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Crossing the divide: supporting students and families relocating from remote First Nations communities to urban centres

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Crossing the Divide: Supporting Students and Families Relocating from Remote First Nations Communities to Urban Centres

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Abstract

This research explores the experiences of First Nations students and families when they relocate from their homes in remote First Nations communities to an urban centre. The research considers student, family and school experiences during this relocation. The purpose of this study was to consider the role schools have in supporting families and students when they relocate from remote First Nations communities to an urban centre. It also explores what makes this transition “successful”, how that success is defined, what barriers families and students face, and how schools can be safe spaces for students during times of transition. The study uses Indigenous approaches to research in combination with more familiar qualitative methods. Data was collected through open-ended interviews and findings are presented in story form and participant voices and experiences. Findings provide recommendations for schools on what is needed to support families and students who relocate from remote First Nations communities to urban centres.

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Chapter One: Crossing the Divide Introduction

Context

“...you must understand Thunder Bay’s past, how the seeds of division, of acrimony and distaste, of a lack of cultural awareness and understanding, were planted in those early days, and how they were watered and nourished with misunderstanding and ambivalence. And you must understand how the government of Canada has historically underfunded education and health services for Indigenous children, providing consistently lower levels of support than for non-Indigenous kids, and how it continues to do so to this day.” (Talaga, 2017)

When you move from a remote First Nations community to the city of Thunder Bay, it is truly crossing a divide between nations and cultures. Understanding the relationship between families, First Nations students and the publicly funded elementary schools they enter after leaving their homes in remote First Nations communities is critical in framing a discussion on supporting families and students in the contemporary school system. Specifically, this research explores the experiences of students and families who relocate from their homes in remote First Nations communities to an urban center and considers the role that schools have in supporting families and students.

Perhaps the first and most important aspect is to understand the historic and current relationship between Indigenous peoples and Western education and to call this relationship complicated would be a tremendous understatement. Toulouse (2011) outlines four phases in the history of Aboriginal education. The first is traditional which describes the time prior to contact when education was considered a community responsibility. In this phase, “Elders and key cultural teachers worked with children in an engaging manner” (p.1). The second phase is segregation, which includes the residential school era, when First Nations children were taken from their homes, families, and communities and placed in Indian Residential Schools. According to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015), these residential schools were “created for the purpose of separating Aboriginal children from their families, in order to minimize and weaken family ties and cultural linkages, and to indoctrinate children into

a new culture” (p.v). During the same time, a third phase emerged, the assimilation phase characterized by day schools run by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) in First Nations communities. The fourth phase of Aboriginal education in Canada, which extends to the present, is integration. In this phase Aboriginal students attend publicly funded schools in towns and cities. However, this is not true for students in remote First Nations communities, who remain in schools funded by INAC and run by a community-directed education council in their own communities. If these students decide to further their education beyond what is provided in their community (typically up to Grade 8), they must move from the federally funded on-reserve school into the provincial system. This often requires relocating many miles away from their family and community. It is becoming increasingly clear that both of these current systems of education are failing Indigenous students (Battiste, 2013; Hare & Pidgeon, 2011; Harper & Thompson, 2017; Lamb, 2014; Mendelson, 2008, Pidgeon et al., 2013; Talaga, 2017; White & Beavon, 2009).

The significant discrepancy in educational outcomes for Aboriginal versus non-Aboriginal Canadians is well documented (Anderson et al., 2015; Anderson & Richards, 2016; Hare & Pidgeon, 2011; Harper & Thompson, 2017; Lamb, 2014; Madden et al., 2013; Mendelson, 2008; O’Gorman & Pandey, 2015; Riley & Ungerleider, 2012). Specifically, the number of Aboriginal youths who do not complete high school is much higher than their non-Aboriginal peers (Anderson & Richards, 2016; Hare & Pidgeon, 2011); Aboriginal students are more likely to leave school early (Riley & Ungerleider, 2012); and, there is a significant gap in achievement between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students (Lamb, 2014, Anderson & Richards, 2016). Graduation rates are particularly alarming for on-reserve First Nations students (Lamb, 2014), indicating that some discrepancy exists between the federal and provincial systems of education. If the two systems are not equal, then attention should be paid to those students entering provincial schools in urban centers from on-reserve, federally funded schools in First Nations communities.

Literature suggests that the public system of education in Canada promotes Eurocentric views by presenting European knowledge as universal, normative, and ideal (Battiste, 2013; Harper & Thompson, 2017; Lamb, 2014; Pidgeon et al., 2013; Steinhauer et al., 2020). This is important when considering the relationship between Indigenous peoples and Western education. Battiste (2000, 2013) explains how this system is a form of cognitive imperialism, which exists “when Indigenous knowledge is omitted or ignored in the schools, and a Eurocentric foundation is advanced to the exclusion of other knowledges and languages” (Battiste, 2013, p.26). This results in a system of education that assumes the superiority of Eurocentric knowledge. Many argue that as a result of cognitive imperialism inherent in our education system, it remains assimilative in nature (Pidgeon et al, 2013; Battiste, 2013; Milne, 2016; Harper & Thompson, 2017), suggesting that perhaps we have not moved entirely beyond the assimilative phase of Aboriginal education that Toulouse described.

For the purpose of this research, the term transition(s) or transitioning is specifically describing First Nations families relocating from remote First Nations communities to Thunder Bay for the first time. The students and families are relocating from their homes in remote First Nations communities to live in the city of Thunder Bay.

In Canada, the population of Indigenous people continues to grow. In 1996 the number of Indigenous peoples represented 2.8% of the population. This number grew to 3.8% in 2006, and in 2016 there were 1,673,783 Indigenous people, accounting for 4.9% of the total population. (Statistics Canada, 2018). According to Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (2014), almost half (47.4%) of First Nations people live off reserves (INAC, 2014) and this number is growing every year. Within Ontario, the total number of people who indicated First Nations (single ancestry) is 97,435, with nearly half (49%) living on-reserve and just over half (51%) living off reserve.

The Indigenous population in Thunder Bay reflects a similar pattern in population growth. According to 2016 Census data (Statistics Canada, 2017), nearly 10% of the population in

Thunder Bay are First Nations. This number is an increase of almost 4% from the 2011 census data and shows that Thunder Bay has the highest population of Indigenous peoples in cities across Canada on a per capita basis. The population of First Nations families in Thunder Bay is growing and many of them are coming from remote First Nations communities in northern Ontario. I have witnessed and experienced the relocation of students and families as a teacher, friend and boarding parent.

As someone who lives far away from where I grew up and the Land I call home, I can often feel the weight of this distance. At times I long for it--the air, the water, the land that raised me. Simpson (2014) suggests that there are spiritual and emotional connections to place and homeland. I know this connection, and I feel the disconnection created by living a great distance away from my "home". A participant from Wilson (2008) shares how land is "paramount for all Indigenous societies", indicating that "their relationship to that land, their experience on that land shapes everything that is around them" (p.87). Land represents our place, our environment, our reality and the space we are in. Indigenous worldviews are established through location and strong connection to "territory, nation and community" (Absolon, 2011). The spiritual, emotional and physical disconnection experienced when moving from remote First Nations communities to a city like Thunder Bay is substantial.

Locating Myself

Absolon and Willitt (2005) believe it is necessary for researchers to locate themselves as this is a fundamental principle to Aboriginal research methodology. To further explain this necessity, Wilson (2007) asserts, "we cannot be separated from our work, nor should our writing be separated from ourselves" (p.194). As a researcher, I acknowledge my connections to this process. From the research question, to the communities, schools, and families I am speaking with and for, they are part of me, and this research comes through my truth. McIvor (2010) encourages researchers to consider the questions: "What brought you here? What do you feel

you have/need to contribute to your people/community/nation? From what “place” do you speak?” (p.140). It is through these questions that I will locate myself within this research.

What brought you here?

I am Anishnaabekwe currently living in Thunder Bay, Ontario, the traditional territory of Fort William First Nation. The community listed on my Certificate of Indian Status, issued by the federal government, is Wikwemikong Unceded Indian Reserve. I refer to this as my ‘home community’ and acknowledge that it has been more than three generations since anyone in my family has lived there. My father is Ojibway/Odawa, my mother is settler-Canadian with roots in England and Ireland. I grew up in an urban setting just north of Toronto, Ontario in a community and school with very little diversity. Not only were my brother and I the only First Nations students in our school, we were the only visible minorities. The only time I was around other First Nations people was at family gatherings or when we attended the annual pow wow hosted by the local Indian Friendship Center.

From a young age, I knew I wanted to be teacher. I have always been drawn to the energy of children and I love learning. During my Bachelor of Education program, I completed an elective course titled Teaching First Nations Children. This course sparked something within me along with a connection to who I was. I knew that my career path needed to involve improving the educational experience of First Nations students. I began my teaching career in a fly-in First Nation community in Northwestern Ontario. Having grown up as what I refer to as a ‘city Nish’, I always wanted to spend time ‘on the rez’. This desire grew in me as I learned more about the history and relationship between First Nations people and Canada. Living and teaching in a First Nations community was important for me as I tried to make sense of my own Anishnaabe identity. I grew to love the beauty of the community, but in the end, found the isolation to be too much. My husband and I moved to his hometown, Thunder Bay, which is the closest city to the community where we had been working. After spending two years building relationships with students and families in the remote First Nation community, I found it difficult

to leave them. I knew those Grade 8 and 9 students who wanted to continue their education would be moving without their families to Thunder Bay in the fall. Students who leave their home communities to attend school live in boarding homes around the city. Hoping that having some familiarity would help with this difficult transition, we decided to board a number of students while they attended high school in the city. In that first year, we had 14 students live in our home. We did our best to help them transition from a community of 300 people to a school of 1000. Since then, we have had over 25 youth from remote northern First Nations communities live with us while attending high school in Thunder Bay.

I was hired by a provincial school board in Thunder Bay and spent six years teaching in a school with a high population of students who self-identify as First Nations before taking on the role of Indigenous Education Lead for the board. This role has opened my eyes to a wider view, not just of the schools in our city, but of the work in Indigenous Education across the province.

It has been a personal goal of mine to complete a master's degree in education. I chose to specialize in Indigenous Education because supporting Indigenous students is what matters to me and it is the work of my heart. I make an effort to balance the learning that comes through academic reading with learning from Elders, traditional teachers, knowledge carriers, and ceremony, knowing that both have equal value for my growth. This is part of my professional and personal journey that has brought me to this space and shapes my research project.

What do you feel you have/need to contribute to your people/community/nation?

The idea of supporting Indigenous families as they transition to Thunder Bay from remote First Nation communities is very close to my heart. As a boarding parent, I have experienced this forced relocation alongside a number of Indigenous youths. The experiences of these youth have recently received national attention as a result of the inquiry into the deaths of seven First Nations students who were attending high school in Thunder Bay (Bennett, 2016;

Talaga 2017). As a result of the Inquiry recommendations (Ontario Ministry of Solicitor General, 2016) changes are being made, additional supports are being put in place, and awareness is growing for the transitions faced by Indigenous youths leaving their First Nations communities to attend high school without the support of their families.

In my role as the Indigenous Education Lead, I see many families moving directly from remote First Nations communities in Northern Ontario with their children who are entering our elementary schools. I have found that once these families have a Thunder Bay address and students register in school, they are absorbed into the student body with little attention given by school staff to the unique needs they may have. As a boarding parent, I have experienced the transition firsthand with many youth who are without their families, and it is extremely difficult for them because of the harsh contrast between the two communities, and the loneliness they feel leaving their home and family. While the loneliness may not be the same when you move to Thunder Bay as a family, many of the same challenges exist, and there is a level of culture shock being experienced by the entire family. I use the term *culture shock* to describe what is experienced when an individual enters an unfamiliar, unsafe, or unpredictable social, physical, or cultural environment (Kreuzer, 2016) to describe the disequilibrium they experience.

Battiste (2013) writes that when we are “connected to community and to place, the relational aspects of communities, people, families, and their context become the important elements of how to proceed with knowledge search and production” (p.74). With this in mind, I acknowledge that the relationships I have with students and families from remote First Nations communities have been the starting point for my knowledge search about the role that school staff play in supporting families and students in making this transition.

Through my experiences teaching in a remote First Nation community and my work in the provincial school system, I understand the similarities and differences between these two systems. I have seen the struggles of families and students who are transitioning from their

home community's school to the provincial school system in Thunder Bay. During this transition, they are often treated like other students attending that school with little to no additional supports, suggesting that school staff may not understand the gravity of this transition for the student and family. Through this research, I intend to close the gap between what families and students need and what staff in schools understand and provide.

From what “place” do you speak?

I speak from a place of respect for two worlds. I have grown to understand and appreciate what it looks like to walk in both worlds. Hatcher et al. (2009) describe this as Two-Eyed Seeing, “learning to see from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous ways of knowing and from the other eye with the strengths of Western ways of knowing and to use both of these eyes together” (p.146). I attend ceremony and learn from my Elders. I am a drum carrier and a water walker. I also enjoy learning through academia. I read scholars and write papers. I have lived, worked and been a part of a remote First Nation community, and I currently work within the provincial system. I do not aim to belittle either of those experiences or places. I hope to assist schools in understanding and supporting families and students who are making the transition.

Theoretical Framework

Donald (2012) describes a form of *ethical relationality* that grounds my research approach. The idea that research “carefully attends to the particular historical, cultural, and social contexts from which a person or community understands and interprets the world” (p.536) is crucial for this study. The lived experiences and histories in remote First Nations communities differ dramatically from an urban center and families making this transition are experiencing these two realities simultaneously. It is crucial for both schools and families making the transition to gain insight and understanding into the differences to support a successful transition from one reality to the other. Donald (2012) also writes that it is “imperative to acknowledge and honour the significance of the relationships we have with others, how our

histories and experiences position us in relation to each other, and how our futures as people in the world are tied together” (p.536). With this theoretical perspective, I approach this research through relationships and in understanding that our unique histories will impact the lens through which we view this transition. Although remote First Nations communities and urban centers may seem worlds apart, ethical relationality urges us to treat lives “as relational and braided rather than isolated and independent” (p.537). Many lives come together when families move from their home communities to a city and enroll their children in the provincial school system.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the ways that school staffs can support the transition for families and students who enter provincial schools in Thunder Bay from federally funded, community-run schools in remote First Nations communities. This research explores four questions:

Research Questions

Primary research question:

1. What role can school staff play in supporting families and students who are relocating from remote First Nations communities to urban centers?

Secondary questions:

2. What makes a transition “successful”? How can we define that success?
3. What are barriers to successful transitions?
4. How can schools be safe spaces for students in times of cultural/environmental transition?

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the gap in knowledge about the experiences of families and students who make the transition from remote First Nation communities to urban centers.

Through examining the needs of families and students who are transitioning, supports that exist (within the city and school), and best practices to support students and families, I hope to contribute to the knowledge of how to best support families and students during this transition. Kovach (2008) asserts that research must be relevant and useful to Indigenous communities, and this can be achieved by “defining the research inquiry based on actual, not presumed, need and by designing a research process that is respectful and effective” (p.59), allowing research to become a practical tool. In my experience working in schools with Indigenous families, the need for better understanding and resources to support this transition has been identified. The literature shared in chapter two supports this.

There is a significant gap in the knowledge about the role of school staff in supporting families during this particular transition. Limited information exists on the differences between remote First Nations communities and urban centers and the impact on families and students who make this transition. Some literature addresses how schools can support Indigenous students more generally (Battiste, 2013; Cross et al., 2011; Harper & Thompson, 2017; Pidgeon et al, 2013, Rountree & Smith, 2016) however, I could not locate research that considers the unique needs of students and families who are experiencing the kind of culture shock one encounters when transitioning from remote First Nations communities to urban centers. Talaga (2017) shares that “the culture shock [is] startling” (p.97), and Pearce (2001) writes about how difficult it is “for students who come from a northern reserve to go immediately into an urban environment. Students often come with a number of social and academic problems and are soon overwhelmed” (p.125). Although this current study is focused on Northwestern Ontario, federally funded schools run by First Nation communities exist in every province across Canada. Indigenous families and students are experiencing a disparity in educational outcomes due to this transition in communities across the country (Cotrell, Preston, & Pearce, 2012; Richards, 2014).

Some research (Lamb, 2014; Rountree & Smith, 2016) has explored the difference in outcomes of students on-reserve versus self-identified Aboriginal students from provincial schools. I was not able to locate any research that considered what this discrepancy means when students move between these systems or what can be done to support this transition.

Contribution to the Community

As discussed earlier, the population demographic in Thunder Bay is changing as the population of Indigenous peoples grows, and schools are working to meet the needs of a diverse group of learners. This research will benefit educators and school staff as they will gain insights into the unique needs of Indigenous families and students who are moving to Thunder Bay from remote First Nations communities. If school staff better understand the experience of these families, they can begin to consider what can be implemented to support them during this transition. This offers the potential to improve the experience of those families and students who move from remote First Nations communities and into the provincial school system.

Limitations of the Study

While the number of participants (8) is sufficient for the purpose of this research, the number of stories and experiences from each group of participants is somewhat limited in representation. There are only a few remote First Nations communities represented. Like all qualitative studies, these data are difficult to generalize. While there are similarities between this specific example in Thunder Bay and cities across the country, further study is needed to be able to generalize the findings.

Summary

As the number of families relocating from remote First Nations communities to the city of Thunder Bay increases, it is crucial that educators and school staff understand the gravity of this transition so they can provide responsive supports to students and families. This is required to promote reconciliation in schools, wellbeing of First Nations students and families, and to

address the goals in Indigenous Education. While the literature is currently very limited in the specific area of families and students transitioning from remote First Nations communities to urban centers, it is worth exploring research that has examined differences in educational outcomes on First Nations reserves versus those in provincial school systems, some potential barriers to Indigenous student success, and best practices that support Indigenous students.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Battiste (2013) describes the experience of Indigenous students in Canada as one of being “thrust into a society that does not want them to show too much success or too much Indian identity [all the while] losing their connections to their land, family, and community” (p.23). In many ways, there is no greater example of this experience than for the families and students that move from remote First Nations communities to live in cities like Thunder Bay. The differences in all aspects of life between remote First Nations communities and cities in Ontario can be an overwhelming contrast and is not always a welcoming experience (Riley and Ungerleider, 2012; Talaga, 2017; Urban Aboriginal Task Force, 2016).

Many barriers have been identified for Indigenous students in the mainstream system of education (Battiste, 2013; Harper & Thompson, 2017; Lamb, 2014; Madden et al., 2013). There is little research available, however, on the interplay between these barriers and their impact on students moving from schools in remote First Nations communities to provincial schools in cities. Some studies have identified approaches to overcome barriers for Indigenous students and many of these advocate for holistic approaches (Battiste, 2013; Cross et al., 2011; Rountree & Smith, 2016). The relationships among family, schools, and community are crucial in education at every stage, and particularly during a time of transition (Friedel, 1999; Hill et al., 2012; Lea et al., 2011; Milne, 2016).

This review of the literature explores four areas that promote understanding of the relocation for students and families. First, I outline some of the differences between life in the city and life in remote First Nations communities, including healthcare, social services, and education. Next, I provide literature that explores the barriers that exist for Indigenous students and families, followed by a positive look at how schools can create spaces of cultural safety for First Nations students. Finally, I explore the role and importance of the family-school-community

relationship in an Indigenous context. By looking at the differences, barriers, ways to build feelings of safety, and importance of key relationships, we gain an understanding of what the transition feels like, what challenges exist, how schools are supporting Indigenous students and how families, communities and schools can work together.

Life in the City versus Life in Remote First Nations Communities

Life in remote First Nations communities in Ontario looks and feels tremendously different than life in the city of Thunder Bay. I know this from experience, as I spent the first two years of my teaching career living in a remote First Nation community; however, there is little peer-reviewed literature that contrasts these spaces in a meaningful way. I wrote a poem using David Bouchard's *If You're Not From the Prairie* as a mentor text for an Additional Qualification (AQ) course shortly after we moved to Thunder Bay that introduces some differences as I experienced them:

If You Haven't Lived on the Rez

*If you haven't lived on the rez,
You don't know the dirt.
You can't know the dirt.*

*Trucks pass by leaving you in a brown cloud
In Spring brown rubber boots fill welcome mat
It's a favourite place to play
The more dirt on your clothes, the better the day.*

*If you haven't lived on the rez,
You don't know the dirt.*

*If you haven't lived on the rez,
You don't know the store.
You can't know the store.*

*The one and only place to buy gas, food, and furniture
Astronomical prices on everything but pop and chips
More options for meat in a can than fruit or vegetables
It's also the post office, oh the joy of getting mail!*

*If you haven't lived on the rez,
You don't know the store.*

*If you haven't lived on the rez,
You don't know the land
You can't know the land*

*Just a few steps away,
the boreal forest invites you to play
The earth turns to water, the water to sky.
Every inch filled with knowledge from Creation*

*If you haven't lived on the rez,
You don't know the land.*

*If you haven't lived on the rez,
You don't know the kids
You can't know the kids*

*They have a sense of adventure like you can't imagine
A growing curiosity they're eager to share.
While facing more struggles than hardly seems fair,
Their smiles imprint on your heart forever.*

*If you haven't lived on the rez,
You don't know the kids.*

From pavement and apartment buildings to city buses and movie theatres, the list of discrepancies could fill many pages. It is overwhelming when you consider the number of adjustments to daily life that families need to make when they arrive in Thunder Bay. To go from having one or maybe two stores that serve as your bank, grocery store, post office, hardware store, corner store, and coffee shop to having multiple options for all these things within each block is a significant change. Vehicles, such as cars and trucks, are limited in remote First Nations communities, whereas in the city of Thunder Bay, the streets are full of vehicles.

Among the contrasts to daily life, there are some specific concerns about the low-income status of many families and the differences between on-reserve and off-reserve school structures that are worth exploring further. In order to understand these complexities, it is important to include a discussion about the creation of reserves. Talaga (2017) urges Canadians to understand how the “utter failure and betrayal of the treaties... worked in conjunction with a paternalistic piece of legislation called the Indian Act to isolate Indigenous people on remote reservations and keep them subservient to Ottawa for more than one hundred

years” (p.55). In Ontario, treaties were signed between the Crown and Indigenous peoples in the 19th century, including the Robinson Superior Treaty, which is the territory that Thunder Bay is situated within. Under these treaties, First Nations groups agreed to share lands and resources with settlers, understanding that the lands would be *shared*, and their practices respected not that they would be confined within a small allotment indefinitely (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP), 1996). Reserves today are often contained within First Nations’ ancestral and spiritual homelands. Despite having spiritual connections to these ancestral territories, the ongoing impacts of colonization, forced assimilation, and isolation have had a tremendous negative impact in these communities (Hanson, 2009).

Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN) is a political territorial organization that represents 49 First Nation communities within northern Ontario. NAN’s membership (on and off reserve) is estimated at around 45,000 people (NAN website). In 2012, NAN released the Report on the Challenges and Needs in Kikinahamaagewin (Education). This report outlines some of the struggles faced by families when living on-reserve, which includes meeting the basic needs of life, leading to “very little hope for empowerment and success” (p.27). Employment opportunities are extremely limited in northern First Nations communities, leaving many families in abject poverty (NAN, 2012; O’Gorman & Pandey, 2015). In some cases, students living on-reserve are in overcrowded and unsafe conditions due to housing shortages (NAN, 2012).

