're trying to be successful by coming to university then obviously you believe in yourself at least a little tiny bit to be here to begin with. But it's not going to take very much to take that away.

The sentiments expressed in Kristie's statement speak to the second research question regarding barriers affecting the continuation of a post-secondary education. The very fact that these women are at university shows they have gotten past their self-doubts and low expectations regarding their academic capabilities. However, those doubts hover near the surface, as evidenced in the above final comment from Kristie. Discriminatory experiences, even if not intended, are perceived and add to the daily struggle.

4.2.8.1 Exclusion. The effects of discrimination often include feelings of exclusion and intimidation on the part of those who have felt discrimination (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 2001; Timmons et al., 2009), and therefore, I have included this as a sub theme of discrimination as it was mentioned repeatedly in all the interviews. Throughout

our discussions, Tina describes her state of mind repeatedly as feeling excluded and intimidated in the academic setting. Even before attending UPEI, Tina felt intimidated by the whole educational experience. Her cycle of being in and out of school contributed to feelings of exclusion from and intimidation by mainstream education. An "alternative" school linked with the "regular" high school became the eventual home to most of the Aboriginal students during her high school years. However, one positive to this alternative school was that it provided a sense of home or belonging missing at the other school.

... a lot of the Aboriginal kids and "troubled kids" were in the alternative school. Cause I, high school, it was really – I hated high school. But then the alternative school, even though it was meant for all different types of people, it was like, it felt like, a little home. And after I, um, after I got pregnant, then that is where I went. I wasn't the "troubled child" or anything, but it, it felt more comfortable. Like you know, you felt comfortable, and it wasn't intimidating.

When Tina found herself at university, a place that she always thought was not available for her, it was hard to ignore previous demoralizing experiences and ask for help. "There are no supports for Aboriginal people. Like students in general, I know there are supports for students, but for me, I never went and used any services because I was very intimidated and shy and scared, and I kind of felt out of place." She believes these feelings prevented her from attempting to access some student supports.

If there were a lot of people who went to university [from her community] then I probably wouldn't have been as intimidated and scared. I probably would have accessed as much things as there is here [UPEI]. Like I know there are student

services here for whatever, for like all students, but it is very intimidating to go in there and ask for something.

Kristie echoes this sentiment. Based on her own experiences and those of others who have shared with her, she points out the problem of feeling excluded and how intimidating it can be to a Aboriginal university student often preventing them from seeking help when it was needed.

So, even though, up there at Student Services is a place that Aboriginal people are welcome to go, obviously they're welcome to go anywhere on campus, but they don't feel like they belong. They don't feel like there's actually a place you can go sit on a couch, be comfortable have somebody to talk to, somebody who can direct you for academic counseling...I definitely think what most Aboriginal students that I know, and myself what I would have liked to have seen is something – a, a safe place basically, not just a place that is in-I mean even in Student Services - comments that I've heard other people say it just seems so sterile and so institutional and you go in there and there's always different people in there and they all kinda just look at you like what do you want, and you don't know what you want you kinda, you just, sometimes you just want support, you don't even know, you can't verbalize what it is you want. They don't know what they want help with; they just want to walk in, have other people around who they can relate to.

Kirkness and Barnhardt (2001) argue that non-specific supports for Aboriginal students are not sufficient in aiding in retention. Non-specific supports refer to the supports available to all university students such as financial aid, academic and personal

counseling, student mentoring, and other student supports aimed at making the university experience more enjoyable. These types of supports are ineffective in attempting to increase retention of Aboriginal students because while assisting in the transition to the institutional culture, these supports do not assist in the inclusion of the Aboriginal culture and way of learning. When messages about identity conflict, as is often the case when Aboriginal people attend mainstream educational institutions, the sense of needing to choose between the culture at home and the culture represented in school is ever present (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 2001). In order to aid in retention, Aboriginal students will be better assisted with Aboriginal specific supports (Timmons et al., 2009) that will acknowledge and recognize the uniqueness of their culture, a uniqueness that has been recognized in the RCAP document (1996). Without this recognition, Aboriginal students often feel excluded, conflicted between their culture and the university; a struggle that often acts as a deterrent to attempting and/or completing a post-secondary education. Marie's own research findings from a Mi'kmaq project looking at education for Aboriginal students on PEI showed a drop rate of over 50 per cent. This is a big concern for her and points to a disturbing trend that she has experienced herself.

