

**Connecting Social Support to the Academic Persistence and Health of Indigenous Post-
Secondary Students**

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ABSTRACT

This case study examined how social support affected the academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students attending an Indigenous-affiliated institution. This research study aimed to provide a holistic understanding of Indigenous students' experiences that will inform educators and administrators about the lived realities of Indigenous post-secondary students and facilitate policy and program development to support the academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students in undergraduate programs.

The Family Education model by HeavyRunner and DeCelles (2002) provided conceptual support for the collection, analysis and interpretation of the data. An intrinsic qualitative case study approach was used. Data were gathered through four focus group interviews and three face-to-face interviews with Indigenous students and staff and faculty members from the case institution.

The findings suggest that although Indigenous students are a diverse group, they experience many similar personal, familial, social and campus-related challenges. Indigenous students receive social support from their peers, families, communities, and from the staff and faculty members at First Nations University of Canada (FNUniv), Northern campus. Staff and faculty members deliver social support through their authentic relationships with Indigenous students by displaying genuine interest, building trust, creating a supportive environment, and establishing connections with Indigenous students. Social support improves Indigenous students' academic persistence by providing motivation, building resilience and shaping Indigenous students' identities while enhancing their holistic health.

The conclusions from the study suggest that FNUniv, Northern campus, as an Indigenous-affiliated institution, is helping Indigenous students obtain a post-secondary education. The Northern campus is creating a culturally responsive environment and building a web of support for Indigenous students. The findings indicate that culturally responsive social support delivered with an Indigenous-affiliated institution is needed for Indigenous students to persist academically, flourish as individuals, and contribute to the broader Indigenous community.

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DEDICATION

*For my friends who
~love to teach and teach with love~
thank you*

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CHAPTER ONE

The Problem

There is a crisis in Canada that appears only to be getting worse. That crisis is the gap in post-secondary education (PSE) levels between Indigenous¹ and non-Indigenous people. PSE refers to the highest level of educational achievement after secondary school and includes certifications, diplomas, undergraduate and graduate university degrees (Statistics Canada, 2008). Although all aspects of PSE are important, for this study, the term PSE only included undergraduate degree programs.

There has been a consistent increase in the number of Indigenous people earning undergraduate degrees, however non-Indigenous Canadians are attaining degrees at a higher rate. Consequently, the PSE gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people continues to widen. Table 1.1 depicts the difference in attainment of undergraduate degrees between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians from 1981 and 2016. The data indicates that Indigenous people have seen an 8.9% increase in PSE attainment, yet the PSE gap has widened from 6.1% to 17.6% (Gordon & White, 2014; Statistics Canada, 2008; Statistics Canada, 2013; Statistics Canada,

¹ For this dissertation, the terms Indigenous and Indigenous people are used to refer to the Aboriginal people of Canada and include all First Nations, Inuit and Métis people as defined in Section 35 of the Canadian Constitution (1982). The term Aboriginal was used when reflected in the literature, and whenever possible, culturally specific names were used (National Collaborating Center for Aboriginal Health, 2017).

2018). Under these "conditions, post-secondary attainment of Indigenous Canadians will not catch up to the rest of the population any time soon" (Friesen, 2013, para 2). In the best-case scenario, progress will stagnate, and at worst, the gap will continue to widen as non-Indigenous people complete PSE at greater rates (Gordon & White, 2014).

Table 1.1 *Undergraduate Degree Attainment of Indigenous and Non-Indigenous People in Canada*

Year	Indigenous People	Non-Indigenous People
1981	2.0%	8.1%
1991	2.6%	11.6%
1996	4.2%	15.5%
2001	5.9%	20.1%
2006	7.7%	23.4%
2011	9.8%	26.5%
2016	10.9%	28.5%

Note. Adapted from Statistics Canada 2008, 2013, 2018 with additional data from "Indigenous Educational Attainment in Canada" by C.E. Gordon and J.P. White, 2014, *International Indigenous Policy Journal*, 5(3), p. 17.

Background of the Problem

PSE has proven to be prosperous for Indigenous people and the Canadian society as evidenced by its economic and social benefits. The economy relies on educated workers to meet the demands of rising productivity and improve the economic performance of the country. As Hull (2015) noted, improved education increases human capital and grows the Canadian economy. Indigenous people receive a double benefit from achieving an undergraduate degree: not only do earnings rise with education, but job satisfaction also increases (Howe, 2011). Howe (2011) also maintained that PSE increases agency as "educated individuals are more likely to vote, stay better informed and be politically active" (p. 35). Individuals, with PSE, constructively contribute to building a justifiable society (Calver, 2015). Notably, for Indigenous people, PSE provides an essential foundation for nation-building by facilitating the growth of self-determined communities (Assembly of First Nations, 2010; Begay, 2016; Cornell & Kalt, 1998).

The reasons why the PSE gap continues to widen are multifaceted. According to Timmons and Stoicheff (2016), deeply rooted economic and social issues are the central causes that hinder Indigenous students' persistence to complete undergraduate degrees. The important economic factors include: a) Indigenous people are amongst the poorest in Canada (Wilson & McDonald, 2010) and many are of low social economic status (Statistics Canada, 2018) and b) federal funding for Indigenous post-secondary students is insufficient, which either inhibits Indigenous students from attending PSE or hampers the completion of PSE. Socially, Indigenous students are more likely to: a) distrust educational institutions as a result of generational effects of colonization (Bombay, Matheson & Anisman, 2011; Malatest, 2002; 2004), b) lack familial and community support as a result of relocating to attend PSE (Hardes, 2006; Holmes, 2005; Mendelson, 2006) and c) be academically unprepared and experience low academic self-concept as a result of accumulated generational education deficits, especially at the secondary level (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2017; Orłowski & Cottrell, 2019).

In Canada, Indigenous people are affected by health disparities in more significant numbers than the general Canadian population. Health disparities are systematic, inequitable health differences based on income, education, occupation, gender, race, disability, and any other characterization associated with marginalization (Braveman et al., 2011). Economic and social issues have impacted the health of Indigenous post-secondary students by intensifying stress and feelings of isolation, increasing vulnerability and academic inadequacy, and impacting Indigenous students' persistence to complete their undergraduate degrees (Holmes, 2006; Malatest, 2002, 2004; Mendelson, 2006).

Effective academic programs and student services require different types of social support. According to House (1981), social support "is a flow of emotional concern, instrumental aid, information and/or appraisal... between people" (p.26). Subsequently, there are four types of social support: emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal that can be dependent or independent of one another. Social support can be delivered informally by peers and family members and formally by professionals and service groups (House, 1981). At the post-secondary level, peers, family members, and professionals provide social support that takes on many forms, such as displaying caring and empathy, academic tutoring, financial assistance, personal counselling and academic feedback. Savitz-Romer, Jager-Hymen, and Coles (2009)

demonstrated that social support fosters academic persistence in post-secondary students who attend mainstream institutions while House (1981) determined that social support buffers stress to improve physical, mental and emotional health.

Many Canadian post-secondary institutions are developing responses to the PSE gap. Barnhardt (1991) identified four types of post-secondary institutions and their varying levels of cultural responsiveness to meet the needs of Indigenous people: assimilated, integrated, independent, and affiliated. In particular, mainstream institutions, that integrate Indigenous programs within their structure have implemented services directed towards addressing the challenges faced by Indigenous post-secondary students (Barnhardt, 1991) with some of the more popular initiatives including gathering spaces, cultural and spiritual activities, and peer mentorship programs (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 2013).

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada (2015b) recommended that Canadian post-secondary institutions be critical players for reconciliation and the rekindling of relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. The TRC (2015b) emphasized the criticality for post-secondary institutions to take the lead in reconciliation by demonstrating “mutual respect for different ways of knowing and recognizing the intellectual contributions of Indigenous people” (Universities Canada, 2015, para 4). Many mainstream institutions have committed to Indigenization by employing strategies to “empower Indigenous self-determination, address decolonization and reconcile systemic and societal inequalities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians” (Pidgeon, 2016, p. 77). Some of the strategies that have been implemented include: increasing the number of Indigenous leadership positions, creating Indigenous strategic plans, developing specific Indigenous policies (Pidgeon, 2016) and “providing culturally responsive programs, information, and services developed in collaboration with Aboriginal communities and organizations” (Ministry of Advanced Education, Innovation and Technology, 2013, p. 13).

The Indigenous-affiliate institution, FNUniv, Northern campus, has embraced cultural responsiveness by incorporating Indigenous values into policies, bridging Western and Indigenous knowledge and using traditional practices in teaching and learning. FNUniv has responded to Indigenous students’ needs by creating environments, academic programs and supportive services that center on the spirit of Indigenous people, the sharing of Indigenous

knowledge and the maintenance of cultural traditions (The Aboriginal Institutes' Consortium, 2005). FNUUniv has followed the recommendations of the Aboriginal Institutes' Consortium (2005) and delivered culturally responsive programs and services that "address the specific cultural, linguistic, intellectual, social, and economic needs and conditions of Indigenous peoples in Canada" (p. 33). This approach to PSE is quite different from those of mainstream institutions. FNUUniv uses culturally responsive approaches that focus on students' cultural frames of reference (Gay, 2013) through the incorporation of traditional knowledge, values, and traditional teaching practices in a culturally appropriate manner. The culturally responsive approaches "recognize students' differences, validate students' culture and asserts that cultural congruence ... increases students' success" (Ragoonaden & Mueller, 2017). FNUUniv also uses these approaches to create integral connections and balance between students, the institution, and broader Indigenous communities that are necessary for nation-building (Begay, 2016; Cornell & Kalt, 1998).

There are numerous models and theories that attempt to explain the process of student persistence in PSE. Tinto's interactionist theory (1975, 1993) is one hallmark model that is used frequently to investigate the interactions between students and institutions to determine the students' level of persistence. Tinto (1993) postulated that students who were able to separate from family and friends and transition to the norms and values of the institution were better able to integrate into the institution and academically persist. Although Tinto's interactionist theory (1975, 1993) has been used extensively in research and is deemed credible and valid, its assumptions are not designed around non-traditional learners and do not include influential institutional factors (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

HeavyRunner and DeCelles (2002) developed the Family Education Model (FEM) as a model of student persistence for Native American post-secondary students. Rather than assuming Native American students were identical to traditional learners, this model framed Native American students as a unique group of students who rely heavily on their native cultural values and family connections as social support for academic persistence. This model set forth the following assertions for Native American students:

- a) academic activities and cultural life should meld;
- b) establishing and maintaining a sense of family is necessary both at home and at the

institution;

c) the separation of Native students from the traditional supports provided by the extended family creates complications that are generally not addressed by traditional institutional student services (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002, p.31).

The central feature of HeavyRunner and DeCelles' FEM (2002) is that Native American culture and engagement of the family have a significant influence on the academic persistence of Native American students. Lundberg (2014) also found that family and cultural involvement positively influenced the academic persistence of Native American post-secondary students while Tanchine, Cabrera and Yellow Bird (2016) confirmed that exposure to culture and family created a sense of belonging which led to greater academic persistence in Native American students. These assertions were used to gain a deeper understanding of how familial and cultural social support affected the academic persistence of Indigenous students at the case institution. FEM will be further elaborated on in Chapter Two.

Academic persistence and graduation rates define traditional academic success. Academic success focuses on students being intellectual productive in order to pass courses and (academic persistence) and graduate from academic programs. Pidgeon (2008, 2014) found that Indigenous students associated academic success with more than being intellectually fruitful. Notably, she found that as some Indigenous students progressed through their academic programs, they grew mentally, emotionally, and culturally in their abilities to achieve their individual goals and aspirations, give back to their families and broader communities and "maintain their cultural integrity" (Pidgeon, 2008, p.143).

Indigenous post-secondary students experience a unique set of challenges associated with PSE. Indigenous students are more likely to experience social and economic issues stemming from the generational effects of colonization that subsequently affect their academic persistence (Timmons & Stoicheff, 2016). Studies have shown that social support increases academic persistence in traditional students and improves physical, mental and emotional health in others. However, I did not uncover any literature that examined the relationships between social support, academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students. Given the different approaches to addressing the challenges faced by Indigenous post-secondary students, a more in-depth look at the link between social support, academic persistence and health of Indigenous

students at an Indigenous-affiliated institution is warranted. This knowledge may become the foundation for closing the PSE gap and improving Indigenous people's health.

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this descriptive, interpretive qualitative case study is to understand how social support affects the academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students at an Indigenous-affiliated institution in North central Saskatchewan.

Research Questions

To fulfill the study's purpose, a central research question and supplementary questions guided the work.

Central question

To what extent does social support affect the academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students who attend FNUniv, Northern campus?

Supplementary questions

1. What challenges do Indigenous post-secondary students face?
2. Who provides social support to Indigenous post-secondary students?
3. How is social support delivered to Indigenous post-secondary students?
4. What effect does social support have on the academic persistence of Indigenous post-secondary students?
5. What effect does social support have on the health of Indigenous post-secondary students?

Significance of the Study

Social and economic issues rooted in the generational effects of colonization contribute to the widening of the PSE gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians (Timmons & Stoicheff, 2016). As a result, we have seen post-secondary institutions respond by providing programs and services oriented towards Indigenous students. Although researchers have demonstrated a positive relationship between social support, academic persistence and health of post-secondary students in mainstream institutions, I uncovered limited research on the role social support plays in the academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students who attend an Indigenous-affiliated institution. The failure to understand the

experiences of Indigenous post-secondary students will continue to contribute to widening the PSE gap.

Through this research, I sought to understand the perceptions of the effects of social support on the academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students at FNUniv, Northern campus. This research was timely, and the findings will inform the educational community about the issues faced by Indigenous post-secondary students and the culturally responsive social support that effectively influence their academic persistence and health. The conclusions identify the need for culturally responsive social support to be delivered in culturally responsive environments for Indigenous post-secondary students. Knowing the sources and types of social support that Indigenous students perceive as important has the potential to assist Indigenous students in navigating the PSE landscape and institutional leadership, staff and faculty members to determine what is desirable for future policy and practice.

In summary, this research contributes to the literature by providing an understanding of the participants' perspectives of social support and its effect on the academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students. The knowledge gained from this research will provide information for future comparisons and insight for policy and practice. Improved understanding of the experiences of Indigenous post-secondary students will contribute to closing the PSE gap in Canada.

On a Personal Note

During my doctoral journey, I have had the opportunity to consider my Indigenous heritage, my personal and professional perspectives, and my experiences, which have helped me to recognize and understand the values and beliefs that have influenced my life and shaped this study.

I am of Métis heritage, however, not rooted within traditional Métis knowledge or understanding. I became aware of my Métis heritage only nine years ago after an inadvertent discovery through a casual conversation. Although this discovery occurred unintentionally, I used it as a sign of encouragement to learn more about Indigenous worldviews and traditions in an attempt to better understand my roots.

I have opened my eyes, heart, and mind to the new knowledge and practices I have learned. This new knowledge has helped me strive to find a balance between Indigenous culture and Western society. As an educator and researcher, I have come to respect the unique life experiences that each person brings to the setting. I acknowledge that all experiences are crucial to understanding perspectives and worldviews, and I listen to understand and not to judge. People are the experts of their perspectives; to be listened to and respected is the source of empowerment. By exploring and questioning my unique perspectives, I have examined my knowledge formation processes, which has helped me to become more rooted and reflective and allowed me to share my understandings with others.

However, at this point in my journey of self-discovery, I possess insufficient knowledge about tribal epistemology and Indigenous language to be able to design a study, collect and analyze the data and interpret the findings according to an Indigenous methodology. Being of Indigenous ancestry does not provide the automatic privilege to use an Indigenous methodology; however, it does require me to be trustworthy, respectful, and accountable for my actions. I have fulfilled these responsibilities. However, the recent nature of my discovery of my Indigenous heritage and my lack of knowledge of Indigenous traditions and languages placed me at a significant disadvantage to effectively use an Indigenous methodology within this study.

I followed the ethical guidelines for working with First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples as outlined in the *Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (TCPS2) (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Science and Engineering Council of Canada, and Social Science and Humanities Research Council, 2018). Subsequently, I asked three individuals, who were employed at FNUniv, Northern campus, to be members of an advisory group or community of interest as identified within the TCPS2 (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2018). These members were chosen because of their work with Indigenous post-secondary students and knowledge of customs and protocols relevant to the local Indigenous communities. The advisory group was comprised of the following members from FNUniv, Northern campus an Elder, a staff member who was Cree/Métis woman, and a non-Indigenous faculty member. Each member brought distinct expertise to the group. The Elder shared Indigenous customs and protocols regarding respectful conduct, the staff member provided an authentic perspective of Indigenous students and reinforced the necessity of

relationships throughout the research process. The faculty member brought forth the importance of the study's relevance and the responsibility to reporting the findings. I consulted my advisory group members during the recruitment process, sample selection, selection of data gathering methods, and during the interpretation phase.

This study also involved community engagement with Indigenous students, faculty and staff members at FNUniv, Northern campus. There were representations from a multitude of Indigenous groups; consequently, it was impossible to follow the customs and codes for all the represented Indigenous groups. I believed that it was imperative to show my respect to the Indigenous groups and subsequently incorporated aspects of Indigenous values and practices into the study when deemed appropriate. Therefore, through respectful conversations with the research participants and advisory group, it was determined that Plains Cree codes and customs would be incorporated into the study when appropriate. Particularly, I followed protocol when offering tobacco to each of the advisory group members, and I consulted with my advisory group about recruitment strategies and the appropriateness of using a talking circle format for data collection. Through conversations, I also created new relationships and strengthened existing relationships with the research participants. Subsequently, these relationships were foundational to the research process and allowed for a shared exchange between the participants and me. I encouraged reciprocity as I acknowledged the participants' involvement in the research process and highlighted how their participation-built capacity for future involvement in research. Finally, I recognized my responsibility to report the relevant findings respectfully and have presented them within this dissertation and will share them with the research participants after the completion of my doctoral studies. Subsequently, having the ability to share and consult with the members of the advisory group and the research participants has strengthened me as an Indigenous researcher and their willingness to listen and teach were invaluable contributions that shaped this study.

Position to the Setting

During the first part of this study, I was an Assistant Professor in the Department of Indigenous Education, Health and Social Work at the FNUniv, Northern campus, a position I had held since 2005. Throughout my employment, I became intimately familiar with the level of cultural responsiveness integrated into the campus setting, and as a faculty member, I provided

culturally responsive education to the students I taught. Consequently, my experiences with cultural responsiveness, along with the interactions I had with my Indigenous students, supported the feasibility of this study as having these opportunities allowed me to become familiar with the challenges and social supports that affected Indigenous students' academic persistence and health. My position allowed for relatively easy access to Indigenous post-secondary students, while my association with the faculty and staff members supported the development of trusting relationships. My closeness to Indigenous students and the setting was also an asset in privileging my capacity to gain insight into students' contexts and concerns. Also, researching within my setting increased the chance of experiencing intense interactions, which allowed gaining a deeper subjective understanding and greatly enhancing the quality of the collected data (Toma, 2000).