Talaga (2017) explains how many of the students moving to Thunder Bay to attend high school come from “homes touched by the horrific trauma of residential schools – abuse, addictions, extreme poverty, and confused minds” (p.146). Maddison (2013) shares that life in the city often includes many of these same struggles for Indigenous families, stating that, “the city remains an inhospitable landscape, dominated by poor housing quality, high unemployment, high rates of incarceration and substance abuse” (p.295). Harper & Thompson (2017) also write that many students who leave their homes on reserves to study in the city often end up in low-

rent accommodations located in high-risk neighbourhoods. Indigenous youth from low-income families are at increased risk of academic failure (Harper & Thompson, 2017; Maddison, 2013).

Education Experiences in Remote First Nations Communities

Currently, on-reserve schools run by band councils are responsible for the education of about one in six Aboriginal children--provincial governments are responsible for the other five (Richards, 2008). Schools in First Nations communities often lack the resources to prepare students academically, putting them at a disadvantage when they enter public schools in urban centers (Anderson & Richards, 2016; Harper & Thompson, 2017; Mendelson, 2008). A closer look at some of the specific data surrounding the so-called "gap" in Aboriginal student achievement illuminates this issue and the impact it may have on students transitioning from First Nations community schools. Mendelson (2008) references a study of public opinion regarding Aboriginal issues from INAC (2004), which found that students in any given grade in on-reserve Aboriginal schools were about two years behind "city schools", noting that "of 140 First Nations educational administrators who responded, only about 18 percent believed that there was transferability between grades for First Nations schools and public schools" (p.6).

Beyond administrators in First Nations schools, Anderson and Richards' (2016) study of how band-operated, on-reserve schools compare with provincial schools showed that,

Among young adults aged 20-24, nine of 10 non-Aboriginals have at least high school, as do eight of 10 Métis and seven of 10 First Nation living off-reserve. In stark contrast, only four in 10 First Nation young adults living on-reserve graduated from high school (p.4).

Figure 1 shows Richards' (2008) use of Canadian census data from 2006 to illustrate this ongoing and continued discrepancy in high school completion.

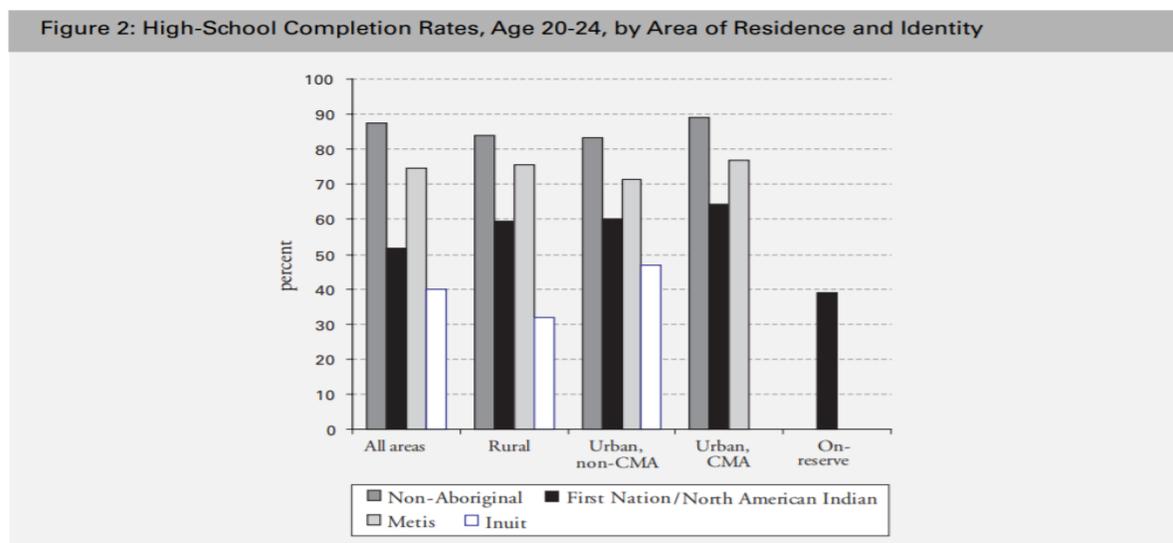


Figure 1. Richards, J. (2008). *Closing the Aboriginal-non-Aboriginal education gap. Backgrounder No. 116. Toronto: C.D. Howe Institute.*

A presentation by Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN, 2020) revealed results of a report they completed to identify and address the achievement gap in their communities. They identified contributing factors for the discrepancy in achievement in three areas – school based, external factors, and measuring the gap. School-based factors include: lowered expectations of staff in NAN schools, lack of cultural relevance of content and learning, lack of instructional leadership in communities, the difficulty in recruiting and retaining qualified and experienced school staff and providing staff with quality professional development. School based factors also include: resources within the communities, the majority of education facilities not meeting current standards for school safety, limited access to relevant education materials, and a lack of equipment and technology-based resources. The report found a general lack of student interest and effort, resulting in increased absenteeism and limited student effort put into learning. The report suggests that many NAN parents are suffering the inter-generational impact of residential schools and the Sixties Scoop, and “through no fault of their own, they lack the knowledge and skills to support and reinforce student learning” (Slide 15, NAN, 2020). In addition, the report acknowledges the staggering statistics on addiction issues in many NAN First Nations

communities. Addicted parents are not in a position to provide the support, encouragement, and in some cases, the basic necessities for students to be effective learners.

Education Funding in First Nations Communities

NAN (2020) outlines “chronic under-funding of First Nation education” as one of the top external factors contributing to the disparity in academic performance in First Nations students in NAN schools. White and Beavon (2009) describe the complex relationships that exist between “the constitutional provincial educational responsibilities and the treaty-based federal educational responsibilities” (p. 10) which often leads to underfunding resulting in lower standards for schools in First Nations communities. Talaga (2017) shares that between 1996 and 2006 provincial school system funding increased annually by 3.8 percent, whereas funding through INAC for schools on-reserve has been capped at 2 percent since 1996. This discrepancy exists despite the fact that the Indigenous birth rate continues to far outpace non-Indigenous birth rates (Talaga, 2017). Mendelson (2008) further explains the funding structure, sharing that:

Indian and Northern Affairs Canada funds Band councils or other First Nations education authorities to pay for education from kindergarten through to adult learners for people resident on reserves... Funding is through several different types of agreements, with varying degrees of autonomy for First Nations (p.4).

According to White and Beavon (2009), this system results in instability and little accountability, along with high teacher, staff and educational leadership turnover. Talaga (2017) argues that the federal government has no place in the business of education--it is in accordance with the Indian Act that they remain in control. However, the Indian Act is not responsible for imposing any level of education standards, which creates significant variance among First Nation communities and results in inconsistent delivery of education.

Many have argued that on-reserve First Nations schools are under-funded in comparison to provincially run schools (Harper & Thompson, 2017; Lamb, 2014; NAN, 2012, 2020). NAN (2012) asserts that this chronic underfunding of schools results in higher student-

teacher ratios, lack of resources, lower teacher salaries, and limited access to cultural and language curriculum development. Harper and Thompson (2017) use this chronically underfunded education in reserve schools as an example of racism that has been institutionalized.

Due to the differences that exist between the two systems of provincial and federally funded on-reserve schools, it is not as simple as it may seem to determine the level of underfunding. An important consideration in this debate, as well as in the understanding of the experiences of students transitioning between the two systems of education, is the size of schools. Anderson and Richards (2016) share that,

Forty percent of reserve schools have fewer than 50 students; more than half have fewer than 100 (Richards and Scott 2009, 60). Over the last two generations, provincial school systems have closed most such small schools for reasons of scale economies. For small reserve schools, there are almost no “comparable provincial schools” to serve as benchmarks (p.10-11).

Understanding the size difference between the schools themselves is a necessary consideration for supporting students in transitioning from remote First Nations communities to provincial schools in cities.

Programs/Services

Student mobility was noted in NAN (2020) as an external factor that contributes to the gap in academic performance, finding that many students are forced to relocate temporarily for reasons of health, employment, or parents/guardian’s education. Schools are not the only public service that changes delivery from federal to provincial jurisdiction when families move from First Nations communities to cities. Social and health services are impacted as well (Williams, 2000). As a result, Williams (2000) found that parents often do not know how to gain access to the necessary services when they make this transition.

Youth participants from Hare and Pidgeon’s (2011) study, who moved from their home communities in First Nations communities to a city in northern Ontario, describe many of the cultural and recreational activities that the school in their First Nation community provided. They

specifically mentioned the language and culture classes. These kinds of experiences were lacking in their provincially funded high school and “for many of these youth...they struggled to find meaning in the dominant cultural norms associated with curriculum and teaching demands” (Hare & Pidgeon, 2011, p.101). While this example suggests that students are being separated from cultural experiences when they leave their home community, Maddison (2013) found that many urban-dwelling Aboriginal people actually have the same access to culture and traditions as those living in remote communities. These suggest conflicting views about whether or not urban centres offer First Nations people more or less opportunities to connect to cultural and traditional knowledge.

What Hinders: Barriers to Successful Transitions

The barriers that exist for families during this transition are substantial. In this section I share literature surrounding how the Eurocentric approaches and structure of the current education system and lack of meaningful representation impacts Indigenous students. Some literature describes the outright racism and discrimination experienced in schools, assumptions made by teachers about Indigenous students and cultural differences connected to the expectations of parents and families.

The provincial and federal control of formal education continues to legitimize and normalize dominant culture and knowledge “through what is taught, how it is taught, and how learning is measured” (Milne, 2016, p.275). As a result, mainstream education supports a very narrow range of learners (Battiste, 2013; Friedel, 1999; Pidgeon, et al., 2013). This deliberate process of normalizing and legitimizing is what Harper and Thompson (2017) describe as structural oppression and it “produces detrimental outcomes [for] people outside the dominant group” (p.45). It has been suggested that many of the structural characteristics of the education system itself negatively influence student success, particularly for Indigenous students (Battiste, 2013; Friedel, 1999; Lamb, 2014).

Historically, there “has been no force as effective at oppressing First Nations cultures than the educational system” (Lamb, 2014, p.193). Due to the Eurocentric approaches and absence of relevant Indigenous representation, worldviews, histories, and perspectives, Indigenous youth have difficulty engaging in school (Hare & Pidgeon, 2011; Harper & Thompson, 2017). Some argue that it is not just an under-representation, but in fact a misrepresentation of Indigenous peoples and histories that is causing harm to students (Battiste, 2013; Pidgeon et al, 2013). Battiste (2013) asserts that public schooling is “perpetuating myths about Aboriginal cultures, languages, beliefs, and ways of life” (p. 163). Lamb (2014) argues that the public school curriculum is constricting the knowledge base of our children. Scott (2020) explains that when schools attempt to include Indigenous perspectives, they tend to settle for “token” pieces of Indigenous content randomly placed in different content areas without committing to meaningful incorporation of Indigenous ways of knowing and learning.

Harper and Thompson (2017) share four large-scale oppressions that are commonly faced by Indigenous students. These include, poverty, suppression of their identities, racism and gender violence. In addition to these overarching daily struggles of Indigenous youth, Hare and Pidgeon (2011) found that the schooling experience for First Nation youth from two northern Ontario communities was overwhelmingly marked by experiences with racism and discrimination, both personal and systemic, when they transitioned to the provincial school system. These kinds of racism have observable consequences such as “low self-esteem, negative attitudes, and interactions with peers and teachers and early school exit” (p.96).

Riley and Ungerleider (2012) examined how factors such as race, class, and gender influence the decisions teachers make regarding Aboriginal students. They found that, although most teachers believed that Aboriginal students had the ability to do well, teachers “presumed that negative life circumstances inhibited their potential to succeed” (p.313). Teachers’ beliefs

about students have a large impact on student success. As Wilson (2000) describes, one of the greatest challenges for their school district has been “to help teachers and administrators curb their first impulse to push First Nations students out of the school as quickly as possible and to direct them towards other resources” (p.142). Madden et al. (2013) state that without discussions of how colonization and Eurocentrism continue to shape the education system, non-Indigenous educators often blame Indigenous students and families for their academic shortcomings.

It is important to understand that these barriers, “are not self-made or imposed. They are the legacy of the many systemic policies and practices (e.g., residential schools) that continue to be reproduced in our educational system” (Pidgeon et al., 2013, p.21). The approach to teaching and learning often varies between Indigenous communities/parents and educators’ expectations, and this discrepancy can be a barrier. In a study conducted by Lea et al. (2011) exploring the relationship between place features of schools and parent-school engagement, they found some discrepancies between what educators perceived as barriers and what Indigenous parents felt. Educators in this study were very concerned that as a Western institution, the physical space of the school was not a ‘culturally safe place’, but parents did not mention physical structures as barriers. Parents in this study were satisfied with the nature and extent of their involvement in their children’s education. Similarly, Berger (2009) explains the need for educators to realize that “good parenting” varies between cultures, and the need to recognize their own bias and judgement that comes from a Eurocentric frame of reference.

In the face of many potential barriers to Indigenous student success in schools, there is a growing body of literature that explores ways in which Indigenous student success can be supported in mainstream education.

What Helps: Supporting Indigenous Student Success

Many suggest that building identity through honouring Indigenous ways of knowing and being is critical to increasing Indigenous student well-being and success in schools (Battiste, 2013; Cross et al., 2011; Harper & Thompson, 2017; Pidgeon et al, 2013, Rountree & Smith, 2016). These are in line with how Katz (2018) defines *safety* for Indigenous students, which “needs to include the safety of identity, culture, language, worldview, and approach and solutions to problems... safety in the context of Indigenous peoples means being safe to be, to think, and to act Indigenous” (p.ix).

Although students relocating from remote First Nations communities may have some of their immediate family members with them, there is a great deal of culture shock when transitioning to urban settings, and students are often without a safe, protective environment during transitions (Harper & Thompson, 2017). Talaga (2017) explains that many students coming from a northern reserve immediately into an urban environment “often come with a number of social and academic problems and are soon overwhelmed” (p.125). Ensuring spaces of cultural safety exist in schools may help with these feelings of being overwhelmed and culture shock.

Battiste (2013) makes a comparison between the experiences of Aboriginal peoples and Immigrants and refugees. She explains that their experiences differ in that immigrants know they will have to learn a particular culture when they make the choice to make their way to Canada, whereas Aboriginal people do not have a choice--assimilative processes have been forced upon them. The fact that they have a choice, Battiste (2013) claims, is what “guides them along the way [and] helps them make this transition” (p.24). Wilkinson (2002) writes that newcomers who “relinquish their own culture for the mainstream ‘white’ culture are more likely to be successful in school...” (p.177), whereas, “youth who reject mainstream values... are more likely to quit school, get into trouble with the law and practice deviant behaviours” (p.178).

The idea that students must relinquish their cultural identity in order to succeed is heartbreaking, and it is the reason that Katz (2018) calls for schools to be places of cultural safety.

Williams (2000) argues that it is the “firmly established First Nations identity [that] will aid them in reaching out for the opportunities available in the city without having to feel that in order to belong in Canada... they must divest themselves of their identity” (p.145). Katz (2018) paints the picture of what this could look like in schools by stating that “where schools in Canada were once used as weapons against Indigenous peoples, the inclusive schools of reconciliation will be places of healing, empowerment, and hope” (p.209). What this actually looks like in our provincially funded schools is still unclear.

Pidgeon et al. (2013) share lessons learned and reflections from three educators with different perspectives and involvement in the journey and history of Indigenous education. Through their reflections, we can imagine an education program that meets the needs of Indigenous students to be holistic, including intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual aspects of development, in which the determinants of learning and growth are personalized, non-competitive and inclusive. Pidgeon et al. (2013) discuss what it might take for institutions to “break the hegemonic assumptions of colonization” (p.32) in the way that they design policies, programs, and practices. Similarly, Harper and Thompson (2017) argue that, “contemporary education must now cultivate Indigenous pride and strength in identity” which will “dramatically increase one’s sense of belonging” (p. 47). This requires that Indigenous ways of knowing and being are honoured and reflected in ways that go far beyond the simple act of putting up Indigenous artwork.

It is becoming increasingly important that well-being and measures of success be broadened. Cross et al. (2011) ask the question “who gets to decide what is effective?” They assert that, “whose preferred outcomes are used to establish effectiveness is a matter of social justice” (p.100). Cross et al. (2011) use the Relational Worldview Model to gather data about

views of success from youth and stakeholders about urban Native Youth. Participants in the study emphasized culturally based outcomes to define youth success, such as “the seven ways of walking”, knowing histories and ceremonies, participating in cultural crafts and activities, and understanding spiritual beliefs. Their findings demonstrate the importance of culturally based indicators in assessing youth well-being and success. Similarly, Rountree and Smith (2016) found that community members consistently describe cultural values and a positive cultural identity as necessary to well-being. In their review of the literature, Rountree and Smith (2016) shared the indicators most frequently cited in each of the areas of the Relational Worldview Model. In the Mind quadrant was cultural identity or sense of belonging. In the Body quadrant was financial security/stability/income and access to health care. They concluded that because most schools do not take contextual and spiritual indicators into account, these mainstream indicators of success are “missing half of the picture” when it comes to Indigenous student well-being.

Both Harper and Thompson (2017) and Pidgeon et al. (2013) write about the importance of strong social relationships with instructors for student success. Pidgeon et al. (2013) explain how proactive actions of teachers within the classroom to “disrupt, interrupt, and prevent racial slurs or stereotypes” (p.27) allows students to feel supported, and in turn, builds relationships. In addition to building positive relationships, the curriculum, pedagogical approaches, and teacher training/knowledge have a large role in creating safe spaces for Indigenous students (Cross et al., 2011; Hill et al, 2012; Lamb, 2014; O’Gorman & Pandey, 2015; Pidgeon et al, 2013; Riley & Ungerleider, 2012).

What we Teach Matters

As mentioned in the discussion about barriers to success, historically Indigenous perspectives and histories have been absent from classrooms. It is time for teachers to recognize that, “contemporarily, First Peoples [are] present in the classroom” (Pidgeon et al.,

2013, p.14). O’Gorman & Pandey (2015) examine the factors causing off-reserve high school graduation rates among Aboriginal individuals in Northern communities to differ so dramatically from those in the rest of Canada. The only variable they found to relate positively to the probability of high school graduation is students being taught about Aboriginal history and customs in school. Similarly, Lamb (2014) found this same variable to negatively relate to the probability of leaving school early for both on- and off-reserve students. This confirms the position held by Pidgeon et al. (2013) that teachers working with First Nations children must be responsible, knowledgeable, and respectful of Indigenous peoples and education. Harper and Thompson (2017) call for anti-racism strategies as part of teacher training, which address the truth about Aboriginal history, the history of colonization, and educate about treaties and Indian residential schools.

How we teach matters

It is important to consider not only *what* is being taught but also *how* it is being taught. Training in cultural awareness for teachers on how to work more effectively with Indigenous students may further lead to academic engagement and success (Cross et al., 2011; Lamb, 2014; Riley & Ungerleider, 2012). Cross et al. (2011) found that teachers’ practice was transformed through teacher understanding of the historical, cultural and structural factors, and this moved teachers’ discourses away from blaming and towards engaging with students and families. In order to address systemic barriers, educators must face their own “colonial legacies and resultant privilege” (Madden et. al, 2013) requiring us to “turn the mirror back upon ourselves and answer... How do we solve the settler problem?” (Regan, 2010, p.11). Riley and Ungerleider (2012) found that teachers familiar with the combined theories of stereotyping and attribution may: a) better understand the ways discrimination may manifest in the classroom; b) carefully consider the attributions made about students’ successes or failures; c) understand how personal beliefs or values may lead to the denial of student opportunities; and d) recognize

and challenge their own stereotypical perceptions and those of others. This kind of self-reflection and knowledge is necessary for educators to remove systemic barriers.

Hill et al. (2012) describe many best practices that support “mobile Indigenous students” in Australia. One key support involves an expanded notion of readiness to learn. Schools must acknowledge factors beyond those directly related to classrooms and include things such as environmental factors (housing, transport and family circumstances). In this way schools are attending to the social and academic needs of students in transition. Hill et al. (2012) noted the positive impact of having a specialist staff to assist schools and families with educational mobility, in particular for students facing poverty and mobility as many Indigenous students are. This staff member was able to ensure students were: attending regularly, encouraged to participate in other activities, and that all diagnostic assessments were up-to-date and completed in collaboration with the classroom teacher. These factors all contributed to developing a plan for learning. Ensuring proper assessment data is gathered to support the learning of students in transition is very important to their success (Hill et al., 2012). Another important finding that Hill et al. (2012) note is how schools view student mobility as something that needs to be “fixed” rather than as a cultural difference requiring understanding. This kind of attitude can lead to educators in schools maintaining a deficit perception that promotes blame rather than partnership. Mutch et al. (2011) suggest some practical ways to support students and create safe spaces by developing a buddy system, ensuring desk and coat hanging is available on arrival, as well as matching personalities and interests of students with particular teachers when possible.

Who Teaches Matters

When considering the structure and approach to teaching, the participant voice from Madden et al. (2013) sheds some light on what this might look like when their participant says, “the very first thing you do is get them [students] out of the regimented rows. You bring them

back to the way the Elders taught” (p.233). In attempting to help students to transition successfully from remote communities to urban schools, it is necessary to have the help of the community (Berger, 2009; Pidgeon et al., 2013). Schools must draw on the knowledge and experience of Elders and knowledge keepers and encourage community involvement in decision-making.

Family-School-Community Relationship

We believe that the Creator has entrusted us with the sacred responsibility to raise our families...for we realize healthy families are the foundation of strong and healthy communities. The future of our communities lies with our children, who need to be nurtured within their families and communities. (RCAP (Volume 3),1996, page 13)

Many researchers have written about the generational impacts of Indigenous families' negative experiences with school (Battiste, 2016; Berger, 2009; Friedel, 1999; Madden et al., 2013; Milne, 2016). Milne (2016) writes about how social class and legacies of racial discrimination create distrust, tension and act as barriers that complicate families' ability to meet teacher expectations for involvement. As such, Indigenous families face unique challenges when navigating school systems. Madden et al. (2013) identify four barriers that still prevent Indigenous community members from engaging in urban education: 1. unwelcoming schools, 2. professionalization of classroom teaching, 3. colonized classrooms, and 4. unilateral decolonization. As a result of these circumstances, it is vital for school staff to build positive relationships with families transitioning to a new school and city.

Friedel (1999) writes, “mainstream parents do not have to spend time and energy making the education system reflective of their culture, because they know the school will reflect similar values to their own” (p.144). Lea et al. (2011) identified a lack of confidence in Indigenous parents dealing with the school system. As a result, it becomes accepted that school staff and administrators will do a better job at educating their children, they are viewed as experts (Friedel, 1999). An attitude of “school is school, and home is home” (Milne, 2016) perpetuates for Indigenous families. However, Friedel (1999) suggests that it is more likely that

Indigenous parents resist becoming involved because administrators continue not to ask for guidance or advice. Either way, the end result is Indigenous parents on the outside looking in at schools and their children's education (Friedel, 1999).