> It's frustrating when I...when we did the research, I just found it so discouraging
> to find that, you know, so many started and then didn't, didn't, [they] dropped out.
> Because what is that doing to their self-esteem and their [future]? You know, it's
> almost like they don't belong here. They do, they do belong there, but, I mean,
> look, it's just being Aboriginal. You have a different perception on life. You
> view the world different. Even the material, when I read the material and I am
> struggling with my group, when I read the material, I read it from a different

perspective then they do. I work with Aboriginal youth. I see the effects of racism and the songs and the curriculum on Aboriginal Studies, on these youth. I see they don't feel a part of the school system. They are disengaged. Yet, when I try to say it in class, that you know, it's experience, there is a lot of eye rolling.

Kristie recognizes that some services are already available at UPEI but are not being accessed by some of those who need them. Part of the problem lies in perception and how those who do attempt to access the services are received.

Just because it doesn't say Aboriginal students doesn't mean they are not welcome to go there right but the problem is that people don't feel welcome. People have experience going there and not getting what they needed. I've had a couple a people say to me "I've went to them and they've actually called me international student even though I've told them I'm from PEI, I'm from here and this is what I do and they still call me an international student." So people just don't like to be labeled as something that they're not. They perceive it as though people aren't understanding, and that's for anybody for anything. You want to be understood right? That's an issue, that sense of belonging; everybody wants to feel like they fit at least in some way.

For Brenda, feelings of exclusion from her school setting started before she attended UPEI. Brenda's high school experience contributed both positively and negatively to her future educational experiences. Many of her Aboriginal classmates ended up at an alternative school, separate from the local school. Brenda wanted to attend the alternative school with her Aboriginal peers, which would have resulted in a general

level program. She is grateful that the teachers and counselors did not let her leave as she desired.

> You know I was 16, 17 and I was pregnant, and all my friends were down there at the other school, and I was like the only Indian kid sitting at the table by myself at lunchtime. So I kind of, yeah, I kind of wanted to go where everybody else was, but they didn't let me, so I was kind of frustrated because they didn't let me. But I'm glad that they didn't.

By not letting Brenda go to the alternative school, staff at her high school helped her graduate with an academic diploma - the foundation for potential post-secondary studies. However, this same staff did not provide her with the appropriate information needed for applying to university, nor did they encourage or challenge her to even consider it. Brenda regrets the high school faculty did not attempt to challenge her to a post-secondary education,

> ... the guidance counselors, they didn't make me feel like I was university material, and they didn't help me. They didn't even know that. I just think that they should have still showed me what courses I needed to take.

She also regrets not being provided with the appropriate information about university, even the basics of which courses she is eligible to take, "I didn't understand anything about the university and anything about the courses or anything. I just took whatever I could." Aboriginal students from other studies indicate this lack of proper preparation for post-secondary education being an enormous barrier (Chacaby et al., 2008; Malatest & Associates Ltd., 2004).

Even after getting acceptance to UPEI, her lack of understanding about how things worked increased Brenda's feelings of being out of the loop or excluded,

> I had a hard time finding things out and not knowing what I needed to do to get into the academic program of my choice, and then when I got into it, um, it did get a little bit better, but there was not a lot of supports for Aboriginal people. ...I had a hard time, I didn't know what the 101 or 102 could, you know I'd, I'd sign up for things that are 102 thinking, oh this is really cool, and then finding out that you can't and you know and then not understanding why.

These experiences beat one down and diminish self-confidence in one's abilities. Brenda admitted to feeling like "...people are waiting for me to fail." Similarly, it never occurred to her to apply for financial help believing the message already given to her that she was not scholarship material,

> I never thought about applying to a scholarship or bursary because I never thought I was capable of getting one. Like I didn't think I was scholarship material being a, I don't know... it's not that I couldn't do the work, but my grades weren't reflective of my what I could do, so I never thought I could.

Marie's perspective focused on her time at university rather than on her educational experiences before getting here. These, too, exemplify feelings of exclusion.

> Um, knowing there is probably other Aboriginal students, not even knowing, *having* other Aboriginal students in your class would have made a big difference for me. Because being the only one, um it's difficult, because you talk about Aboriginal issues and you get the eye rolling. You try to bring it into the classroom and there are a lot of defences that go up. They put their defences up

and that's from ignorance and lack of knowledge. And you feel like you're

constantly teaching. So instead of getting stuff out of the program, you're giving

to the program and giving and giving and not getting anything back. It would

have been nice to have other Aboriginal students with me to be able to go talk to

and ah, support each other along the way, I think.

Clearly, Marie did not feel like her cultural heritage was an acceptable discussion

topic. The reaction from her classmates is indicative of that struggle to which Kirkness

and Barnhardt (2001) and Cappon (2007) refer and which perpetuates the idea that she

does not fit in or belong.