According to Alvesson (2003), conducting research in one's own setting can lead to concerns about the researcher's level of subjectivity based on the familiarity with the setting and the people, the power imbalance between the participants and researcher, and the results of inaccurate or potentially damaging data that may jeopardize the roles of the participants. In order not to compromise the study, I addressed the concerns as follows.

I addressed my level of subjectivity in my statement of positionality to the setting. Although I was familiar with the Northern campus and the Indigenous students, staff and faculty members who were enrolled or working in this institution, this familiarity did not influence my subjectivity; I treated each participant in the study with equity and fairness.

Conducting the study at the Northern campus, where I was a faculty member, created the possibility for a student who was enrolled in my class to be a participant in the study. This student-faculty relationship demonstrated a power imbalance where the student may have felt obligated to participate to please me or feel helpless if he or she refused to participate. This imbalance of power is referred to by Kipnis (2001) as a vulnerability of authority, which is a "perceived external threat to personal autonomy" (p. G10). In order to address the potential threat to personal autonomy, I implemented the following safeguards based on the University of Victoria's *Guidelines of Ethics in Dual-Role Research for Teachers and Other Practitioners* (2008) and the TCPS2 (2018).

In the recruitment letter and informed consent, I used neutral language to lessen the pressure to participate in the study, and I assured the participants they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point in time without consequence. In the informed consent, I acknowledged my position as the researcher and identified that the participants might feel coerced to participate in the study. I stated that their choice to participate or not participate in the study would not influence their grades or academic standings. I also identified that if the participants had any concerns about their rights as participants, they could contact the University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Board through the provided contact information.

As the participants had the opportunity to participate in more than one data gathering method, I provided ongoing consent to those who chose to participate in both the focus group interviews and face-to-face interviews. Ongoing consent was presented as separate informed consent for the focus group interviews and face-to-face interviews. Consequently, allowing the participants to confirm if they wanted to continue to participate in the other data gathering procedure or withdraw from the research. The recruitment letter and informed consent for the focus group interviews and face-to-face interviews are located in Appendices A, B, and E. Chapter Three includes further details on informed consent.

The accuracy of the data collected from the participants was a limitation. The self-reported data provided by the participants could not be verified, but in order to demonstrate the accuracy of the provided data, I used multiple strategies to ensure qualitative validity and reliability. Within Chapter Three, under the heading “Qualitative Validity and Reliability,” further discussions on the utilization of triangulation, peer review, member checking, and thick descriptions are provided. As well, pseudonyms were used to protect the participants' identities and reduce the risks associated with inaccurate or potentially damaging data. Further discussions on the confidentiality measures employed throughout this study are located in Chapter Three.

Assumptions

The following assumptions were made in this study:

1. It was assumed that there were constructed connections between social support and the academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students at the case institution. Previous research identified that social support affected the health of Indigenous people. Other research also identified that social support influenced academic persistence in

Indigenous post-secondary students at mainstream institutions. The study sought to describe and interpret the connections between social support and the academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students at the case institution.

2. It was assumed that the participants in the pilot focus group had similar qualities to the Indigenous student participants but did not provide a true representation of all the sample groups.
3. It was assumed that the participants were aware of the social support that affected the academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students. Although this term was unfamiliar to some, additional probing and rewording of questions were necessary to flush out the social support that mainly affected Indigenous post-secondary students at the case institution.
4. It was assumed that Indigenous post-secondary students were a heterogeneous group, but collectively, there were commonalities to the challenges and social support they experienced.
5. It was assumed that the research participants would be comfortable and forthright to participate in either or both of the data gathering methods. During the face-to-face interviews and focus group interviews, the participants would feel safe and secure in sharing their experiences about how social support affected the academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students.
6. It was assumed that the research participants' understanding of social support and its effect on academic persistence and health were socially constructed, and what the participants perceived as real was real. The findings of this study were co-constructed from both the participants' and my perspectives.
7. It was assumed that the research methodology, qualitative case study, and the data gathering methods, field notes, memos, focus group interviews and face-to-face interviews, were the most appropriate choices for the study.
8. It was assumed an appreciative focus would prevail in this study with particular emphasis on the strengths of social support and positive impacts it had on the academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students within the Northern campus. This focus differs greatly from the other forms of research that are deficit oriented and not specific to a setting.

Delimitations

I placed the following delimitations on the study:

1. The purposive sample was confined to Indigenous undergraduate students and staff and faculty members attending or employed at FNUniv, Northern campus. The sample of Indigenous post-secondary students included First Nations, Métis and Inuit men and women who were enrolled in undergraduate degree programs. The staff and faculty members included full time, part-time, contract employees who taught, counselled, or advised students. This delimitation referred to the number and type of participants used in the study.
2. Only undergraduate degree programs offered at FNUniv, Northern campus were examined as graduate programs were not offered during the time of the study.
3. The pilot focus group interview was used to test the focus group questions.
4. Only social support affecting the academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students was explored. Informational and instrumental social support provided by peers, family, and faculty and staff members were verified as important social support in the pilot focus group interview.
5. Health was viewed in a holistic manner that included the balance and connectedness between the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual elements of an individual, the community, and nature. This information was also confirmed from responses elicited from the pilot focus group interview.
6. The location of this study involved one setting, FNUniv, Northern campus. FNUniv, Northern campus, is an Indigenous-affiliated institution. As a First Nations controlled institution, it possesses a unique mission and provides culturally responsive programs and services based on Indigenous knowledge, values, and traditional practices and directed towards building nations.
7. Although factors such as academic success and graduation rates have been cited as bearing influence on academic persistence, the literature for this study was delimited to an exploration of academic persistence from a holistic perspective as outlined by Pidgeon (2008, 2014).

Limitations

The following are the limitations that affected this study.

1. This study was conducted over a specific time with data collection occurring from April 2016 to March 2017, which provided only a snapshot of the experiences during that particular time.
2. I used a purposive sample rather than a random sample and included only Indigenous undergraduate students and faculty and staff attending or employed at FNUUniv, Northern campus. I chose this sample because of the easy access and their unique characteristics. I was limited to the number of Indigenous students, faculty and staff members who were willing to participate and consent to the study.
3. The three members of the advisory group contributed to the research on two levels: 1) they were consulted throughout the research process and provided valuable insight during the recruitment, data collection, analysis and interpretation phases and 2) as research participants. The potential for participant bias was possible as a result of the dual roles. In order to manage this bias, the advisory group members voluntarily agreed to participate in both the advisory group and data collection, data collection questions encouraged storytelling and sharing personal experiences that provided valuable contributions to the data, and the advisory group consultations reflected on the data and the emerging ideas; all suggestions were fully discussed and alternative options were explored.
4. I employed a case study methodology, which was descriptive and interpretive and tailored to the needs of my participants. Therefore, it was difficult to generalize findings to more broad populations or to draw general conclusions from the findings.
5. The self-reported data gathered from the interviews and focus group interviews was limited by the fact that it could not be independently verified. I have taken what the participants said as truth and acknowledge that participants may have used selective memory, attribution, and exaggeration that may have led to potential sources of biases (Brutus, Aguinis & Wassmer, 2013).

Definition of Terms

The following terms are used throughout the dissertation and were defined by the researcher and other sources.

1. **Academic persistence:** In the traditional sense, academic persistence has been seen as the student's ability to pass courses and ultimately complete his or her program of study. As this

definition focuses on intellect achievements, it discounts the physical, emotional and cultural growth the student may experience from completing an undergraduate program. Pidgeon (2008, 2014) found that some Indigenous post-secondary students went beyond meeting intellectual benchmarks and sustained cultural knowledge, met personal goals and gave back to their families and communities. Subsequently, in this study, academic persistence was examined beyond intellectual achievements and used Pidgeon's (2008, 2014) findings to understand how social support affected academic persistence in Indigenous post-secondary students at the case institution.

2. **Cultural responsiveness:** According to Gay (2010), cultural responsiveness involves "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounter more relevant to and effective for them" (p. 31). Cultural responsiveness includes "seeing cultural differences as assets; creating caring learning environment, using cultural knowledge . . . , challenging racial and cultural stereotypes, . . . , being a change agent for . . . academic equity" (Gay, 2010, p.31).
3. **Health:** Within the Indigenous worldview, health is an intrinsically woven balance and connection between an individual's four elements of life: physical, emotional, mental and spiritual, the community and nature (Howell, Auger, Gomes, Brown, & Leon, 2016).
4. **Indigenous-affiliated institution** is an Indigenous institution that has negotiated a mutually beneficial agreement with a mainstream institution to provide educational courses and programs under the academic oversight of the mainstream institution (Barnhardt, 1991). FNUniv, Northern campus, is considered an Indigenous-affiliated institution, for it has an agreement to offer educational programs under the academic umbrella of the University of Regina.
5. **Mainstream institutions:** are post-secondary institutions that follow dominant Western-style institutional models with "ascribed structures, academic disciplines, policies and practices" (Pidgeon, 2016, p. 77) and focus on providing foundational knowledge and the associated credentials for gainful employment.
6. **Post-secondary education (PSE):** PSE refers to the highest level of educational attainment in the form of certificates, diplomas, and degrees from technical schools, community colleges, private colleges, and universities (Statistics Canada, 2008). Although all forms of

PSE are valuable, for this study, only programs leading to undergraduate degrees attained at the FNUniv, Northern campus were included.

7. **Social support:** “is the perception that one is cared for, has assistance from others, and there is a flow of information and appraisal from others” (House, 1981, p. 18). Social support can be provided informally by friends and family and formally by professionals and service groups. According to House (1981), there are four types of social support: emotional, instrumental, informational and appraisal.

Organization of the Dissertation

Following the guidelines set out by the College of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies at the University of Saskatchewan, Chapter One included the identification of the problem, the purpose of the study, research questions, significance of the research, researcher’s position, assumptions, delimitations, limitations, and definition of terms.

Chapter Two provides a review of the literature and is divided into four sections. The first section presents an overview of the history of Indigenous PSE. The second section discusses the identity of Indigenous post-secondary students, culturally responsive institutions, and social support typology. The third section presents the Indigenous view of academic persistence and health, and the conceptual framework concludes the chapter.

Chapter Three presents the research methodology and the study’s design. It contains an explanation of the paradigm, methodology, and data collection methods along with a description of the data analysis, interpretation, and dissemination of the findings. This chapter concludes with an explanation of qualitative validity and reliability and ethical considerations.

Chapter Four presents the participants’ responses elicited from the focus group interviews and face-to-face interviews. Findings are presented as the main themes that emerged from the data.

Chapter Five presents an overview of the study, a review of the findings in light of the existing literature, a revisit of the conceptual framework, and closes with conclusions.

The dissertation ends with Chapter Six and the identification of the policy, practice, and theoretical implications, recommendations for future study and final thoughts.

CHAPTER TWO

A Review of the Literature

The purpose of this study was to examine how social support affects the academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students at an Indigenous-affiliated institution. In this chapter, the literature about Indigenous post-secondary students and social support as they relate to academic persistence and health are reviewed. It was necessary to examine multiple sources, including books, peer-reviewed journals, policy papers, governmental and organizational reports, and theses and dissertations. The following key terms were systemically searched through the University of Saskatchewan Usearch: *Aboriginal, First Nations, Indigenous, post-secondary education, higher education, holistic health, social support, and academic persistence*. Usearch searched the entire University of Saskatchewan collection, including the catalogue and 483 databases. Searches on Google and Google Scholar using the same key terms were also completed. The literature review encompassed all studies to date and was not limited due to the historical nature of some of the topics. Literature that referred to or related to Indigenous post-secondary students and social support were considered. The published literature selected for this chapter is predominantly representative of the Canadian context; however, articles situated in the American context were referred to in certain circumstances. Although a significant amount of research relevant to this subject area has been completed in Australia, New Zealand and South Pacific, this literature review intended to provide a place-based lens specific to Indigenous people of North America and include the appropriate historical and cultural perspectives.

This review begins with an overview of the history of Indigenous PSE in Canada. The current demographics and challenges of Indigenous post-secondary students are discussed, and recent responses of post-secondary institutions to Indigenous students are highlighted. A description of the main components of the conceptual framework that guided my research

follows and includes House's (1981) typology of social support, FEM, Indigenous perspective of academic persistence and worldviews of health.

Historical Context of Indigenous PSE

Before contact with the European people, the education of Indigenous people focused on gaining knowledge through first-hand experiences with group socialization, participation in cultural rituals, and oral teachings (McMillan & Yellowhorn, 2004). Parents, Elders, and other members of the community used these approaches to educate each other and their children about nature, survival skills, and life values. Education was not limited to a specific time and place but was shared at opportune moments to offer social, cultural, spiritual, and historical learning. For instance, survival skills such as trapping, hunting, and gathering were learned at an early age through play and recreation; and life values were taught to young children through observing examples in the home. These approaches proved to be a positive collective learning system that relied heavily on looking, listening and learning (Haig-Brown, 2016). During early contact, Indigenous people transferred knowledge to Europeans through similar means by teaching them skills for adaptation and survival, often through the relationships that developed between Indigenous women and European traders (Dickason & Newbigging, 2018).

In Canada, between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, there were several attempts to change the Indigenous education system through assimilation. Beginning in the seventeenth century, missionary groups tried to "civilize" Indigenous people by converting them to Christianity and a European lifestyle (TRC, 2012). Missionaries taught Christian doctrine and Eurocentric practices in Indigenous communities, causing many Indigenous people to convert to Christianity, but few adapted to the "civilized" way of life (Haig-Brown, 2016). The missionaries' failure to convert Indigenous people fuelled the Canadian government's belief that residential schools were the best option to refine Indigenous people. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, manual labour schools, boarding schools, and day schools employed authoritarian instructional styles (TRC, 2012). These instructional styles were contrary to the traditional Indigenous communal learning systems and focused on "treating students like adults, using strict discipline, fostering competitiveness, and emphasizing recitations and examinations" (White & Peters, 2013, p. 14). These institutions arrived at the same fate of the missionaries and failed to assimilate Indigenous people: as *The Report of the Special Commissioners* (1856)

concluded, “this benevolent experiment has been to a great extent a failure” (as cited in Miller, 1996, p.85).

The *British North American Act* (1867) signalled the demise of Indigenous people’s autonomy in Canada. Originally, Indigenous people occupied the land in Western and Northern Canada and maintained their livelihood through hunting and trading with each other and with European settlers. In the nineteenth century, the diminishing herds of buffalo threatened the survival of Indigenous people while the rest of Canada flourished (Dickason & Newbigging, 2018). The government desired to gain control of Indigenous lands for resource exploration and agricultural development and established treaties with Indigenous tribes to ensure the survival of Indigenous people (Miller, 2016). Treaties were nation-to-nation agreements that implicitly acknowledged roles and responsibilities and were to “be carried out as long as the sun shines above and the water flows in the ocean” (as cited in Carr-Stewart, 2001, p. 130). Amongst the land entitlements, hunting and fishing privileges and education were prevailing rights within the Numbered Treaties:

Treaties 1 and 2 established both the treaty right to and policy context for the provision of educational services when First Nations requested them. As well, the treaties established the Crown’s fiduciary obligation for First Nation education. The treaties gave the First Nations responsibility for the implementation and control of education, and when and where educational services were to be provided. (Carr-Stewart, 2001, p. 128)

Although the treaties were meant to clarify roles and responsibilities, the interpretation of the treaties took on two, often contradictory, forms the Indigenous oral interpretation and the Canadian government’s written interpretation (Stonechild, 2006). Subsequently, the treaties became the vehicle by which the government implemented additional assimilation policies, particularly concerning PSE, which the government envisioned as a privilege and not an inherent or a treaty right (Stonechild, 2006).

The *Indian Act* (1876) is a significant piece of Canadian legislation that demonstrated the federal government’s paternalistic management in the affairs of Indigenous people. Although the *Indian Act* (1876) has been amended several times, the original intent has not changed. It continues to apply only to Status Indians; Inuit people are a federal responsibility, but not subjected to the *Indian Act* (1876), while Métis people and non-Status Indians have continued to

be overlooked by the federal government and do not have the same rights as Status Indians or Inuit people despite being original to Canada.

Under the *Indian Act* (1876), the government of Canada assumed responsibility for the education of all Status Indian children on reserve lands. The Numbered Treaties promised education through on-reserve day schools, but issues with attendance and the failure to assimilate children who still lived on the reserves led the search for alternative schooling methods (TRC, 2012). Under the direction of the Canadian federal government, Nicholas Flood Davin (1879) recommended the use of residential schools and Christianity as a means to civilize Indigenous children. In the early twentieth century, the government mandated all Indigenous children between the ages of 6-15 years to attend residential schools that taught elementary education and primary vocational skills (TRC, 2015a). Residential schools forced the separation of Indigenous children from their parents, forbade the speaking of native languages, denied ceremonial practices, and were plagued by physical, psychological, and sexual abuse at the hands of teachers, administrators and other students. The goal of residential schools was to “end the country’s treaty obligations by assimilating its Aboriginal population” (TRC, 2012, p. 12).

Furthermore, in the early twentieth century, the Canadian government proposed compulsory enfranchisement as another means of civilization. Compulsory enfranchisement gave power to officials to forcibly relinquish the Indian status of those Indigenous students who survived the residential school system and attained PSE (Stonechild, 2006). This policy caused Indigenous people to believe that higher education resulted in assimilation and the loss of rights, benefits, and personal identity. A change in government in 1921, led to the abandonment of compulsory enfranchisement (Stonechild, 2006).

It was not until 1957 that the federal government began to look more closely at PSE for Indigenous students. A system of higher education scholarships was created to fund exceptional Status Indian and Inuit students who were eligible to enter teaching, nursing, or technical programs (Department of Citizenship and Immigration, 1957). The scholarship program provided financial support to Status Indian and Inuit students on a case-by-case basis. By 1968, the federal government introduced a financial assistance program, which provided additional PSE funding to eligible Status Indian and Inuit students (Stonechild, 2006).

During the end of the 1960s, Canada's education policies surrounding Indigenous education began to change. In 1969, the federal government released the *White Paper Policy*, which among other things, sought to transfer the responsibility for First Nations education on reserves from the federal government to the provinces. Indigenous people objected to the *White Paper Policy* and responded with the National Indian Brotherhood position paper, *Indian Control of Indian Education* (1973). This response focused on the need for local control of Indigenous education purposely referencing adult education: "Considering the great need there is for professional people in Indian communities, every effort should be made to encourage and assist Indian students to succeed in post-secondary studies" (National Indian Brotherhood, 1973, p. 13). The *Indian Control of Indian Education* (1973) was accepted in principle as a national policy, which shifted the discussions towards Indigenous people restoring control of their education (The Aboriginal Institutes' Consortium, 2005).