Lea et al. (2011) found that looking at both parental and educator comments about school engagement/barriers, offered glimpses into the misunderstandings and assumptions each group holds about the other and the school environment. The educators interviewed placed much more emphasis on the physical space of the school, and how this might be improved to engage families, rather than the desire to have Indigenous input about how things operate. Parent interviews in this study showed that they were often very content with their level of involvement in their children's education. One parent indicated that "just getting the child up and ready for school was commitment enough" (p.269). Parents in Lea et al. (2011) did not indicate any feelings of discomfort, despite educators consistently indicating 'parental discomfort' as a barrier to family-school engagement. It is important for these teachers to learn to recognize and value the different ways that parents are supporting their child's education.

Researchers suggest that educators not expect Indigenous families to behave and engage with schools in the same way as middle-class non-Indigenous families (Berger, 2009; Friedel, 1999; Milne, 2016). There is a need for schools to recognize and honour different cultural models of teaching and learning. Pidgeon et al. (2013) write about how Indigenous people have always valued education, although different than today's Eurocentric system, Indigenous nations had their own systems and pedagogies that were the very heart of their existence. Battiste (2013) states that, "different cultures have different styles of teaching and learning" (p.149). Youth participants in Hare and Pidgeon (2012) speak about the "emotional, social, and cultural support their families offered" (p.105) in their education. This "characterizes how values are shared within an Indigenous community" (Hare & Pidgeon, 2012, p.102). Youth did not share whether parents or family were able to help them with homework, or whether they

attended parent-teacher interviews, but rather they felt supported by caring members of their family and community that gave them the courage to persevere.

Milne (2016) describes how non-Indigenous teachers come to blame Indigenous students and their families for the lower levels of academic success. One interview shared in Milne's (2016) research was with a middle class First Nations grandparent, who talked about participating in school board committees and councils, which she described as her chance to receive "a free education about the school system" (p.281). This knowledge about how the school system actually works is what is missing for many Indigenous families who lack confidence in engaging with the public school system. Berger (2009) found that parents will become more involved when they understand school goals, and Friedel (1999) citing Delgado-Gaitan states, "to actively participate in the school, parents must be informed about the school system and how it functions" (p.143). As discovered by Milne (2016), many low-income Indigenous parents are simply unaware that they can take an active role in their child's education.

Mutch et al. (2011) conducted 11 case studies documenting schools that have good practices for supporting students and their families to make successful transitions to new schools. One important piece to a school's success is the ability to build relationships with families through a variety of ways, both formal and informal (school sporting events, phone calls home, etc). The relationship building starts from initial contact, with being purposeful about the enrolment stage, and allowing for initial discussion to be relatively informal and welcoming for the whole family. Mutch et al. (2011) found that transient students often have more social and educational needs than other students and this is why transitioning families often require full service social supports. Schools that were successful at transitioning families did not limit their role to education-related matters, but took on a wider community context role by drawing on social services. Schools noted that social issues faced by many families (hunger, family violence, budgeting and housing issues) were seen as barriers to achievement in school. These

schools offered a more coordinated approach, especially between the government agencies available to support families and schools. Mutch et al. (2011) found that “schools can improve outcomes for transient students by working effectively and positively in partnership with families, communities and support agencies” (p.244).

In supporting Indigenous families and students, schools must connect with the greater community and there are a number of reasons that this is necessary. Friedel (1999) writes that, “parents alone cannot make change, they need the community to work with them, and they require the perspective and vision of their Elders” (p.149). He suggests that by only including parents in the school community, the learning curve for school staff working on building inclusive schools will remain virtually stagnant. Lamb (2014) shares that Elders are the “custodians” of language, and they should be given dignity by actively valuing their knowledge and services. Participants in Madden et al. (2013) indicate that many children have not had the opportunity to walk with Elders and hear the lessons. They call for this “living knowledge” to be brought into schools. Pidgeon et al. (2013) also discuss the importance of having an advisory committee made up of people from the local community to advise schools, and this input must be acted upon to show their voices are truly valued rather than just being heard for the sake of it.

Summary and Implications

There are a number of interconnected influences impacting families and students who relocate from remote First Nations communities to the city of Thunder Bay. There is no question this experience is a significant transition.

The stark contrast between life on a reserve and life in the city has a significant impact on families and students. Many families living in remote First Nations communities are living with the ongoing trauma caused by colonization, including high poverty, overcrowded housing,

and substance abuse. Students are coming from underfunded schools without consistent standards and are often well behind the provincial standard.

There are some inherent barriers within the public education system that make this relocation from their home communities even more difficult. I have discussed how the curriculum and content is not always accurate or inclusive of First Nations peoples, perspectives, and worldviews, which results in systemic oppression of Indigenous students. Many teachers do not understand the traditional approaches to teaching, learning, and parenting, which impacts the relationship between families and the school. Families and students who move to urban centers from their First Nation communities are experiencing a culture shock and are being asked to blend in or fit in with an unfamiliar system.

It is necessary for school staff to create safe spaces where Indigenous students feel they belong, and it is argued that educators have an obligation to strengthen Indigenous students' identity. Educators may have to reexamine what their definition of success is and consider what this really looks like for Indigenous students. Research has shown that Indigenous students benefit from educators and staff taking time to examine their own biases. It is crucial to avoid using a deficit approach that involves placing blame rather than building relationships when working with these families.

Building positive relationships between families and school staff is foundational to Indigenous student success. The literature suggests that there is some discrepancy between what educators perceive to be barriers and how parents feel about their level of engagement. Indigenous parents could benefit from gaining a better understanding of the education system. Including Elders, knowledge keepers, and traditional teachers in schools can have a positive impact on student success and builds relationships.

Within the context of the historical relationship between First Nations peoples and education, and the current struggles of life in First Nations communities, there are many barriers to families and students moving seamlessly from one to the other. Although they are undergoing a physical change in location, the question schools need to ask involves more than physical safety, when they consider whether or not they are “culturally safe for Indigenous students” (Katz, 2018). How can we ensure that relationships are being built between families, the school staff, and community members/organization that will optimally support this transition?

Chapter 3: Methodology

Approach to Research

“The research process has the potential to reconcile a researcher’s personal and professional selves, their inner and outer worlds even” (McGregor, Restoule & Johnston, 2018, p.23)

What are Indigenous ways of teaching, learning, and gaining knowledge? Answering this question by attending a colonial institution for a master’s degree that specializes in Indigenous Education is an irony not lost on me. As someone who has been raised through and learned to excel in this colonial system of education with little Anishnaabe cultural experiences or understanding growing up, this style of institutional, academic learning is still deeply ingrained in me. Over the last ten years, I have been growing in my understanding of myself as Anishnaabe kwe. I continue to seek Mino Bimaadiziwin, the good life. To me this means returning to the teachings of the Anishnaabe in the way I act and think and choose to live, walking the path that my ancestors planned for me. I try to ensure my learning is balanced between the colonial education system and ceremony or time spent with traditional teachers, knowledge keepers and Elders.

Wilson (2008) uses the concept of a circle to explain the elements of an Indigenous research paradigm, stating that: “they are not too easily compartmentalized nor separate from our existence as Indigenous people” (p.91). As Anishnaabe kwe, I cannot separate who I am from how I conduct research, and as such, my methods are Indigenous. At the same time, I acknowledge that I am a “woman of multiple ancestries” (Fellner, 2018). I was raised by a settler-Canadian mother in an urban, Eurocentric knowledge system. Johnston et al. (2018) share that who you are matters in Indigenous research, and this approach differs depending on where you are from, your motivations, your relationship with participants, and the location of your research. Despite being of mixed ancestry, Fellner (2018) wrote that her “paradigm *needed* to be “inherently and wholly Indigenous” (Kovach, 2009, p.13)” (p.35, italics added). Initially, I felt similarly compelled to employ wholly Indigenous approaches, but as I worked through the

research design, it became clear that my research paradigm is, as I am, a blend of Western Euro-settler and Indigenous ways.

The philosophical approach and guiding principles of this research are informed and influenced by Indigenous methodologies. My research question and approach allow for exploration of cultural history, colonial history and future aspirations, three elements that Absolon (2011) includes in her description of Indigenous paradigms. Indigenous methodology is based on Indigenous worldviews and rooted in Indigenous knowledges and relationality (Wilson, 2008; Kovach, 2009; Tuhawai Smith, 2012).

My Worldview

Indigenous Worldview

Absolon (2011) defines worldview as “an intimate belief system that connects indigenous people to identity, knowledge and practices” (p.57). For Indigenous peoples’, these worldviews are rooted in traditions, land, language, relations and culture and are passed from one generation to the next through oral traditions. Archibald (2008) describes the First Nations concept of holism, referring to the “interrelatedness between the intellectual, spiritual..., emotional, and physical... realms” (p.11) which forms a whole person. This often-circular image expands to include living in harmony among “animals, people, elements of nature, and the Spirit World” (p.11). Benton-Banai (1988) describes this as a “delicate balance” where humans are called to live with all of Creation. Creswell (2014) explains worldviews as “general philosophical orientation about the world and the nature of research” (p.6). I enter into this research with these beliefs - the cyclical nature of life, the interconnectedness of Creation, and the centrality of holism – as grounding for my approach.

Transformative Worldview

Research conducted within a transformative worldview “contains an action agenda for reform...” (Creswell, 2014, p.9). In line with my approach, this philosophical view focuses on improving conditions for marginalized groups, such as Indigenous peoples, based on their needs. My research has an action agenda. I hope to create change in schools as a result of the knowledge gained that will have a positive impact on First Nations students and families who have been historically marginalized in the Canadian education system.

Indigenous Knowledge

Kovach (2005) explains that “indigenous knowledge systems are the heartbeat of indigenous methodologies” (p.57), and holistic thinking is at the heart of Indigenous knowledge. Battiste (2013) states that holistic thinking “includes the unity of spiritual and physical worlds” (p.76). Hart (2007) describes indigenous knowledge as holistic, personal, social, intergenerational, and involving both spiritual and physical. I connect the spiritual and physical through the use of tobacco offering and smudging throughout the research process. The role and importance of these will be discussed in more detail later.

Indigenous people are diverse across Canada, as Battiste (2013) points out, stating that “each community will have its own stories and understandings... this ultimately shapes their humanity, their spirituality, and their heritage” (p.75). Knowing this, I understand that in my research the interpretations and findings will “conform to Indigenous knowledge according to local cultural imperatives” (p.75) within the Thunder Bay area.

Relationship-based Approach

Tuhiwai Smith (2012) uses the term respect to explain how the relationships and place of everything in the universe is kept in “balance and harmony”. Respect is “reciprocal, shared, [and a] constantly interchanging principle which is expressed through all aspects of social

conduct” (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012, p.125), and it is paramount within Indigenous approaches to research.

Wilson (2008) shares the key features of a healthy research relationship which include respect, reciprocity and responsibility. This research prioritizes the respectful implementation of Indigenous methodology as well as the usefulness of results to families, students and Indigenous communities, leading to reciprocity between participants and researcher. Kovach (2009) explains how the relationship is not bound only to the interview sessions, but also includes the time and energy put into building and maintaining that relationship.

Many of the participants in this research will be in some way connected to me, either through my role with the school board, or my work in remote First Nations communities in Northwestern Ontario, or connections through community events. Through the relationships I have built and trust I have established within different circles, I was given the responsibility of listening to their stories and experiences and using the knowledge gained to inform school staff and community members/organizations in ways that helps students and families.

Research Question

Through my role as the Indigenous Education Lead with a local school board, and my experience teaching in a remote community, I have had many opportunities to work in and with community. Schools in our city need to be better equipped to support families and students who are moving from remote First Nations communities and enrolling in public schools. They represent a unique population of students and families with unique needs, however, once they register with a Thunder Bay address, it is my experience that they are often treated like any other resident.

The school board has an Aboriginal Education Advisory Committee (AEAC). It is comprised of several staff members with the majority of voting members being Aboriginal parents and representatives from different community organizations in Thunder Bay, including the Thunder Bay Indigenous Friendship Centre, Nishnaabe Aski Nation Education Director, Matawa Education, Fort William First Nation Education, and others. In an urban context, it can be difficult to determine whose voice you use to speak for urban Aboriginal people. AEAC represents a cross section of our city's urban Aboriginal population, and this group informs the board's priorities and guides our work in Indigenous Education. Supporting student transitions and increasing parent involvement have been identified as important aspects of the committee's workplan for a number of years. I've selected my research questions based on personal experiences, the needs identified by the AEAC committee, and the research suggesting that a) Aboriginal students struggle in provincially funded schools (Battiste, 2013; Lamb, 2014; O'Gorman & Pandy, 2015; Harper & Thompson, 2016) and b) the transition from remote First Nations communities to urban settings is difficult for families and students (Maddison, 2013; Harper & Thompson, 2017). My research questions are formed around these assumptions and restated here for readers.

Primary research question:

What role can school staff play in supporting families and students who are relocating from remote First Nations communities to urban centers?

Secondary questions:

What makes a transition "successful"? How can we define that success?

What are the barriers to successful transitions?

How can schools be safe spaces for students in times of cultural/environmental transition?

Research Design

“Indigenous research is not just about healing from colonization... it is more about seeking a path forward that supports “a good life” or overall well-being (Bell, 2013).” (Johnston, McGregor & Restoule, 2018, p.8)

Throughout the research process, I rely heavily on the spiritual power and role of tobacco. It is my teaching that tobacco comes first, and as such, my tobacco has been offered along with my “intentions, thoughts, prayers, questions, emotions, and feelings” and these “travel with the tobacco to the spiritual realm” (Wilson & Restoule, p.35) to begin this research. Tobacco ties have been prepared in this same manner, offering my intentions, thoughts and prayers, and smudged before offering them to participants. When possible, a smudge was offered at the time of the interview (both before and after). Wilson and Restoule (2010) share words from Cree Elder Pauline Shirt who says that,

When you use the smudge you are creating a purified space for the spirits to come and help with what is going to be talked about. Tobacco is presented and then it can be sent up as an offering to the Spirit world (p.39).

With this use of tobacco and smudge, my approach goes beyond “conventional intellectual ways of seeking knowledge” (Johnston, McGregor & Restoule, 2018, p.8) to include a connection to the spirit. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, some of my interviews took place over Zoom during times of government-enforced lockdowns when tobacco could not be offered in person. I went out on the land prior to each interview and offered on our behalf. I let participants know this. In addition, throughout the data analysis process, I committed to maintaining positive energy surrounding participants’ stories and experiences. This involved smudging myself, and the space I was working in before interacting with data.

The research we do as Indigenous people needs to be relevant and useful *for* Indigenous people. Kovach (2005) explains that when we define our research inquiry in this way, the research process will be respectful, effective and it will become a practical tool. My

initial goal in pursuing my master's degree was to produce a resource for schools in Thunder Bay that would help them to support families and students who register directly from remote First Nations communities through the portfolio route. While this remains my end goal, as I learned more about the research process, I saw the value in exploring this topic through a master's thesis that will provide a foundational resource that can support First Nations families and students as well as educators.

My research has been designed using a desire-based model as described by Tuck (2009). This requires looking beyond the "broken and conquered" images in First Nations communities and being "concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives" (p.416). In the review of the literature for this research, we can see that generally, Indigenous students in Canada are "underperforming" compared to non-Indigenous students. Rather than focus on this damage-centred information, this research explores how to support a specific group of First Nations students and their families, to move beyond the barriers.

Assumptions, limitations, and scope

Based on my experience with children and youth who have moved from their home communities to urban centers, the assumption being made is that this is, in fact, a difficult transition, and there is more that can be done at the school-level to support families.

First Nations communities in northern Ontario are diverse, and I cannot assume that one community's experiences are universal to all. While this research is not a representation of all remote First Nations communities, it will provide a snapshot of what relocation is like for families

and will provide educators' voices about their thoughts and experiences. This snap shot is a valuable starting point for larger projects.

Data Collection

Data was gathered through a familiar method in qualitative research, using open-ended interviews. In line with what Tilley (2016) describes as a form of unstructured, in-depth and open-ended interviews, I shared interview guides with participants before the interviews, "with the expectation that these questions are to initiate a conversation between the interviewer and interviewee; some questions may never be answered, and new questions often emerge through the conversation to which both the interviewers and interviewees contribute" (p.48). By providing questions and topics that connect to participants lived experiences, this method of data collection provided information through the lens of the interviewees (Creswell, 2014). Archibald and Xiiem (2019) explain the use of Indigenous lived experience stories within methodology to "provide a deeper and more authentic perspective of Indigenous Knowledge systems, colonial impact, and sovereignty approaches" (p.18).

While I provided guiding questions, by beginning with my own location, experiences and purpose, I encouraged a combination of reflection, story, and dialogue (Kovach, 2005). Feller (2018) cites Lee Maracle (2015) who notes that: "listening to story is an emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual commitment" (p.56). This method of collecting data fits within more traditional Western methods, and as well, in the action of giving voice to participant experiences and stories, uses elements of Indigenous storywork (Archibald, 2008). "Indigenous storywork seeks to rectify the damage and reclaim our ability to story-talk, story-listen, story-learn and story-teach" (Archibald et al., 2019, p.7). These concepts of story-talk, story-listen, and story-learn were at the forefront of my data collection and analysis.

I acknowledge that, “for story to surface there must be trust” (Kovach, 2009, p.98). To encourage this, I opened conversations and dialogue by sharing my self-location, situating myself, and explaining my motivation for this research. I trusted the role of tobacco and other medicines to help build this foundation of trust as well.

Educators and families (parents and children) participated in separate open-ended interviews. Three interviews were conducted in person and audio recorded. The remaining four interviews were done via Zoom video conference with both the audio and video recording being used for transcription. Guiding questions that were used for the different groups can be found in Appendix A.

Participant Selection

In an effort to capture multiple perspectives from those involved in this transition, the participants in this research include three groups: education leaders from remote First Nation communities, educators from schools in Thunder Bay, and families (parents/guardians and children) who have experienced the transition from schools in remote First Nation communities to a school in the city of Thunder Bay. I felt it was important to balance family and educator input and seven interviews was sufficient to capture a snapshot of this experience.

I reached out to leaders in education working in and with remote First Nations communities that I have a working relationship with to participate in this research. The educator participants from Thunder Bay were selected based on school board data showing a large number of students who have registered directly from remote First Nations communities, with the input from the board’s Aboriginal Education Advisory Committee. Educators were approached via email, instant message or telephone to encourage participation. Families were recommended through the schools or other community and personal connections.

Participants

Although it was not an intentional part of my research design, all of the participants in this research self-identify as Indigenous, either Anishnaabe or Métis. Many of the participants in are members of First Nations communities across Northwestern Ontario, including Bearskin Lake, Muskrat Dam, and Big Trout Lake, or Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug (KI). I use gender-neutral pronouns throughout to describe the participants. This is in part to maintain anonymity and also to honor Anishnaabe languages, which do not assign gender when discussing people.

Education Leaders from Remote First Nations Communities

One participant is a Principal, working in a remote First Nations community in Northwestern Ontario. They grew up in the community they work in now, and have themselves, relocated to Thunder Bay for educational purposes at different times.

One participant is a leader with Nishnaabe Aski Nation (NAN), who has responsibilities for Education across all 49 NAN communities. They lived in their remote First Nation community in Northwestern Ontario for much of their childhood and moved to Thunder Bay when they were in elementary school.

Educators in Thunder Bay

One of the educator participants working in Thunder Bay have worked in a number of positions, both elementary and secondary across the city, and at the time of our interview was working in a central support role to support Indigenous Education within a school board.

One of the educator participants is currently working as a Principal at a school that was identified by school board data to have a high number of registrations each year from students/families who are transitioning directly to Thunder Bay from a First Nation Education Authority. The school data showed that in 2019, this school had 27 students register in their school directly from a remote First Nations community. For many schools this number was zero,

and only three other schools in the board registered over 20 students directly from a remote First Nations community.

Families

One of the families that participated relocated from a remote First Nations community 14 years ago, when the family member who participated was entering Grade 9.

One of the families that participated moved from their remote First Nation community before their children were school-aged. One of the parents worked in the school in their home community, and both have experience working with youth who have relocated from their home communities for school.

One of the families that participated relocated to Thunder Bay from their remote First Nation community when the student was in Grade 2. That student is now in Grade 9. The parent in this family also moved to Thunder Bay when they were 14 to attend secondary school in the city.

Data Analysis

During data analysis my paramount responsibility as the researcher was to ensure stories were treated with respect (Kovach, 2009). Following the completion of interviews, video/audio recordings were transcribed. While reviewing the transcripts, I began the process of *restorying*, which Ollerenshaw & Creswell (2002) describe as “reading the transcript, analyzing the story to understand the lived experiences and then retelling the story” (p.330). In this process, “researchers narrate the story and often identify themes or categories that emerge from the story” (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002, p.332). Wilson (2008) maintains that during this process, knowledge being interpreted should continue to help build the relationships that have been established. My responsibility as researcher was to ensure accurate voice and representation (Kovach, 2009). Interview excerpts that I planned to include within the overall

themes they were connected to, were then shared with each of the participants to ensure accuracy and comfort with how their stories were being represented.

Finding the Story

Once my data was organized and I had identified several themes and important quotes from each participant's interview, I went to the land with their stories. I went to a sacred space in our community carrying the voices of my participants--their stories, their experiences, the quotes, and everything my participants had shared with me over the last year.

I went snowshoeing on the mountain through the yellow birch, past the rare cedar patch, the sugar bush, and the beaver lodge. I climbed up, listening to the crunch of the snow, dodging the branches. Admiring the red willow and the small maple, careful not to break any branches as the path narrowed. I listened to the stillness and felt the strength of the mountain. It is full of good medicine. Anemki Wajiw – the home of the Thunder Beings.

I brought my semma (tobacco), prepared to offer my thanks for the stories, knowledge and experiences shared by my participants--for the trust I've been given to share them and to the land for sustaining us and giving us life.

Anemki Wajiw whispered to me about all of the stories they carry and about all of the families and children they've greeted upon their arrival to this place. I understood that they've been here for every story. They know each of my participants. Their research has been going on much longer than mine. I put down my semaa. An offer had been accepted. Anemki Wajiw wanted to help tell the story.

As a result of this experience on the mountain, I am sharing my data in two ways. First, in chapter 4 I share the whole story, with Anemki Wajiw as the storyteller. Then I share the voices and stories of my participants organized within the themes and important areas that relate to my research questions and along the same path of the story told by Anemki Wajiw.

Conclusion

In the beginning of my research journey, I struggled to write a methodology. I questioned if I was using or could employ Indigenous methodologies effectively, but as the process revealed itself to me, the path naturally aligned with the approaches that Wilson (2008), Archibald (2008), and Absolon (2011) describe. While I initially resisted a storywork approach, in the end, my data and methods led me to stories.

Chapter 4: The Whole Story

After completing much of my data analysis, I visited the sacred home of the Thunder Beings on Fort William First Nation, Anemki Wajiw, renamed by settlers and now commonly known as Mount McKay. I went to the mountain carrying the stories and experiences of my participants in my mind and heart. In my time with Anemki Wajiw, it became clear that they wanted to help. What follows in this chapter is a full picture of the story that emerged from my data collection through the conversations with participants. The story is told from the perspective of Anemki Wajiw, who has been here to greet every family and student that has had to leave their home community in the remote north to come to Thunder Bay.