Marie is actively involved in her Aboriginal community, and though she does not

live on reserve, she receives the support from and belongs to that community. This

support has proved to be invaluable to her as she works through her schooling.

There is a lot of support in my home community....that's probably the biggest

misconception ...that when you live off reserve you don't have supports. The

[name of organization] has been my biggest supporter in the years that I have gone

to university. [Name], which is the current President and Chief, I cried on her

shoulders many time. Many times, being frustrated at being different, knowing

I'm different, knowing that I think different, see the world different, and always

feeling like I don't fit in.

Fortunately, Marie has access to a support that understands what it means to be an

Aboriginal in a non-Aboriginal setting. Unfortunately, this support is outside the

university, and yet one that is helpful and necessary for Marie's emotional health.

Extrapolating from Marie's comments, I can see how helpful a similar Aboriginal

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specific support would be for Aboriginal students to find on campus, one that could counter the negative effects of feeling isolated. For these specific supports to be available on campus necessitates the university administration being involved. Creating supports specific to the identified and articulated needs of Aboriginal students would send a clear message to the Aboriginal students on campus that UPEI respects and values their presence at the university. Such measures would develop an atmosphere of belonging and start to foster a collaborative culture of leaning (Abele, 2004; Battiste, 2005; Chacaby et al., 2008; Cummins, 2001; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 2001; Malatest & Associates Ltd.,, 2004; Timmons et al., 2009; Torres, 2009). As one participant so clearly and simply expressed it, "You want to be understood, right? That's an issue, that sense of belonging; everybody wants to feel like they fit at least in some way." The next chapter discusses more about a collaborative culture of learning.

4.2.9 Intrinsic Motivators

While Marie and Tina credit wanting better lives for their children as motivation for pursuing a post-secondary education, they also exhibit some intrinsic motivators that give them academic success. They may not even recognize the strength and courage of their convictions that helps them tackle their challenges; however, certain statements would indicate there is something within each of them that fights to succeed in spite of the many challenges they face. Marie recognized a spirit of independence early in her life that separated her from her siblings. "I was always the independent one," she said, which could also explain the supportive role she played with her siblings in spite of being the youngest. In addition to this independence, she has always had a powerful desire to learn.

I love to challenge myself; I love the knowledge...I love questioning; I love

finding more things. When I got into Political Science, it was like, "Wow! I can

handle this." Just a thirst for knowledge and always wanting to know more.

Marie's statement echoes findings from Ryan & Deci (2000) who refer to intrinsic

motivators as being an innate tendency to seek out challenges, to push one's capabilities,

and to explore and learn. Kristie, too, demonstrates a determination that has helped her

overcome her schooling challenges. She is the first not only in her family but also in her

entire small community to achieve a post-secondary and graduate education. Something

was driving her to be academically successful, an achievement no one else in her family

or community had accomplished. Furthermore, she succeeded despite the challenges

unique to her living in a tiny, isolated community. Kristie was unprepared for some basic

common occurrences that come with living in a larger city. For example, all the

buildings in Kristie's community are single ground level. An early experience at UPEI

had her asking a staff member where a room labeled 040 was. Not having experience

with buildings on more than one floor, she had no frame of reference to know that it

meant a room in the basement. The reaction from the staff member was as follows:

"It's downstairs!" like, like everybody should know that and I mean I'm a fairly- I

don't give a crap about what anybody else says, so for me it wasn't that big of a

deal, but I can certainly see how other people who are much more quiet and shy

and timid would have been kinda taken back by that 'cause she really did just go

like 'What are you, an idiot...its downstairs.'

As Kristie pointed out, her own reaction to the derision may not be the norm.

Often non-supportive conditions, including demeaning comments, undermine intrinsic

motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000) However, Kristie's refusal to be intimidated by such a reaction is indicative of some intrinsic traits that have helped her along the way. Marie, too, showed a refusal to submit to a perception another had about herself as illustrated in the incident she shared while taking a business course.

> I remember one of the teachers telling me that it was better if I didn't take the Corporate Finance because it was a hard course, and I was struggling with it. I passed it with, I think it was like a 58 or 59, and I remember her telling me at the time that maybe it wasn't the best course for me to take because I am a self-taught learner. Like I had that gap missing, so I would take the book home and learn on my own and try to figure it out. And she said because I am doing that, I am learning the harder way around things. And I didn't pick up the easy way like the rest of the students. And that probably wasn't the best course for me to take. And I took it to spite her. And then when I finished it, I walked out. So I had actually got accepted into Business, what I wanted to get into, struggled to get into. Showed her up and then walked away from it. Because I was like, you know what? If you do not want me, then I don't want you!