Even with the acceptance in principle of the *Indian Control of Indian Education* (1973) as a national policy, the advancements to PSE for Indigenous people were trifling. Before the 1970s, a few mainstream institutions in Ontario and Quebec and then in Manitoba offered Indigenous teacher education and Native Studies programs in an attempt to meet the needs of Indigenous students (Richardson & Blanchet-Cohen, 2000). These programs were delivered utilizing conventional Western pedagogy and often ignored the worldview of Indigenous people.

A momentous advancement came in 1976, when the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College, which later became the FNUniv, was established in partnership with the University of Regina. According to Stonechild (2006) Saskatchewan Indian Federated College grew from the need of Indian control of Indian education and "was born at the initiative of Saskatchewan First Nations elders [*sic*] and leaders who wished to see the formation of an institution of higher learning that would mirror their philosophies, languages, history and concepts of government" (p. 121). The establishment of the Gabriel Dumont Institute of Native Studies and Applied Research (GDI) followed in 1980. It was the first Métis post-secondary institute in Canada that "focused on education through cultural research as a way of renewing and strengthening the heritage and achievement of Métis and non-Status Indian peoples in Saskatchewan" (Dorion & Yang, 2000, p.180). GDI is unique as it is owned and controlled by Métis Nation of Saskatchewan (GDI, n.d).

Many Indigenous controlled institutions continue to operate without policy support (The Aboriginal Institutes Consortium, 2005). Consistent funding is absent from the federal and provincial governments for daily operations, curriculum development and upgrading infrastructure (The Aboriginal Institutes Consortium, 2005). This lack of support implies that Indigenous controlled institutions do not hold the same worth as mainstream institutions, which results in structural inequality. According to Amadeo (2019), structural inequality is a system of privilege created by public institutions with the intent to advantage some groups while purposefully disadvantaging others. For Indigenous people, structural inequality has continued under the direction of the federal government through acts of assimilation which include, but not limited to the *Indian Act (1867)*, unfulfilled treaties, mandatory attendance at residential schools, and selective funding commitments to PSE (Menzie & Hwang, 2017). Although FNUniv has a unique arrangement and receives funding from the federal government, FNUniv does not receive funding for capital development or maintenance and receives substantially less funding for student resources when compared to mainstream institutions (Stonechild, 2006).

Indigenous controlled institutions are expected to integrate Indigenous ways of knowing while providing educational components of the mainstream curriculum into undergraduate programs (Paquette & Fallon, 2014). This expectation means that Indigenous controlled institutions are providing dual education in order to ensure their students are equipped with the appropriate cultural knowledge along with the necessary academic credential required by employers (Paquette & Fallon, 2014). Consequently, a parity paradox results for some Indigenous controlled institutions. A parity paradox is the "the challenge of balancing the needs for distinctively Aboriginal process and content with the need to master knowledge and skills characteristic of mainstream Canadian education" (Paquette & Fallon, 2010, p.23). A parity paradox devalues the credibility of the education Indigenous institutions provide. The lack of credibility is further compounded by the lack the authority Indigenous controlled institution has to grant diplomas and degrees (The Aboriginal Institute Consortium, 2005). Consequently, when the public perceives little value in Indigenous culture, they are less supportive of Indigenous PSE (Paquette & Fallon, 2014).

In 1977, the federal government instituted the PSE Assistance Program (PSEAP) that provided funding for Status Indian and Inuit PSE (Thompson & Hill-MacDonald, 2018). Non-

Status Indian and Métis students were not eligible for PSEAP funding. This program was designed to cover the essential costs of tuition and books and provide living allowances for Status Indian and Inuit students enrolled in university, college, and pre-entrance programs (Thompson & Hill-MacDonald, 2018). Non-Status Indians and Métis students were required to utilize financial programs offered to the general population to fund their PSE.

In 1989, the federal government established the Indian Studies Support Program (ISSP) in response to the demands for Indigenous people to control their education system (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2013). The ISSP provided funding to First Nation and Inuit education organizations, and First Nations, affiliated, and mainstream post-secondary institutions to create and deliver culturally responsive programs and courses directed towards meeting the needs of First Nation and Inuit post-secondary students (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2013).

In 2014, the ISSP was replaced with the Post-Secondary Partnership Program, which is a competitive funding program for Canadian post-secondary and Indigenous-affiliated institutions. The program supports programs or courses that are tailored for First Nation and Inuit students and meet labour market needs (Indigenous Services of Canada, 2019). Currently, the Post-Secondary Partnership Program continues to provide funding for Indigenous post-secondary programs based on merit (Indigenous Services Canada, 2019).

Also, in 1989, the federal government replaced the PSEAP with the Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP) (Assembly of First Nations, 2012). The associated conditions with the PSSSP “tightened eligibility and restricted funding for Status Indians and Inuit students eligible to enrol in appropriate post-secondary programs in approved post-secondary institutions” (Assembly of First Nations, 2012, p. 9). With these changes, non-Status Indian and Métis students remained ineligible for the funding offered through the PSSSP.

Currently, the PSSSP continues to be the primary source of post-secondary funding for Status Indian and Inuit students and is defined by criteria that have not changed in three decades. The criteria for the PSSSP are as follows:

- The federal department of Indigenous Services Canada (ISC), formerly known as Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), determines the funding guidelines and the allocations to the First Nation and Inuit organizations.

- The First Nation and Inuit organizations develop and implement local-level policies that determine the funding and selection criteria by following national guidelines.
- First Nation and Inuit learners apply for funding to the organizations administering the PSSSP fund. (Assembly of First Nations, 2012; Indigenous Services Canada, 2018)

The regional allocations and budgets for the PSSSP are dependent on annual treasury board authorizations. The treasury board deems what is appropriate for PSSSP funding based on a national funding formula (Paquette & Fallon, 2010). The national funding formula does not give any allocation to growth in the population, tuition increases, inflation rate, or any additional secondary fees (Assembly of First Nations, 2012). Additionally, in 1996, the federal government capped PSSSP funding by limiting its budget to an increase of 2% annually, consequently restricting the number of funds available to eligible Indigenous students. As a result, many First Nation and Inuit communities created stringent policies guiding the allocation of post-secondary funding to ensure that funds are being used effectively and appropriately (Assembly of First Nations, 2012).

A review of the PSSSP in 2005 confirmed a significant inadequacy of funding that, as Paquette and Fallon (2010) noted, "is seriously out of date in general and out of touch with the current reality of First Nations post-secondary needs in particular" (p. 139). The Assembly of First Nations (2012) further documented that in 2008, the PSSSP supported approximately 22,303 Status Indian and Inuit students on a budget of \$3 million. When in fact, \$724 million was needed to support "the real costs of education, additional students ready to enrol, the backlog of students able to enrol and the number of students required to address the gap in educational attainment with non-First Nations students" (p. 2). Usher (2009) concurred that funding had stayed relatively the same over the past 15 years, even though more Status Indian and Inuit students are becoming eligible to attend PSE. However, the federal government views the PSSSP as a social policy and administers it at a discretionary level, noting that neither the treaties nor *Indian Act* included a direct reference to PSE (Thompson & Hill-MacDonald, 2018).

First Nations people assert that PSE is an inherent and treaty right that was promised in exchange for surrendering large amounts of land. Oral interpretations of the treaties infer education includes all levels of schooling and not just primary and secondary. The Royal

Commission on Aboriginal People (1996a) stated,

First Nations maintain that the spirit and intent of the treaties are as significant as the actual wording. The promise of a ‘schoolhouse on every reserve’ represents what was state-of-the-art education when the treaties were signed. And elders maintain that it was state-of-the-art education that Aboriginal peoples negotiated. Supreme Court interpretations have lent support to Aboriginal contentions that the representations of government at the time are as important as the actual words written down (p. 471).

Indigenous people continue to scrutinize the lack of legislation around Indigenous post-secondary funding and its associated underfunding for the last two decades. Accordingly, it is argued that the federal government has a responsibility to provide Indigenous people with the “education necessary to survive and prosper in the new post-treaty socio-economic reality” (Paquette & Fallon, 2010, p. 141).

The TRC released the Calls to Action (2015b), which continued to pressure the federal government to remedy the funding shortfall for Indigenous PSE. The TRC (2015b) called upon the federal government “to provide adequate funding to end the backlog of First Nations students seeking a post-secondary education” (p. 2). In response to the TRC, the Canadian government, in the 2017 federal budget, earmarked a \$90 million influx into the PSSSP over a two-year period to support the financial needs of Status Indian and Inuit post-secondary students and an additional \$25 million over a five-year period to Indspire, an Indigenous program that allocates scholarships to Indigenous post-secondary students (Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, 2017). According to Bathish et al. (2017), the proposed funding exceeded previous funding commitments, but the associated two-year timeline left uncertainty about the future of PSE funding for Indigenous students.

The federal government has failed to respond to the PSE funding needs of non-Status Indian students. Even though non-Status Indians are identified as Indigenous people within the *Constitution Act* (1982), the PSSSP only recognizes Status Indian and Inuit students. Consequently, non-Status Indian students, with financial need, rely on financial assistance, grants, and bursaries that may be unreasonably difficult to access. A similar situation exists for Métis students who are considered Indigenous people but are not eligible for PSSSP funding. Although in the 2019 federal budget, the Canadian government earmarked \$362 million over ten

years for Métis PSE and \$40 million per year after that, it is yet to be seen if the federal government will fulfill its promise (Department of Finance Canada, 2019).

There are organizations that have responded to the shortfall of federal funding for Indigenous PSE. In particular, Indspire, previously known as National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation, has provided First Nations, Métis and Inuit students with PSE funding through bursaries and scholarships since 1985 (Indspire, 2017). Their *Building Brighter Futures: Bursaries, Scholarships and Awards* program has provided PSE financial assistance to just under 28,000 Indigenous students since 2004 (Indspire, 2017). In 2016-2017, even though Indspire awarded 3746 awards worth \$11.6 million, the program could “fund only 11% of the actual financial need of the students that applied for financial support” (Indspire, 2017, p. 2&3). Consequently, additional funding is still required to meet the financial needs of Indigenous post-secondary students. In 2019, the Métis Nation–Saskatchewan received a 10-year, \$89 million fund from the Saskatchewan government for Métis PSE. The funds are designated to support Métis students with tuition, textbooks, and living expenses and provide additional supportive services at GDI (Ahnationtalk, 2019). Although this program is in its infancy stage, the additional funding may lead to an increase in Métis students enrolling in undergraduate PSE programs.

In summary, the history of PSE for Indigenous people has been marred with acts of assimilation and questions regarding the government’s commitment to Indigenous PSE. The continued involvement of the federal government and the associated patterns of underfunding signify the government of Canada is not willing to give up control over Indigenous PSE, nor does it fully value PSE for Indigenous people. The long history of assimilation indicates that Indigenous post-secondary students still face significant challenges that have led to the increasing education gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Following this overview, the next section explores the distinguishing factors associated with being an Indigenous post-secondary student, including how pertinent historical, cultural, social, and personal challenges shape the “typical” Indigenous post-secondary student.

Indigenous Post-secondary Students

Indigenous post-secondary students are often different from the typical 24-year-old, single, English-speaking female that predominantly populates the student body at Canadian

post-secondary institutions (Statistics Canada, 2017). The demographics and challenges experienced by Indigenous students distinguish them from each other and other post-secondary students. Whitley (2014) confirmed “Aboriginal students, as with non-Aboriginal students, comprise a heterogeneous group in terms of, for example, background experiences, living in urban or more remote communities, first language, cultural identity, academic abilities, strengths, family support, academic motivation and self-concept” (p. 157). This section of the literature review presents an overall portrait of the collective demographics associated with Indigenous post-secondary students and the influencing historical, cultural, social, and personal challenges.

Demographics

The demographics of Indigenous post-secondary students are critical to understanding the current trends in Indigenous PSE. The following section will review the statistics related to the population, age, sex, marital status, and family composition of Indigenous post-secondary students. The majority of this information was retrieved from organizational reports that synthesized data from several voluntary surveys, suggesting the following data is an estimation of the collective demographics of Indigenous post-secondary students.

Population. The most current data from the Canadian University Survey Consortium (2017) middle-years university student survey concluded the population of Indigenous students attending Canadian universities was approximately 65 000, representing 5% of the undergraduate population (Prairie Research Associates, 2017). The University of Saskatchewan (2018) has one of the highest rates of Indigenous students at 12.5%, but in comparison to the total student population (21 318), there are limited numbers of Indigenous students (2672). It can be assumed this number is less than the actual number, as many Indigenous students view self-declaration as a form of assimilation and fear further marginalization. Consequently, the low number of Indigenous students reduces the opportunity to connect and interact with other Indigenous students, which leads to isolation and discourages participation in PSE (Bailey, 2016). However, in Indigenous-affiliated institutions, Indigenous students have a more significant opportunity to connect and interact with other Indigenous students because the student population is primarily of Indigenous descent. For example, at FNUniv, Northern campus in the fall of 2017, 82% of the total enrolment identified as Indigenous (FNUniv, 2018).

Age. Indigenous people who attended PSE were older than their non-Indigenous counterparts, with 54% of Indigenous post-secondary students falling within the range of 25-44 years of age (Hull, 2015). In 2011, 23.1% of Indigenous people attended university by the age of 21 compared to 42.2% of non-Indigenous people of the same age (Statistics Canada, 2013). As Hull (2005) noted, "the gap that exists between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups suggests that Aboriginal students are moving through the school system more slowly than non-Aboriginal students and are continuing to pursue postsecondary education as they get older" (p.12). Indigenous post-secondary students who attend PSE later in life have more life experience, but often lack many of the academic skills. Consequently, mature Indigenous post-secondary students must acquire additional skills, such as time management techniques and technological abilities, in order to persist in post-secondary programs (Harden, 2006; Shankar et al., 2013).

Gender and family composition. The majority of Indigenous post-secondary students are female and, in some programs, Indigenous women account for 80% of the total enrolment (Hull, 2015; Mendelson, 2006; Statistics Canada, 2018). Almost one-third of Indigenous post-secondary students have children which lead to additional demands for adequate housing and appropriate daycare (Bingham, Adolpho, Jackson, & Alexitch, 2014; Battiste et al., 2018; Bonnycastle & Prentice, 2011; Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 2005; Harden, 2006). In many urban areas, the shortage of housing and the lack of quality daycare compound these students' responsibilities. The Indigenous post-secondary student often juggles familial and academic responsibilities, and in many cases, PSE is interrupted to meet family obligations (Bingham et al., 2014; Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 2005; Deer, De Jaeger, & Wilkinson, 2015; Harden, 2006).

Challenges

The historical, cultural, social, and personal challenges influencing Indigenous post-secondary students arise from the troubled and complex position Indigenous people have in Canadian society. The challenges differentiate Indigenous post-secondary students from each other and non-Indigenous post-secondary students, and subsequently, different approaches and supports are required for Indigenous students.

Historical challenges. The *Indian Act* (1867) was significant in supporting the assimilation process, which forced Indigenous people to abandon their status, tradition, and

culture to become members of Canadian society. In regards to PSE, The *Indian Act* (1876) enacted compulsory enfranchisement that terminated the Indian status of those who gained a university degree or became a doctor, lawyer or clergy (Lawrence, 2016), because it was assumed that if an Indian became successful he/she should no longer be a ward of the Crown (as cited in Stonechild, 2006). Although compulsory enfranchisement is no longer enacted, the history of enforced assimilation continues to distress Indigenous post-secondary students. Strong assimilative forces are still seen as prominent factors within post-secondary institutions, so feelings of alienation, distrust, and hostility towards PSE continue to exist and are challenging to many Indigenous post-secondary students (Friesen & Friesen, 2005; Hards, 2006; Holmes, 2006; Indspire, 2018).

In 1920, an amendment to the *Indian Act* (1867) made residential school attendance compulsory for all Indigenous children between the ages of six and fifteen (TRC, 2015a). This legislation permitted the forcible removal of Indigenous children from their homes so they could be placed into residential schools. Indigenous children were sent for physical and moral training where they were physically and mentally reprimanded for speaking their native language, wearing traditional clothing and practicing cultural ceremonies (TRC, 2015a). Residential schools suppressed Indigenous culture, tradition, and language and hindered coping strategies and created long-term feelings of isolation, mental distress, depression and loss of self-worth in the people who attended (Bombay et al., 2011; Dionne & Nixon, 2014; Hackett, Feeny & Tompa, 2016; Oster, Grier, Lightning, Mayan, & Toth, 2014).

The effects of Indian Residential schools are generational, and according to Bombay, Matheson, and Anisman (2009) the abuse, neglect, and parental dysfunction experienced by the first generation led to reduced cognition, coping strategies, and mental health which nurtured poor parenting, abuse, and neglect that continues to be repeated in the subsequent generations. Consequently, the current generation of Indigenous post-secondary students affected by the generational effects of Indian residential schools are more likely to have higher risks of mental distress, low self-esteem and confidence, and cultural discontinuity (Bombay, Matheson, & Anisman, 2014; Dionne & Nixon, 2014; Kral, 2013; Oster et al., 2014; Stout & Peters, 2011).

Cultural challenges. Canadian post-secondary institutions have not traditionally concerned themselves with how culture influences Indigenous students and thus have a long

history of programs and practices that serve the beliefs and values of the non-Indigenous population (Holmes, 2005; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; Mendelson, 2006; Ottman, 2017; Richardson & Blanchet-Cohen, 2000; Royal Commission on Aboriginal People, 1996a). These post-secondary institutions offer structured programs where competitiveness and individualism are the central tenants. This format directly conflicts with the Indigenous worldview that all things are connected, and learning is based on sharing skills and knowledge between one another (Deer et al., 2015; Friesen & Friesen, 2005; Little Bear, 2000; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples; 1996a). This direct conflict leads to cultural dissonance, which is the “clash or conflict that results from the difference between values, beliefs, practices or ideologies of two or more cultures” (Fitzpatrick & Berman, 2016, p. 140). Therefore, to succeed within these institutions, Indigenous students “must acquire and accept a new form of consciousness, an orientation which not only displaces but often devalues the world views they bring with them” (Barnhardt, 2002, p. 241). Many Indigenous post-secondary students find themselves in between two worldviews struggling to balance their Indigenous beliefs with the values of the post-secondary institution; often those who cannot find balance, cease to persist and go home (Barnhardt, 2002; Bickel & Jensen, 2012; Bingham et al., 2014; Brayboy, 2004; Hades, 2006).