You see, inawemaagan, my relative, these families are not new to this place. It's this place that is new. Their ancestors have visited since time immemorial, the great Lake Superior, Anishnaabe Gitchi Gami, holds many of their stories. The water remembers them well. We remember when they lived according to the cycle of the seasons and provisions of Creator. The times they were free to visit and share; to gather and trade; to feast and play games; the times they came to make agreements with other nations.

Gitchi Gami and I, we remember when they were independent and untethered, the times before their lives were restricted by the newcomers. They always travelled north through the summers, each to their own piece of land that sustained them. They came closer for winter. But as the newcomers moved in, and set up, and built forts, the families stopped coming to visit as often. The men still came once in a while; they brought their furs to trade for supplies; that's when they still relied on the land to meet all of their needs. That's before they realized a leader from another world, the leader known as the king who lived across the ocean, was giving away their land. Before they knew land could be owned.

We knew these families when the Elders shared their visions; they foresaw the treaties, the reserve system, and the devastation to come.

We saw that big wave that came for the children, that strong and powerful wave. It was out of control that wave. It still is. We watched as generation after generation got sucked into the undertow, into the dark, deep waters. We carried the songs of the ones who didn't make it out. We sent strength to those who fought back to the surface. We know that everyone still remembers that wave, the fear of the water has not left these families.

Gitchi Gami and I, we see the wreckage left on the shores from those waves.

We know that they have not been served well in their new homes in the north.

We understand why they come to this place.

We understand they've left pieces of themselves behind.

We understand that this place does not make it easy to connect to Land.

We welcome them to our ceremonies; we share the pieces we can to restore their identity.

We feel the impact of the crash as they collide with this culture.

We greet them with love, but we know that's not what they feel from this city. We know the hurt that causes.

We feel their fears.

We see them struggle to navigate these new systems. We are proud of how they take on all of the new responsibilities.

We see them, even when they're hiding, trying to blend in. We see the pain that brings.

We know their longing for connection and community, that pull they feel to return to their home. We try to let them know they belong.

We know they were made for relationship.

We know it is hard when they don't see or feel themselves or their relatives reflected in this place.

The newcomers, they don't know what we know. They don't understand our gifts.

The newcomers, they don't know us yet. But they can learn,

We see their victories.

We see how the community is there to support them.

We know they can help each other.

We share our strength. We share our medicine. We believe it will get better.

I wrote this story as a summary of the data I collected--as a way to share the themes in the stories I had uncovered through my research and tie them together to create a full picture of participants' experiences. The story allows me to share the themes in an uninterrupted way. I offer it here as an introduction to what you will read in the next chapter. Chapter five follows the same path as this story. You will see these themes shared through each subheading and using the words and experiences of participants to demonstrate their meaning.

Chapter 5: The Story in Their Own Words

All that we are is story. From the moment we are born to the time we continue on our spirit journey; we are involved in the creation of the story of our time here. It is what we arrive with. It is all we leave behind. When...we take the time to share those stories with each other, we get bigger inside, we see each other, we recognize our kinship – we change the world, one story at a time. Richard Wagamese

In presenting the data collected through my research, I have decided to share many participant quotes in their entirety. I often feel that even the word data is too clinical sounding a term for the gifts that were given to me by my participants. There is powerful learning in the stories and experiences shared. As a way to honour and respect them, I have chosen not to paraphrase the lived experiences of my participants in most cases. I present data that was gathered through my conversations following the same path as the story that was shared in chapter four, but in this chapter, the story is explained and expanded upon using the words of participants.

This story starts with understanding life in First Nations communities, the structure and reality of life in a remote reserve, and the ongoing impacts of the Indian residential school system on families. It follows the path of leaving the community, arriving in the city, the feelings and experiences that define this time, and then shares school experiences and participant suggestions for what could be helpful for families, and how school staff can connect with community to support this transition.

The Reserve System

Both of the leaders in education from remote First Nations communities brought up some of the issues created by the isolation and the impact of living in these government-run communities. One participant connected the isolation to an apparent lack of relevance for parents when it comes to school engagement, stating that,

It's not relevant to them, or they don't see the relevance to education because they are just going to live in the community. There's no jobs. We don't produce anything, and so there's no sort of expectation or goal for their kids.

Later in our conversation, that educator went on to share that the only jobs are government funded jobs: the school, the nursing station, and the band office. The government has created both dependence and a level of apathy in remote First Nations communities.

When asked to consider the differences families face when relocating to Thunder Bay, another participant replied, "being independent"; making the bold statement that coming to the city after having spent your life on the reserve is "almost like asking a little baby or a toddler to look after themselves, because they are not ready". They explained that,

...if they were living on welfare, everything was probably taken care of for them. They're homes, right? Rez homes, you don't need to fix anything yourselves...we have a high welfare rate, not because they are lazy, but a lot of the times, there's no jobs.

This reliance on paternalistic government-funded structures makes it very difficult when a family wants to leave the community.

Families talked about the high cost of living in remote First Nations communities, and the limited access to supplies.

There's high expense cost of groceries and electricity back home [in the remote First Nations community], and then the internet cost and phone cost are higher up north, but there's no mortgages, but you can't just fix up things, because you don't have places to buy things for upkeep. A lot of the times they just have grocery stores, and gasoline stores, that's it. And then freight is so expensive, so a lot of people utilize the winter road.

Limited access to supplies makes the cost of living very high, which as a couple of participants explained, makes it very difficult to save money for the relocation to Thunder Bay.

The Role of Residential Schools

Every participant spoke about the impact and ever-present reality of the Indian Residential School System in the lives of children and families coming from remote First Nations communities, either directly or indirectly.

“The residential school is so friggin’ powerful... it’s so powerful in a negative way. It’s just like these hidden under the rug, deeply rooted issues and...they eat away at a person,” said one of the educational leaders from remote First Nations communities. The deep roots of the residential school system came up in a number of ways and were explained also as a “big deep wound, that no one knows how to close or how to heal”. One of the educator participants from a remote First Nation community shared that because their parents went to residential school, and didn’t give them compassion, “you end up not being like that towards your own kids. There’s a cycle, a vicious cycle”. The idea of that cycle, and the ripple effect of damaged relationships between generations came up with other participants as well. One educator, now in Thunder Bay, who grew up in the north, shared,

Both my parents [went to] residential school, the classic, textbook story, the narrative around what intergenerational impact looked like. I was struggling [when I left to attend school] with wanting to be with my family, but it was such a challenge to be with my family because there were so many issues with them at that point.

As one participant said, the impacts and experiences of residential schools are still “hidden under the rug” in many communities; the survivors who have returned to the community have not had access to healing. As a result, many of the families and children, from one generation to the next, experience the pain and the hurt, without understanding the roots. One educator in Thunder Bay, explained that,

Even though a lot of our families have said that they have a hard time connecting to the history, they just have the residual trauma that they don’t necessarily know all the history around it. They’ve said ‘we are a residential school survivor family, but we don’t know any of the stories about it. We just know that in our family, there have been members who have gone to residential school and have come back.’

Some of the more indirect ways this topic came up was through discussions about the number of churches in the community, and how Christianity “interferes with traditional ceremonies”, like pow wows, drumming, or the sweat lodges in many of the remote First Nations

communities. One family shared about how the more traditional practices were forced out of the community,

When I went to my family's traditional area my grandpa would make us rattles, and there was a drum, a hand drum at my traditional area, and I saw different ceremonies, so it was done outside and not in the community, because it [the community] was more Anglican.

This family disconnect and the absence of traditional spiritual practices in remote First Nations communities speak to the success of the residential school system in weakening families ties and cultural linkages (TRC, 2015).

Intergenerational Impacts of Residential Schools

Most participants, when talking about life in remote First Nations communities, or the challenges families have to overcome when they come to Thunder Bay, spoke about trauma. The idea of trauma came up in multiple representations, but most often surrounded the ripple effects of the Indian Residential School system.

One of the educators from a remote First Nation community talked about the few success stories they had seen where well-adjusted families were living in Thunder Bay. They went on to say that,

Those are the exceptions. The rule, the majority are the families you see coming from the north, the families in our communities, the people in our jail cells, the people addicted to drugs and alcohol; those are the people that have not been able to deal with it in a positive way...that just could not get through those times without resorting to violence, alcohol, drugs, but deep down they are very good people. They want to be good parents. They want to be good partners. They want the same thing we all do. They all want to raise their kids in a healthy way, but that deep-rooted stuff is just eating away, and it's hard to get there.

Many participants talked about the "social issues" connected to the abuse of drugs and alcohol as a significant factor impacting students and families relocating from remote First Nations communities. An educator in Thunder Bay said,

A lot of our kids are now facing so many social issues that are connected directly to the opioid addiction crisis that's happening, so, there's that layer of trauma as well. Kids are

exposed to homes, to peers, to community challenges because of the opioid addictions, or just addictions in general.

One of the parents in a family I spoke with, shared about the progression of substance use in their First Nation community,

When my mom was younger, it was alcohol, homebrew; then when I was growing up, it was pills, and then now it's the hard shit. The hard drugs now that are up there. So, you know, it changes for each generation.

Some of the ripples mentioned with less frequency included abuse/violence, suicide, and lateral violence. One of the participants from a remote First Nations community shared that, "abuse is very common in our communities", acknowledging this as "a challenge for our schools, a challenge for society, when it comes to our people who come from the north". This same participant shared another way the deep-rooted impacts of residential schools reveals itself, saying that, "suicide is the main one. That trauma that results from sexual abuse and other forms of abuse and it results in suicide. If a kid is left with nothing to live for, that's a powerful thing".

When asked about feelings of safety in their home communities, one parent participant responded by sharing this,

I have lived in the Rez from a baby up until 14, and so, I had experienced different events, there was a murder. I was at an event where there was a murder of a young boy. There has been a couple serious assaults that we as a community have been through, so it's not completely safe. But then, those are a part of drugs and alcohol, and mental health issues that are not addressed. There's no mental health anything in the north. And so a lot of people turn to drugs and alcohol and a lot of those serious events occurred because of drugs and alcohol. So, there is that aspect of the community, that is very unsafe. But that's... that has been an ongoing issue for a long time.

This kind of lateral violence, defined by Bailey (2020) as "violence derived from extensive historical colonization and oppression", was mentioned by another participant when discussing their own experiences with racism in Thunder Bay, who shared that, "I never got jumped by a

bunch of non-Native people, it was always other Indian guys, right? And that's where the violence came against me."

A few participants talked about how these kinds of experiences rooted in trauma are often amplified when families move to Thunder Bay.

Things don't get better just because they come to Thunder Bay, sometimes they get worse. You add the alcohol, you add the ability to go out and party. We were all in our 20s, we liked to go out and have a good time, and they do. But a lot of them can't handle their booze, and they don't even know that. They probably shouldn't drink, right? And our young families are like that.

Young Families

The quote above from an educational leader in the north also introduces the idea that many of the families relocating are young. A number of participants, including family members themselves, educators in Thunder Bay, and education leaders from remote First Nations communities talked about the age of many of the families impacting their transition. One education leader from the north, when talking about their own children as parents, said,

They don't really think about school for their kids. They just want to have fun. With my kids, my older kids, they had kids when they were kids. They were 15, 16 years old. So, it's because they didn't know how to parent.

They connected this not knowing how to parent, back to their own parents being residential school survivors. One of the educators in Thunder Bay explained that, "especially when we have young mothers, they don't understand why they feel the way they feel" with respect to their relationship to the legacy of the residential school system, and in effect, school systems today. They shared that, often families "know that the stories are out there, but they don't know their connection to it".

An education leader from remote First Nations communities said, "you can almost guarantee that a young First Nations family coming in, 90% is having major issues, and that the kids need help". Another educator from the north described a "mass exodus" from their

community “because of opioids and because it was cheaper to get it in Thunder Bay. So, we lost a lot of young people and young families that moved out”.

Reserve Realities

To some extent, every participant mentioned ways that remote First Nations communities have been underserved. This was broad at times, but often very specific to education. There were multiple references to the lack of health services and resources in the remote First Nations communities. One family explained,

There is no doctor on the reserve, you might have a nurse there, and dentists fly in and fly out not that often. Even seeing an eye doctor is very limited up north. It takes 6 months to a year for one person up north, where the timeframe here is shortened a lot.

Another parent participant shared that there are a lack of mental health supports available, noting that, “there’s no mental health anything in the north”.

Housing

A second concern that was discussed by two of the participants who have lived in remote First Nations communities is the lack of housing in communities, and the impact this has on families and children in schools.

The other issue we have is housing. We got 3-4 families in a home. When we talk about lunch time, we get a lot of students being late because they’re family didn’t cook first. Because... whoever’s kids get fed first are the first ones coming to school... there’s a lot of different dynamics in each home.

Some participants living in Thunder Bay said it was lack of housing that kept them from ever moving home to their community.

Education On Reserves

The topic of funding for reserve schools was mentioned by most of the participants at some point in our conversation. Concerns ranged from available education services to lack of resources and teacher turnover.

Special Education

An area of concern, brought up by an educational leader who works in a remote community is the access to Special Education services and funding. “Because we don’t have resources...A teacher identifies [a need], does a referral, says they want speech and language or to get them assessed, it takes a while, sometimes it doesn’t even happen in that same year”. Students have often not been assessed or provided with the supports they need in their First Nations community, which makes the transition to the school system in Thunder Bay even more difficult. Often times, as was shared by one education leader in the north, students with special needs are left without an option for education at all. “We don’t have enough people. We have 6 students that need one-on-one. We don’t have that. We only have two one-on-one workers”. When asked what happens to the other four students, they replied,

The other ones are at home. They’ve been assessed, and it was determined they need one-to-one support to be in school. They did advertise positions, but there’s no one really qualified. You’re just grabbing them from the community; they don’t want to be with a student that’s very difficult.

Resources

One of the parents I spoke with, who worked in the school in their First Nation community prior to moving to Thunder Bay to raise their children, talked about the resources available:

There are a lot more resources [in Thunder Bay] in regards to books and supplies, teaching materials...And more people you can call on, resource people. On the reserve you just have to use what you have. Even with gym, a lot of kids don’t have gym wear, proper shoes, you can’t just buy that readily back home, and most schools are starting to have gymnasiums and libraries, whereas a lot of times before, they didn’t even, still some schools are like that where there’s no library, there’s not a proper gym. It’s just limited resources, working with what you have. You have teachers that are good at working like that, and then you have teachers that can’t cope with that.

This lack of resources is due to both inaccessibility and inadequate funding. One of the education leaders I spoke with explained why the school has a hard time getting community

engagement, such as Elders and knowledge keepers to share teachings and land-based skills with students,

We don't have the resources to pay them. Other programs like Choose Life, the Health workers, Ontario Works, they pay them [Elders and knowledge keepers] good money when they go there. We pay them half of what they are getting from other organizations, per day.

Teacher Retention

The concerns raised about resources not only impacts student success and achievement, but also teacher retention. Both of the educational leaders from the north mentioned teacher retention as a main concern for schools in remote First Nations communities. "Schools are tough because they're always changing. They're changing in their leadership. They're changing with their principal. They're changing with their teachers". One of the educators from Thunder Bay also mentioned the teacher turnover when talking about how "the kids already face so many challenges in their learning before coming into our system [in Thunder Bay]". Similarly, one of the remote First Nation educators said, "you don't know the teachers that come in and their teaching style. You only get to see them once or twice, so that's a challenge".

In addition to the lack of resources, the teachers who move to remote First Nations communities, have their own difficulties in making this transition. One participant explained,

The teachers are dealing with isolation too. That's another thing. Teachers not staying long enough because of isolation which is understandable, because our kids are used to it. We're used to it--being in the isolated communities...the teachers up there, it's culture shock. Somebody from the city going to this little community in the northwest, completely isolated, they are going to deal with culture shock. Isolation and culture shock, I know that's happened to quite a few teachers, and it took them a while to be able to do anything productive, because they are so in shock.

The importance of having local representation in schools was also shared by a few participants,

There were a few local teachers, and they are still there. Thank God for those people. But then we did get a lot of people from down south, or even different countries, coming

in and usually they would only stay for half a year. They wouldn't come back after Christmas break. There was a lot of that.

The reality of having non-resident teachers adds to the lack of relevance in material and the difficulty in providing culturally responsive learning for students. "It's difficult for non-resident teachers to lead any culture or land-based activities, like people from India or Jamaica. It's the first time they see snow." For this reason and many others, "having our own people become teachers" came up as a priority with education leaders from remote First Nations communities. Many communities have some teachers at the elementary level who are not Ontario certified teachers, but community members who have worked at the school for a long time. This representation was mentioned as an asset for building relationships with students and families.

Two of the families that participated spoke about the benefits of having consistent teachers in their children's schools in Thunder Bay.

It's just really nice to see friendly faces all the time. The same ones. When you're up in [our First Nation community], you have the yearly new crop of teachers, so I appreciate the fact that they have consistent teachers there [at their school in Thunder Bay].

Another family shared about the ease in building relationships with the school as each of the children move along through the grades,

We do get a lot of engagement from the teachers here, ourselves, because we have been around a long time and they have gotten to know us, each of our kids have gone through [the same school], and each of the teachers have probably had 2 or 3 of our kids come through. So, in that way, just because we've been around a while, it's easier for us to be in touch with the school.

Reasons for Leaving First Nations Communities

It was noted by many participants that the jobs are limited in remote First Nations communities and some families move with the hopes of finding employment. For all of the families I spoke to, education played a role in their decision to come to or stay in Thunder Bay. "We knew our kids would eventually have to come out for school, so we said, well, we might as well just stay here", said one family member. Another family member shared that even though the parent misses their home community, if they were to move back with the younger siblings,

they would have to leave their oldest in the city to attend school, since there is no secondary school in the community. For one family, they moved when the oldest sibling was starting secondary school and the single parent also decided to start an undergraduate degree at the same time. One of the educators from Thunder Bay explained that, “often times when families move here, they are moving for access to education or health care”.

Most families also acknowledged that there are more opportunities for quality education and additional experiences. For example, one of the students shared that they do theatre, “which is fun! And there obviously isn’t anything like a program for that type of stuff up north. So, there’s more opportunities here [in Thunder Bay].”

Another reason many families make the move is related to housing. A factor that, as I will share later is kind of ironic in light of how difficult it is for First Nations people to find housing here in Thunder Bay. One family explained,

We had to stay here [in Thunder Bay] because one, there’s no housing. That’s one of the challenges of being up north. The housing is so limited, so we chose to be out here after we went to school for housing reasons. If I were to go home, I’d have to stay at my dad’s house. There’s 6 of us, and my dad has a family of 6.

Sometimes when families move, it is under traumatic circumstances. One of the educators from Thunder Bay shared about a student who came in Grade 8 during their last year of elementary school.

They came through Faye Peterson House [a shelter for women and their children in Thunder Bay], so they were coming from a very traumatic place. They’d been not only removed and uprooted from their home, but then they were put into Faye Peterson for protection, and then they came to [our school].

There were a few stories shared about families who came to Thunder Bay during times of crisis.

Disconnection from Land

The way participants talked about the feelings and impacts of being away from their homelands, showed their powerful connection to place. When describing the relationship to the

land in their home community, one participant explains that “our land is everything to us.

Everything. It connects you to your being”, they expanded on this to say,

It protects you, it gives you life, nourishment, but it connects you to your loved ones, your ancestors. It connects you to things that we can't see; you can feel it, and it makes you strong. You drink the water, you go shoot a moose, partridge, all those things make us who we are. And proud of who we are. You are proud when you are able to harvest your own meat, or pick your own medicines. You get to talk to... pray out there. And it's on your lands where you feel the most powerful. So, when you're taken from that, and you need to leave, and you're sitting in a house, and you're going to work, and you're living the way that you're just... your people didn't live that way.

One participant said that this disconnection from the Land was the hardest thing about leaving their home community-- it was leaving “their traditional way of life, which was being outdoors. That was everything for me, that's who I was. And then you come to the city and you can't do anything.” The disconnection created by displacement from the Land was described as a traumatic experience by more than one participant. Many families are experiencing “the trauma of being displaced from your extended family and the community that raised you.”

As a result, two of the participants who were children entering the school system when they made the transition to Thunder Bay, talked about feeling like they lost the connection to their community, which causes sadness, a level of confusion, and guilt. One student participant said,

I feel more comfortable here [Thunder Bay], than up north. It's also like, my family is all up north, so it's confusing, because I feel comfortable here, but I know my family is there, and I *should* be more comfortable where my family is, but I just...

At this point, they put their fingertips from both hands together and then pulled them apart, symbolizing that severed connection with a powerful gesture.

This connection is often not well understood by non-Indigenous people living in cities. It is much deeper than simply enjoying being outdoors. One participant made this clear,

I try to tell people, non-Native people, that may not understand our connection, it's like... okay around here [Thunder Bay], you've got all these nice camps. You love going out there – sea-dooing and fishing. It's so beautiful. You love the sunsets, you love to be out there because it's peaceful, it's away from the city. It's great. And it is nice, it's a human thing too, to be out in a beautiful spot like that. But for us [First Nations people], it's like home. It's like a connection, like you're connected to the roots of the trees, the waters. It's like you're looking for your loved ones within the trees, on the lakes. You feel the power of your homelands, your ancestors. That's not talking about the beauty of it and the fishing, all the hunting we do. That's awesome too, but it's that feeling of being on your homelands. It feels safe.

It's difficult to maintain your connection to your homeland once you leave. One participant explained that the costs associated made it almost impossible for their entire family to travel to their home community. For a family of four, it would cost close to \$2000.00 to get there and back.

Many of the participants talked about how this connection to the land was fostered through the school in their remote First Nation community, something that is generally lacking in schools in the city. When asked to describe how often and what type of land-based programming was offered at their school in the First Nation community, one leader explained that students get out about once a month. They have a staff position dedicated to land-based experiences.

They want to see another person in that position to offer more land-based stuff. Because kids look forward to that. In September, they went blueberry picking, at the beginning of the year. They went on an outing partridge hunting. Then we had our cultural week. That is all out on the land. We split it into two weeks, K-3 one week, and then 4-9 the next week.

When asked about some of differences between the schools in their home community compared to school in Thunder Bay, one family spoke in length about the Land-based programming.

There's a lot of Land-based programming. I remember growing up we did have stuff like that. We did have Elders come in and teach us about different things- snaring rabbits. I forget what the program was called, or if it was even a program, or if somebody just got invited, they'd go take kids from the school.

This family added also that,

If there was community gatherings, they would let us [the students at school] go to those. That was one of the things where, they would excuse the school to go attend these events. There was always lots of food, lots of cooking, lots of traditional food being cooked. And our Elders were there teaching...it wasn't an official "program", but they would have Elders cooking here and there, they'd make a soup or a traditional food and then whoever wanted to come in and out would come, it wasn't like considered a program, they just did it.

The idea that these programs were offered and available as a natural, informal part of life and learning is an important difference between what schools in Thunder Bay offer and the schools in remote First Nations communities.