Even if there is an interpretation that Marie's behaviour is based on a trait other than intrinsic motivation, I maintain her decision to go against a professor's advice shows resilience and strength. These behaviours demonstrate positive results coming from negative experiences, and these positives came about due to the women involved refusing to be intimidated. Support from Marie's family exemplifies the supportive conditions identified by Lumsden (1994) and Ryan & Deci (2000) as facilitating intrinsic motivation. Tina refused to accept the negative stereotypes that she experienced at the

hands of some of the nurses in the children's hospital; Kristie refused to accept the ridicule directed at her ignorance of the classroom location, and Marie's rejected advice given to her, with an admittedly spiteful defiance, when she perceived it to be discriminatory. All these women had shared past examples of times when they accepted the discrimination or low expectations, and yet they have been able to rise above those past incidents. It is this ability to reject the negative, where it had previously been accepted, that shows, I think, the intrinsic traits that allow them to attempt a post-secondary education; it is why they are now attending university. The mothers interviewed found new strength because of wanting more for their children and recognizing they needed to make changes in themselves. However, not all mothers from any group react in a similar way in taking on a difficult task to improve the lives of their children and themselves. There must be something intrinsically within these three that was awakened with the births of their children. For Kristie, who has no children, her intrinsic motivators seem to stem from an interest in and desire to improve her own life. Wigfield, Eccles, Roeser & Schiefele (2009) and Ryan & Deci (2000) found interest closely tied to intrinsic motivation. In improving her own situation, Kristie hopes to give back to her community. Regardless of what motivated these women, clearly they have an inner capacity to deal with struggles and barriers that get in the way of their choice to graduate from university.

The previous sections looked at the emergent themes, some of which acted as supports, and some of which acted as barriers to completion of a degree. The next section presents support services desired by the participants of this study.

4.3 Supports

I asked each participant if she had a wish list for supports she would like to see in place at UPEI. I do not include any participants' quotes in this section, as they would not add any richness to the information. Furthermore, each participant had almost exactly the same wishes, so I believe a listing is sufficient. First, a resource person was desired to provide help in navigating (1) the funding process with its varied options, and (2) the choosing of courses explaining prerequisites and such. This resource person would not necessarily be Aboriginal but should be understanding and knowledgeable about Aboriginal issues. Ideally, this person would be at the university but act as a liaison with high schools, sharing information needed at the high school level to ensure students are prepared for university. Second, participants wanted the allocation of seats for Aboriginal students to various programs. Two of the participants named another Maritime university that provides this support and wished it were available at UPEI. (Since these interviews were conducted, the School of Nursing allocates two seats to Aboriginal students.) Third, participants requested an Aboriginal student lounge. This lounge would not only be to provide practical support such as a computer, photocopier, fridge, and coffee maker, but also to provide a space that would attract other Aboriginal students allowing for community within the Aboriginal student population. Lastly, three of the participants mentioned the desire for an emergency fund be made available in the event of unforeseen expenses. UPEI does provide emergency funding, but the participants may not have been aware of this support. The next section revisits the overarching theme of caring.

4.4 Identity

I did ask the participants what motivated them to pursue a post-secondary education. The subtext of many of the responses indicated that a desire to improve their social identity and thereby improve their self-concept was at play in their motivation even though it was not named specifically as such. Cummins asserts, "the process of identity negotiation reflects the relations of power in the society" (2001, p. 15) where culture and language, being such important elements in both individual and collective identities, need to be recognized and included in any approach to addressing the issues which prevent people from flourishing and participating within society in a positive way. Cummins (2001), Hogg and Vaughan (2002), Tajfel and Turner (1986) and Turner et al., (1987) have researched the relationship between identity and being part of a group. Group membership contributes to a sense of self. This contribution can have either negative or positive effects depending upon the power that group has within the larger society. Nowhere are negative, coercive power relations (Cummins, 2001) better illustrated than with Canada's Aboriginal people.