Other post-secondary institutions are cognizant that Indigenous perspectives should be integrated into PSE, and they rely on faculty to integrate Indigenous knowledge into their courses (Association of Canadian Community Colleges, 2010). Many faculty members within the post-secondary institutions demonstrate a lack of concern for the Indigenous culture or else portray Indigenous people inaccurately (Bailey, 2016; Clark, Kleiman, Spanierman, Isaac & Poolokasingham, 2014). According to Bailey (2016), the lack of awareness of Indigenous culture and history by faculty stems from a “generalized lack of knowledge regarding Indigenous peoples in Canada and more specifically a lack of awareness of the Indigenous presence on campus” (p. 1276). The failure to acknowledge and correctly portray Indigenous culture and history often results in further marginalizing Indigenous students and alienating them from the rest of the institution (Archibald et al., 1995; Bailey, 2016; Clark et al., 2014; Hades, 2006; Indspire, 2018; Shankar et al., 2013; Restoule et al., 2013; Timmons et al., 2009).

Social challenges. Social challenges, such as insufficient funds and being disconnected from families and communities, derive from the complex realities of society and adversely influence Indigenous post-secondary students.

Insufficient funds. Indigenous people are amongst the poorest in Canada (Wilson & McDonald, 2010), and Indigenous students from rural and remote communities tend to be of lower socioeconomic status (Finnie, Childs, Kramer, & Wismer, 2010). In 2015, the median income for an Indigenous person was \$25 526, which was 26% less than the median income for the rest of Canada (Statistics Canada, 2018). Concerning location, there was a \$6442 income gap between Indigenous people and non-Indigenous people in off-reserve areas while on-reserve, Indigenous Canadians made on average \$13 000 less/year than non-Indigenous people (Statistics Canada, 2018). Consequently, the lower income means many Indigenous students cannot rely on financial support from family to fund their PSE. The financial responsibilities for on-reserve Indigenous students are compounded, as many are required to relocate to urban settings to attend PSE, consequently incurring additional accommodation and transportation costs.

The Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP) is a primary source of university funding for Status Indian and Inuit students (Thompson & Hill-MacDonald, 2018; Timmons & Stoicheff, 2016). The PSSSP was capped in 1996; however, in 2017, the federal government infused 90 million dollars into PSSSP to help support 4600 Status Indian and Inuit students over two years (Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, 2017). Even with the extra allocation, the PSSSP cannot support all eligible Status Indian and Inuit post-secondary students. Consequently, there has been a 20% drop in the number of students supported from 1999 to 2009 (Assembly of First Nations, 2011). Métis and non-Status Indian post-secondary students are not eligible for PSSSP funding and, unless they come from Northern territories or enter into a program where tuition and allowances are covered, they must rely on alternate forms of funding such as the Canada Student Loans Program (Bathish et al., 2017; Bingham et al., 2014; Holmes, 2005; Stonecircle Consulting Inc., 2011).

As previously identified, Indspire is an organization that provides alternative funding to First Nations, Métis and Inuit post-secondary students. Although they provided \$11.6 million in awards during 2016-2017, it only covered 11% of the financial requests from Indigenous post-secondary students, and consequently, 89% of the requests were unfulfilled (Indspire, 2017).

Many Canadian post-secondary institutions have responded and provided bursaries and grants, tuition waivers and emergency funds to help with the associated financial hardships experienced by many Indigenous post-secondary students. Often the funds received from the PSSSP and alternative sources are insufficient to support Indigenous post-secondary students who typically have higher transportation, relocating and living costs (Archibald et al., 1995; Assembly of First Nations, 2012; Indspire, 2018; Shankar et al., 2013; Thompson & Hill-MacDonald, 2018; Timmons & Stoicheff, 2016; Usher, 2009). The inadequate financial support causes undue hardship and stress for many Indigenous post-secondary students (Bingham et al., 2014; Holmes, 2005; Iwasaki, Bartlett, & O'Neil, 2005; Timmons et al., 2009).

Disconnected. The presence of a loving, supportive family is significant within the Indigenous culture. Individuals who have close relationships with their immediate and extended family members have a sense of belonging and a feeling of rootedness (Anderson, 2016; Berry 1999; Horse, 2001; Little Bear, 2000). Many people within Indigenous communities are related and create a sense of family amongst the people who are part of the community. For many Indigenous post-secondary students, family and community provide much needed support in the form of child-rearing, teaching culture and knowledge, and providing motivation (Bingham et al., 2014). Some Indigenous students who live at home during their PSE can maintain close contact with their supports. However, other Indigenous post-secondary students who relocate to urban centers to attend PSE often lose direct support from their families and communities (Bingham et al., 2014; Hades, 2006; Holmes, 2005; Mendelson, 2006; Timmons et al., 2009). The loss of family and community support often leaves Indigenous students feeling isolated and lacking a sense of belonging within the post-secondary institution (Galabuzi, 2016; Holmes, 2005, 2006; Indspire, 2018).

Crab mentality is another societal attitude that negatively impacts Indigenous post-secondary students. According to Miller (2015), crab mentality is a metaphor “used to describe the mentality and behaviours of individuals belonging to or identifying with a particular community or culture, who “hold each other back” from various opportunities for advancement” (p.13710). For some Indigenous students, the lived experiences of family and community members provide examples that discourage academic persistence and changing their life circumstances (Anonson, Desjarlais, Nixon, Whiteman & Bird, 2008; Hades, 2006). The *crab*

mentality is associated with Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory of minority school performance. Ogbu (1983) suggested that the long history of racism, discrimination, and conflict that has been inflicted on involuntary minorities (American Indians, Alaska Natives, Black Americans) by the white society has led to distrusting the Westernized institutions of learning. Although many, involuntary minorities have an abstract belief that education is the key to success their lived experiences with poor economic and social conditions alludes that “they will never be fully rewarded or accepted for their education and hard work” (Ogbu & Simon, 1998, p.171).

Therefore, students are easily influenced not to persist because

perseverance at academic tasks has not developed as a part of their cultural traditions; the actual texture of their parent’s lives of unemployment, underemployment and discrimination convey a powerful message that counteracts verbal encouragement; and students learn from observing older members of their community that school success does not necessarily lead to jobs and other necessary and important things. (Ogbu, 1983, p.181)

Some Indigenous students attend PSE with the belief that education will provide them with a better quality of life. However, when family and community members share their concrete experiences of poor socioeconomic conditions and systemic racism, it deters students' academic persistence.

Personal challenges. Low academic self-concept, low educational aspirations, and being a first-generation student, are personal challenges for some Indigenous post-secondary students.

Academic self-concept and aspirations. The personal attributes of academic self-concept and aspirations are individual influences that impact Indigenous post-secondary students differently. Students who demonstrate a positive academic self-concept and have high aspirations are persistent and passionate about their academic work (Henderson, Hansen, & Shure, 2017) while students with poor self-concept and low aspirations demonstrate a poor work ethic, limited attendance and a lack of responsibility (Cherif, Movahedzaheh, Adams, & Dunning, 2013). Indigenous students have poorer self-concept and lower aspirations about their education performance when compared to non-Indigenous students (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2017). These challenges are more evident within the competitive environment of PSE, where Indigenous post-secondary students express a significant level of personal stress due to their poor academic

preparation and lack of self-confidence (Restoule et al., 2013). Higher stress levels contribute to lower motivation and increased feelings of inadequacy (Brade, Duncan, & Sokal, 2003; Hards, 2006; Wiebe, Sinclair, Nychuk, & Stephens, 1994).

First-generation students. Finnie et al. (2010) identified that Indigenous students were more likely to be first-generation students. Accordingly, about 55% of Indigenous students and 38% of non-Indigenous students are first-generation students (Finnie et al., 2010). First-generation students are defined as students whose parents or guardians have never attended PSE (Finnie et al., 2010). Rodriguez (2003) explained that first-generation students were often less knowledgeable about the process of PSE, less academically prepared, had less familial support, and were less likely to be able to fund their PSE. Because their familial, academic and cultural experiences are mismatched to those presented at post-secondary institutions, many first-generation students feel like outsiders upon entering the post-secondary environment (Lehmann, 2009; Sinacore & Lerner, 2013). As a result, many remain silent and struggle seek support that is necessary for success (Birani & Lehmann, 2013; Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011; Michalski, Cunningham, & Henry, 2017). Their inability to gain access to supportive services further intensifies their feelings of being marginalized (Sinacore & Lerner, 2013). However, students who were non-first-generation students were more likely to have adequate financial support, be sufficiently academically prepared and have access to university processes, which derived from their parent's experience with PSE (Lundberg, Schreiner, Hovaguimian, & Slavin Miller, 2007). Although the literature proposes specific characteristics of the first generation and non-first-generation students, Indigenous post-secondary students may be more profoundly impacted by the historical, social, and personal challenges.

The literature identified challenges that resulted from the generational effects of assimilation, cultural differences, social obstacles, and personal anxieties and potentially create feelings of isolation and increase levels of stress in Indigenous post-secondary students. Although these outcomes are important, it is imperative to explore the types of post-secondary institutions to determine their approach to addressing the challenges faced by many Indigenous post-secondary students.

Types of Post-Secondary Institutions

As noted in Chapter One, Barnhardt (1991) identified four types of Indigenous institutions with accompanying levels of cultural responsiveness: assimilated, integrated, independent, and affiliated. Cultural responsiveness is an approach that focuses on policy, curriculum, and instruction with regards to students' cultural identity, strengths, and background (Gay 2010; Ladson-Billing, 1995). Being culturally responsive means "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant and effective for them" (Gay, 2010, p.31), consequently, making it explicit that culture is a paradigm and resource for teaching and learning and academic success (Gay, 2013; Sleeter, 2012). The level of cultural responsiveness can be determined by the degree of Indigenous autonomy within the institution. The following section will describe the four types of institutions in greater detail and explore their associated levels of cultural responsiveness.

Assimilated Institutions

According to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996a), the assimilative institution "offers a fixed menu of programs, courses, and services. Everyone is expected to fit in" (p.532). Consequently, the level of cultural responsiveness is non-existent in this type of institution. This type of institution was the norm thirty years ago, but significant shifts in university mandates and responsibilities to Indigenous people have seen institutions move towards more integrative programming.

Integrated Institutions

There are a large number of integrated institutions in Canada that are working towards meeting the TRC (2015b) Calls to Action by taking on active roles in reconciliation through the process of indigenization. Ottman (2017) acknowledged that indigenization "should be a positive process that involves acknowledging, legitimizing, valuing and celebrating Indigenous Knowledge systems (this including languages, traditions and cultures) and their inclusion in spaces and places where they have historically been silent" (p. 103). Consequently, many integrated institutions have included strategies for indigenization to support academic persistence within Indigenous students. In a recent article, Pidgeon (2016) identified several indigenization strategies, such as the integration of Indigenous models of government and Indigenous advisory

committees as a means to address and support the relationship building between the institution and Indigenous communities. Pidgeon (2016) also acknowledged the Indigenous Education Accord (2009) as an indigenization strategy that provided a strong framework for institutions to follow as a means to improve teacher education and better serve Indigenous students and their communities. Other researchers stressed the importance of creating spaces where Indigenous students feel a sense of belonging and suggested the strategies of offering role models, peer and faculty mentorship programs, personal and career counselling, and access to Elders and cultural ceremonies (Bruce & Marlin, 2012; Ottman, 2017; Restoule et al., 2013).

Integrated institutions deliver programs directed towards Indigenous post-secondary students that are "contained wholly within and administered by existing mainstream institutions" (Barnhardt, 1991, p. 16). Mainstream institutions offer integrated programs based on the needs of Indigenous students within a particular geographical location or as a response to an increased population of Indigenous students within a current department (Barnhardt, 1991). According to Kovach, Carriere, Montgomery, Barrett, and Gilles (2015), "there is no one correct course of action" because Indigenous knowledge is "deeply entwined with epistemologies of place" and integration would be based on local community traditions (p.7). In some cases, institutional responsibilities have led to the establishment of Indigenous-oriented programs within specific departments and colleges within the mainstream university. The University of Saskatchewan is a mainstream university that provides integrated Indigenous post-secondary programs. For instance, the on-campus programs, Indian Teacher Education Program (ITEP) and Native Law Centre Summer program are tailored to the values and needs of Indigenous students and integrate Indigenous culture and knowledge into the courses. Both programs offer a variety of support services including, but not limited to, academic and personal counselling, tutoring and mentoring services, and collaborative classroom environments (University of Saskatchewan, n.d.; University of Saskatchewan, 2013). Integrated programs and Indigenous student support services have been deemed helpful in supporting academic persistence in Indigenous students (Preston, 2016).

Independent Institutions

Independent Indigenous post-secondary institutions provide education to Indigenous people, are autonomously operated, and include tribal colleges in the United States, and Te

Wananga o Raukawa in New Zealand (Barnhardt, 1991). Independent institutions encompass community-level revitalization, spiritual renewal, tribal development, and self-governance (Barnhardt, 1991). These institutions create programs and courses based on the educational needs of their community members (Barnhardt, 1991).

Affiliated Institutions

Affiliated institutions contribute to the educational aspirations and needs of Indigenous people, but cannot operate as independent institutions (Barnhardt, 1991). These institutions require the willingness of mainstream universities to cooperate and collaborate within affiliated contractual relationships. The Indigenous institution administers educational services for Indigenous people under the academic and administrative authority of the mainstream university (Barnhardt, 1991). In Saskatchewan, there are two affiliated Indigenous institutions, GDI and FNUniv.

GDI is the educational affiliate of the Métis-nation of Saskatchewan and is governed by its Board of Governors, who are responsible for its policies and operations (GDI, n.d.). GDI offers education, employment and cultural services primarily for Métis people of Saskatchewan (GDI, n.d.). “The institute is a conservator of Métis history and culture, a national leader in Michif-language initiatives, and a trusted source for those seeking Métis-specific information” (GDI, n.d., para. 3). There are several post-secondary education programs offered by GDI through their affiliated agreements with the University of Saskatchewan and University of Regina. Through these affiliations, GDI delivers the Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program (SUNTEP) and undergraduate arts and science courses at the campuses in Prince Albert, Saskatoon and Regina (GDI, n.d.). In 2013, GDI affiliated with the University of Regina Faculty of Education and Faculty of Graduate Studies to offer a community-based Master of Education for in Prince Albert for Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners (GDI, n.d.). More recently, GDI has united with the Lac La Ronge Indian band and the University of Regina Faculty of Education to offer the Northern Indigenous Teacher Education Program (NITEP) in La Ronge, Saskatchewan (GDI, n.d.). The institution has increased its reach to provide post-secondary education to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.

FNUniv. is an affiliated institution of the University of Regina and shares a contractual agreement outlining academic responsibilities and fiscal accountability. The affiliated

designation not only allows the FNUniv to support Indigenous students through culturally responsive administration and policy, curricula creation and program delivery, community and institutional research, and student support services, including working with Elders and Indigenous communities, but also gives the FNUniv increased credibility granted by its association with the University of Regina. Mainly FNUniv integrates cultural responsiveness into its institutional, curricular and instructional dimension by: committing to the First Nations communities it serves; integrating local leadership through its board of governors, senior leadership, faculty and staff; involving Elders, who help to guide its leadership and students; providing opportunities for spiritual growth; incorporating traditional ways of knowing, traditional teaching practices, and a congenial environment in both community and campus-based programs; and supporting participatory research with local, national and international Indigenous communities (First Nations University of Canada, n.d.). Through this approach, FNUniv works towards preparing Indigenous students to create sustainable communities and build strong Indigenous nations (Begay, 2016; Cornell & Kalt, 1998). The student relies on the institution for education, nurturing, and support, while the larger community depends on the healthy, educated student (Barnhardt, 1991).

I uncovered limited research that directly connected cultural responsiveness with its impact on student's academic persistence within an Indigenous PSE context. In the Canadian context, prominent researchers and organizations have stressed the importance of cultural responsiveness. Battiste (2002) identified, "Indigenous knowledge is now seen as an educational remedy that will empower Aboriginal students if applications of their Indigenous knowledge, heritage and language are integrated into the Canadian educational system" (p.9). The Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (2013) also acknowledged that

for Aboriginal students, having activities and services that allow them to stay connected to their identity and build a sense of community can make a huge and positive difference in their ability to navigate postsecondary education successfully. Aboriginal students are most successful when their people's knowledge, history and culture are part of the curriculum, and when instruction is relevant to their life experiences and communities.

(p. 2)

Consequently, stressing the importance of moving towards cultural sustainability where preservation of traditional Indigenous knowledge and fostering new learning must come together to meet contemporary need of Indigenous students (Paris & Alim, 2014). Although the importance of cultural responsiveness has been emphasized, there is a need for more evidence-based research that documents the connection between culturally responsive social support, academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students who attend an Indigenous-affiliated institution. A deeper understanding of the connections will help determine the ideal social support and settings for Indigenous PSE.

The four types of institutions use different, culturally responsive strategies to address the needs of Indigenous post-secondary students. The next section will examine the concept of social support and how it is used in post-secondary institutions, followed by an exploration into how social support has affected the academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students.

Social Support

The study of social support has evolved throughout several disciplines, including education, nursing, and psychology, and consequently, the definitions of social support vary within and amongst these disciplines. The lack of consensus leads to discrepancies when comparing and evaluating the outcomes of social support. House's (1981) definition and conceptualization of social support were used to guide this study. According to House (1981), social support "is a flow of emotional concern, instrumental aid, information, and/or appraisal... between people" (p. 26) that provides the answer to "*Who gives what to whom regarding which problems?*" (p. 22). The sources of social support vary from person to person. However, primarily social support is provided informally by family, friends, co-workers, peers and by more formal sources such as professionals (personal counsellors, registered nurses, lawyers) and organizational programs and service groups (House, 1981). House (1981) identified a typology of four potential forms of social support: emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal, whose purpose is to buffer stress and bolster physical, mental, and emotional health.

Savitz-Romer et al. (2009) acknowledged that social support for post-secondary students is the foundation for building resilience, fostering social networks, and motivating post-secondary students to persist within an academic environment. Social support is comprised of

purposeful strategies that are "interrelated, developmentally appropriate, and provide integrated, coordinated and comprehensive support in order to improve student achievement" (Savitz-Romer et al., 2009, p. 1). Savitz-Romer et al. (2009) employed House's four potential forms of social support to categorize conventional social support strategies available to post-secondary students. Complementing the finding by Savitz-Romer et al., (2009), post-secondary institutions continue to respond to the changing student population and provide further social support strategies such as cultural and spiritual ceremonies, free textbooks, tuition waivers, free public transportation, access to cultural advisors, culturally responsive policy, curriculum and instruction, high faculty expectations, and community connections to meet the needs of the non-traditional student (Gallop & Bastien, 2016; Gay, 2010; First Nations University of Canada, n.d.; Ragoonaden & Mueller, 2017) . In the following section, House's (1981) typology of four potential forms of social support: emotional, instrumental, informational and appraisal will be further described along with appropriate examples of social support strategies for post-secondary students.