Difficulty Accessing Land-based Opportunities in Thunder Bay

The differences between life in remote First Nation communities and the city of Thunder Bay that came up in all conversations were plentiful. One family member made the simple statement that "it's the landscape, the land itself is different," and further elaborated:

In the reserve it's more natural. Yah, they have the roads, they have the buildings, but they try to leave things as natural as possible. But they do need to get the roads in, they do need to get those building in. Here you have, even the difference in the type of road material, it's concrete here, up north it's still dusty roads, and the access to the land is different too. Here it is more recreational, where you go to a park and you can sit by the water. You can do things at a park. But you can't do the types of things you do up north, like at the park here, we can't go goose hunting, when you see geese down by the water. We'll get arrested and be on Facebook and Thunder Bay Concerned Citizens webpage, whereas up north, if we were to just be around our community, we can do that kind of stuff, and nobody would think anything. They'll be like, oh, I wonder if they have more to give us some, you know like that kind of, that different worldview is there too. Because we are still harvesting food when we are at home, and here we have to go far, because our Treaty area is further. That's another thing too- the Treaty, our Treaty rights for hunting and fishing and harvesting, right? We are able to do that within our own Treaty, and we are in a different Treaty. So, we can't be free as we would, in our own Treaty.

In that small bit of conversation, the family addresses so many things that make it difficult to maintain connections to Land in the city. The layer of pavement that lies between them and the earth when they drive or walk on the sidewalk--that barrier does not exist in their home communities. The judgement they feel is from differing worldviews and relationships to animals. There are also the limitations of "Treaty right" on hunting and fishing.

It is also the colonial structure of the workday that makes it difficult for families to connect to Land,

[The limited access to Land] is because of the way the working day is now. You have to be there 9-5 Monday to Friday, and some jobs are even on the weekend, so it's hard to take that family time, so the work time is actually keeping our families away and our kids from doing that, so nobody is teaching the kids to do that [traditional land-based skills].

When a family leaves their home community, "that family misses more than a school" said one of the education leaders from the north.

That family should be able to go hunting, [but] they can't afford it all the time. They can't afford to go out where we go, that costs money, a lot of money to go where we go. Taking a group of ten kids costs us \$20,000, for three nights. Chaperones, firearms, a lot of money just to get them out on the land. Families don't have access when they come here.

The financial requirements of getting out to do Land-based learning activities and to be able to connect with and continue that relationship becomes nearly impossible when you move to the city, as many of the participants discussed. One of the participants shared that when they moved to the city, their access to the Land was "limited", explaining that "I didn't have a vehicle, I couldn't go... wherever, go out. The only option for me was just when friends or family would come and then they could take me out, up the road. I would go with them". The cost of getting out to participate in traditional Land-based activities can be prohibitive when you live in a city--even one surrounded by untouched sections of the Boreal forest. One of the family members shared,

The financial cost does come into consideration when we are doing these [Land-based] activities. I think that's why we started doing the Chippewa things, because we said okay, we don't have to go very far, we can get gas that's cheaper along the way, or back from the reserve, it's not a far distance for people to travel, so that's why we chose Chippewa park, to have our fires and gatherings.

The cost, in combination with the distance needed to travel to be able to hunt and find the space, limits access to Land for families relocating.

That's one of the things we noticed when we first started going around here is the distance we have to go to, that's why we go to Graham Road. It's 2-3 hours to get to where we need to go, but we do it because we still want to be able to practice, you know, what we would do if we were to be at home. We do that if we go to Bearskin Lake. We are out fishing, we are out doing whatever. If I go home, every time, even in the wintertime, I go out with my dad - moose hunting, checking his traps, we try to look for caribou. So that's the difference right there. We have to go quite a far distance to do that [living in Thunder Bay].

For families who are used to walking outside, and in minutes, be on the Land practicing traditional Land-based skills like hunting, fishing, or trapping, it is a significant impact on identity to no longer have that opportunity.

Land-based Culture versus Ceremony

Many of the participants who had grown up in First Nations communities, shared about the importance of Land-based activities as a way of life. This area, rooted in Land, was an important part of the identity of their community and more so than other ceremony based First Nations cultural practices, such as pow wows and the sweat lodge. One family member described it this way,

We are more connected to our land, and the traditional way that we grew up in. The traditional way that we grew up in is different from the traditional way that people might be practicing down here [in Thunder Bay]. It's more being in touch with the land and all that, rather than the pow wow and the drum and all that. Ours is more being with nature... I didn't experience the pow wow until I was in high school, when I left the community, we got taken to Wabigoon for the pow wow there and then the first time I heard a drum there, boom, boom, I just felt it right in (puts his hand on his chest), right through my body. It was amazing. So yah, that's the one thing I remember is there was nothing like that back home.

While the city lacks in access to Land-based traditional ways of being, Anemki Wajiw, along with Fort William First Nation often welcome everyone to their annual pow wows and drum circles. There are a number of organizations in the city, such as the Thunder Bay Indigenous Friendship Centre, Ontario Native Women's Association, Dilico Anishnabke Family Care, that provide access to knowledges and parts of First Nations culture that have been, for the most part, suppressed as a result of the influence of Christianity and the Indian Residential School System in remote First Nation communities.

Culture Shock

The term “culture shock” was used by all of the families that I spoke with as well as both educators working in Thunder Bay when describing some of the differences and sharing about the transition.

Much of this culture shock emerged from discussions about the size of the community, and specifically the schools. Many different people addressed this in our conversations.

The whole thing of moving from a community of 300 into [a Secondary School], which is a school of 1100, non-First Nations kids. It was super, super tough. And I think I had a hard time transitioning into just a new culture, it really is a new culture, even though I grew up in the same province, in the same country, they are two completely different worlds. (Family member)

Culture shock. For sure... It's just, you're leaving a small community, there's communities smaller than mine, and then all of a sudden you're in this place where there's a lot of people, a lot of people you don't know, and so, I think, just not knowing a lot of things. Now knowing a lot. (Family member)

The first thing, thinking back to when I had to leave, leaving a community of 4-500 people and going into a school that had 800 people, just the school. For me...it was mostly white students then, and so not seeing anybody like myself, so the culture shock is huge.(Educator)

More often we will pull [additional school-based Indigenous Education support] in with kids who are really struggling with being in a new city, because this is a very big place, and even just being in our city, our school is a very over-whelming place. Because it is a big school. We have 280 students, when you compare that to the school or Education Authority, they went to, it's quite big. (Educator)

I remember my first day of Grade 2, I got on the bus and I was thinking, 'with this many students, how are we all going to get home for lunch? And still have time to get back for school.'... I remember thinking that the school was huge, I thought it was a business building, there was two floors, and then they had this big yard, like whoa! Everything was more than what was available in my community. (Family member)

These quotes from participants highlight feelings of being overwhelmed with just the size and expanse of the shift in daily experiences when relocating from their homes in remote First Nations communities to the city of Thunder Bay.

One of the family members I spoke to shared their experiences beyond the size and scope of the buildings and number of people to include the behavioural expectations and pressures they felt.

I think the biggest difference was just the way the kids were. Like, in Muskrat for the most part, a lot of us were/are very reserved, and in my community, it wasn't really a good thing to be open or excited about things; everybody was just like reserved, you always had to hold back, and you couldn't really express how you were feeling, but then when I started going to [high school in Thunder Bay], everybody was so excitable and so loud, so, for me that was the biggest difference that I felt. And I found that very stressful because I felt pressured to suddenly be like those kids, you know, that had grown up in the city and that's just kind of what they were like.

The sudden contrast in behavioural norms can be very difficult for youth to navigate, as one participant explained, "and especially at that age too, right? Because you really care what your peers think about you. I don't think I was equipped with the social skills that I needed, really. Like I said, two completely different cultures".

Some of the other cultural differences noted by families included the size of families, "It's different, having the big families and then here it's like one or two [children]. Three is a lot for people here, but three is a small family up north". One family also talked about the unfamiliarity of different parts of the infrastructure,

Like the washrooms, for example, I remember being impressed about walking in and seeing the sinks that they have where you just step on the bottom and all of a sudden it comes out like a rainfall. It was just small things like that, that were things that I'd mostly seen in movies.

One educator from Thunder Bay talked about what it looks like to support students through this culture shock as a way to ease the transition:

Often we have that place for them. We make sure they know all of the safe hubs, so if they are struggling with being overwhelmed they can go down and see [additional school-based Indigenous Education support], they can do something quiet. There's a bit of ease in that transition rather than just plunking them into a class.

Racism in Thunder Bay

“I felt like as soon as I moved out here, I started experiencing racism, a lot... that was a pretty defining feature of my experience at the time”.

Every one of the participants who grew up in a remote First Nation community before moving to Thunder Bay, shared about experiences of racism. For many, it is their first time coming face to face with racism and the first time they are not surrounded by their relatives. For the first time, they are an “other”, and for many of the participants, this was not a subtle undertow or a minor attribute, but instead was at the core of their experience.

The hardest thing about making the transition was the difficulty of dealing with that racism... The first time I faced it these little girls were mocking me, and I was just like, oh my God, I couldn't comprehend what that was, and then I started to learn later, what it was.... And it's blunt, right in your face, some of it was very subtle and then in the middle, all levels of that, and not understanding it right away. That was hard, and it was very damaging. (Family member)

And then you bring a person into, say a city like Thunder Bay, and they are seeing all these racist comments online, they're kids are seeing it, kids aren't dumb, the kids feel it. You combine what's going on in your home and then you combine the racism that you have to endure. Racism is very powerful; racism is very hard to deal with. There's the extreme racism, which I would prefer to deal with, where someone just says "hey, you dirty Indian", you know? I would love to confront them and say, what did you say? But then, the ones that are hard to deal with are just the looks you get. And the attitude, because that person is not doing anything wrong, but you know it has something to do with your race. And that hurts the person deeply, it's a deep, deep wound. By the way they're treated, and then the system is very racist. (Educator)

One participant explained that “thankfully, I never had things thrown at me, but when me and my friends would be leaving school and walking home, there would be cars full of the non-native students who would drive by and say things.” It is hard to imagine being thankful for having hurtful words hurled at you from moving vehicles.

These experiences are not limited to peer interactions, or instances in the broader community. As one participant shared, “even the teachers too, holy shit, the teachers... I can't believe how blatant they were in their racism at times. They would use terms, or I remember one teacher kind of like saying things like, ‘only Native students swear’”. One of the students

described their experience as feeling, “kind of pigeonholed, in that, they only saw me as a First Nations, or a Native student, and that I wasn’t allowed to have interests in other cultures, or things that they deemed not Native.”

Housing

A challenge that was shared and discussed by all participants that connected directly to experiences of racism was finding adequate housing when families arrive in Thunder Bay.

I feel like housing is a big thing, a big worry when families first move out. When we first moved out, we were homeless for almost two years. We were living with a crazy cat lady, and then we were renting a room from my cousins. Eventually we found a basement apartment which we really liked. It took us two years, to find a place that was good for us. The landlords are racists as fuck. You know? It’s just, they won’t say they don’t rent to Indigenous families, but they’ll say, need professional families, or mature students, yah, it’s just, you kind of have to fake it until you make it. (Family member)

I don’t know how many places we looked at, because, I felt there was uh... because you’re Native, they’d say, oh you know, somebody’s going to take it. So, it was hard. We had to stay in a hotel, a motel for \$65 a night. (Remote First Nation educator)

This was raised by the Thunder Bay educator’s perspective --students and families relocating often end up experiencing some transience when they arrive initially.

They’re going to find that families are transitioning in and out at various points throughout the year. You know, there’s a lot of transience, it’s not so much that they’re transient, but... because they’re looking for housing, they are constantly... there’s a lot of transition before they settle once they get into the city.

Another educator in Thunder Bay noted that a lot of families will “come to the school, stay for a little bit, either go back to their home community, and then come back, or they’ll move across town, and it’s based on housing”.

Internalized Racism

As many of the previous quotes from participants alluded to, the impacts of feeling this constant presence of racism can cause serious harm. “In my teens and early twenties, I internalized that [racism], and, same with our child, they went through that too. They internalized it”. One family shared the experiences of their child,

Our oldest, they experienced racism. When I tried to include them in like, soccer, volleyball, more in the competitive level, there was racism there. They went through a lot, a lot of emotional, mental trauma, spiritual trauma, because they excluded them and it was very, very obvious. They went through that for years. You know, and they are still recovering from that. I'm still recovering from that, from allowing that to happen and being gaslighted to think that it was just us, but in reality, we were dealing with racism. And at schools it's the same way too. At schools our kids have to face that racism, I faced it coming out as well, like sitting outside waiting for a bus, having the [other high school kids] kids, you know, in their cars, sticking a finger at me, and going *whooh whooh whooh (hand over mouth). You know, that's horrible.

This family really stressed the importance and impact of what they called “cultural gaslighting”, sharing that “you need to set a tone in the city that acknowledges that there is racism. It's the same with the school. They need to acknowledge that it is there and go forward”. Participants explained that too often leaders in Thunder Bay, both political and educational, defend and deny the racist actions of others, rather than accept and work to repair.

Combatting Racism

Some participants spoke about the ways they rise above racism, or strategies they have used to work against the negative impacts.

I mean Thunder Bay for example. You know, I am not even angry at the racist people. They just need to be educated on what has actually happened to this group of people that they want to cite hatred, or indifference against. I found when I played hockey, when I went to school even, most people that got to know me were like, ‘you know what, you're not that bad of a guy. You're the first Indian I've ever talked to, right? I've never liked them.’ And I ask why, ‘I don't know, because I wasn't supposed to. That's just what we're taught, right? They're dirty. They're on welfare. They're alcoholics, right?’

That leader in education from remote First Nations communities went on to say, “if they understood, if they put themselves in our shoes...” in respect to our discussion about the impacts of residential schools, suggesting that building empathy and understanding in the broader community would help with the experiences of racism.

Another thing that families shared was to keep their children informed so they are prepared to experience racism.

They [our children] are very informed of the racism, the prejudice and you know, just plain old jerks too. And they're a little bit more resilient I find than I was when I first came in because I didn't have anybody telling me about this stuff, because you're at home [in the remote First Nation community] and everybody is there, and if someone is being a jerk it's because they're being a jerk. It wasn't because I was Native, you know?

One of the family participants started a club in their high school,

One of the reasons why I wanted to do that in my school was because I wanted to bridge the gap between the Native students, or the Native girls and the non-Native girls, and I tried to get that mix going on.

Safety in Thunder Bay

Another very common concern, when considering the differences between living in remote First Nations communities and coming to live in the city of Thunder Bay, is safety.

Physical, emotional, spiritual and cultural safety were brought up by many participants.

Emotional and spiritual safety have been addressed through the discussions about racism.

Physical Safety

Every family and most of the educators talked about physical safety,

... all the things they had, even the safety, you know. Going from the community to this big city of Thunder Bay, it's the racism, the crime, the access to everything you want, good and bad, there's a big shift in that person's life.

A couple of participants talked about what families might fear in their home communities, acknowledging that the Land can be very dangerous, "it could take your life". One of the families shared that you "don't go hang out at the garbage dump", their child responded, "obviously, because there's bears. But we don't have bears here [in Thunder Bay]. We have people. People are the threat". The threat is serious, and it causes families to view daily activities differently when they first arrive.

When she was younger and we were living on the Rez, I would never worry about her going to play outside. When we moved out here [to Thunder Bay] I was definitely more concerned with their safety. A couple of years ago, there were reports of a white van, and then I had talked to them about that, just to keep them aware, but I didn't realize how paranoid it made them. What ended up happening is they would keep a description of the van on them. So definitely safety is a big issue to families and to kids too. This is a

completely different environment that they have also found themselves in, even though kids are more resilient, it's still traumatizing to feel those things, to feel worried about your safety and all that.

Another family spoke about this difference as well.

The kids feel there's more freedom in the communities. They are able to go out and visit their buddies and all that, whereas here it is hard to let them just step outside, even out front. Safety, you know, there's that difference.

One family shared that at the time they moved to Thunder Bay, "that's when a lot of students from DFC were going missing, or passing away. It was kind of a scary time." Thunder Bay has a reputation for being dangerous if you are an Indigenous person (Talaga, 2018).

Navigating the City

Two of the participants who were students when they moved to Thunder Bay shared experiences of riding the bus and ending up in places that didn't feel safe, indicating that receiving some guidance and support with areas of the city that could be dangerous would be helpful.

...when you are trying to navigate the city and you don't know about the different areas of the city, the reputations that they have. You know, I don't want to talk shit about any place, but I know what other people say, so, you know, it's just helping families navigate through that.

"Knowing which places not to go--that's something that would have really helped, because... fun stories...being somewhere and it not being a good place. Not feeling safe in certain places of the city, where things have happened." This example of ending up in unsafe spaces was shared by two of the participants who moved from their remote First Nations community as children or youth.

Learning how to navigate the buses, that was interesting, I remember me and my friends kind of just hopping onto any bus, and then going for bus rides and then just seeing where the bus would take us, and getting to know the routes....so I remember that being pretty fun, but that being said, there were times when I ended up in parts of the city where I probably shouldn't have been in, and things that... being in situations that I would hate to hear that my daughter was in. Yah, like I said, there were good and fun things, but there were also parts of the city that I definitely should not have been in.

For this reason, one family shared,

We keep our kids close to us. If they go out, they have to be... they have to have a ride, or we give them a ride. That's why we're always so busy, because we would rather drive them and their friends around if we need to, to keep them safe.

Navigating Systems and Independence

Earlier I shared about the level of dependency created by life on reserves, which one participant described as, "every aspect of their life is dependency." Families come to Thunder Bay, "ready to take control of their life, and that's hard. That's hard being an adult, they are often not ready for it." One family member shared that, "there is so much more to navigate. You have to realize that you're going to have to play more than one role in this new environment." Within this reality, families have to juggle the expectations of schools for them to "perform", which one educator described as "not realistic".

We're expecting indoor shoes, we're expecting snack one and two, we're expecting to arrive on time, with proper clothing, when often times, with children and families that are struggling or vulnerable, they are worried about whether they are going to have food on the table at dinner. Getting to school for 8:55am is not a priority. I think if they can get their children to school at any point in the day, we should be celebrating that. And I think that we overreact as an education system when kids or families are disengaged. If they are coming out, if they're transitioning out and families, parents themselves are going to be experiencing the same shocks and traumas that the children are. There are even more challenges for the parents. Because they are old enough to access alcohol, and or other substances. That impact of substance use on the home adds even more risk. I think that our school systems overreact when those families are challenging to engage with--we default to attendance counsellors or child welfare.

Documentation and Paperwork

Many participants brought up the demands of paperwork or obtaining necessary documentation for access to schools and services in Thunder Bay, including IDs and immunization records. One participant talked about the process of trying to get their child's immunization records from the nursing station in the remote community because students couldn't register without confirmation of an up-to-date immunization. One family shared,

Getting things like IDs, those are very challenging, if you don't have all those things and you can't access that stuff up north, it's even harder when you're out here [in Thunder

Bay]. Especially if you're a student and a new family just stating up, it's hard to pay for those things.

Often times, families are not informed about or prepared with the documents required for school registration. One family explained that they were originally registered at the wrong school,

Originally, I had them registered at [the wrong school]. No one had explained to me about school zones. I thought it was the closest school to me. But because of where I was located, we were in [a different school's] zone, and not the [school they had registered at]. So, first, they were registered with [one school], and then they were like, oh wait, you have to go here. And it was kind of daunting because I had them registered for the bus too, so that's like a different application process too. They didn't really explain to me how the bus works, you know inside, who's watching her and whatnot. I kind of just had blind faith that everything would be okay.

Another concern shared by one educator was about students with exceptionalities,

When kids come out with exceptionalities, what are the interventions that need to be put in place, and should they be going on a waiting list for years to get the Speech Path or the OT [occupational therapy] that they need? That's another barrier, getting all of those forms signed and back to the school, those referral forms. So, how can we alleviate those barriers, or how can we minimize the barriers that exist for families and how can we make sure that community supports are better equipped to support First Nations families that are transitioning out.

Affordability

The high cost of living in remote communities was discussed earlier. Many participants also shared about the difficulty keeping up with expenses when living here in Thunder Bay. One educator shared,

Often times when families move here, they are moving for access to education or health care. So financially, they don't have very good financial stability, so they are often times coming and living in poverty. And have no access to affordable housing.

Some of the difficulties with housing were discussed earlier in relation to experiencing racism with the process of finding a place to live, but there is also the reality that "they want your first and last month's rent, and then you have to put deposits down on hydro and other stuff" as one participant described. "Plus, you have to buy a washer, dryer, a ranger and a fridge. All of the appliances, all the furniture, beds and all that stuff". The expenses are very high for families relocating to Thunder Bay.

Pressure to Assimilate

It was shared earlier that for many people moving from a remote First Nation community to Thunder Bay will experience racism. This takes many forms, and as a result of this new feeling, some people feel the need to assimilate or “blend in”. One of the youth participating who moved to Thunder Bay at a young age, had one of the most insightful explanations:

Student: Yah, I mean, that [being a minority] was pretty obvious, honestly. It wasn't like, at the time it wasn't just that, it was just more, okay so... this is observable that, what I look like isn't what everyone else looks like, how can I make myself be a part of the majority while still being a minority.

Parent: I think she figured it out. She realized she has to be as smart as them.

Student: It was academic-wise. You know, get to the same level, or be a bit more than. I don't want to say I'm smarter than anyone else.

Parent: You have to try, try harder.

Student: Yah, try harder to get there. And, being more socially aware than everyone else, knowing what's going on. To me that's very important in being on the same level, because everyone, non-Indigenous, the students... just being more aware about what's happening because then, I could be like aha I know better than you, I know what's happening, you don't, let me tell you about this.

The adaptability and awareness required to make that shift at 7 years old is remarkable.

Another participant who was a student when their family moved to Thunder Bay shared about how other First Nations students helped them navigate the city:

Thankfully there were some students who were from communities themselves, but had moved to Thunder Bay during elementary school, so they kind of had a better feel, or a better idea, the lay of the land, and they helped us transition. As well, we got to know the students from Fort William [First Nation], and they had a really good idea of what it was like to live in a city, just how to be. I found them really helpful at that time.

Connecting students with other students who may have experienced this or who can help them adapt to this new environment could be a helpful way to support them.

Self-advocacy

This student who moved with their family also shared about the amount of advocacy they had to do for themselves and other First Nations students during their time in high school in Thunder Bay. “[My high school] wasn't open to offering services to First Nations students

because they saw it as, I don't know if it was dividing, or separating the two groups". They reflected on that experience,

I look back on that time too, and I don't really know how I managed to be so active or vocal. In some ways it was good for me, but in other ways it wasn't because I think it also exposed me a lot to having to speak on behalf of all Native students, or, having to defend my experiences to people, people who weren't the most open minded to hearing those things, so it had it's good things and then it had it's bad things I guess...By the time I was actually done high school and did a lot of that advocacy work, I was like already burnt out.

Many of the participants shared about the experience of being the only First Nations student in certain arenas. For example, one participant was taking mainly academic classes in secondary school. They explained that this was more isolating because they were the only First Nations student in the majority of their classes. Another shared about how they arrived late in the school year with a number of people from their community and were subsequently all placed in a class of First Nations students.