When Aboriginal people attend many of Canada's universities, they continue to face coercive relations of power that negatively impact their identity and cause further erosion of their culture and language (Cummins, 2001; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 2001). The United Nations recognizes that this is a type of discrimination against culture "resulting in the rejection of the legitimacy or viability of the values and institutions of Indigenous peoples" (Battiste, 2002, p. 22) which further results in being detrimental on a social and economic level between Aboriginal people and their country of origin. It is detrimental when the lack of helpful policies coupled with either an atmosphere of

negativity or neglect towards a group of students suggest that it is better to conceal your identity or ignore your culture in order to succeed academically as was part of the testimony participants in this research shared during this research. Often this conflict leads to dropping out of the institution, which directly affects the economic level of security of said individual. Ignoring one's culture means that Aboriginal students are not drawing on their own cultural strengths to recognize and value the deep knowledge and experiences that are such a valuable aspect of Aboriginal cultures. In addition, it can negatively affect the poverty level of the student. This speaks to the interconnectedness of the social determinants of health where not only does the obvious economic aspect of poverty negatively affect health, but so does the social aspect of poverty including exclusion, powerlessness, and the stigma of marginalization. Addressing some of the social ills by implementing caring policies that value Aboriginal culture, thereby encouraging Aboriginal students to complete university degrees, will positively affect the economic ills brought upon by a lack of education. The following section explores the interconnectedness of the social determinants of health as illustrated in presented themes in the lives of the participants.

4.5 Determinants of Health

Without generalizing and stereotyping, many of the barriers experienced by these four are, common challenges experienced by women [gender determinant] given that our society in Canada still predominantly favours men (Fletcher & Ely, 2003; Tanton, 1994; Lewis, 1993; Statistics Canada, 2005). Since these women share Aboriginal backgrounds [Aboriginal status] and belong to a disenfranchised minority group living in a dominant society [social exclusion], their experiences of challenges or barriers go beyond those

shared by other women in Canada at this time (Abele, 2004; Stats Canada, 2007; Health Canada, 2000; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 1998).

These four women share Aboriginal culture. Canadian Aboriginal people historically have been subjected to discrimination through assimilation attempts that are directly linked to their health status (Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010). The effects of discrimination are marginalization and exclusion, and, in fact, the determinants of health refer to this as social exclusion.

Social exclusion interconnects with income exclusion or insecurity. Level of income influences living conditions, psychological well being, and health related behaviours including food and exercise choices (Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010). The three mothers in this study shared experiences regarding these very factors from living under stressful conditions on the reserve to not being able to eat lunches in order to pay for gas. Furthermore, those who are excluded socially and economically have little power and influence over those who create policies, the very policies that may help their situation (Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010).

Brenda, Kristie, Marie, and Tina's shared gender also contributes to their social exclusion. Women experience more adverse social determinants of health than men largely due to the responsibilities attached with child rearing (Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010). This, too, is evident in the stories shared by the three mothers in this study. Marie and Brenda told of constant financial stresses related to the daily costs of child rearing and how funding from bands is insufficient for families with growing children. When funding is not enough, choices have to be made between doing without and taking on a part time job to make money. Being unemployed means being dependent on social safety

nets or living in poverty. Taking on a part time job necessitates childcare, decreases the number of hours spent with their children and their studies that can have a negative impact on grades.

Ultimately, these women are in university aiming to complete university degrees in order to improve their conditions. Education is a powerful determinant of health in the obvious fact that further education provides more opportunity for attaining more secure and higher paying employment. Further, raising education levels improves physical health as, generally speaking, the more education attained the more healthy one is (Raphael et al. 2004; Ungerleider & Burns, 2004). In addition, a post secondary education provides the opportunity for more influence on the very policies and policy makers that affect society's health (Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010). None of the participants felt they had been adequately prepared for university, and none had family role models for higher education. Yet they all appreciate the value of attaining a degree and are struggling through the many challenges mentioned in this study to do so.

The challenges mentioned by these women directly affect their academic performance in school. Some of these challenges could be tempered with a support system at the university with the specific purpose of aiding Aboriginal students in retention and completion of their degrees. While the university does offer student supports, the participants' experiences provide examples of the difference between availability and accessibility of support services. If those students are not accessing the implemented supports aimed at assisting students, then it is incumbent upon administration to encourage accessibility by making changes to say supports to ensure the people who need them are indeed using them. Timmons (2009) found the institutions

that offered the most visible, accessible, Aboriginal specific supports had higher usage of said services and almost unanimous positive feedback. The experiences of the women at UPEI speak to what is missing and what the university could be offering.

4.6 Conclusion

We have all experienced motivating teachers who positively affected us, and "these relationships can frequently transcend the economic and social disadvantages that afflict communities" (Cummins, 2001, p. 1). For instance, as was the case for one of the participants, an individual professor can choose to make allowances for an Aboriginal student who was late for a test because a fight on the reserve kept her awake during the night. A professor can change a racist atmosphere within the classroom to become welcoming and inclusive, one where all students feel safe to share. One participant experienced this when the negative messages conveyed by eye rolling, suggesting that Aboriginal students should keep their culture at home, was countered by a professor's comments. Individual professors may even be able to help mitigate some economic disadvantages for individual students by hiring them to assist with research or securing funding for short-term supports. However, what takes place within the larger institutional setting is often outside the professor's control and beyond her or his scope. Therefore, policies must also be enacted that promote institutional collaboration at a macro-interaction level (Torres, 2009).