Emotional Support

Emotional support is described as supportive acts that display empathy, love, trust, and concern (House, 1981). Family and friends primarily deliver emotional support and it has the highest impact on reducing stress and improving mental and physical health (House, 1981). Emotional support is interconnected with the other forms of support and is often seen as being provided in collaboration with one or more of the other forms of social support. Within the post-secondary environment, emotional support behaviours include personal counselling services, cultural and spiritual ceremonies, and building interpersonal relationships among faculty, staff, peers, family and community (First Nations University of Canada, n.d; Gay, 2010; Savitz-Romer et al., 2009).

Instrumental Support

Instrumental support provides tangible goods in order to help the person in need. In the academic setting, instrumental support "encompasses specific behaviours that help students reach a particular outcome or goal" (Savitz-Romer et al., 2009, p.2). Instrumental support is easily distinguishable from emotional support and is more likely to be viewed negatively, especially if the receiving person perceives the support as inappropriate, misguided, or unhelpful (House, 1981). For example, well-organized and conscientious students may view mandatory

attendance at a time management workshop as an ineffective use of resources. In contrast, mature students with inadequate time management skills may find a workshop of this nature to provide substantial tools to encourage academic persistence. Other acts of instrumental support that exist in the post-secondary setting include tutoring programs, emergency financial assistance, supplemental course instruction, textbooks, and public transportation vouchers.

Informational Support

Informational support is the act of supplying knowledge to individuals so they can use the knowledge to help themselves (House, 1981). Savitz-Romer et al. (2009) further explained: "informational support refers to an exchange of information that can help students meet academic goals by providing them with advice, suggestions, directives and information" (p. 2). The act of providing information support encourages students to receive, process, and apply the knowledge so they can problem-solve rather than depending on others to provide the resources for them. The connections between emotional, information and instrumental support become more evident as providing information and tangible goods are often also viewed as being empathetic (House, 1981). Additional post-secondary student informational support includes academic advising, admission orientation, financial assistance policies and procedures, cooperative internship programs and culturally responsive policy, curriculum, and instruction.

Appraisal Support

Appraisal support consists of providing assessment and feedback for self-evaluation (House, 1981). In appraisal support, information is transmitted and, the receiver processes and applies the information to assess the level of performance (House, 1981). In the post-secondary setting, appraisal support is provided by peers through peer mentoring programs and faculty in the form of high expectations and formative and summative feedback where students' performances are evaluated and compared to the institutions' standards and expectations. If the formative aspect of appraisal support is completed in a timely and effective manner, faculty, staff, and students have the opportunity to access additional informational, instrumental or emotional support to strengthen students' academic persistence (Savitz-Romer et al., 2009).

House's (1981) typology of social support – emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal – define social support for this study. It was selected because of its applicability to the social support strategies provided at post-secondary institutions for students. The next section

will delve into the meaning of academic persistence and include a discussion of how social support has positively influenced academic persistence in Indigenous post-secondary students.

Academic Persistence

By mainstream standards, graduation and academic persistence rates are critical indicators of academic success. Graduation rates measure the number of students who have completed programs of study while academic persistence rates measure students' progress through the various stages of programs. "By mainstream standards, a successful Aboriginal student would be like any other student, by completing his or her course work with a high GPA [grade point average] and graduating from his or her program in a timely manner" (Pidgeon, 2008, p. 144). Although there are some Indigenous students who are deemed successful while meeting only intellectual benchmarks, the use of intellectual measures to gauge academic success ignores the multitude of other outcomes deriving from PSE. Pidgeon (2008) confirmed, "defining student success based on the number of Aboriginal students who graduated places emphasis on academic success. This focus results in an imbalance within academic programs, with little attention given to the physical, emotional and cultural realms" (p.144). Consequently, Aboriginal success should be measured to recognize all aspects of learning. The Canadian Council on Learning (2007) identified that Aboriginal success should be measured by: "comprehending the learning spirit, Aboriginal language learning, diverse educational systems and learning, pedagogy of professionals and practitioners in learning, and technology and learning" (p.10) as a means to examine success from a holistic lens.

In her research, Pidgeon (2008) found that some Aboriginal post-secondary students were deemed as successful if they were able to acknowledge their cultural knowledge and maintain balance while gaining new knowledge; achieve individual goals and personal aspirations; and give back to their families and broader Aboriginal community. Pidgeon concluded that academic success was more than intellectual attainment and focused on balancing the four elements of life: physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. Researchers from Nipissing University (2015) also identified that success for Indigenous post-secondary students went beyond meeting academic standards and included identifying diversity and developing identity and leadership.

As previously stated, the definition of academic success includes graduation and academic persistence rates. Academic persistence "is the ability of students to continue their

post-secondary studies from one year to the next and ultimately to proceed to the completion of their program” (Parkin & Baldwin, 2009, p. 1). Similar to academic success, academic persistence rates have been measured by meeting specific intellectual benchmarks such as the completion of classes. This narrow definition ignores the other outcomes of Indigenous students’ persistence. Unlike Pidgeon’s (2008) study that defines academic success in Aboriginal students, there is a gap in the literature that distinguishes the outcomes of academic persistence in Indigenous post-secondary students. Acknowledging that Indigenous students must progress towards achieving academic success, the outcomes of academic success identified by Pidgeon (2008) will be used to contextualize the findings on academic persistence in Indigenous post-secondary students found in this study.

Theoretical Models of Academic Persistence

The study of academic persistence has evolved over the last five decades, with theories and models deriving from several disciplines that compare the variables that influence academic persistence in students attending higher education. Particularly, Tinto's interactionist theory (1975, 1993) has been a hallmark model associated with student persistence research.

Tinto’s interactionist theory (1975, 1993) is one of the most notable theories on academic persistence in higher education. Tinto (1975, 1993) posited that students enter PSE with a variety of personal attributes and varying degrees of socioeconomic status, family support, academic and personal goals, educational skills, and cultural and social values, while the institution has its own formal and informal academic and social systems. Accordingly, “the extent to which a student is integrated into the formal and informal academic and social systems determines leaving behaviours” (Seidman, 2005, p.10). Students who successfully integrate into the social systems of the institution were more likely to persist academically (Tinto, 1993).

The initial design of the Tinto's interactionist theory (1975, 1993) used traditional-aged, white students in a four-year university or college settings as the primary reference group (Seidman, 2005). This particular group of students often possessed similar intentions and commitments as the institution; consequently, they were more likely to integrate. Indigenous students are not representative of Tinto’s reference group. As previously stated, Indigenous students are non-white and generally older than the traditionally aged post-secondary student.

Accordingly, Tinto's interactionalist theory may not be beneficial in understanding the educational experiences of Indigenous post-secondary students (Huffman, 2010).

Tinto's interactionalist theory (1975, 1993) also expected students to discard the attitudes and values from their previous communities in order to successfully integrate into the academic and social systems of the institution. This assumption is assimilative (Pidgeon, 2008; Tierney, 1992) and according to Tierney (1992), may "hold potential harmful consequences for racial and ethnic minorities" (p. 603). This assumption may be especially detrimental for Indigenous students who use their cultural connections as sources of persistence in PSE (Huffman, 2003). Expecting Indigenous students to disassociate from familial and community knowledge would ignore the influence culture plays on academic persistence and reincarnate assimilative practices from the past.

Tinto (1993) recognized inconsistencies in his theory and to address its assimilative nature; he acknowledged that students must at least share some of the expectations of the institution rather than fully conforming in order to persist in higher education. He later recanted his position on the influence of culture and identified that for many minority students, "the ability to remain connected to their past communities, family, church or tribe is essential to their persistence" (p.4). Although he acknowledged these discrepancies, the interactionalist theory is less effective at predicting variables that affect academic persistence among Indigenous students and other minority students in post-secondary institutions (Lundberg et al., 2007).

Tinto's interactionalist theory (1975, 1993) continues to guide persistence research in higher education, but a gap exists between theory and the implementation of educational innovations to improve academic persistence among Indigenous students. In contrast to the Tinto's theory, HeavyRunner and DeCelles (2002) created the Family Education Model (FEM), an Indigenous-based persistence model, to address the practical application of social support to increase academic persistence in Native American post-secondary students at tribal colleges.

FEM was "founded on traditional native cultural values and, as such, offers a unique perspective on the barriers and potential opportunities for academic advancement" for Indigenous students (Huffman, 2010, p. 219). According to Huffman (2010), FEM infers four fundamental assertions:

- Academic and personal services and activities cannot be disconnected from the student's cultural beliefs and values;
- The centrality of the extended family is fundamental within the native culture;
- The connection between the individual and extended family is essential to meeting the holistic needs of the individual; and
- The separation of the student from his/her extended family creates complications that are not generally addressed in mainstream institutions. (p. 221-222)

The FEM acknowledges that the extended family plays a significant role in the lives of most Native American people (HeavyRunner and DeCelles, 2002). Native American students who are separated from their extended family are more likely to lack the social support needed to meet their emotional, mental and spiritual needs, which then leads to negative academic consequences (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). Within the FEM, faculty and staff members of the tribal institution constitute the extended family. By replicating the way the extended family operates, through providing culturally-based social supports, building respectful relationships, being flexible and responsive, and affirming strengths and abilities, faculty and staff members create a sense of belonging and empowerment for Native American students that significantly reinforces students' persistence in attaining undergraduate degrees (Broughton-Pretti, 2016; HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002; Lundberg, 2014; Tachine et al., 2017). The assumptions of FEM are used in this study to consider how social support affected the academic persistence of Indigenous post-secondary students at an Indigenous-affiliated institution.

Academic Persistence and Social Support

There have been several studies that have explored the decisive role that social support plays on improving the academic persistence of Indigenous post-secondary students. In the following section, a review of the literature will highlight the role of emotional, instrumental, information, and appraisal support in improving academic persistence in Indigenous post-secondary students.

Emotional support. There have been several researchers who found that respectful relationships between Indigenous students, staff, and faculty members enhanced academic persistence, intellectual and personal growth. The authentic interest displayed by staff and faculty members encouraged student engagement, increased academic persistence and helped

Indigenous students' build confidence, self-worth and sense of belonging (Embleton, 2012; Gallop & Bastien, 2016; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Hampton & Roy, 2002; Jackson, Smith, & Hill, 2003; Simpkins & Bonnycastle, 2015). Relationships between peers that were based on shared experiences, developing trust, and making connections created a community of emotional and mental support that inspired persistence and motivation (Gallop & Bastien, 2016; Lundberg & Lowe, 2016; Mosholder, Waite, Larsen & Goslin, 2016; Ragoonaden & Mueller, 2017). Supportive family and community members attended to the holistic needs of students by caring for children, sharing cultural teachings and practices, and providing financial resources and subsequently became sources of motivation for academic persistence (Flynn, Duncan, & Jorgensen, 2012; Freeman, 2008; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Simpkins & Bonnycastle, 2015).

Even though relationships are deemed necessary in providing social support, there is limited literature on what is needed to create an authentic relationship among Indigenous post-secondary students. Milne, Creedy, and West (2016), Ragoonaden and Mueller (2017), and Timmons et al. (2009) stated that relationships with Indigenous students needed to be meaningful and positive. However, they did not delve into the interventions that were needed to make a relationship meaningful and positive. Flynn et al. (2012) and Embleton (2012) provided more detail and identified friendships and social connections as being essential to form relationships; however, they failed to explain how friendships and social connections were created. Other researchers offered unilateral interventions such as staff and faculty members being available, accessible, and flexible, but these researchers did not explain how these interventions helped develop relationships (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; Lundberg & Lowe, 2016; Milne, Creedy, & West, 2016; Timmons et al., 2009). The findings by Jackson et al. (2003) were the most cohesive by recognizing that relationships between Indigenous students, staff and faculty members were formed on caring practices such as showing genuine warmth, a willingness to help and being personally connected. The existing literature lacks specificity as to the factors and actions necessary for the development of relationships with Indigenous students, and more research is needed for a deeper understanding of the concepts within this context.

Instrumental support. Researchers identified that a designated physical space provided instrumental support for Indigenous students (Embleton, 2012; Hinds, 2014; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Tierney, 1992; Timmons et al., 2009). In these studies, the designated space

was identified as a resource center specifically for Indigenous students. For the most part, these resource centers housed academic, personal, social, and cultural services or tangible goods for Indigenous students and provided a space for staff and Elders to connect with students.

According to Smith and Varghese (2016), Indigenous student space built "a sense of community, fostered and enhanced Aboriginal identity and provided a safe space for Aboriginal students" (p. 458). While the participants in Hinds (2014) study "found comfort, community and a second home in their center" (p.149). These findings were similar to those of the study by Guillory and Wolverton (2008), where the Native American Student Center "countered the effects of leaving home and the feelings of isolation that many of the Native American students encountered during their stay at the university" (p.76). In these three studies, the resource center was more than a designated space. Initially, it was an environment that provided necessary services, but once the students became comfortable within the space, the environment evolved, and students were able to connect and form relationships with one another, staff, and cultural resources.

Informational support. Several researchers identified that the respectful adoption of Indigenous knowledge, values, and practices into courses provided informational support and subsequently increased academic persistence in Indigenous students (Embleton, 2012; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; Timmons et al., 2009). Embleton (2012) found that the use of sharing circles within classes connected her participants to their culture and made the classroom feel like a safe place. In the study completed by Timmons et al. (2009), their participants identified that courses in Indigenous studies "provided information, community, and coping mechanisms for Aboriginal students ... [and] also created positive space for Aboriginal students to study issues relevant to their academic and personal development" (p.24). In these studies, the sharing of Indigenous knowledge and incorporation of traditional teaching practices aided in creating a supportive environment for Indigenous students, which reinforced their academic persistence.

Ragoonaden and Mueller (2017) engaged a culturally responsive pedagogy within an introductory university course and incorporated Indigenous cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of Indigenous people as touchstones. The results revealed that Indigenous students who attended the culturally responsive course were able to connect with other peers, staff, and faculty, and this connection was foundational to the sense of community and

relationships that followed. The relationships further contributed to Indigenous students' emotional and mental health by reducing feelings of isolation and improving academic persistence (Ragoonaden & Mueller, 2017). Although this study provided evidence to the benefits of a culturally responsive program for Indigenous students, there is limited literature examining the effect of culturally responsive social support on the academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students in an Indigenous-affiliated institution and more research is needed for a deeper understanding.

Appraisal support. Institutions have created mentoring opportunities, and faculty members have offered constructive feedback as a means of appraisal support for Indigenous post-secondary students. Rawana, Sieukaran, Nguyen, & Pitawanakwat (2015) found that Indigenous students, who participated either as a mentor or mentee in an undergraduate Indigenous post-secondary peer mentoring program, interacted and shared their experiences with other Indigenous students who created a sense of belonging and community. Similarly, Archibald, Pidgeon, and Hawkey (2010) found that within the SAGE undergraduate to graduate transition program, faculty and Indigenous graduate students mentored and created supportive relationships with Indigenous undergraduate students. These relationships created a sense of belonging and were influential in the students' decisions to pursue graduate studies (Archibald et al., 2010).

Gallop and Bastien (2016) also found that faculty members provided appraisal support through clear expectations and constructive feedback. Clear expectations and feedback empowered Indigenous students to remain in their programs of study while "unclear instructor expectations could further marginalize many of these Aboriginal students by increasing their feeling of self-doubt, inadequacy and overall alienation" (Gallop & Bastien, 2016, p. 217). As a result, mentorship, clear expectations, and positive feedback enhanced academic persistence in Indigenous students (Gallop & Bastien, 2016; Archibald et al., 2010; Rawana et al., 2015).

The purpose of this section was to identify the research related to social support and its influence on academic persistence in Indigenous post-secondary students. The review looked explicitly at the literature that addressed the emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal support. The majority of the research was qualitative in nature and the studies were located primarily in mainstream institutions and examined academic persistence from a traditional

perspective (Embleton, 2012; Flynn et al., 2012; Freeman, 2008; Gallop & Bastien, 2016; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Hinds, 2014; Jackson et al., 2003; Timmons et al., 2009). These studies employed a variety of methodological approaches that included participatory action research (Gallop & Bastien, 2016), phenomenology (Flynn et al., 2012; Hinds, 2014), grounded theory (Timmons et al., 2009), multiple case studies (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008) and an Indigenous methodology (Archibald et al., 2010). In addition to the qualitative articles, two articles took on a mixed-methods approach (Ragoonaden & Mueller, 2017; Rawana et al., 2015) and only one article was quantitative (Lundberg & Lowe, 2016). The current study provides a new perspective through a constructivist lens and single case study design to understand the effects of social support on the academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students attending an Indigenous-affiliated institution.

Indigenous Worldview

A worldview is a lens that we use to interpret our experiences and construct the meanings of our realities. An Indigenous worldview is a perspective of guiding principles and traditional values which encompass shared philosophy, values, and customs that emerge from social, political, economic, cultural, and spiritual perceptions and beliefs of Indigenous cultures (Little Bear, 2000; Poonwassie & Charter, 2001). Although Indigenous people have diverse beliefs and values, collective worldviews exist and suggest a united awareness of how Indigenous people perceive themselves with particular aspects of existence (Little Bear, 2000). The concept of health has a variety of definitions, but the worldview of health is a shared perspective, as it possesses foundational values consistent with many Indigenous cultures.

Indigenous Worldview of Health

In many Indigenous cultures, health is seen as being achieved through balance and connectedness of the four entities and directed by shared values. It is perceived that individuals strive for balance within their physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions and nurture these entities together to create a strong holistic bond while connecting respectfully with family, community, and nature (Howell et al., 2016).

The Medicine Wheel has been employed as a framework to represent the values, worldviews and practices held by Indigenous people. Indigenous people do not universally accept the Medicine Wheel, nor is there one absolute version of the Medicine Wheel. According

to Calliou (1995), "medicine wheels can be pedagogical tools for teaching, learning, contemplating, and understanding our human journeys at individual, band/community, nation, global and even cosmic levels" (p. 51). In the literature, the Medicine Wheel has been used to guide counselling, social work and educational endeavours, among others (Bell, 2014; Kemppainen, Kopera-Frye, & Woodard, 2008; Sundlie, 2009). The following sections will describe one version of the Medicine Wheel to demonstrate the worldview of health and interconnection and balance between the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual elements.