I knew I was smart. I knew I could have taken those other classes if I wanted to, but because I was late, we were all stuck into this class that they made up for us, pretty much. But at the same time, I did really like being with other people of my colour.

One family spoke in detail about the racism experienced by their oldest child. When asked if they felt like it was getting any better for their younger children, the response was generous, but not hopeful.

I think it's the same...because other families experience that, the newer families that have come in, whereas we are more seasoned, and our children are more aware, because of our oldest daughter, what she went through. Whereas new families coming in, they are still facing all of that. From our oldest one to my youngest one, we have 4, they are a lot more aware, but they still face it. They still face the exclusion, and the subtle comments and behaviours toward them, so, it's still the same. For it to be culturally safe, that's still a long ways, a long, long ways. There's still a lot to work on in that area. It's not just a tokenism, you know? They're just doing it so people will be quiet. We are still a very, very, very long way from being culturally safe.

Programming in Schools

A couple of participants from remote First Nations communities discussed how the programming options and curriculum content speaks to how culturally safe or relevant schools in Thunder Bay are for First Nations students.

You compare the French program, where they have to take French and the Native Language as an option, where you barely get half an hour or forty minutes on it, that's not culturally safe. I really firmly believe that if they were really wanting reconciliation and to include us, that they would make that mandatory as well. They would make it part of being a mandatory credit. So, in that sense, I feel like we are still very far from it. And my kids, our kids, are very vocal, so, whereas there's some students, some kids from the north that are just moving here that aren't. And they are not aware of this. They're like us when we first come in and experienced that, they're just experiencing it, and that's horrible, it does damage your spirit, it does damage your well-being, everything. It makes you question who you are, and your worth, your self-esteem goes low and, it's horrible.

One of the education leaders from the north shared about this topic as well,

You put this kid in a school, and he's learning about Prime Ministers, and all these great leaders that they are being taught about in school. The English language, the French language, and you're like, what about my language? What about my way of life? What about the things that I am supposed to be, that make me proud of who I am. Kids sitting there speaking English, that kid is going to grow up thinking, how come I can't speak the language of my ancestors. That's going to hurt them deeply, whether they admit it or not.

Both of the educators in Thunder Bay addressed at least parts of these concerns relating to cultural safety in our conversations. One shared a story about a specific teacher who years ago had difficulty building relationships and connecting with a First Nations student. Since then, that teacher had done a lot of professional growth because they recognized,

...that whole concept around cultural safety, and what cultural safety is for kids, and learning about that, that they are really wanting to do different in their practice, and so I said it's not about taking it personally, it's about creating space and opportunities for kids so that they feel like they belong, and whether that's people places or things, then we have to make sure as educators we provide that as best as we can.

An educator from Thunder Bay also shared about the idea of creating the environment in such a way that the school is "neutral ground" and doing this by "always talking about school pride, and being proud of who we are [as part of this school community]".

Belonging

Earlier I discussed the feeling of isolation that often drives away teachers who go to remote First Nations communities to work. This similar feeling of isolation is what many participants talk about feeling and experiencing when moving to Thunder Bay. Although not physically isolated, the separation and removal from their family and community, creates a feeling of isolation.

When asked what the most difficult thing about relocating to Thunder Bay was, one participant replied, “the loneliness... there was your community there, your family...”. Another explained,

When I was living on the reserve, you had your extended family as well as your immediate family, so I would have... well, I have a pretty big family, so lots of cousins, and a lot of those cousins have kids, so I would call them my nieces and nephews, aunts, uncles. There’s a real sense of belonging when you’re surrounded by people that you know, that will always be there and that have always been there. Sometimes you can find pieces of that here in Thunder Bay, but that’s really all you’ll find, when you’re outside of the community, just pieces of that feeling.

That feeling of belonging to a place and to a people is strong in remote First Nations communities, and it is lost when families move to Thunder Bay. One of the family participants shared,

You do lose that [belonging], and you have to build your community. It’s taking us years to build our community and we are still building. We don’t stick to just one group of people. We try to build our community bigger for our kids. With different people too because like, this is such a big city, we still have the mentality of being in a small community, right? You know everybody, you want to engage with everyone as much as possible and here, we are still meeting people, we are still learning who is who. So that was another difference, it’s much larger, but it was nice to know that there was still a community, a Nishnaab community in this city.

Homesickness

Each of the family participants I spoke to share a sense of longing for their home community. One described that, even after years of living in Thunder Bay, “there’s days where I just want to pack it up and go home. I’m like, I’m so sick of Thunder Bay, let’s go home”. Others talked about this same feeling,

I miss it, I miss it. I always think about moving back. All the time, oh it would be good to get back, to my people. You know? To my home, but at the same time, I know, I am well aware of the education system in my home community, and I am well aware that if I take my younger kids there, that they wouldn't get the same quality education they would here. And I've seen, you know, how beneficial it is to have that good qualification all the way from quite a young age. So there's no point at this moment, but it's still wishful dreaming. [My community] will always be my first home. (Family member)

For a long time, I was super homesick, I think the last time I thought about moving back was when I had my daughter, because, I had her on my own, and I was just looking for a sense of security. But, we didn't end up doing that...I feel like I've kind of lost my connection with my community, which is like kind of sad, like, you know, it makes me sad to say that--especially too, because I wanted my daughter to experience some of the good things that I had experienced. (Family member)

Building Community

Families shared about how gatherings for feasts were one thing that contributed to the sense of belonging and community. One of the families talked about "the summer gatherings, the feasts. We feast all the time back home". This family started their own community gatherings at Chippewa Park with other First Nations families.

There's one thing that we try to do is, every once in while we'd go to Chippewa Park, and just invite whoever to come have a cookout with us, and lots of people would show up. And we'd spend a lot of time having a cookout and whatever.

Another family talked about finding neighbourhoods in the city where they can feel more welcome and connected and staying in a school that builds a sense of community. "There is a sense of community there that is also in the reserves, but it is here because of the large amount of Indigenous families that live here and go to one school." As a result, that family has always tried to live in the same area because, "we'll be surrounded by our own people. Our own colour." When asked how the school they attended builds that sense of community, they responded,

I have an example, regularly they would hold feasts, I feel like that's a real community building activity/event. It's just getting together and eating food, and then they would sometimes do Art Shows, so they would get together the kids' arts, and put them up and have some food too, and I really liked that.

The student added that, “it was a really easy community to be a part of because everyone was included”. Another family participant, reinforced this importance of gathering in community, saying that,

Community events are very helpful. Because in [my home community], we used to have feasts every week, where the whole community would eat together, and there were a few times that there were events like that, that were hosted in Thunder Bay I don't know if they were through NAN, or some other Tribal council, but those are pretty fun.

Relationships

The second most common topic, brought up in a number of different ways, including taking time, being creative, using strengths, a holistic approach, being welcoming, providing informal opportunities to connect, were related to the building and sustaining of relationships with students and families.

Put in the Effort

School staff need to put forth a greater effort in order to support families during this transition time, was discussed frequently by most participants.

How do you help a family who just wants to succeed? And school is very, school is a very instrumental, foundational, whatever you want to call it, way for families to succeed. And they can do a lot more for sure. They just need to, well for one, put in the effort.

One of the educational leaders from the north explained that, “some focus needs to be put on these families. They need to be treated different because they are different.”

Many participants shared stories about teachers who helped them because of this extra effort.

There were a few teachers who just took it upon themselves to like do their own outreach and try to support us, and have us do our own group activities. One of them opened up her class to First Nations students to come and pop into. (Family member)

One participant shared a story about arriving late to school, and walking around the building outside, not wanting to disturb the class by going in late. The teacher came outside to get them. “She's like, come in. She was awesome, she put special focus on me, I knew she did. In a good

way, and I don't think she even told anybody. She brought me lunch sometimes when I didn't have lunch".

One of the students who moved here when they were young said, "I feel like teachers could do a lot more with making their students feel comfortable in classes," and then gave an example:

I had one teacher who, when the students that came from up north were like, out of the classroom, he spoke to the rest of the students about how they were coming from the north and that everyone else should particularly be nice and make them feel more comfortable. It was really sweet.

The educators from Thunder Bay both added to this idea as well:

I think it actually starts before families come... Because we do acknowledge that there are people in our system who maybe don't have the history, don't have the understanding, or have never worked in a school that has a high Indigenous population, we do have that transience and those children coming from northern communities, so we also take time after we've had a student register. We go up and we'll say, we have a new student coming, they're coming from... here, here is what I know.

The status quo practice has been to reach out to the family when there's a problem, rather than reaching out to the family when the family first arrives. We do it for refugee families, we do it for families that are coming from war-torn countries that are coming into the city, we send home care packages, there's sponsor families, but we have families that are coming from communities that are lacking basic human rights in our own country, and sometimes they're looked at as a burden on our system. And that's the shift we have to make in our thinking in our system.

Be Innovative

The message that schools in Thunder Bay cannot rely on the usual practices to connect and build relationships in this circumstance was shared by a number of participants. "Be innovative, right? Find ways to improve their lives, because schools have a role in teaching the kid, but I don't think they know how much of an impact they have on certain kids and families". This educator from the north added, "don't be happy with your boring curriculum. That comes down to your leadership. That comes down to your principal and your teachers. We want those high energy, fun leaders." As one educator explained,

I think teachers need to be comfortable with taking risks and acting outside of the standardized practice. Not the standards of practice, but just, what we've learned, our learned behaviours, what has been status quo. Teachers need to just feel confident; they need to gain confidence in that. And knowing what language to be using as well, knowing how to approach families and, you know, in all of the work that I do with teachers, or any staff, it's about encouraging staff to build relationships. It's about building relationships before it becomes a crisis. That's super important.

Informal Approaches

An educator working in Thunder Bay explained how their school changed their approach to registration forms.

We used to use these forms that were very formal, and I felt like they set up a lot of barriers for our families. They would ask things like, does your child have any special needs, are you connected to any resources, and there was one question that talked about agency connection, and right away I felt like many families thought that was a very judgy question because it led itself to 'are you connected to Dilico, Tikinagon, Children's Aid?' So, we actually removed the questionnaire and we basically just have coffee talk with our families and the first thing we ask them is where are you from. Because that opens up their story. Asking someone where they're from is a bit more personal, and it's just natural, as opposed to saying, which agencies are you connected to, why are you here, why did you move? It has a bit more of an ease.

Another educator from the north shared the same ideas:

Even coffee, you know, I recommended this to one of our schools, they were having trouble with their parents, parents weren't getting involved. Why don't you have kids get dropped off and invite parents in for coffee, have a coffee talk?

Providing opportunities for informal connections with families can help build relationships.

Connecting with Families

Most participants had some ideas about how schools can connect with families and the importance of making those connections. One educator explained, "it is not just child centered, right? It's family-centered approaches. I think that is critical in this work as well. You can't just work with the individual child". One participant shared they thought teachers "might even be scared of First Nations families," so they need to build a level of comfort.

I would have liked it if the school had reached out to me for example, or a teacher, a phone call or an email or even a Facebook message, and said 'hey, how's things going, how is your family doing? We got this event coming up...' Or, 'your kid has a concert'. I

know that the usual invites go out, but if you pay special attentions to that one family, knowing that they are from the north, they're kind of an exception and maybe the school doesn't want to treat them like that, but sometimes the parents actually like it, I know I would. The school, or the person that is watching your kid all day reaching out to you would mean the world. It might have a huge impact on the family itself. It might just be a turning point for them.

One of the educators from the north shared that in their efforts to try and keep parents informed, they started doing monthly reports to parents,

What your class is doing, and how your child is doing because they found that in November when they had parent-teacher night, and you find your kid's behind, and three months has already gone by. So, they wanted parents to have some sense of how their child is doing in school regularly.

In another remote community, they hand deliver all of their report cards and "they combine the parent teacher interview with their report card delivery. It's an opportunity for the teachers that go out and do that. It's different. It's not coming in the mail, and it's a way to connect".

Families who made this transition also discussed the differences in ways that teachers engage with families in Thunder Bay compared to in their home community. One family member explained that,

The teachers are engaged with the community events. That's how they get to know the community and the kids. That goes back to the communities being isolated. Once you're in the community, you're a community member, so, what else are you going to do except engage with people, right?

They're [teachers in Thunder Bay] engagement is different from the up north teachers' engagement. That's another thing too-- it's just different. Here it's like to talk about marks and stuff, which is good, but I think schools up north try to do that as well. But it's more like, the community, it's more overall.

One of the educators in Thunder Bay talked about getting parents involved in the school,

Our Ojibway teacher has done the most amazing thing. When they call home, even if they call and we've noticed some struggles, they'll say, when can you come in and make bannock, or when can you come in and... your child has told me that you can write in syllabics, when can you come in and share that with us? So, there's that invitation in, as opposed to just talking about the wrong doings. We've had a huge success at getting more families into our building because we've changed the way we are doing things. We're having more natural conversations as opposed to formal sit-downs.

As one educator put it, “we need to have many cups of tea with families to make sure that we build those relationships”.

Welcoming Environments

The city of Thunder Bay is not always a welcoming place for students and families relocating from remote communities. As one educator from Thunder Bay shared,

Our schools need to really prepare our front-line staff better to create a safer place and space for Indigenous or First Nations families coming into the city. That would be our secretaries, the staff that are on morning yard duty, custodians, the first people that parents see or talk to in the day, in their child’s day, and supporting them and helping them understand so that they have more empathy towards the student’s situation. And helping them understand that it’s not always a bad thing why a student is away. It’s not that parents don’t care. Every parent cares for their child --every parent loves their child and wants their child to be okay, but the extenuating circumstances around them being in the city, trying to attend school, trying to survive, trying to find safe, affordable housing, trying to find food, and go to school or access the healthcare or whatever they need for whatever reasons they’re in Thunder Bay for, the family is going through a lot.

It’s the school’s responsibility to initiate that. It’s everybody in the school, to initiate that, from even the tone of the voice in the secretary when they’re phoning for late arrival. It’s the teacher phoning and building that relationship as soon as the child comes to their classroom, whether it’s in September, or the end of January.

This educator suggests that building understanding and awareness will support school staff in creating welcoming environments for students and families.

Relationship-based Approach

Educators also spoke about the importance and care necessary to build relationships with students in the schools. “We don’t know what our kids experience outside the classroom and there’s not enough room in that child’s life for educators to be taking things personally,” explained one educator. Another shared two examples of how this relationship-based approach has worked.

[Previous leadership in our school] and this child butted heads a lot, because they didn’t mesh. Now, fast forwarding 3 years, since I have been there as the leader. We actually sat down and talked to him last year and said, what has changed, because he is not banging on lockers anymore, he is settled, he is not bullying anymore. He said, you

know what, you guys talk to me. And I thought, isn't that so simple. Don't we talk to everybody? But then it makes you realize, am I actually mindful of the kids who are quieter? Am I talking to them? Because maybe those are the students that we are not seeing or that we are seeing. Like when students come to us and we don't know them, we're seeing behaviours, but we need to break down the behaviours and see what their actual needs are.

We had a teacher this year, first year [at this school] but has been within the school systems for a very long time and really had a good strong understanding of teaching students from a holistic manner. And watching her when we had new students come in, the first thing she did was just spend time with them. She would sit, maybe if she had taught a lesson and the kids were working, she would just take some time and sit with that child and just talk to them about anything and everything, as opposed to just saying, 'you're brand new, let's do all these things'. I think we need to give time. I think that time is key in giving children time to feel acquainted.

One participant shared about their experience in high school, noting that, "they asked us what we needed to get to school every day. I remember that teacher because of the actual effort she took in getting to know us and getting to know what we wanted."

The bottom line, as shared by one of the educators is that "relationships are key, making sure they are building the relationship first" when students and families arrive in schools in Thunder Bay. Another educator explained how a relationship-based approach was part of their philosophy, adding that, "kids need to feel like they have a person". The idea of that caring adult was brought up by one of the educators from the north when sharing about their own experience of coming to school in Thunder Bay. They said that, "there was no one around, for many days in my life when I needed someone. It was the school. It was a teacher, right? Thank God it was a caring teacher". Making the effort to build a relationship and demonstrate care for students during this time of transition is crucial.

Whole-School Ownership

One topic that came up with educators from Thunder Bay was the lack of continuity that can exist between staff responsibilities for First Nations student success.

There is a lot of disconnect there, for example, in the high schools, because we have [Indigenous Student Support roles], often when there is concern for an Indigenous

student, it's defaulted to that person, and then the responsibility is put on them to develop the relationship with the family and find the support that is required.

Instead of classroom teachers, or student success teachers feeling like they have some responsibility to build and maintain relationships with Indigenous families and the success of those students, this work is often left to the Indigenous student support staff.

Similarly, one educator shared a way to address this at the elementary level,

We felt like students needed to know more than just their teacher. And also, there were certain kids who were, in grade 5, but in different classes, so they didn't even know each other's names. So, we wanted to build a sense of belonging as a school, and we also wanted to get away from the silos of teachers. So, you are Grade 1 teacher, and a grade 8 student walks down the hallway and you don't acknowledge them. We wanted to be able to teach and to work with our students as a whole, as opposed to, well that's a grade 8 student, so the intermediates can deal with them. We built [school] families that basically encompass cross-grade groups, and then we did lots of team-building, some literacy stuff, math stuff, but very fun things, and they all had a different adult, who they normally wouldn't be with.

In the same way, if there is professional development offered that relates to Indigenous Education content, it is often shared only with Indigenous staff, rather than being offered to all staff,

If there's Indigenous content, or there's an Indigenous PD, they send all the Indigenous staff. It's the assumption that this... they are othering, right? This is an Indigenous kid, so they need specific support, which is true, but I think teachers need to think outside of that box, where, yah, they are Indigenous students, but we need to have many cups of tea with this family, to make sure that we build those relationships.

This happens with leadership as well. As one educator explained, there are times when "as soon as a First Nation family moves into their school, all of these assumptions are being made, and an email is flipped over to me [as an Indigenous educator] saying we need to have a meeting". The idea that First Nations students and families are the responsibility of First Nation supports to "deal with" in our schools is problematic.

Representation in Schools

While it is not the sole responsibility of people holding roles connected to Indigenous Education to support and promote First Nations student success, it is valuable for students and families to see themselves represented in schools. One of the educators from the north shared that one of their challenges is having “our own people become teachers.” In some schools in Thunder Bay there are roles dedicated to the support of Indigenous students. Oftentimes these roles are held by people who identify as Indigenous which has proven to be very valuable when supporting the transition for families. An educator shared about how often students are drawn to them naturally, and at times she has to explain this to non-Indigenous educators.

[The student] has a white foster mother, she has a white case worker at Dilico, and she has a teacher who looks like those other two women. They desperately want a female figure that they can connect with in their cultural ways. Whether or not she knows it, her spirit is drawn to that, and, because it's this young teacher, who is so well-intentioned and loving and caring and did nothing to hurt that child in any way, could not understand why she could not build that relationship with her, and it took a long time for that teacher to recognize that.

Indigenous presence in schools also helps families to advocate for their needs. One educator shared:

A lot of our families wouldn't be able to come in and be able to articulate [their needs]. So I am able to go in because I've lived poverty, I've lived broken family, I've lived all of that crisis, so I am able to take that and use it to help the families that I'm working with. Not to say that educators who have experienced it who are non-First Nations, that they don't see families or empathize with families who are experiencing it, but I think that their worldview is so different. I think the combination of my worldview with my lived experience has allowed me to be able to go in and to see families in a different way, and to see the relationships in a different way.

Both educators from Thunder Bay talked about the importance of learning from Indigenous staff who naturally model best practices and ways to interact with students,

We put too much responsibility to be the helpers of Indigenous families in our schools. For those of us that are in our roles, we have to role model what that looks like. I was hoping that that's what I was doing for the other adults in the classroom when I was in there--to show how to talk with them--how to sit with them.

When describing the role of the Indigenous Student Support person at one of the schools, and why they were so effective at working with students, the educator said,

They are good at their job because of who they are. They are very funny, they have a good sense of humour, but they are also soft and calm and they love the kids. They are calm and gentle and kind and they are a very good listener. So, when students come in, sometimes they don't have trust. They don't know who you are. They don't know anybody in Thunder Bay. This person will often just sit and they'll colour with them. So, there are no words. It's just we are just going to be here together. They don't bombard them with things. That's really key, having someone who can be a really good listener, really kind, very open, they often make tea for kids all the time, that's something we have adopted as a whole school, is to just have tea together, it really does bring peoples' walls down, you are just breaking bread.

I have learned from watching their interactions with children, and how I interact with kids as well, because often when children come in to Thunder Bay, there is another [student] who came from [a remote First Nations community], and they really struggled. Often, we'd find them sitting in a corner curled in a ball, and they'd be really upset and really angry, and I would just sit with them. I wouldn't talk, I was just showing him that I was there. That's something I learned from our [Indigenous Student Support person], just being there as opposed to bombarding, bombarding, bombarding.

If schools are unable to have positions within the school for First Nations representation, some shared about connecting to the community, or other resources to be able to provide representation.

We try to have mentors in our school. We have an Ojibway teacher who is deep rooted in their culture, and we also have the Friendship Centre that comes twice a week that does boys and girls groups. They do drumming and cultural teachings.

We've been looking for Elders, we do have Elders that come in once a month they come in and do smudging and cultural teachings, but we don't have a connection to them as much. This is our second year doing that, so I think some of our families and students are creating connections to people they see more often, so they are building a little bit more of a connection to him, but we are looking for ways to make that connection stronger, because we do want a place where kids could go when they are struggling or if they just need someone to talk to they can connect with.

The "Learning Gap"

I heard from many participants that one of the greatest benefits to being in Thunder Bay was access to better quality education and learning supports/resources. One of the families shared,

I am well aware of the education system in [my home community], and I am well aware that if I take my younger kids there, that they wouldn't get the same quality education they would here. And I've seen how beneficial it is to have that good qualification all the way from quite a young age.

Another family shared that one of the main reasons they decided to stay was for education and because there is more resources and services. One family member explained that leaving the "Rez" is a "sacrifice" the family made, "so that they could get a good education, because I knew from my experience, when you leave as a teenager, it's not a stable road". Eventually, if you want to attain a high school diploma, your path will lead you out of your remote First Nations community and into a city.

Contributing Factors

A number of factors that might contribute to the perceived "achievement gap" for students were brought up by participants, including, parental involvement, attendance, and lack of proper supports. An educational leader from the north said,

[Lack of parental involvement] is probably the biggest issue that we have. That entails, that they're not getting anything at home, and they are not being sent to school. So that absenteeism comes in, and it's big. Because if you are not there, you are not learning anything.

One of the educators explained that "because there's so much interruption in learning in the communities, the progression of learning stalls". Some examples of these interruptions that were used by participants include, the death of a community member, issues with the school building itself (no water, or heat), community gatherings, seasonal cultural activities (hunting, harvesting), weather-related closures. As a result of these disruptions, many families are not used to consistent attendance in schools. Another practice that impacts students' academic performance that one educator shared is that, "they are still failing children in grades in the north. So, you could get a child coming out who might have failed two grades, so age-wise they are not with their peers. That's quite common". For the most part, this practice doesn't happen

in provincial schools. Students continue to progress with their peers, regardless of academic performance.

The reality is that many students in remote First Nations communities stop attending school before graduating from Grade 8.