Cummins (2001) theory of collaborative and coercive power relations requires the negotiation of identity at the micro-level of interactions between people, as the example above illustrates. He suggests that collaborative or coercive macro-level of power relations, such as those evident in the residential school era in Canada, are reproduced

interpersonally at the micro-level continuing cycles of either empowerment and self-determination or dependency and discrimination. For universities to actively reverse the effect of coercive power relations evident in the education of Aboriginal people in Canada, changes need to consciously take place at both the macro-level in terms of policies and at the micro-level in terms of relationships between learners and educators. Establishing policies that encourage collaborative relations of power at all levels in the university would be a recognition of the value and importance of honouring Aboriginal experience and identity in the academy. Furthermore, if Asante's (2005) finding that higher levels of education result in a diminished sense of ethnic identity is consistent with findings from other research, then it is important that Aboriginal students and their culture be visible and valued so that their identity can remain strong and vibrant. The desired supports suggested by the participants in this research would contribute to valuing the Aboriginal identity at UPEI.

Wanting a better life for themselves and/or their children, these women found they needed to overcome the odds and attempt a university education. While along this path, they shared examples of how they surpassed their own and others low expectations and were strengthened and gained confidence in themselves and their capabilities, accomplishing things they previously did not think they could. However, all encountered serious challenges and barriers to the continuation of their schooling, some that are shared by many other university students (financial stresses) and some that are more particular to the Aboriginal experience (discrimination). These barriers may be mitigated by the university implementing Aboriginal specific supports as specified by the participants in this research and students attending other Atlantic Canadian universities

(Timmons et al., 2009). In doing so, the university will be exemplifying a more just and caring approach to aiding the retention of a marginalized group of Canadians by recognizing the value of this unique culture which is in critical need of social and economic help.

Chapter 5

Summary

5.0 Questions Revisited

This was a phenomenological study where four Aboriginal women shared rich data about their lives. The purpose of this research was to look into the experiences of Aboriginal women currently pursuing a post-secondary education and explore their perceptions on (1) Why they are attending university, (2) What barriers may affect their continuation at university, and (3) What can the university do to alleviate these barriers in an attempt to encourage retention and completion? Several themes emerged from this data including the impact the following had on the participants: caring, academic role models, advocates, financial challenges, reserve life, family, discrimination, and intrinsic motivators. The participants, sharing rich and valuable data with me through interviews, answered these queries.

5.0.1 Question 1: Why Attend University?

All four shared a desire for a better life for themselves, their children, or their community as the motivating reason for attending university. They believed furthering their education at the post-secondary level would affect directly and positively their options for employment resulting in financial security. They also expressed the desire to set positive examples for their children and/or Aboriginal youth outside of their immediate families, showing young people that a post secondary education is accessible and attainable.

5.0.2 Question 2: What Barriers Affect Continuation?

Academic role models, advocates, and family affected the participants in both negative and positive ways. Depending on the circumstance, these themes acted as either barriers and/or facilitators to the women's university experiences. Financial challenges and reserve life provided barriers to the women often incurring additional stress that interfered with their focus on schooling. Intrinsic motivators turned the negative effects of discrimination into positives.

After analysis, an overarching theme emerged related to most of the themes which were found. This overarching theme can be named caring. In all instances, the four women expressed the desire for and positive results from feeling someone in the university setting cared for them. All wanted someone to understand or believe in them and attributed academic success and a strengthened belief in their own capabilities when they experienced someone caring. Marie's desire to be understood reveals the critical need to have someone from a similar background who can appreciate the experiences particular to the place. In Marie's case, she would benefit from having an Aboriginal role model who could discern the struggles she experiences in university. The ability to truly relate to someone is of utmost importance for anyone, and is especially true for those outside of the dominant group.

For Marie, to have an Aboriginal role model to look up to would not only counter the tendency to think university is for the 'other' but would positively affect her experience. Brenda attributed an increase in grades and self-confidence when she developed a relationship with a professor who showed concern for her. Tina credits a high school teacher and youth worker for her graduating from high school given the

'extracurricular' caring they showed her, for instance, delivering school work to her home when she missed classes. Similarly, Tina mentions some instructors for facilitating her university experiences describing them and their help as being "just great". Kristie's poignant reference to everybody wanting to be believed in speaks to this theme of the need to know and be shown that someone cares.