Physical element. Physical health is comprised of anything that is associated with the body as a physical entity. Mainly, nutrition and physical activity contribute to physical health and reduce the development of chronic disease (Bartlett, 2005; Spector, 2002). Many Indigenous people believe that physical health is achieved through consuming a traditional diet enriched with wild meats, berries, and vegetables and engaging in physical activity to strengthen the body (Graham & Stamler, 2010).

Mental element. The mental entity focuses on the mind and learning (Bartlett, 2005; Spector, 2002). Being intellectually healthy involves making good choices, being open to new ideas, and respecting the views of others. Indigenous people who have good mental health are often at ease with their knowledge and abilities and can adapt to circumstances and respond with creative ideas (Bartlett, 2005; Graham & Stamler, 2010; Isaak & Marchessault, 2008).

Emotional element. Being emotionally healthy consists of having a positive self-image, content relationships, and the capability to address feelings and attend to life's difficulties.

Accordingly, Bartlett (2005) noted that

emotionally well individuals are those who can identify feelings and understand their sources; accept emotions as part of the self; express feelings and keep others' feelings confidential; manage and control emotions in daily life; and understand that emotional well-being can only truly arise within one's self. (p. S25)

Within the Indigenous culture, emotionally healthy individuals are those people who possess confidence and humility, have a strong identity, and partake in positive lifestyles to serve as encouraging examples for other Indigenous people (Isaak & Marchessault, 2008).

Spiritual element. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996b) emphasized the foundation of Indigenous spiritual beliefs as:

not a system of beliefs that can be defined like a religion; it is a way of life in which people acknowledge that every element of the material world is in some sense infused with spirit, and all human behaviour is affected by, and in turn has an effect in, a non-material, spiritual realm. (p.589)

For many Indigenous people spirituality is practiced to gain guidance from the Creator and ancestors to develop or redefine their identity, which is especially helpful during times of distress or when people are struggling to improve their lives or the lives of others (Anderson, 2016; Berry 1999; Iwasaki, Byrd & Onda, 2011). To many Indigenous people, spirituality is a central tenant of Indigenous culture. There is “the belief that their spirituality will provide the foundation for a sense of who they are, and a feeling of security within themselves” (Berry, 1999, p. 22). The spiritually well individual has the strength to address adversity, is supportive and non-judgmental, and guides others on the road to spiritual wellness (Bartlett, 2005).

Although health has been described as four separate elements, health is determined by the interdependence between the four elements and the connection between individuals, families, communities, and nature. Health is achieved when balance exists within and in between the four elements and harmony endures between individuals, families, communities, and nature, where the sum of their parts is greater than the whole (King, Smith, & Gracey, 2009; Malloch, 1990; Struthers et al., 2003).

Health and Social Support

There have been several studies that have explored the role that social support plays on the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual aspects of the health of the general population. In the following section, a review of the literature will reveal how different types of social support have impacted the health and, where applicable, will describe its impact on the health of post-secondary students.

Social support has been shown to improve health outcomes by affecting physical health behaviours such as exercise and diet. Marr and Wilcox (2015) found that college students who received emotional support from their family and friends were more likely to participate in physical activity and consume fruits and vegetables in college. Rapoza et al. (2016) found that minority students who received positive social support had better physical health. Uchino (2004,

2006) also found that individuals with social support experienced better physical health through lower blood pressure and heart rate.

Social support can also harm physical health. People who experience relationship stress and those who normalize and encourage the participation of unhealthy habits such as overeating or excessive drinking are in danger of adversely affecting the physical health of others (Uchino, 2006; Umberson & Karas Montez, 2010). Also, those who experience loneliness, isolation, and have limited social support have been shown to have poorer physical health (House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988). Limited social support increases the risk of experiencing cardiovascular, endocrine, and immune changes that are damaging to physical health (Uchino, 2004; 2006).

Social support can influence mental health by acting as a stress buffer. According to Cohen (2004), "support may alleviate the impact of stress by providing a solution to the problem, by reducing the perceived importance of the problem or by providing a distraction from the problem" (p. 678). Support delivered through material resources (instrumental support), exchanging information (informational support) or completing an evaluation (appraisal support) provide a level of support that may "bolsters one's perceived ability to cope with demands, thus changing the appraisal of the situation and lowering its effective stress" (Cohen, 2004, p.677). The opposite holds for individuals who do not have adequate social support. Hefner and Eisenberg (2009) found that individuals with low-level social support were more likely to experience mental health problems.

Emotional support displayed through love and kindness, enhances emotional health by fostering a sense of meaning and purpose (Cohen, 2004; Thoits, 2006). The emotional support provided a sense of personal control where individuals "believe that they can control their life outcomes through their own actions" (Umberson & Karas Montez, 2010, p. S56) - consequently demonstrating a positive relationship between emotional support and emotional health.

Little research has been done to explore the effects of social support on spirituality. A pertinent study by Alorani and Alradaydeh (2017) identified a positive relationship between social support and spiritual health in mainstream post-secondary students. This study is of interest since it pertains to post-secondary students but from an international focus. The findings can inform the work on the effects of social support on the spiritual health of Indigenous post-secondary students attending an Indigenous-affiliated institution.

Determining the effects of social supports on health has proven to be difficult because health is multifaceted. In the majority of studies, only one aspect of health was explored. While these studies are important to consider, they cannot be generalized to the Indigenous post-secondary students attending an Indigenous-affiliated institution. There is a need for additional research to understand how social support influences the health, defined holistically, of Indigenous post-secondary students attending an Indigenous-affiliated institution.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was based on the literature review, personal experience, concepts from constructivism, and the FEM and is based on the following explanation. Indigenous students enter PSE with diverse demographics and experiences and can be faced with numerous challenges. These challenges have been identified in the literature review and can include generational effects from residential schools, cultural insensitivity, funding inadequacies, disconnection from family, poor academic self-concept, and being a first-generation student.

Through the FEM, HeavyRunner and DeCelles (2002) postulated that academic persistence was positively influenced by social support that was centered on Native values of family and cultural beliefs. HeavyRunner and DeCelles (2002) maintained that institutions must provide social support that is culturally significant and replicate the many functions of the family, including providing social, cultural, personal, and spiritual support. Accordingly, it is proposed that the institution's ability to integrate cultural values and traditions and replicate the functions of the family is correlated to the level of academic persistence of Indigenous post-secondary students.

Social support can be emotional, instrumental, information, or appraisal in nature and can be delivered informally by peers and family and formally by professionals. The literature revealed that all types of social support were shown to improve elements of academic persistence and health in post-secondary students (Embleton, 2012; Flynn et al., 2012; Freeman, 2008; Gallop & Bastien, 2016; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Hinds, 2014; Jackson et al., 2003; Timmons et al., 2009).

It was proposed that when Indigenous post-secondary students can form respectful, reciprocal relationships with peers, family, staff and faculty members, they receive emotional,

informational, instrumental, and appraisal support. As a result, Indigenous students are more likely to maintain their cultural integrity, find their gifts, and assume responsibility for reciprocity and improve their holistic health.

However, Indigenous post-secondary students who do not develop respectful relationships with peers, family, staff and faculty members do not receive the necessary social support. Consequently, these students are less likely to persist and often experience adverse health effects academically. Students who feel disrespected by unapproachable staff and faculty members are not provided with the necessary supports and subsequently may disengage, withdraw, or fail (Hawk & Lyons, 2008; Schmidtke, 2009).

The conceptual framework is situated within a circular pattern, but it was not intended to depict a Medicine Wheel. Although the Medicine Wheel has been used as a conceptual framework, I believe its use would be a basic appropriation of "taking a cultural element from its cultural context and using it in another form" (Cultural Heritage Project, 2015, p.2). The Medicine Wheel is used to reflect Indigenous teachings, values, and worldviews and to have used it to describe how social support affected the academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students would have been a misrepresentation of its purpose. Instead, the conceptual framework was displayed a circular pattern to represent that everything is related and "things can not be understood outside of their context and interactions" (Svenson & Lafontaine, 2003, p. 190). The concepts were presented based on my own cultural beliefs that everything starts in the East with the rising sun and moves to the South, West and North until it rises again in the East. The constructivist paradigm was woven throughout the circle to emphasize that participants constructed their understandings by connecting past and present experiences to social interactions, historical and cultural contexts, and by reflecting on what they have learned through their unique lens. The resulting subjective meanings were diverse and numerous and resided within the circle of the conceptual framework. The individual understandings were examined for the "complexity of views rather than narrow the meanings into a few categories or ideas" (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 24). Through interacting with the participants and engaging with the data, multiple realities were organized and reorganized. Consequently, an understanding was derived that accounted for the specific setting, my influence, and the interaction with the participants.

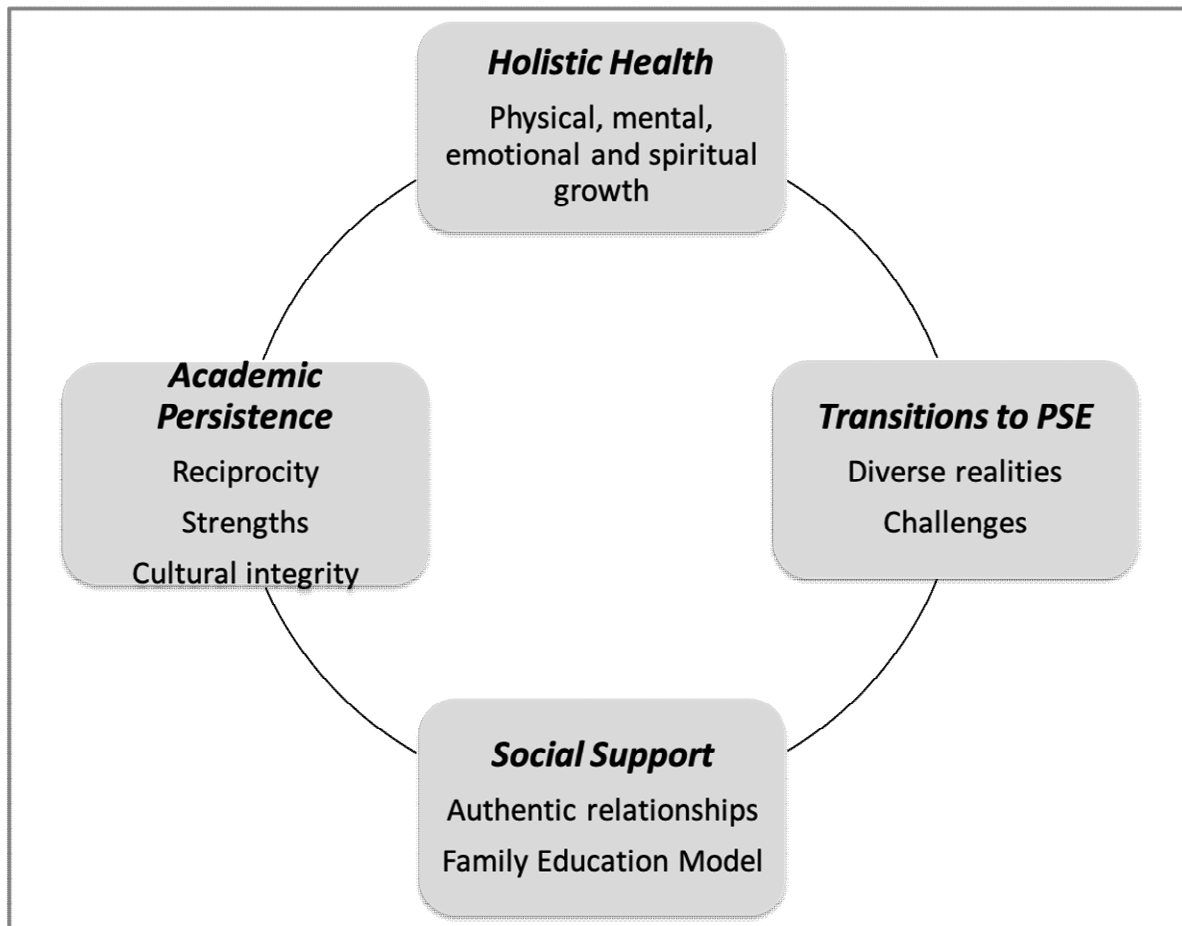


Figure 2.1. Conceptual framework presenting a positive alignment between the literature on social support, academic persistence and health.

In figure 2.1, starting on the right side of the circle, an Indigenous student enters the affiliated post-secondary institution from a diverse reality that is influenced differently by socioeconomic status, family composition, geographical location, generational effects of assimilation, personal and familial levels of education and cultural knowledge. Consequently, this Indigenous student may face challenges influenced by his/her previous reality. As the literature has shown, Indigenous post-secondary students may experience challenges arising from the generational effects of colonization, cultural dissonance, socioeconomic inadequacies, and personal shortcomings. Moving to the bottom of the circle, social support is delivered through the relationships students have with family, peers, staff, and faculty members. As indicated in the FEM by HeavyRunner and DeCelles (2002), it is through these relationships that students receive social support from their peers, staff and faculty members who serve as the

student’s extended family. These relationships also reinforce the use of culturally responsive academic, financial, personal, social, and spiritual support to address existing challenges. Moving to the left side of the circle, the student is provided with the opportunity to use the relationships and social support to build reciprocity, find his/her strengths and grow or maintain his/her cultural integrity, which are essential outcomes to the Indigenous perspective of academic success (Pidgeon, 2008). At the top of the circle, the student has the opportunity to build their holistic health through their strengths.

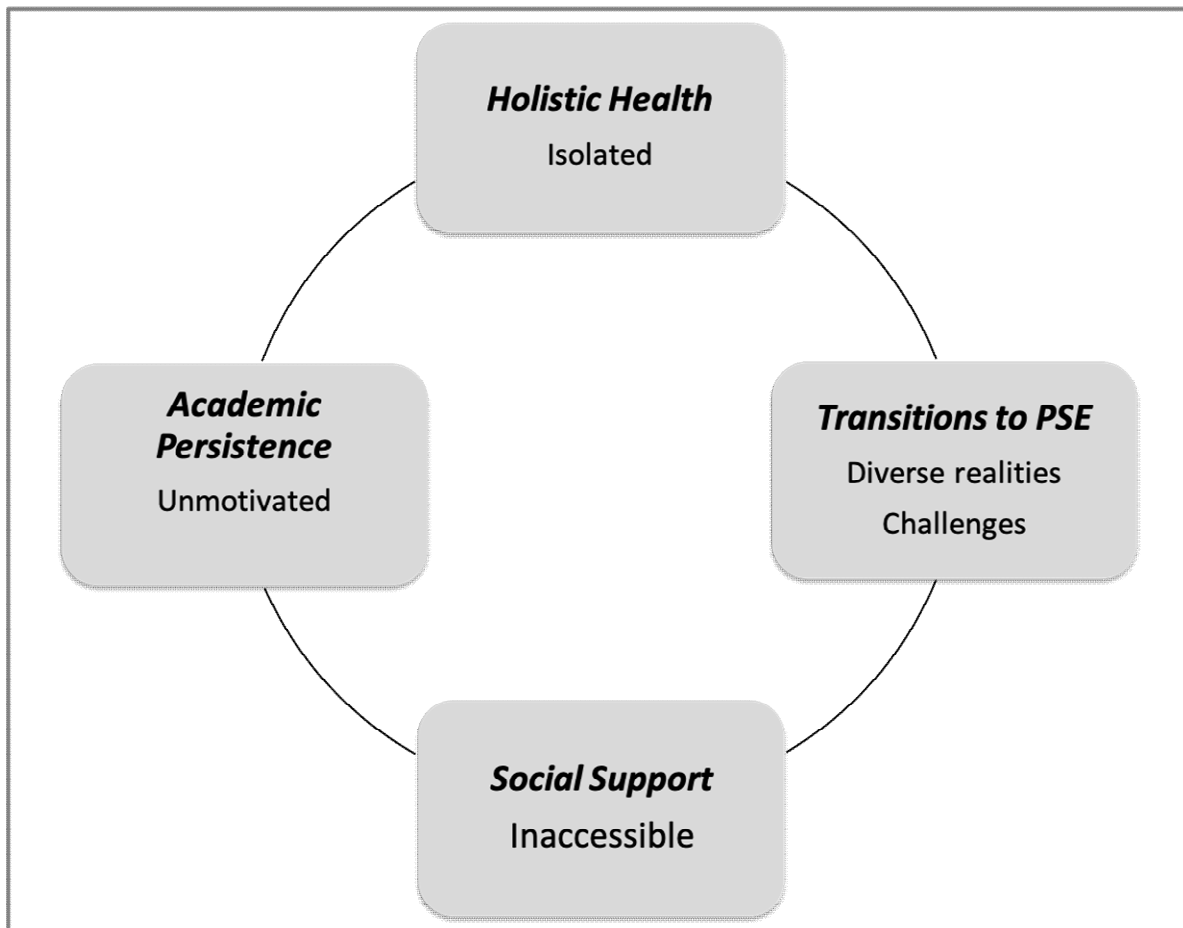


Figure 2.2. Conceptual framework for social support curtailing academic persistence and health.

In figure 2.2, again starting on the right side of the circle, an Indigenous student enters the affiliated post-secondary institution from a diverse reality that is influenced differently by socioeconomic status, family composition, geographical location, generational effects of assimilation, personal and familial levels of education and cultural knowledge. Moving to the bottom of the circle, the student does not have access to social support and does not have

relationships with family, peers, staff, and faculty members. As a result, the student may feel isolated and lack a sense of belonging. Continuing to the left side of the circle, these students will be unmotivated to build reciprocity, find his/her strengths and grow or maintain his/her cultural integrity and at the top of the circle, the feelings of isolation impact negatively on the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual elements of health.

In the conceptual framework, it is proposed that an Indigenous student will receive social support and develop relationships with peers, family, staff and faculty members. It is from these relationships that the student will work towards academic persistence and holistic health. It is acknowledged that other factors may influence an Indigenous student's academic persistence and health; however, the investigation into these other factors is beyond the scope of this study.

Summary

In this chapter, the literature on the historical legislation pertinent to the progression of Indigenous PSE was discussed. Until the mid-twentieth century, PSE was used as an assimilative practice to civilize Indigenous people, and more recently, it has been treated as a social policy where cuts and freezes are done at the discretion of the government. As a result of the government's actions, Indigenous students face many historical, cultural, social, and personal challenges when entering PSE.

According to Barnhardt (1991), integrated, independent, and affiliated post-secondary institutions have accepted the responsibility of making PSE more accessible and meeting the academic, social, cultural, and personal needs of Indigenous students. In particular, FNUUniv, Northern campus, serves the needs of Indigenous people by infusing Indigenous culture, tradition, and values throughout curricula, using methods of instruction to address Indigenous learning styles, offering Elder support, spiritual teachings, and support staff and services that focus on student persistence.