When I graduated from [the school in my community] in Grade 8, there was only 8 of us there, maybe 7 of us that completed Grade 8 that were eligible to go on to Grade 9... we had to have two JK classes, so there was a lot of us when we first started, but then as the years progressed there was less and less of us. Until finally, there was just a handful of us finishing Grade 8.

Often times, students that leave their community and come to Thunder Bay to attend school end up being put on Individualized Education Plan (IEP). One educator from the north said that “all of a sudden your kid is put on an IEP, but because of lack of resources back home, the kids aren’t being referred”.

I asked one educator in Thunder Bay if they have found that students who come from remote First Nations communities are behind academically and they replied,

Always. But I think the culture at our school is that, we just teach kids where they are at. Because we have such a diverse levelling within each classroom, we just teach them. We have actually removed quite a few kids off of IEPs because we are teaching more universally. We are also thinking about knowledge versus, if a student isn’t writing down their knowledge, it doesn’t mean they don’t know it. So, we are shifting that, you know how we have conversations with them, and looking at more of the conversations and observations as opposed to just whatever their product is.

Academic Success versus Strength-based Approaches

Educators discussed the need for school staff to consider multiple definitions of success and the importance of honouring the gifts and knowledges that students do have, rather than focusing on the academic skills that may be lacking.

Our public school system, we put so much emphasis on academia as being math and literacy. That is academic success, it’s math and literacy, whereas you might have a child who is a brilliant hunter, or a brilliant fisherman, or might be able to identify all the different medicines, because they spend a lot of time with their Gookum. So, we have to shift that a little bit. Consider ‘what lens am I looking at academic success from?’ And

then, spending that time with the student to find out where they are at, I wish that there was a culturally appropriate, like an assessment tool that was appropriate for our [First Nations] students.

As this educator explains, students who come to Thunder Bay from remote communities are often only viewed through one lens to assess their knowledge and skills. This is a demonstration of cognitive imperialism (Battiste, 2013) in action. This educator went on to say,

It's a very deficit-based way of thinking. And I think we're already labelling kids when they're coming out with the assumption that they are going to be 2-3 grades behind, and yah, that might be true if we're basing it on Western curriculum. This is Ontario curriculum, yes, they are two to three grades behind, but they have a different skillset. How do we, as educators, support kids with proper interventions to get them feeling confident and comfortable in the classroom in their graded classroom.

"Indigenizing" Approaches

One of the participants acknowledged that the students transitioning from remote First Nations communities to Thunder Bay are,

Trying to walk in two worlds. They are still trying to maintain that connection to their land and their culture and they're hunting and they are fishing--all those things that make them who they are. They are not speaking their language. A lot of them have lost their language; and they are trying to fit in and be successful here [in Thunder Bay].

This is a difficult balance to maintain.

From a school perspective, one of the educators in Thunder Bay shared about their goals to support First Nations students,

If we can build them up and say, wow you've got really great ideas in your head, how can we keep track of these ideas? We need to think about, if we're assessing children on what knowledge they are retaining, then it doesn't just come out of a written form. And if you think about, how our people lived, their stories weren't written down. So, we want to kind of build on those Indigenous ways of being as opposed to just more of the [mainstream] traditional. So, for example, when people say, I think the term that someone used was 'Indigenizing' your school, but even just using that term is saying, we are going to plaster posters on our wall and we are going to say we are embracing this way of being, but we are not. The way that we have shifted, is that I've said we don't need posters to make our students feel like they are seen in our building. So, we're looking more at how did the Elders teacher the youth, and how did parents teach their children, and so on, and then use those teachings as our way of being. So, scaffolding, talking about how when a grandmother or a Gookum was beading, the smallest would be sorting the colours, and then the next child would be doing the task that was a bit

more intense, and so on and so on. So, if we think about how we scaffold, that right there is an Indigenous way of teaching. We are looking at more of the teaching methods, as opposed to, well I've got a medicine wheel on my wall.

Professional Learning

This story was shared by one of the Indigenous educators who works in Thunder Bay and it reinforces many important aspects of the topics and themes that came out of my data analysis and also highlights some areas necessary for professional learning. I wanted to share this story in its entirety.

As one of the Indigenous educators you get called in as the middleman, to try to de-escalate a potential conflict before it happens, comfort for the families and for the principals or teachers. As an example, we had a family, young family, 3 boys, who came mid-year, they came in April. And the two littlest ones, one was non-verbal still, he was in Year 1 Kindergarten, and then the older one was very oppositional, but he was oppositional in a way where... not understanding to take his shoes off outside the classroom, you know? He needed a lot of support for transition times. When the bell went, he just wanted to continue playing, he was in Grade 3, he wanted to keep playing on the hills outside but the yard monitor didn't want him playing on the hills because they were too icy, and then he'd get in trouble, you know, all of those... really bizarre kind of power-trippy things.

So, I spent a lot of time with this family, met with the mom, finding out all about this wild story that they had about their dad dying by suicide, it was a new partner in the picture, new babies, they had just moved, they were living in Thunder Bay housing with another family, so there were 12 children in that one 3-bedroom townhouse. And the Principal was floored, they had not been able to get that information out of the family. The mom, this young mom, it ended up being really good, I ended up spending a lot of time in the school, and so the children started off coming to school for full days, and that wasn't working, it was too overwhelming. So, they started transitioning in, and then even creating learning space that was more appropriate, so they created a learning at home, you know when they hire a teacher that would go into the home, but they actually brought the teacher into the school. So, the student spent some time in the classroom, but then spent some time with the teacher in a small group. Very small, like sometimes one-to-one. Also, providing Native Language learning opportunities for the students, in a school that didn't typically have Native Language as an option. So, it had to be really dynamic and innovative in the opportunities that we offered the families. That is just the systemic stuff, you know the functional part of their learning, but the pedagogical stuff was a bit more challenging. So, I was spending time with this one little guy in his classroom. Well, it was quiet reading time, and you had to have a book and sit, well the little guy, crawled under a table and wouldn't come out. And, immediately the adults went to the child and stood over him and said you need to get out and get a book and you can't sit under the table. I'm like, well why can't he sit under the table, is there a rule in some mystery book in the school that says children can't sit under tables? No, it's all

about power and control. It's about conforming to the rules in the classroom, well these are rules that are not necessary for the safety of children. And then, the child can't read. And so, I took a couple of books to him, and I sat on the floor with him, and then he came around, within minutes, he was fine. Whereas he was already starting to shut down, when he had, you know an adult coming and standing over him telling him that what he was doing was wrong. Rather than giving him an option to do different, and to model the different.

This story includes some of the themes I have already discussed, such as the trauma that students are often carrying when they arrive in Thunder Bay, being innovative in both programming and how we are connecting with students and families, meeting students where they are, and scaffolding learning. It also speaks to the needs of educators to learn and adopt approaches that best support First Nations students who are relocating to Thunder Bay from remote First Nations communities.

Another educator in Thunder Bay shared a story about how the rules that exist in schools can sometimes act as a barrier for students to feeling comfortable and belonging in schools. The example given was about the playground being split into divisional sections.

This is the primary division, this was the junior division, and we basically policed, 'you're intermediate, go into your space', 'you're out of your zone' and we've tried to eliminate those zones, because when we have a family that has come and they have a student in Grade 7 and Grade 4 and Grade 2, sometimes those families want to be together. That was important because we were dividing them, and then we were constantly policing them saying you're not allowed to be in this zone, but they needed to be together; or if they had a cousin that was in the school, they could be with that cousin and there was no harm done in being together.

The most frequently mentioned topic in all of my conversations, which came up consistently with every group involved was the need for educator learning and responsibility.

Cultural Awareness / Anti-Racism Training

Many participants suggested that educators need to address their own biases and prejudices. "They have that racism taught to them" said one family, before suggesting that PD days for educators should include spending time acknowledging and learning about bias, prejudice, and racism. One family member said,

I think anybody that comes into the school, teachers or support staffs, should go through some kind of training, awareness training or sensitivity training, they should be doing stuff like that, because the schools are teaching our young people, and our young people need to learn from adults.

On this same note, one educator shared that teachers need to be “recognizing the power and privilege that you bring into the classroom”, noting that,

That’s the lens that I come at from all the time, what is my power and privilege here? I think that, it’s because I’ve had so much power taken away from me, because I am Anishnaabe, throughout my education journey and just living in this city. A lot of our families wouldn’t be able to come in and be able to articulate that.

It was suggested that this type of training should be “ongoing, not just a one-day thing or a two-day thing, because they’re not going to unlearn what they’ve learned this whole life time of stuff, with just a little bit”. Families also suggested involving the community, going into the community for training, or involving different community groups like Ontario Native Women’s Association or the Thunder Bay Indigenous Friendship Centre. Participants stressed that the training cannot just be “tokenism”, but should include policy, “because that’s where it’s meaningful and it will make changes, that this cultural inclusivity, sensitivity, awareness, is mandatory to include professional development”. One family member said,

We are forced to learn these policies that are not ours, the colonial policies and that are different from our culture, and so it should go vice versa, it should go the same way because we are a Treaty nation. I understand the whole assimilation practices are there, and it still exists, but if they [schools] want to really make changes and be inclusive, they should move away from that. That’s how they’re going to make changes and really do something meaningful.

One family shared their feelings about how “some teachers are not very kind. They have a condescending tone and are insensitive,” especially when it comes to student absences. They shared about an experience where there was a lack of understanding when a family member died and the student was missing a lot of school. The teacher didn’t understand that after the funeral, “we take our family member home, and then there is a service in the community, and then by the time we’re done we come back three or four days later, so just not having that

knowledge and understanding.” One of the educators explained that with this training, schools can build capacity and confidence, because educators are often fearful, but “they want these kids to have success”.

Trauma-informed Practices

Nearly all of the participants talked about the need for trauma-informed practices in schools. Morgan et al. (2015) explain how trauma-informed practices consider how experiences of trauma impact a child’s brain development and ability to learn. Trauma-informed practices involve the implementation of a relational pedagogy and the goal is to build trust and safety (Morgan et al., 2015). “I feel like we have to, before we do anything, with the teaching, we have to acknowledge the trauma, which is hard.” This quote was shared by one of the educators working in Thunder Bay. One of the educational leaders from a remote First Nations community explained that this has recently become a focus for staff learning in their school,

We’re trying to be a trauma-informed school, like trauma that has happened to the parents and, you know, because of the residential school, we are trying to empathize with the student where a student comes into the school, and doesn’t want to do any work. One of the big things is self-regulation, teaching students’ self-regulation. As people. What we found was, they would just keep doing something just to get out of school. So, we are working with also the SNAP program. It’s a new thing, It’s stop now and plan. You’re trying to teach a child to think about their action before, so that’s another trauma-informed thing we are trying to do this school year. Instead of a teacher sending a kid to the office, we are trying different things to minimize the trauma of the child.

Similarly, one of the educators from Thunder Bay spoke about a similar approach,

Another thing that we’ve learned at our school [is that] removal is not the key. Often, we think we have to remove the distractor, but removing can often cause more harm. So, instead we will join them, and work with them within the space so there is no feeling of isolation or removal from their peer group. We are trying to build the connection to their peers.

Defining Success

An important question I explored with most of the participants was about what success will look like for students and families during this transition. Many of the answers indicated a sense of general well-being, rather than perfect attendance or academic success.

It is about families feeling safe in our schools, and that is going to look different for every family. You might have, there might be language barriers, there could be cultural barriers, these are First Nations families that are coming into a very Eurocentric system, so there's that barrier, automatically. So, if families are feeling safe enough so that their children are attending most of the time, or as much time as possible, and that will vary; if families are having conversations with the teacher, with the principal with whoever is involved in their child's care, then that is success as well. (Educator)

I think when students feel a sense of ownership, and also, I see kids being able to have a conversation. So, when they are upset about things, they feel comfortable enough in their space and with the people around them to say, listen, this is what's going on, and there is no feeling of judgement or feeling of unsettling. I think for us, when a student comes into our school, and we are able to meet their needs and support them through their process, when we are able to sit back and say okay, this student has a peer group, they have people that they can go to, they have the confidence or resilience to try new things and to take risks in an unknown space, because they are coming from a smaller place into a bigger hub, so when we see students reaching out and showing off their strengths in different ways, then that's when I think we've seen success. (Educator)

It's not about them attending every day, and getting top grades, I think that if students are attending most of the time. I think that the parents accepting the offers from schools to engage, it's not about, you know, we have the expectations that parents will just automatically engage. They will answer their phones, they're going to phone for late arrival, they're going to do all of this, but a lot of our families coming from the north, they don't know that process. (Educator)

I would put it in the context of well-being, like, how is that student doing on the mental, spiritual, emotional and physical level? Physical, you want to make sure that they are safe, and that they are having all their physical needs met; Emotional, you want to make sure that that child is happy, and does feel that sense of safety, and feels that they have that support network. So, I feel like if you can kind of frame it in that way, in the sense of, is that child having their needs met. For me, I think that's how you can kind of gauge it [success]. And then of course, there is also educational attainment, is that student hitting all of those benchmarks, and are they coming out of this with a high school diploma. (Family member)

One of participants, who was a student when their family moved to Thunder Bay, shared that they did not have the "supports or emotional supports" that they needed during their transition. Another family member talked about how schools should be offering "all around support",

Not just within the school system, but I'm thinking of the medicine wheel, emotional, physical, mental, spiritual. And I'm just thinking, when people first move here, sometimes substance abuse, substance misuse can be an issue. And unfortunately, that could also affect children. So, I think schools, or the school board should be part of that support

system, thinking emotional, mental, you know maybe have a partnership with counselling/therapist or Elders if that's what they're comfortable with.

School-Community Partnerships

Forming partnerships and linking community supports was another important piece shared by participants for how schools can support families during this transition. One of the educators in Thunder Bay explained,

If the family is brand new to Thunder Bay, has never experienced a larger city before, we can always say, have you made any friends, do you know anybody in the city? From there we can connect them to resources. Often, we do connection to the Friendship Centre, because they are, they're nice hub. And it's very non-judgmental, and it's like a little family.

Another educator shared that,

We could be building better networks with the service providers that are in the city, Indigenous specific service providers, like ONWA, Thunder Bay Friendship Centre, Beendigin, not so much the crisis piece, but more of the capacity building programs that they offer. Also, working with city run programs that support families, like Our Kids Count, or Blessings in a Backpack. Roots to Harvest, all of these kind of grassroots skill-based, skill development programs, I think that we could be working in tandem with them to make sure that family needs are being met.

Dilico Anishnabek Family Care is another partnership that some schools are trying to build on to support First Nations families during this transition.

We have been trying to bring Dilico in as more of a positive support, because often whenever families hear Dilico, they think, someone is coming to take my children. So, we have reached out to them for supports for families in regards to advocating for a family, like to get support from the community, or to advocate for housing, but it's harder to do. We have reached out for mental health supports for students, and they were the quickest. There was a mental health line that we called, and it was quick.

Community Supports

Food security was brought up by a number of participants when discussing challenges for families. One participant shared, "what saved us was food banks." Two families talked about how getting involved with a local church that had a high number of First Nations people that attended helped with meeting their basic needs and also building community, "because you got together, barbecues, fires, baseball. It was a community to be a part of."

One family gave the advice of encouraging families who arrive from remote First Nations communities to ask questions and try to make connections with community organizations like Ontario Native Women's Association (ONWA), or the Indigenous Friendship Centre because they offer gatherings and programs that can be very helpful. One family shared about how they took their youngest child to programming at different Child Care centres twice a week,

That helped me when I first moved here, just building that community. It was a mixture of people, it wasn't really culturally-based, but I felt it was really needed because it was activities I could do with my kid and engage with other people so I wasn't at home all the time.

Another community organization that was mentioned by a couple of participants in Thunder Bay is the Regional Multicultural Youth Council (RMYC). One of the family members who was a student when they moved to Thunder Bay shared about how her involvement with RMYC helped them.

In Grade 11 I started getting involved with RMYC, and I developed a really good relationship with [an adult there], and I got involved with a lot of the advocacy things that they were doing at the time. Getting involved with the youth council was really good for me because I started to feel like I was finding my voice, and I started getting more involved in things that were going on at school, and I started my own club. So in that way, I am grateful to the RMYC, they played a big role in my life, in terms of helping me to conceptualize what I was going through. Because they had been working with First Nations students for such a long time, they helped me figure it out, but they also pushed me a little bit to start taking on that advocacy role for myself and for other students.

One of the family members suggested that there should be a guide of the different services directed to the families that come to Thunder Bay. Then the family member took this idea to the next level and said, "What if there was someone devoted to that. Wouldn't that be cool? If you had someone devoted in that role to help those family's transition. I think that would have been helpful."

Helping Each Other

One of the educators from the north explained that many families who come here for education don't have a connection to somebody to help them, and they don't know where to go

for help. Each of the families I spoke with suggested having a person in the role to support families that are relocating to Thunder Bay, “a friend/mentor for them, a person to show them, and take them places”. Another family member explained,

If we had somebody like that in place at the schools, that new families are identified to get in touch with this person, then you know, do what they can to invite them into the community, and get them situated, and as comfortable as possible, with as many tools as they can get to be able to be comfortable enough, that would be so helpful.

One of the families said they would have liked to have someone telling them what to expect on their first day of school. “It would’ve been nice to know beforehand what to expect on that first day, and just sort of, what is expected of me, as a student”.

Families shared that someone in a role like this would need to be flexible, open-minded, and knowledgeable. It was suggested that this person would need to get to know all of the potential people or organizations that they might connect families and students with. “Try to make sure the place is safe for them before you send them there and get to know that organization or the people that are there”. And families shared that being with and actually taking students and families there the first time is very important to building comfort.

That’s why I think it would be good to have someone dedicated to that role, instead of just having them handed a guide or being told to call this person if they need this, or being told to call this person if you need that. There’s a lot of silos.

Simply sharing a number of silos of supports is “putting a lot of pressure on people that just got here and are still trying to figure out their way”.

I will end this section of the participant stories and experiences with the words of one of the Indigenous educators,

We need to never feel like we are doing enough. I think that’s really important. We can’t possibly do enough for the kids. We always have to strive to do better. If we feel like we are doing enough, then we are failing kids and their families.

Concluding Thoughts

The stories shared with me by the participants demonstrate the realities, successes and challenges experienced during this transition. Relocating from a remote First Nations community to the city of Thunder Bay is crossing a rather large divide between two cultures. Those transitioning have not been treated with equity, and as such, in order for this transition to be successful, it requires that special attention be paid, and additional actions be taken to support families and students, so they have the chance to walk in two worlds well.

Chapter Six: Discussion

The stories in chapter five confirm and validate much of the literature that was shared in chapter two. The participants provided valuable insights and experiences which inform the research questions. The primary research question explores the role schools can play in supporting families and students who relocate from remote First Nations communities to urban centres. The secondary research questions explore what barriers exist during this transition, how a successful transition is defined, and how schools can be safe spaces during times of cultural/environmental transition. In this chapter I will explore how the connections between the literature reviewed and what was shared by participants relate to my research questions, beginning with the secondary questions and moving toward the primary research question.

Barriers Faced by Families and Students

Disconnection

Many of the participants in this research are members of First Nations communities across Northwestern Ontario, including Bearskin Lake, Muskrat Dam, and Big Trout Lake, or Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug (KI). Hiebert and Heinrichs (2007) write about the signing of Treaty 9 at Big Trout Lake in 1929 and the original agreement for the creation of Big Trout Lake, Wunnummin Lake, and Sachigo reserves. In the thirty years it took for the government to survey and grant “full reserve status” to the communities, five other communities that were meant to be part of Big Trout Lake separated to form their own reserves. This division comes with some regret. Hiebert and Heinrichs (2007) site resident Frank Beardy, who explains that “we were a big nation and Big Trout Lake was the capital city of that nation....This was the centre of knowledge, and language.” (p.141). This breaking away of communities was just the beginning of a long pattern of members of these remote communities spreading further and further away from the strength of their homelands.

The impact of this separation was often highlighted by the participants. Talaga (2018) shares a story gifted to her by Edmund Metatawabin. She explained what happens when you “take the Indian out of the land, away from their language, culture, way of thought, and traditional ways of living” (p.42), you begin to destroy their soul. Simpson (2014) and Wilson (2018) both write about the importance of land to Indigenous peoples, as spiritual and emotional connection, and the Land’s role in shaping us.

Dependence

Talaga (2017) and Hanson (2009) write about the government’s continued efforts to maintain Indigenous dependence on the crown by isolating nations, both from each other and from settlement areas. This reliance on paternalistic government-funded structures makes it very difficult when a family wants to leave the community. The reality that many participants shared about the limited employment opportunities in remote First Nations communities, leads to many families being dependent on government income sources, which, combined with the high cost of supplies, perpetuates the cycle of poverty (NAN, 2012; O’Gorman & Pandey, 2015). Within this area is also the reality that there is simply no access to services in the same measure as in an urban centre. Often things like doctor appointments, and paperwork for identification is all taken care of through one or two locations, unlike in the city where services are disconnected, and you have to navigate multiple locations and processes spread all over the city for health, social services, and education needs.

Residential Schools

The importance of understanding trauma came up in multiple representations, but most often surrounded the ripple effects of the Indian Residential School system. Confirming the legacy described in the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) as having impact not only on the survivors’, but extending to their partners, children, grandchildren, extended families and entire communities. The ripple effects of this legacy

included things like substance abuse, physical and sexual abuse, difficulty showing affection or being loving parents (TRC, 2015), thereby demonstrating that it is critical for schools to understand this piece of First Nations history. It is a foundational element that underlies the historical relationship between First Nations students and families and the education system.

Families shared about the absence of ceremony in remote First Nations communities, which is also a result of residential schools and the Christianization of First Nations peoples. Hare & Pidgeon (2013) and Maddison (2013) found that youth often had more access to traditional ceremonies and knowledge in an urban setting. Similarly, Maddison (2013) found that Aboriginal people living in cities had more or equal access to cultural knowledge than Aboriginal people living in communities.

Another ripple of the residential school system that came up with families in discussing life in their remote communities was the lateral violence in First Nations communities. Bailey (2020) found that the existence of lateral violence is a serious concern for Indigenous students in colonized educational environments.

Quality of Education

The notion that students living in remote First Nations communities are behind the standards set by the provincial system in terms of academic achievement was commonly discussed (NAN, 2020; Talaga 2017; Anderson & Richards, 2016; Battiste, 2013; Mendelson, 2008), and was also indicated by many participants. NAN (2020) outlines a number of factors contributing to the “achievement gap” for students. Many of those were brought up by participants including lack of resources and supports, teacher turnover, and family engagement.

Many have written about the issues created and difficulty in delivering quality programming because of underfunding for reserve schools (NAN, 2012; 2002; Harper & Thompson, 2017; Lamb, 2014; Talaga, 2017). This was confirmed by the experiences and perceptions of the families and educators from remote First Nations communities that I spoke

with. High rates of teacher turnover, and the impacts this has on relationship-building and the school-family partnership was discussed. This struggle to retain and attain qualified staff is also discussed by NAN (2020) and White and Beavon (2009) in relation to student achievement and quality of education.