5.0.3 Question 3: What can the university do to alleviate these barriers in an attempt to encourage retention and completion?

I asked each participant to provide a wish list of supports she would like the university to provide. They desired a resource person to provide help ranging from explaining and accessing the funding options to choosing courses explaining prerequisites and such. This resource person would be either Aboriginal or have an understanding and knowledge about Aboriginal issues. Participants wanted the allocation of seats specified for Aboriginal students to various programs. They also requested an Aboriginal student lounge to provide space for practical support and a community gathering within the Aboriginal student population. A final request involved finances, specifically wanting the university to provide an emergency fund when and if funding was not sufficient for various reasons. UPEI already has this support in place.

5.1 Strengths

The strength of this research is in the amount of rich detail shared by the participants (Patton, 2002; Polit & Beck, 2004) as demonstrated in their heartfelt testimonies. From formal and informal meetings, I was able to establish a level of trust and rapport whereby our relationship was peer to peer rather than researcher to

participants. These meetings created a safe atmosphere for these women to willingly share some very personal feelings and experiences.

5.2 Limitations

There are always limitations when conducting research. Those limitations that I encountered in my research included participant recruitment and maintaining confidentiality.

5.2.1 Participant Recruitment

One may draw various conclusions from the small number of participants in this study; however, given the size of the Aboriginal population at UPEI, I was content with the four that did work out. Attention needs to be drawn to the fact that there were quite a few other projects from various faculties requiring the participation of this same small group. The small number for my project may have been due to an over usage of a small group or because I was an unknown graduate student as opposed to a professor. Alternatively, it may have been due to the general historical abuses from research on an Indigenous population at the hands of non-Aboriginals. While I had no evidence to suggest the latter, I was very sensitive and aware of my status as a white outsider asking people to share their lives with me.

5.2.2 Maintaining Confidentiality

While not all of my participants requested anonymity, I took measures to delete names of places, friends, colleagues, and certain situations that may identify the women. However, it is very difficult to maintain anonymity anywhere in this tiny province but especially when it involves a small subsection of the population. The size of the Aboriginal population at the university provided this challenge.

5.3 Recommendations

Recommendations come from the participants. As per the requests from those who are living the experience and therefore, those who can best address the needs, the following are supports that would aid the Aboriginal student population at UPEI in completing their degrees:

Recommendation #1 The University funds a resource person who would be knowledgeable in Aboriginal specific issues pertaining to those applying for and navigating themselves around a university setting.

Recommendation #2 The University reserve allocated seats for Aboriginal students in various programs not only the School of Nursing.

Recommendation #3 The University provides space and funds for a lounge dedicated to Aboriginal student population.

Information gleaned from the emergent themes supported by the overarching theme of caring is the basis for the following recommendation.

Recommendation #4 The University provide professional development for faculty and administration to raise the awareness of Aboriginal issues pertaining to feelings of discrimination and exclusion that is often experienced by those in this minority population.

5.4 Future Research

As mentioned, Asante (2005) found that higher levels of education resulted in a diminished sense of ethnic identity. If this is consistent with findings from other research, then it is important that Aboriginal students and their culture be visible and valued while they are pursuing higher education, so that their identity can remain strong

and vibrant rather than being diminished as a result of more education. This question is beyond the scope of my research, but it is a valid and pressing concern that needs to be studied.

Another concern for future research involves intrinsic motivators. Each participant in this study demonstrated some characteristic(s) that allowed her to persevere through the many challenges they experienced and continue with their studies. I named this theme "intrinsic motivators". For the purposes of this study, a simple explanation was offered based on the data; however delving deeper into these motivators and the conditions under which they are supported or diminished would be a very interesting and valuable study.

5.5 Concluding Comments

This research project has provided me with a valuable academic learning experience. It has shown me the value of qualitative research and how it can and must affect policy. Finding out the specific needs of the people is paramount to creating specific supports to address those needs.

This research has also reinforced my belief in the necessity of a just society for all. Listening to the experiences shared with me enhanced my belief that as much as I would like to think Canadian society has evolved and grown past the stage of discrimination based on culture, it is not true. Furthermore, these women's stories tell me that it is the responsibility of individuals, institutions, and indeed government to create a just society. In an assignment for my course work, I used the analogy of a circle being as strong as its weakest link, and after listening to the experiences shared with me, and

delving into the literature, it is very apparent that all of society would benefit from strengthening the weak links – those who are disenfranchised and marginalized.