The chapter continued with an exploration of social support, according to House (1981), where the discussion evolved into examining the FEM and its assertions to understand how culturally responsive approaches affect academic persistence in Indigenous post-secondary students. The following section described health from an Indigenous worldview. In each of the relevant sections, literature was shared to demonstrate the primarily positive effects of social support on academic persistence and health. The chapter concluded with a description of the

conceptual framework that identified the key concepts and explained linkages between the concepts. Moving forward, Chapter Three presents an overview of the research methodology.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how social support affected the academic persistence and health of Indigenous students at an Indigenous-affiliated university in North central Saskatchewan. The study addresses five supplemental research questions:

1. What challenges do Indigenous post-secondary students face?
2. Who provides social support to Indigenous post-secondary students?
3. How is social support delivered to Indigenous post-secondary students?
4. What effect does social support have on the academic persistence of Indigenous post-secondary students?
5. What effect does social support have on the health of Indigenous post-secondary students?

It is believed that a better understanding of this phenomenon will provide a more informed perspective of those factors contributing to greater academic persistence and health in Indigenous post-secondary students.

This chapter begins by identifying the nature of the study and describing how a constructivist paradigm guided the study. The discussion then focuses on the following areas: rationale for research methodology; identification of the case and the associated boundaries; description of research sample and setting; data making techniques; data analysis and interpretation process; approaches to qualitative validity and reliability and ethical considerations. The chapter concludes with a summary.

Nature of the Study

There are three primary purposes of research: exploring, describing, and interpreting (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study was both descriptive and interpretive as it built on the current literature and collected original empirical data to explain further how social support

affected the academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students at an Indigenous affiliated post-secondary institution.

Constructivism

A philosophical paradigm is derived from a belief system about the existence of reality and the nature of knowledge (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Belief systems originate from the ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions the researcher consciously defines to achieve the most informed and distinguished view and congruent direction that guides the researcher's thinking and actions (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This study was informed by a constructivist paradigm and subsequently shaped the research questions, data collection, and analysis.

Within constructivism, the ontological assumption identifies reality as being subjective, where individuals create multiple, socially constructed realities that are truthful and legitimate in specific contexts and interactions (Mertens, 2015). Therefore, I aimed to follow the recommendations of Guba and Lincoln (1994), by acknowledging the variety of realities and attempting to find some consensus of these realities, while being cognizant of new explanations and experiences. In this study, the research participants shared their realities that were representative of their circumstances and interactions, I unpacked divergent realities and the consensus of their experiences was used to delineate how social support affected the academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students.

Epistemological assumptions, grounded in constructivism, identify that knowledge is shaped by lived experiences and interactions between the knower and what would be known (Hayes & Singh, 2012). I was the main instrument in the study, and my experiences and background shaped how I gathered the data through focus group interviews and face-to-face interviews, analyzed and interpreted the findings and sought support from my advisory group. As such, during data gathering, I was cognizant of the participants' feelings and the influences that contributed to the meanings of their lived experiences. The study's findings derived from my interpretation of the participants' multiple realities and were confirmed by my supervisor, advisory group, and interview participants who ensured an appropriate representation of the participants' experiences were presented. Consequently, the socially constructed meanings did not result in a capture of reality that could be generalized to a larger population.

The methodological design is an approach to systematic inquiry, outlining how the researcher will seek out new knowledge. Qualitative designs are best used to explore and understand knowledge or personal experience with an attempt to gain a holistic understanding of a situation within a specific context (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Qualitative research also favours the constructivist paradigm by supporting the interactive process between the participant and researcher to explore the depth, richness, and complexity participants assign to lived experiences. A qualitative design best served this study for its purpose was to explore and gain a detailed understanding of how social support affected the academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students within the context of the setting.

In the following section, the qualitative case study methodology is further explored to demonstrate how it was used to meet the research purpose and sustain methodological congruency within the study.

Case Study

A qualitative case study is a methodological approach that facilitates the exploration of a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life setting through a variety of data sources (Yin, 2014). The case study aims to "thoroughly describe complex phenomena in ways to unearth new and deeper understandings of the phenomena" (Mertens, 2015, p. 245). According to Merriam (1998), the qualitative case study design

is employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved. The interest is in the process rather than outcomes, in context rather than specific variable, in discovery rather than confirmation. Insights gleaned for case studies can directly influence policy, practice and future research. (p. 19)

The qualitative case study is particularistic, descriptive and heuristic: particularistic in that it focuses on a particular situation, event, program, or phenomenon; descriptive in providing "thick" literal descriptions; and heuristic by bringing forth new meanings or confirming what is known (Merriam, 2009).

The qualitative case study methodology is congruent with the constructivist paradigm. As previously identified, constructivism assumes "that knowledge is socially constructed by people active in the research process and that researchers should attempt to understand the complex world of lived experiences from the point of view of those who live it" (Schwandt, 1998, p. 221).

Accordingly, case studies “explicitly seek out the multiple perspectives of those involved in the case, aiming to gather collectively agreed upon and diverse notions of what occurred” (Lauckner, Paterson, & Krupa, 2012, p. 5). In the study, the qualitative case study methodology provided an opportunity for participants to socially construct knowledge based on their lived experiences while providing me with an opportunity to interact with the participants to gain a better understanding of the socially constructed truth that was dependent on the participants’ perspective. In order to ensure the intent of the study was achieved, the case study methodology and constructivist paradigm guided the identification of the case, the case boundaries, the multiple data-gathering methods, the specific data-analysis techniques, and the communication of the case’s findings.

Identification of the Case

Case study research begins with the identification of the case. The case must be about something in order to focus the research and ensure the logic and strategies of the research are clear (Punch, 2009). A case requires an observable subject and an analytical frame; the analytical frame is necessary to put the subject into context (Thomas, 2011). For this study, the case was purposefully selected: the subjects were Indigenous post-secondary students at FNUniv, Northern campus, and the analytical frame was the effect social support has on academic persistence and health. The purposeful identification of the case influenced the case’s intent and boundaries, and what data were gathered and revealed.

The Intent of the Case

To determine the intent of the case, the researcher must ask, “Why is the study being undertaken?” As an answer to this question, Stake (2005) identified three different types of case studies - intrinsic, instrumental and multiple case studies - which have different intents. An intrinsic case study is used when there is an inherent interest to understand a particular case, whereas an instrumental case study is used to provide understanding into an issue (Stake, 2005). A multiple case study design is employed when there is a need to understand the different perspectives of an issue and when there is more interest in investigating a phenomenon, population or general conditions and less interest in studying one particular case (Stake, 2005).

This study’s design demonstrated the characteristics of an intrinsic case study that explored an issue of interest. This case did not represent other cases, and the purpose was not to

understand an abstract concept or to build a theory. An intrinsic case study draws researchers “towards understandings of what is important about that case within its world” (Stake, 2000, p. 450). Intrinsic cases bring forth context-dependent knowledge, including both the common and uncommon particulars of the case, to provide “a nuanced view of reality” that cannot be understood through other methods (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 225). This intrinsic case study provided an opportunity to look carefully at context-dependent knowledge and gain new insights into the multiple realities of how social support affected the academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students. These new insights were beneficial because they guided the policy, practice, and research recommendations presented in Chapter Six.

The Case Boundaries

The case originated from the central research question and encompassed Indigenous post-secondary students at FNUniv, Northern campus (the subject) and the effects of social support on their academic persistence and health (the analytical framework). The subject and analytical framework identified the case, but boundaries were required to establish the confines of the case. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argued that boundaries within a case allow the researcher to set limits for the inquiry, to determine what information is and is not relevant and to determine who should be included and excluded. The case and its boundaries were considered together to reveal the intended purpose of the study. It was impossible to have an accurate picture of how social support affected the academic persistence and health of Indigenous students at FNUniv, Northern campus, without considering the context in which it occurred. In the study, the case was bounded by the selection of research participants, the setting, and the time associated with data gathering.

Research Participants as Boundaries. Purposeful sampling was used to identify the participants as boundaries. Purposeful sampling supports the selection of individuals who were accessible and uniquely knowledgeable about or had experience with the phenomenon and possessed specific attributes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As the central research question was specific to Indigenous post-secondary students at FNUniv, Northern campus, I approached this research study with a perspective that Indigenous students and staff and faculty members at the case institution would provide rich data and a range of perspectives as to how social support affected the academic persistence and health of Indigenous students. It was anticipated that these potential participants would be most informative because they directly experienced the effects of

social support, or they provided social support to Indigenous students. Because there were specific characteristics I was interested in, I used purposeful sampling to search for individuals who possessed similar desired attributes (as identified below) and had the knowledge and experience with the case in order to gain a deeper understanding of the effects of social support on Indigenous students. In an attempt to reduce errors based on researcher bias and sample representativeness, I provided clear reasoning on my decision to use purposeful sampling and provided selection criteria for each sample group. Individuals who did not possess the desired attributes were assumed not have the knowledge and experience associated with the case and were excluded from the study.

Desirable attributes of the first sample group. For the first sample group I searched for participants who were employed as faculty at the FNUniv, Northern campus and possessed the following attributes:

- currently employed as full-time, part-time or sessional teaching faculty;
- presently teaching Indigenous undergraduate post-secondary students.

These traits were specific to individuals who had specific knowledge about the case and had direct experience with teaching Indigenous post-secondary students, consequently implying an understanding of social support and its effect on the academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students.

Desirable attributes of the second sample group. For the second sample group I searched for participants who were staff employees at FNUniv, Northern campus, and possessed the following attributes:

- currently employed and providing supportive service;
- also had current interactions with Indigenous undergraduate post-secondary students.

These traits were specific to individuals who directly interacted with and influenced Indigenous post-secondary students. Staff employees were aware of students' post-secondary experiences, especially regarding the social support that affected the academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students.

Desirable attributes of the third sample group. For the third sample group I searched for participants who were Indigenous post-secondary students at FNUniv, Northern campus, and possessed the following attributes:

- self-identification as an Indigenous person;
- current designation as an undergraduate post-secondary student;
- enrolment in any bachelor's degree program;
- also, currently attending undergraduate courses.

The characteristics were explicit to a group of individuals who have experience with the case. Indigenous post-secondary students who possessed the above attributes were encouraged to participate in the study and share their diverse experiences on how social support affected their academic persistence and health.

Recruitment of potential participants. The advisory group was consulted and assisted in addressing pertinent recruitment questions and identifying pitfalls and associated roadblocks. Upon meeting with my advisory team, we generated three approaches to the recruitment of participants: posters, informational meetings, and presentations. The University of Saskatchewan and University of Regina Research Ethics Boards approved the recruitment poster and presentation. Posters were distributed across FNUniv, Northern campus, as a means of informing potential participants about the study. Personal contact was made with each staff and faculty member where information about the study was shared. Presentations were delivered to several undergraduate classes after the instructor granted permission. Overall, there were approximately 100 students, faculty, and staff members contacted through these recruitment strategies resulting in the twenty-four participants self-selecting to sign a consent form to participate in the study. Consequently, the findings from the study were based on the realities and experiences of the participants who responded and inferences about the whole population of FNUniv, Northern campus could not be substantiated.

The research participants within the first sample group included six faculty members: five females and one male. Each of the six faculty members had a minimum of ten years of experience teaching in PSE, and in most cases, FNUniv was the main institute where they achieved this experience. The research participants within the second sample group included eleven staff members who provided supportive services within the case institution. During the study, all staff interacted with Indigenous post-secondary students daily, meeting the desirable characteristics as outlined within the participants' boundaries of the study. The research participants within the third sample group included seven female self-declared Indigenous

students. Although the recruitment strategies were directed towards all students, only female Indigenous students responded and consented to participate in the study. All seven students were designated as undergraduate students, enrolled in bachelor's degree programs, and currently completing Arts and Science, Indigenous Social Work and Business Administration courses. Consequently, the seven students possessed the desirable traits, as indicated within the participants' boundaries of the study. It was felt that the homogeneity within each of the sample groups increased the participant's willingness to communicate with each other and be supportive because they had similar personal characteristics and experiences (Stewart & Shamdansani, 2015).

Setting as a boundary. The premise of qualitative research supports the use of natural settings. A natural setting is a site where the researcher explores the research problem in the participants' natural environment rather than researching in a controlled setting (Creswell, 2014). In the natural setting, data is gathered where the participants experience the case and where the participants' interactions and behaviours can be observed because as Marshall and Rossman (2016) stated "human interactions are significantly influenced by the setting in which they occur and that one should, therefore, study that behaviour in those real-life natural situations" (p. 101).

This study took place at FNUniv, Northern campus. FNUniv is an affiliated college of the University of Regina and has three campuses throughout Saskatchewan: Regina, Saskatoon, and Prince Albert. The Northern campus is located in Prince Albert, SK and offers undergraduate programs in business and public administration, Indigenous social work, Indigenous education, Indigenous studies, and Indigenous health studies. The Northern campus is a culturally responsive environment where programs are founded on Indigenous knowledge, language, and philosophy and incorporate holistic cultural components alongside professional knowledge and skills. Respect, rapport, and responsibility are valued and central to establishing a connection and creating a sense of community between students, staff, and faculty members. Staff and faculty members understand the culture and infuse it into their work through Indigenous teaching strategies, cultural guidance and ceremonies, academic tutoring and advising, personal counselling, and nourishment to support student achievement. To many students, the Northern campus is a safe space and feels like their home away from home.

Time as a boundary. In the past, case study research was thought to be unreasonably time consuming and was often associated with ethnographic research and the associated data collection methods of participant observation and interviews (Yin, 2014). Case study research no longer solely depends on participant observation or interviews, and as a result, a case study can be completed in less time with the utilization of other data collection methods to produce high-quality research (Yin, 2014). Data gathering for this case study was conducted over approximately eleven months from April 2016 to March 2017 and was facilitated by focus group interviews and face-to-face interviews.

The boundaries associated with the research participants, the natural setting and the timing of the data collection enhanced the particularity of the case study. The boundaries limited the number of variables and shifted the attention to the research participants and how they view the presenting issue (Merriam, 1988). This shift in concentration encouraged a holistic exploration of the participants' constructed meanings about how social support affected the academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students at FNUniv, Northern campus.

Methods to *Make* Data

Typically, in qualitative research, the collection of data involves determining the types of data desired and the appropriate methods to gather them. This reaction to data collection implies data pre-exists and is ready to be gathered (Richards & Morse, 2013). Richards and Morse (2013) argued that qualitative researchers do not collect data, but rather *make* data through a “collaborative, ongoing process in which data are interactively negotiated by the researcher and participants; the data are rarely fixed and unchanging, never exactly replicating what is being studied” (p. 119). The perspective of *making* data coincides with the constructivist paradigm and aims to reveal the participants' meaning of reality in a given situation which was founded on a “matter of consensus among the informed and sophisticated constructors, not of correspondence with objective reality” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 44). The advisory group was consulted to determine the data *making* methods for this study. It was necessary to draw upon multiple methods to *make* data for the proposed case study. I suggested using field notes and memos, focus group interviews, and face-to-face interviews because they were conducive to constructivism and the case study methodology. The advisory group agreed and proposed using a

talking circle format to conduct the focus group interviews as a means to share experiences and engage in reciprocal learning. The following sections will describe how field notes and memos, focus group interviews, guided by a talking circle format, and face-to-face interviews were used to obtain an in-depth understanding from the participants as to how social support affected the academic persistence and health of Indigenous students.

Field Notes and Memos

Field notes and memos were used with the focus group and face-to-face interviews to gain a rich account of participants' view of how social support affected the academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students. Although field notes and memos are written by the researcher, they serve different purposes. According to Saldaña (2013), field notes "are the researcher's written documentation of participant observation, which may include the observer's personal and subjective responses to, and interpretations of social actions encountered" (p. 42). Whereas memos are records of the researcher's developing ideas about data and their interconnections (Glaser, 2013).

I began by writing field notes that described the physical space and social exchanges I observed and heard. These were my direct observations of what occurred at the case institution. Additional field notes were written after each focus group and face to face interview. I chose not to compose field notes during the interviews because I thought it would disrupt the sharing of the participants' experiences. Afterwards, each set of field notes was reviewed, and further clarification and detail was added. Overall, the field notes provided additional insights into the physical, social and cultural context of the case institution and the interactions between participants.

The field notes evolved as I began to write memos. The memos were used to derive meaning from the initial observational notes. Writing memos allowed me to reflect on my assumptions, the research process and to begin assigning meanings to the data. Writing memos assisted with problem solving and guided my thinking as I used a constant comparison method during data analysis and interpretation. The memos made inferences, developed connections and brought forth unanswered questions in an effort to explore emergent ideas. The memos also outlined what was done and what still needed to be completed in regard to data collection, analysis and interpretation. The reflection that arose from the process of writing memos

facilitated a deeper understanding of how social support affected the academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students at the case institution.

Focus Group Interviews

Focus group interviews are considered as a valid method for *making* data (Côté-Arsenault, 2013). Within the study, focus group interviews were used to *make* data and were not used as the research method. Focus group interviews consist of interviewing a small group of people on a particular topic (Patton, 2015). Rather than concentrating on particular questions and answers, I followed the advice of Krueger and Casey (2015) and relied on the interactions between the participants to gain a range of perceptions on how they thought and felt about a particular matter. Focus group interviews require more than gathering a group of people together for a discussion; they require planning and preparation in order to create relevant data. The primary purpose of the focus group interviews was to elicit the participants' perspectives and lived experiences as to how social support affected the academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students. In particular, the selection of participants, the interview guide, and the facilitator contributed to the participants' willingness to share their experiences and creating detailed descriptions.

Participant selection. Krueger and Casey (2015) acknowledged that "participants are selected because they have certain characteristics in common that relate to the topic of the focus group" (p. 2). Each sample group participated in at least one focus group interview because each sample group - the faculty members, the staff members, and the Indigenous post-secondary students - had characteristics and experiences in common. The researcher sent emails to the twenty-four members of the three sample groups who agreed to participate in the focus group interviews providing options for potential dates and times for their focus group interviews. The focus group interviews took place in April and May 2016.

Krueger and Casey (2015) and Patton (2015) identified that a range of five to ten participants within each focus group interview is ideal. A focus group interview of fewer than five participants risks collecting only a small number of perceptions, while a focus group interview of more than ten participants limits the opportunity for each participant to talk and may fragment the group (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Consequently, for this study, each focus group interview had between five and seven participants. There was one focus group interview held for

the seven Indigenous students and another for the six faculty members. As there were eleven staff members, two focus groups were held to accommodate five staff members in one group and six in the other. Before each focus group interview began, each participant was asked to review and sign the consent form required for participation in the study. All focus group interviews were conducted face-to-face and were audio-recorded.