Culture Shock and Racism

Every participant shared about the experience of clashing cultures and new-world experiences when making this transition. The term, 'culture shock' was also used by Harper and Thompson (2017) and Talaga (2017) to describe this transition. In addition to feeling the intensity of clashing cultures, participants described racism as a defining feature of the transition.

The experiences of racism ranged from subtle or overt to widespread systemic examples. In the final report published by the Urban Aboriginal Taskforce (2007), the results of a community survey indicated a widespread problem of racism in Thunder Bay. This was confirmed by the experiences of participants in this research and schools were not exempt as highlighted by Maddison (2013) who wrote about cities being inhospitable landscapes for Indigenous families.

One of the areas where racism was evident with family participants was in the efforts to secure housing. Harper and Thompson (2017) found that many Indigenous families moving to cities often end up in high-risk neighbourhoods, which participants felt was a result of many landlords' racist attitudes.

Defining Success

Eurocentric Academic Expectations

As one educator explained, students who come to Thunder Bay from remote communities are often only viewed through one lens to assess their knowledge and skills—namely their ability to read and write. In many ways, this is a demonstration of cognitive

imperialism (Battiste, 2013) in action. Kihkipiw et al. (2020) write about this over-privileging of readers and writers, stating that as an education system,

We panic if we have a child for whom this narrow version of literacy is not their gift...We look at a child – so full of other strengths, gifts, and promise – and say, “you’re life is going to be a struggle because you are not yet reading at grade level.” (p.79)

There is literature that explains how this approach to success in education supports a narrow range of learners (Freidel, 1999; Battiste, 2013; Pidgeon, et al., 2013).

Well-being as Success

For many of the participants, success in this time of transition was defined in more holistic terms, considering the students’ and family’s well-being. Are the mental, physical, emotional and spiritual needs being met? This description is in line with the Relational Worldview Model presented in Rountree and Smith’s work (2016).

Expectations on Families

Research has suggested that Indigenous families may not behave and engage with schools in the same way as middle-class non-Indigenous families (Friedel, 1999, Berger, 2009, Milne, 2016). This was confirmed by participants in the study who spoke about the expectations of families in Thunder Bay, and how they differed from life in communities. Pressure was placed on families in transition who do not inherently understand the school system or meet the new set of expectations.

Schools as Safe Spaces

Participants’ experiences align with the literature in demonstrating the important role of schools to acknowledge and address racism to create safe spaces for Indigenous students and families.

Pressure to Assimilate

Many participants spoke about the pressure they felt to assimilate to the new expectations put on them from life in the city and by students and staff in schools. Lamb (2014) explains how the education system continues to oppress First Nations content/perspectives, which leads to the feeling of needing to conform in order to succeed. Similarly, Wilkinson (2002) suggests that youth who do not reject their culture for the mainstream 'white' culture are less likely to succeed. It requires proactive actions of educators to support students by building relationships and fostering acceptance (Pidgeon et al., 2013). In order to be safe spaces, schools need to allow First Nations students and families to feel safe "to be, to think, and to act Indigenous" (Katz, 2018, p.ix).

Addressing Racism

Participants shared the need to build understanding of the connection between the past and the present for Indigenous peoples and the necessity of acknowledging the racism that exists in schools and the city. In line with requests made by families about teacher training, Harper and Thompson (2017) call for anti-racism strategies to be part of teacher training programs. This should include teaching about the true history, colonization, treaties and residential schools. Without understanding how colonization and Eurocentrism continue to shape the education system, non-Indigenous educators will struggle to support students and families during these transitions (Madden, Higgins & Korteweg, 2013). Teaching practice can be transformed through a better understanding of these cultural and structural factors (Cross et al., 2011).

Taking this a step further beyond simply addressing and acknowledging Indigenous culture, research suggests that education works to cultivate pride and strength through Indigenous identity, land-based practices, and includes accurate history (Riley & Ungerleider, 2012; Harper & Thompson, 2017; Katz, 2018) as one approach. Family participants shared that while they often had access to this kind of learning in communities, it was not consistently

available in schools in Thunder Bay. Educators acknowledged that this approach had the most positive impacts on students.

The Role of Schools in Supporting the Transition

My experience with education, from kindergarten to graduate school, was one of coping with someone's else agenda, curriculum, and pedagogy, someone who was neither interested in my well-being as a kwezens, nor interested in my connection to my homeland, my language or history, nor my Nishnaabeg intelligence. (Simpson, 2014, p.6)

This quote from Simpson (2014) introduces important themes that connect to the role school staff have in supporting students and families when they relocate from remote First Nations communities to urban centres. Both the literature and participants highlight that the current system of education does not honour Indigenous ways of knowing or being. Students and families shared feelings of disconnection and spoke of their lack of belonging. They also understood that success should be defined by well-being and not through the limited lens of academics or attendance.

Building Relationships

The most frequently discussed topic in my research was connected to relationships. How relationships are built and maintained through informal approaches and creating welcoming environments was stated many times by participants. These concepts are affirmed by Mutch, Rarere, and Stratford (2011) who share that a schools success in working with transient families is dependent upon the formation of relationships with families. They explain that relationship building must be purposeful and start from initial contact with an approach that is informal and welcoming for the whole family. This exact approach was described by one of the educators in Thunder Bay when discussing how they changed their schools' registration process to better suit families. Other participants shared that simply reaching out with phone calls more frequently, or taking the time to put in extra effort to communicate goes a long way in building a relationship of trust.

Belonging and Community

Moving away from their family and communities took away participants sense of belonging. Educators and families who participated shared about the positive impact it has when schools work to establish a sense of community and belonging which is also supported in research (Rountree and Smith, 2016; Harper and Thompson, 2017). Much of the literature explored explained the need for community involvement to support families (Friedel, 1999, Berger, 2009; Pidgeon et al., 2013). This was also confirmed by families and educator participants when discussing supports that helped families and students.

Programming in Schools

One participant commented about the relevance of learning in schools to First Nations students, which includes learning about the prime ministers, the English and French languages, but not their languages, or their true histories as a barrier to students when they come to Thunder Bay. The content and methods of delivery represent Eurocentric approaches (Battiste, 2013; Harper & Thompson, 2017; Hare & Pidgeon, 2011). Absolon (2011) and Battiste (2013) write about the importance of including First Nations peoples' languages to understand worldview. Similarly, Lamb (2014) and O'Gorham and Pandey (2015) found that having the opportunity to learn about Aboriginal history and customs made it more likely for First Nations students to stay in and graduate from school.

Indigenous Approaches to Teaching and Learning

Participants and the research literature also confirm the need for school staff to move beyond tokenism (Friedel, 1999; Scott, 2020) when including Indigenous perspectives. The idea that schools are "indigenizing spaces" should be switched to include meaningful ways of incorporating Indigenous ways of teaching and learning across the curriculum. One of the educators from Thunder Bay shared about how their school is working to include more Indigenous ways of being and knowing in their classrooms through assessment practices,

honouring oral language, scaffolding, and considering how Elders taught youth, and moving beyond simply having a medicine wheel displayed on the walls. A meaningful approach could also impact the physical layout of the classroom, as Madden, Higgins and Korteweg (2013) suggest, taking students out of regimented rows.

Land-based Learning

The impact of being disconnected from land, where many find their sense of purpose, identity and connection to ancestors was shared by participants and is also highlighted in the literature (Wilson, 2000; Simpson, 2014). School staff can support this by providing opportunities for students to participate in land-based learning and experiences.

Professional Learning

Shifting the approach to teaching and learning to include Indigenous histories, cultures, knowledges, perspectives and ways of learning will require an investment in educator learning. Many participants shared about this as an important and ongoing need to support students and families.

Transition Support Person

The suggestion that families and students need a person who can support them during the transition was made by several participants. This suggestion is in line with Hill et al. (2012) who found that having a specialized staff member dedicated to supporting schools and families with “educational mobility” had the most positive impact on student success. Mutch et al. (2011) confirm that students in transition often have many social and educational needs and require full service supports. Participants explained that a simple guidebook would fall short of meeting the needs that families have during this time, and that a person who could meet with them, explain what to expect, share community resources by taking them out and assisting them in navigating the city would be the most impactful resource.

Actioning the Learning

I have conceptualized a summary of the learning and data in a visual representation.

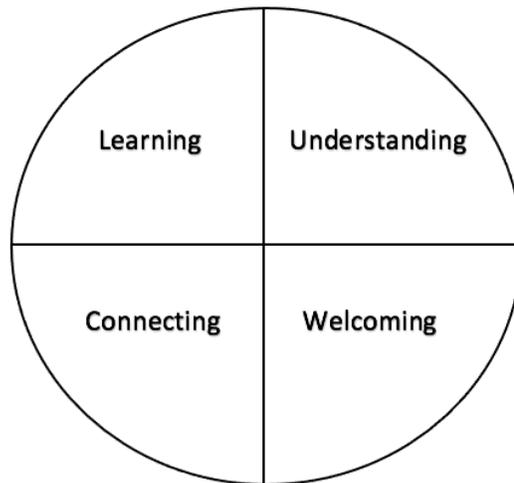


Figure 2. *Supporting Transition, a visual representation.*

This representation, like the Sacred Circle Teachings of the Anishnabek nation, is in a circle divided into four quadrants. It is not linear, but cyclical, representing a cycle that is ongoing and iterative. Each of the words chosen represent the four main themes that came out of my research and are verbs. The process of supporting families in this time of transition requires action. I will start in the Understanding quadrant as I unpack this visual representation as it relates to what school staff can do, and move as the Anishnaabek do around the circle in the way that the Earth circles around the Sun, otherwise known as, clockwise.

Understanding

Based on the literature reviewed that prepared me for conversations with participants and the data collected, beginning with the understanding quadrant seems appropriate. There is much to be understood about this experience. The first thing needed for schools to support families and students is an accurate understanding of the history. The ongoing impacts of the Indian Residential School system play an important role in the lives of students and families coming from remote First Nations communities. This impact of intergenerational trauma effects how families interact with the school system and in turn with the approach and methods that

schools need to consider when providing supports. There needs to be some level of understanding about how this legacy connects to present social issues we see in many communities including substance abuse, physical and sexual abuse, suicide, and lateral violence.

Educators also need to understand the conditions of life in most remote First Nations communities--to know that daily life in these communities is very different than life in cities. Educators need to understand that this system was designed to oppress and create dependence, and after living under the weight of that for generations, it isn't easy to transition away from your community.

Although living conditions are not always ideal in remote First Nations communities, educators should also begin to understand the connection between First Nations peoples and their homelands including the importance of this way of life to their identity and understanding of who they are, and the pain of being separated from that.

School staff in Thunder Bay need to acknowledge the reality that students and families arriving from remote First Nations communities are experiencing culture shock. They need to attempt to understand what that means for their behaviour and the expectations that should or should not be placed on them to perform within hegemonic norms.

Welcoming

Once we acknowledge and understand that students and families are entering a very different world than what they have become accustomed to, schools and educators in Thunder Bay can focus on ensuring they do everything in their control to be welcoming. Knowing that the size of the school is likely overwhelming, school staff can create spaces and processes that allow for ease of transition.

It is important to know that these students and families are experiencing racism for the first time when they arrive in Thunder Bay. Every participant shared that this is a very real experience for them, both in the city and in the schools. How can schools be places where students and families feel culturally safe to be and embrace who they are? School staff need to ensure programming and supports are provided to build and allow for the expression of students' and family's cultural identity. It is also important to know that students and families are often faced with concerns for their physical safety that they are not used to experiencing.

By knowing that families are often struggling financially in these situations, school staff can be welcoming by checking-in and connecting with community partnerships that provide food and school supplies to families to help with the financial burden during this transition.

Connecting

Connecting requires a two-pronged approach, including the school staff's approach to connecting with families and students and also to facilitate connections between community partners and families. It is imperative that school staff build a strong connection with the families from the start. This will take time, effort, and innovative methods. Many participants shared why and how the traditional methods of reaching families does not work with First Nations families, especially those who have recently relocated from their home community. It will require extra effort and focus by school staff, as many First Nations families may not automatically engage the way others do. As many participants shared, students and families are longing for a sense of belonging that is lost when they leave their home community. They are used to being connected to community and they want to find ways to rebuild this sense of community. School staff and school systems can support by providing opportunities for families to engage with each other and build a support network.

Prioritizing relationship-based approaches is foundational in supporting families and students. As was highlighted by participant stories, educators need to take the time to ask

questions, listen to the answers, and then help students and families to meet the needs that are shared.

In addition to ensuring trusting relationships are formed between school staff and families, being a bridge between community organizations that can meet the needs of students and families is crucial in supporting them. It was recommended by a number of participants that there needs to be a person who holds the role/responsibility of supporting families and students in this transition.

Learning

The literature and experiences of my participants suggest that the learning needs to begin with accepting that the so-called “learning gap” that has been identified in First Nations students coming from remote communities is not ‘in’ First Nations children but rather that the gap is in the system’s understanding of First Nations peoples, their cultures, histories, perspectives, ways of knowing, being and learning. The next step is having the courage and willingness to change, which will require a lot of learning. In order for educators to address this, they must acknowledge and understand their own areas of bias, prejudice, and discrimination towards Indigenous peoples and histories, enabling them to move forward in a culturally safe way. Educators and school systems in Thunder Bay need to understand how colonization continues to shape the education system. To begin to shift this reality, schools can offer programming that is reflective of Indigenous knowledges and perspectives and is created by Indigenous people. This will require valuing other knowledges, not just traditional academic skills of reading and writing. It may also require redefining success and assessment practices to include more cultural relevance, while avoiding tokenism.

Learning to implement trauma-informed practices surfaced in my conversations with many participants. When dealing with the impacts and understanding of intergenerational trauma, this

is a necessary approach to take with students and families arriving from remote First Nations communities.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

From the beginning of this journey, my experiences as a teacher in a remote First Nations community, a boarding parent, an Anishnaabe mother, a classroom teacher, and the Indigenous Education Lead for a school board in Thunder Bay, have rooted me in the practicality of my research question. I have a relationship with the families and educators who shared with me. I have experienced this transition alongside many youths. I have seen the struggles and successes of many who have left their home communities and came to the city. These research findings can be applied to educators, not only in Thunder Bay but across Canada, where people from remote First Nations communities often leave their homes in remote locations and enter schools in urban centres.

Learning Through Literature

The generational impacts of Indigenous family's negative experiences with the education system were among the key concepts revealed through the literature review about life and education in remote First Nations communities. Another important topic discussed was the underfunding of education in First Nations communities. Many sources (Anderson & Richards, 2016; Battiste, 2013; Harper & Thompson, 2017; Lamb, 2014; Mendelson, 2008; O'Gorman & Pandey, 2015; Richards, 2014, 2016) discussed reasons for the identified gap in academic performance between First Nations students in remote communities and students in provincial schools. It was noted that there is a growing population of off-reserve First Nations people across Canada, and in Thunder Bay, Ontario, specifically.

Families and students come to the city for many reasons, including health care, education, employment or housing. It was suggested in the literature (Bailey, 2020; Harper & Thompson, 2017; Maddison, 2013; Talaga, 2017) that cities can be an inhospitable landscape for families who often struggle to meet basic needs and are overwhelmed by culture shock. With regards to schools specifically, it was shared that Indigenous knowledge, histories, beliefs are

often suppressed by mainstream education through cognitive imperialism, ignoring or omitting Indigenous knowledge, thus resulting in a system of education that continues to be assimilative in nature.

The literature suggested that barriers exist in building the school-family relationship due to differences in parenting styles or expectations between Indigenous ways and Eurocentric understandings. This has implications for what it looks like to support students in their education. It was suggested that building parent understanding of the school system might promote involvement (Berger, 2009; Friedel, 1999).

Through professional development in the area of cultural awareness/sensitivity, or anti-racist education that promotes self-reflection and knowledge, school systems can begin to remove systemic barriers. To move beyond simply removing barriers, it is important for the education system to have a role in strengthening Indigenous pride in identity to promote student success. This can be done through increased representation in schools, avoiding tokenism when including Indigenous voice and perspectives, and providing opportunities for students and families to connect to Land, language, and culture.

Learning Through Methodology

Integrating Indigenous methodologies with a common qualitative method like open-ended interviews allowed for a process of learning that was rooted in respect, responsibility and reciprocity and ensured the focus remained on accessing practical, relevant knowledge that will be useful for Indigenous people and communities. The representation of participants was balanced between educators from remote First Nations communities, educators working in Thunder Bay, and family perspectives. I chose to have three family experiences rather than two so that this was the largest group represented, because they are the center of my research question.

I'm grateful to the power and grace of the land in sharing knowledge and wisdom throughout the research process. I initially resisted Archibald (2018)'s storywork approach, but

as it turns out, this came to me in a very natural way. The way the story in my data revealed itself to me through Anemki Wajiw helped to contextualize and see the themes and words of my participants through holism.

Learning Through Restorying

In chapter four, I shared the story created using the themes from my conversations with participants. In Anemki Wajiw's story, residential school is described as a powerful wave. I wrote that the fear of the water still exists, meaning that the relationships with the education system is still largely one of fear which is an important understanding when working with families from remote First Nations communities. The ongoing impact of residential schools was one of only a few concepts mentioned by every participant. Anemki Wajiw goes on to explain all of the things they've seen and witnessed as families relocate to Thunder Bay, which follows the path of the themes shared through participant voice in chapter five.

Implications for Schools

This research presents many implications for actions that can be taken by school staff to support students and families during the transition from remote First Nations communities to Thunder Bay. In this section I outline things that school staff should consider, including providing opportunities to connect with Land, addressing racism, integrating Indigenous knowledges meaningfully in the curriculum, and focusing on relationship-building.

Land-based Opportunities

A prominent experience shared by participants related to being separated not just from family and community, but from the physical place--the Land they belong to. Many shared about the negative impacts that disconnection can have on identity. Participants shared about the importance of being outdoors and how land-based activities defined who they are. They shared about how that piece of them is often taken when they come to Thunder Bay. In a literal sense, this is demonstrated by the layers of pavement and concrete that act as a barrier to their connection to Land. The significance of this topic would suggest that investing in land-based

programming and providing opportunities for students and families to connect to Land through outdoor education could be a very effective way to support students and families when they arrive.

Addressing Racism

Encountering racism was a defining feature shared by most participants when considering the experiences of First Nations students and families relocating to Thunder Bay. Schools need to acknowledge and be equipped to address this in ways that promote understanding, respect, and cultural safety. In terms of professional learning, there were many suggestions made in line with literature that educators need to be trained in cultural awareness, anti-racism, and trauma-informed practices to best support students and families from remote First Nations communities.

Indigenous Knowledges in Curriculum

It is important for school staff to incorporate Indigenous knowledges into curriculum and classrooms in a meaningful way, avoiding tokenistic approaches to First Nations content or people in schools. School staff should aspire to have Indigenous representation in schools. Many participants shared the benefits of implementing approaches to teaching, learning and being that had been modelled by Indigenous staff or community members to support students.

Relational Approaches

Another concept that was discussed by every participant was the importance of relationship-building with students and families and the need to reassess how school staff approach this. This is as simple as the suggestion made to ensure that front-line staff (secretaries, custodians, staff on morning duty, etc.), are informed, understanding, and welcoming when families arrive, regardless of what time it is. School staff should consider more informal approaches, think beyond parent-teacher interviews and monthly newsletters to a more personalized approach to reaching out. The participants and the literature encourage schools to

think outside the box when connecting with families who are relocating from remote First Nations communities.

Based on participant experiences and best practices, schools might need to apply a more holistic lens when defining success, consider the family/student's emotional, physical and spiritual health, and not base this measure solely on attendance and academic performance. It is imperative that schools work closely with community partners to support families and provide opportunities to connect students and families to Indigenous cultural learning experiences when possible.

A Resource to Support Schools

My intent was to use this research to inform the creation of a resource for schools that will act as a guide for staff when supporting students and families who register in their schools in Thunder Bay directly from a remote First Nation community. Based on my findings, I would suggest including information to build understanding about life in remote First Nations communities, the creation of reserves, and the history and ongoing impacts of the residential school system. The resource could include information about how to create welcoming environments, ideas for the registration process and the first days and weeks that the student attends school, and how to build trust and a strong partnership between the school and families.

Based on literature and participants experiences, it would have to include supports and information that build cultural awareness and understanding, allow for staff to identify and recognize stereotypes and bias, and consider anti-racist approaches to education. Since many participants talked about the experiences of trauma families they are arriving with, I would also suggest including information on trauma-informed practices. For schools that regularly receive a large number of families who come from remote First Nations communities, it would be worthwhile to hold professional learning sessions to build these understandings with the entire staff. A resource document is a start, but has limited ability to create impact on bigger topics.

Support for Families

The suggestion was made by participants to create a resource for families arriving in Thunder Bay with information they may find useful, such as bus schedules, services and locations for supports in the community (health services, walk-in clinics, food banks, Service Ontario, Service Canada, etc.), what to expect at school, how to prepare for school, or which community agencies to connect with for additional support. While a print (or digital) resource would be helpful, and is a great starting point, the participants and other research indicates that having a staff member responsible for providing support during the transition for families and students would be the best way to ensure success (Hill et al., 2012; Kreuzer, 2016; Morgan et al, 2015). If a staff role is not possible, school boards could consider initiating a mentorship program for families to connect with others who have navigated the transition for support and guidance.

This research provides important learning that can guide schools towards effectively supporting families and students who leave their home communities and enroll in schools in Thunder Bay. School staff have an important role to play in working with families to address their needs during this time and they have the opportunity to positively impact the successful transition for families so that they feel safe in their new environment.

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APPENDIX A: Interview Guide

Crossing the Divide: Supporting Families and Students Relocating from Remote First Nations Communities to Thunder Bay SchoolsGuiding questions for Educators in Thunder Bay:

1. What supports do you have in place for students/families in your schools?

Follow up: Are any of these supports specific to First Nations students? Are any of these supports in place to support students relocating from remote First Nation communities?

2. What, if any, are differences you are aware of that exist between schools in Thunder Bay and schools in remote First Nations communities?
3. When a family moves to Thunder Bay from a remote First Nations community, what does a “successful transition” look like? What kind of role do you see the school playing in that?
4. A. What are some things that are difficult during this transition?
B. What have you found helpful during those difficulties?
5. A. How does the school use community resources to support families?
B. Are you aware of community supports in Thunder Bay that support families who may be new to Thunder Bay?

Guiding questions for Educators in Remote Communities:

1. What supports do you have in place for students/families in your schools?
2. What, if any, are differences you are aware of that exist between schools in Thunder Bay and the school in your community?
3. When a family moves from your community to Thunder Bay, what would you consider a “successful transition”? What is the role of your school in that?
4. A. What are some things that you suspect are difficult during this transition?
B. What have you found helpful during those difficulties?
5. A. How does the school use community resources to support families?
B. Are you aware of community supports in Thunder Bay that support families who may be new to Thunder Bay?

Guiding questions for Families:

1. How is life in Thunder Bay different or the same as life in your home community?
2. Is there a difference in the supports offered by the school in your home community than in the school(s) in Thunder Bay?
3. What does a “successful transition” look like?
4. A. What are some things that are difficult during this transition?
B. What have you found helpful during those difficulties?
5. How did it feel to move from you home community?
6. Are there any community supports in Thunder Bay that supported you in this transition?