I am very grateful that these women were willing to share their personal stories with me. I sincerely hope I have done some justice to them in this presentation. Their powerful stories have truly inspired me.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX I

Interview Queries

1) To your knowledge, are there supports available at UPEI specifically for Aboriginal students?

2) Tell me about your experiences accessing these supports.

3) Tell me about your experiences using these supports.

4) What kinds of supports would you like to see available?

5) Describe an experience or event that positively contributed to your overall perspective on the available supports.

6) Describe an experience or event that negatively contributed to your overall perspective on the available supports.

7) What are the supports available in your home community? Do you think similar supports at university are needed? Should they be different? What is working, and what is not?

8) What kinds of barriers or facilitators have you encountered in your efforts to complete a post secondary education? How are these different from above?

9) What is your intention for further studies?

10) If you are considering post graduate studies, what are the anticipated challenges you would face?

11) What would you need to be successful?

12) What motivates you to complete your post secondary education? Why do you want a university degree?

APPENDIX II

Information Letter

My thesis, *Overcoming Barriers: The Perspectives of Aboriginal Women Attending the University of Prince Edward Island* (UPEI), is an extension of the project mentioned below, and includes looking at the life stories of Aboriginal UPEI students who are women. The literature shows that many of the issues and barriers facing Aboriginal university students are due to family obligations, and many of these fall on women. The qualitative approach to my thesis will get rich data and deepen the knowledge of the life experiences of Aboriginal women attending university.

The above research will compliment a bigger project called *Retention of Aboriginal Students in Atlantic Canada's Post Secondary Institutions: An analysis of the supports available to Aboriginal students.* This is a Canadian Council of Learning funded project, which has already received ethical approval from UPEI and Cape Breton University.

Together, the research will:
- Identify Aboriginal students' perceptions of the social and academic supports available to them at UPEI, and
- Provide rich data on why and how some Aboriginal students persevere and complete their post secondary education despite some significant barriers.

Consent Form

After reading the Information Letter, and having this research project explained, I …………………………………………………………….. agree to voluntarily participate in the research project entitled *Overcoming Barriers: The Perspectives of Aboriginal Women Attending the University of Prince Edward Island.*

I understand that I may stop participating at any time without any penalty or recrimination. I understand the risks involved in participating in this research, if any, are slight. I understand the researcher will do her best to maintain confidentiality and anonymity, by using a pseudonym or code to protect my identity. And, despite her attempts, it is possible that others outside the research may be able to identify me as being part of a study on university supports.

The interview may take about one hour with Julie Puiras from UPEI. The interviews will be recorded so that Julie Puiras can refer to them later. I accept this condition of recording my interview knowing that my name and the information in my interview will be kept confidential. No one but Ms. Puiras will know what I say. I do not have to answer any questions if I don't want to. I may also withdraw an answer to an already asked question if I want to. I may stop the interview at any time I want. When my interview is transcribed, I understand that I will be able to read the transcripts and at that time, decide if I want to withdraw any answers. I also understand that Ms. Puiras may use direct quotes from the interview for her research.

I understand I can contact the UPEI Research Ethics Board at (902) 566-0637, or by email at lmacphee@upei.ca if I have any concerns about the ethical conduct of this study. I will be given a copy of this consent form. If I have any questions or concerns, I can email Julie Puiras at japuiras@upei.ca or call collect at (902) 566-6485.

{ } I understand the need to have my interview recorded, and I agree to it.

Signature of participant: _____

Date: _____

Name: _____

Address: _____

Signature of Researcher: _____
I understand that the information will be kept confidential within the limits of the law.

APPENDIX III

Table 2 indicating initial development of themes through colour coding

COLOUR	THEME	LINES
Light grey highlight	exclusion	66
Light green highlight	feel supported (maybe successes?)	115, 152
Blue 8 highlight	(lack of) supports	57, 97
	need for belonging	109, 159
Yellow highlight	desired supports ****/barriers (also desire to be understood and accepted)	9, 120, 127, 143, 216
light magenta letters	intimidation	6, 16, 159
dark purple letters	motivators	22
orange 2 letters	vicious cycle/rut	23, 28, 39
turquoise 2 letters	lack of mentor	70

Table 3 indicating merging of themes from initial identification of theme

MERGED THEME	COLOUR	INITIAL THEME	LINES
barriers	Light grey highlight	exclusion	66, **132 see discrimination**, 190
	light magenta highlight	financial stresses	156
	light cyan highlight	discrimination	126-132?? 238 see 283
	light magenta letters	intimidation	6, 16, 159
	blue 8 highlight	(lack of) supports	57, 97
	turquoise 2 letters	lack of role model	70, 334