Interview guide. Interview questions for focus group interviews are required to be “carefully predetermined and sequenced – so they are easy to understand and logical to the participant” (Krueger & Casey, 2015, p. 7). Stewart and Shamdasani (2015) recommended utilizing open-ended questions organized in a rational sequence where questions at the beginning of the interview guide are more general and directed to getting the participants to talk about a topic while the questions at the end of the interview guide are more specific and generate more useful information.

The pilot focus group interview. A pilot focus group interview was used to determine if the focus group questions were appropriate and rationally sequenced. Before data gathering, I organized an informal lunch and invited several Indigenous nursing students from the University of Saskatchewan to participate in the pilot focus group interview. Subsequently, on a mutually agreed upon date and time, I conducted the pilot focus group interview with six Indigenous nursing students who volunteered to participate.

The information obtained from the pilot was used to modify the focus group interview guide for the actual study. There were significant changes needed because several of the questions used in the pilot were compounded and vague. With this feedback and guidance from my supervisor, I used the central and supplemental research questions as a framework and created an interview guide that was appropriately sequenced and elicited the most useful information. Notably, I added a preliminary question to establish rapport with the participants and an initial question to present the research topic and seek out the challenges faced by Indigenous post-secondary students before delving into the five key questions. In the pilot, two key compounded questions sought information about the available social support and its effect on academic persistence and health. Consequently, these two questions were transformed into five key interview questions that characterized the available social support and their effect on academic persistence and health. The interview guide concluded with a summary question to

offer an opportunity for participants to share their final thoughts and to reiterate what was discussed. The interview guide was used with the student focus group, and subsequent revisions were designed to better address the research questions with the other sample groups.

During the initial development of the interview guide, I was cognizant of the proposed time and number of questions for the focus group interviews. The scheduled time for the focus group interview limited the number of questions that could be asked and the participants' responses in the group setting. In the study, the focus group interviews were scheduled for 1 ½ - 2 hours. The interview guide addressed five key questions as an assurance that all questions were asked, and the participants had sufficient time to respond. Three out of the four focus group interviews were completed within the 2-hour time frame, but in the focus group interview for sample group 3, many of the participants had prior commitments and had to leave 15 minutes early. Although the participants were all provided with an opportunity to answer the last two questions, their responses were abbreviated in comparison to the other participants' responses.

The facilitator. The role of the facilitator within a focus group interview is not a position of power, but one of enablement (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The facilitator is responsible for the "interaction of the group, the way the topics are introduced and the quality of data" (Richards & Morse, 2013, p. 129). Subsequently, the facilitator must be respectful, have clear communication skills, be open and non-defensive, and be effective in gaining the most useful data (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The role of the facilitator is to introduce the questions, listen to responses with a nonjudgmental attitude and ensure the conversation not only stays on-topic but is also balanced among the participants (Richards & Morse, 2013).

I was the facilitator in the designated focus group interviews and was mindful, practical, and flexible and strived to display good communication and listening skills. As the researcher, I was thoroughly grounded in the purpose of the study and understood the topic, which helped me determine what information was the most useful to the study. This knowledge was advantageous while I acted as the facilitator because it allowed me to introduce the questions and guide the discussion, so the most valuable information was achieved. I was able to delve deeper into critical points by asking probing questions or moving the discussion in a different direction when it went off track.

As the facilitator, I attempted to achieve balance within the conversation by allowing every participant the opportunity to speak. After receiving approval from the participants, I followed a traditional talking circle protocol that provided each participant with the opportunity to share their perspectives, feelings, and opinions in a safe, confidential environment. In the talking circle, a talking stone was used to facilitate a respectful, balanced conversation. The talking stone was passed to participants in a clockwise direction, and only the participant holding the talking stone was permitted to speak while the other participants listened. Participants were also able to pass the stone without speaking. Following this protocol eliminated one person from dominating the conversation and encouraged all participants to share their perspectives at specific times. This format had the potential to limit the interpersonal interaction between the participants. The participants' inability to interact with each other may have affected how they presented their perspectives and questioned others' perspectives or sought further clarification. Consequently, this data was absent from the analysis and interpretation.

Focus group participants are sometimes asked questions about topics with which they have limited or no experience. When this occurs, many participants feel the need to fabricate an answer based on what they perceive (Krueger & Casey, 2015). To reduce the likelihood of this occurring, I reinforced to the participants the need to answer each question honestly and explained that, if they did not want to respond to a question for any reason, they should follow the talking circle protocol and pass the stone onto the next participant without contributing to the conversation. Although the majority of the participants answered every question, their information could not be independently verified. Consequently, the information the participants provided is believed to be accurate, but I acknowledge that selective memories, attributions, and exaggerations could have been provided.

The focus group interviews provided an opportunity to explore the study's topic together under my facilitation to "provide a rich and detailed set of data about perceptions, thoughts, feelings and impressions ... in the member's own words" (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015, p. 177). The interactions between the participants and me elicited a significant amount of data, including feelings and opinions, acknowledged differences, and insight into how social support affected the academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students.

Face-to-face Interviews

Face-to-face interviews were used in this study as the third method to *make* data. Face-to-face interviews involve an interaction between two people at a scheduled time and set location to discuss certain topics and questions associated with a particular subject (Patton, 2015).

Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) observed, “It is an inter-view, where knowledge is constructed in the interaction between the interviewer and interviewee ... [It is] an inter-change of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest” (p. 4). This type of interview is participant-focused: “The participant’s perspective should unfold as the participant views it (the emic perspective), not as the researcher views it (the etic perspective)” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 150). In a face-to-face interview, the researcher has the flexibility to explore and build on particular discussion and to instinctively probe for immediate clarification and justification within a conversation format, but with the focus being on the participant’s perspective of a particular experience (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Patton, 2015). The face-to-face interviews were conducted after the focus group interviews and preliminary analyses were completed. The purpose of the face-to-face interviews were to unpack pertinent experiences, fill in gaps and confirm or refute emerging ideas that arose from the focus group interviews.

Interview guide. An interview guide allows the researcher to design questions that are worded flexibly to frame the discussion without limiting the discovery of the participant’s perspective (Merriam, 2009). An interview guide “increases the comprehensiveness of the data and makes data collection somewhat systematic for each respondent. Logical gaps in the data can be anticipated and closed” (Patton, 2015, p. 438). An interview guide for the face-to-face interviews was developed with guidance from my supervisor and advisory group. After a preliminary analysis of the focus group data, a matrix was constructed to illustrate the relationships between the study’s research questions and the preliminary findings. I met with my advisory group to discuss the matrix and share the preliminary results that required further exploration. I was apprehensive about exploring the academic tensions at FNUniv, Northern campus, but the advisory group reassured that this was an area of great concern that required further exploration. During this meeting, my advisory group supported my preliminary findings and offered suggestions on how to formulate follow-up interview questions. The interview guide consisted of several primary and probing questions about Indigenous student heterogeneity, the

availability of social support, and the presence of academic tensions. These questions were designed to provoke narratives and encourage in-depth responses to gain a deeper understanding. After each face-to-face interview, there were alterations to the questions to ensure the most relevant information was being gathered.

Interview process. At the end of each focus group interview, I identified the next steps of the data *making* process and described the purpose of the subsequent face-to-face interviews. I requested one member from each of the sample groups to participate in a follow-up face-to-face interview and instructed interested participants to provide their contact information. It was determined that if more than one participant per sample group came forward, the participant who voiced interest first would be asked to participate in the interview. From each of the sample groups, there was only one member who voiced interest and left her contact information.

Face-to-face interviews can fail if a trusting relationship has not been developed between the participant and the researcher. Consequently, measures were taken to ensure that a trusting relationship was established before the face-to-face interview. I met personally with the three participants and described the purpose of the study, invited their participation, and requested a convenient date and time based on the participant's availability for the interview. The interviews took place during March 2017. Before each of the face-to-face interviews, the participants reviewed and signed their consent to participate in the interview. All interviews were conducted face-to-face and audio recorded.

Within the constructivist paradigm, "face-to-face interviews are considered a vehicle for knowledge creation between the researcher and interviewee" (cited in Lauckner et al., 2012, p.10). There was the fear the participants would not provide narratives or be willing to divulge any information about the chosen topics. This fear was lessened during the face-to-face interview because the participants and I were able to make small talk, laugh and show nonverbal communication, which encouraged open dialogue. I created a safe, welcoming environment that allowed for reflection and encouraged the participants to talk about the subject of interest. I helped the participants feel comfortable by being at ease and demonstrating an open and relaxed posture while encouraging discussion by appropriately framing questions and using gentle probing cues for elaboration. I was sensitive to the participant's reactions and paraphrased responses to ensure that I interpreted correctly. The face-to-face interviews also empowered the

participants as they can watch the researcher respond and question when the researcher looks confused or disinterested (Shuy, 2001).

The face-to-face interview created a large quantity of data while offering me the opportunity to follow up and clarify questions and concerns immediately. The opportunity for immediate follow up ensured questions were answered appropriately during the conversation rather than seeking clarification after time had elapsed, and the context had been altered. The face-to-face interview was an authentic method to make data. It was used to augment the information obtained through the focus group interviews, clarify statements, and probe for additional information on how social support affected the academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students.

Theoretical Sufficiency

It was once thought that data collection was completed once theoretical saturation was achieved in the sense that any additional data would only result in the same findings (Richards & Morse, 2013). Consequently, theoretical saturation implied there was only one truth and negated the constructivist lens of multiple realities. Through a constructivist lens, reaching theoretical sufficiency has been identified as a better indicator of data collection completion. Dey (1999) suggested that theoretical sufficiency is achieved when the categories and themes are well described and fitted to the data, implying the inclusion of multiple interpretations to explain phenomena. Theoretical sufficiency coincides with the constructivist paradigm where multiple perspectives are sought out “aiming to gather collectively agreed upon and diverse notions of what occurred” (Lauckner et al., 2012, p. 5). In the study, theoretical sufficiency was achieved through four focus group interviews, followed by three individual face-to-face interviews where the multiple realities were interpreted to determine the themes and findings.

Data Analysis

Unlike in quantitative research, data analysis in qualitative research is not a distinct process. In quantitative research, data analysis follows data collection and precedes interpretation and conclusions. The emergent nature of qualitative research makes the distinction of data analysis far less absolute because data collection and data analysis are completed simultaneously through a recurrent process to build a sound understanding (Merriam, 2009). For this study, data

collection and data analysis co-occurred, where the preliminary data analysis informed further data collection.

The Data Analysis Spiral

The process of data analysis and interpretation consists of many procedures to ensure that data has been analyzed and interpreted thoroughly. In a case study, “conveying an understanding of the case is the paramount consideration in analyzing the data” (Merriam, 1998, p. 193). The case study methodology can follow any number of analysis methods just as long as it communicates the understanding derived from the case (Stake, 1995). In an intrinsic single case study, there is one stage of analysis: the within-case analysis (Merriam, 1998). The within-case analysis includes several analysis processes such as those found in Creswell and Poth’s (2018) Data Analysis Spiral.

The Data Analysis Spiral demonstrates a discrete process for within-case analysis. The Data Analysis Spiral, as illustrated in figure 3.1, consists of five main analysis procedures: managing the data, reading and writing memos, describing, classifying codes into themes, interpreting, and representing and visualizing the data. I used these five procedures to analyze, interpret and delineate the data. Mainly, co-construction with the advisory group and interview participants occurred during the classifying and interpretation procedures. Further explanation as to how this was completed is included in the following sections.

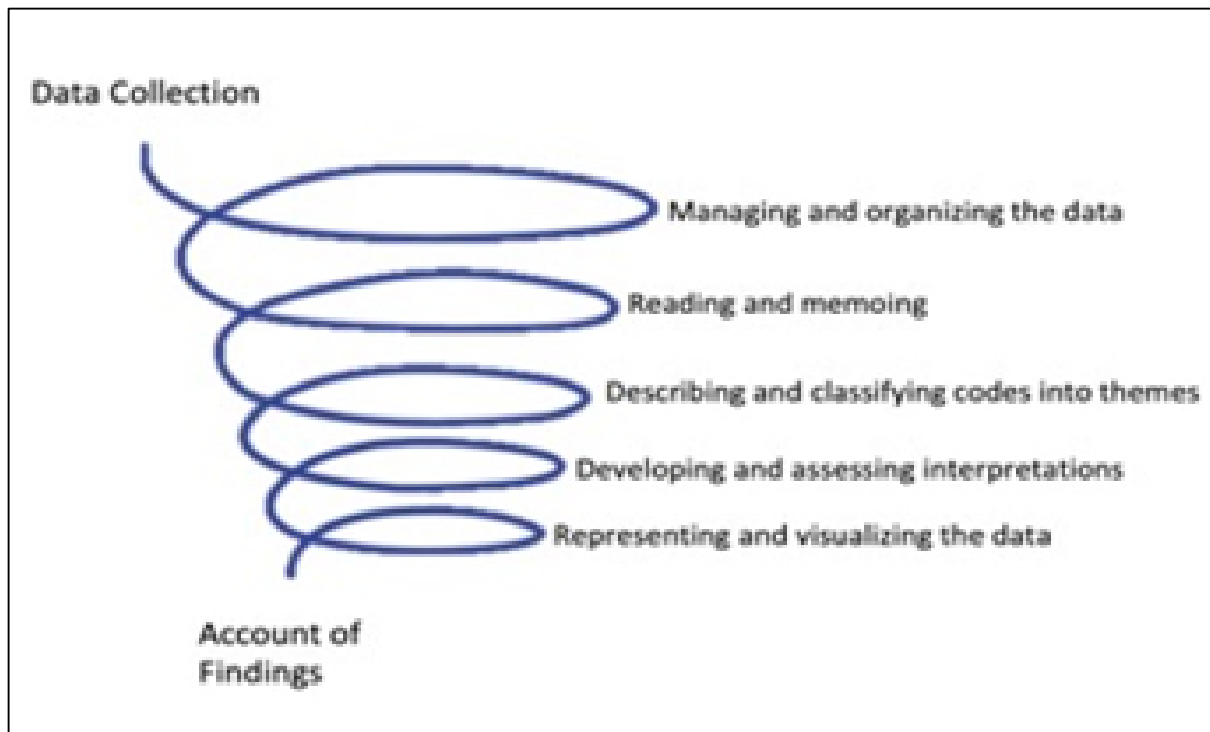


Figure 3.1. The data analysis spiral. Adapted from “Data Analysis and Representation,” by J.W. Creswell and C. N. Poth, 2018, *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.), p.186. Copyright 2018 by Sage Publications, Inc.

Managing and organizing the data. Case study research produces considerable amounts of raw data; hence, it was necessary to employ an inventory strategy to ensure all the raw data from the case was properly organized and accessible. Yin (2014) suggested organizing raw data into a case study database “to preserve the collected data in a retrievable form” (p. 124). The case study database for the research study consisted of data collection logs and document files. According to Saldaña (2013), data collection logs are considered to be a form of attribute coding. The data collection log used for this study chronicled the descriptive characteristics such as setting, demographics, time frame, and data format for each focus group and face-to-face interviews. The second aspect of the case study database employed document files to store and manage the raw data. Each distinct experience was stored as document files; consequently, an individual document file existed for each associated focus group interview and face-to-face interview.

Reading and memoing. Memos were written throughout the data collection and data analysis stages. Acknowledging the constructivist paradigm and the co-construction of

knowledge, I used memos to document and reflect on my assumptions and experiences, the coding process, the emerging categories, and subcategories and themes deriving from the data. As Saldaña (2013) identified, writing memos provided a place to “dump my brain” about the participants, phenomenon and the process and evoked more thinking and deeper reflection about the data. When writing memos, I followed the recommendations by Saldaña (2013) and directed my memos towards reflecting on the following categories:

- the study’s research questions,
- the code choices and their operationalized definitions,
- the emergent codes, categories, subcategories, and themes,
- the possible links between codes, categories, subcategories, and themes,
- and the potential problems with the study. (p. 44-46)

The memos created throughout the research study helped develop a deeper understanding of the data and guided how the data were interpreted and presented.

Describing and classifying codes. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), the next step of the data analysis spiral is the recurring nature of describing and classifying codes into themes. During this step of data analysis, techniques were employed to code and categorize the data and deduce it to several central themes. The conceptual framework developed from the literature review was used to guide the describing and classifying. This next stage focused on applying the constant comparative process to holistic coding, topic coding, and analytical coding to conceptualize the central themes.

The constant comparative method. The constant comparative method required me to continually examine and re-examine each piece of the data and compare it to all other data. Consequently, coding was completed as the data was continually compared within and against each other. Coding linked “the data to the idea and from the idea to all the data pertaining to that idea” (Richards & Morse, 2013, p. 154).

Holistic coding. According to Saldaña (2013), taking the opportunity to become thoroughly familiar with the data is a form of holistic coding. Holistic coding guides the attempt to “grasp basic themes or issues in the data by absorbing them as a whole” (Dey, 1993, p. 104). Subsequently, after the focus group interviews and face-to-face interviews were completed, I listened to each recording several times and wrote memos and field notes to provide a record of

the events and settings, the mood or context of the interaction, my thoughts, and impressions about elementary categories and themes. After establishing a general impression of the data, the focus group and interview recordings were transcribed. Once the interview transcripts were transcribed, I sent each interview participant the appropriate transcript for review, which was returned promptly with few or no changes. The focus group transcripts were not sent to the focus group participants for review. After receiving all the transcripts, I immersed myself in the data, by reading and rereading the transcripts, comparing all the data, and adding supplementary memos to gain a deeper appreciation of the data as a whole.

Topic coding. Topic coding is a coding technique that classifies all information on a given topic for further analysis. Topic coding places “emphasis on finding all the data about an aspect of the site or experience studied or on accurately portraying the distribution of attitudes and experiences” (Richards & Morse, 2013, p. 157). The process of topic coding was conducted through line-by-line analysis while writing and revising memos, and field notes helped define the codes. For example, memos and field notes helped define the following codes (family restraints; ill-equipped; relocating). The codes were organized to answer the research questions and describe the relationship between the key topics from the conceptual framework. The topic codes that did not fit were organized as emerging topics. The codes within each topic were considered and reconsidered to determine subtle differences, unspoken assumptions, gaps in the data, and the potential need for further topics.

Once topic coding was completed for the first focus group interview, my supervisor reviewed the transcripts and topic coding and clarified what was found and discussed potential emerging topics that informed the subsequent analysis stage. This form of informal triangulation followed the constructivist paradigm and allowed a different view to clarify meanings, share interpretations, and ensure the data was not being misinterpreted (Stake, 2000).

Analytical coding. Topic coding eventually evolved into analytical coding where codes advanced into categories and subcategories. Analytical coding “aim[s] at working up from the topic coding and working out by coding around the topic to establish its significance and meaning” (Richards & Morse, 2013, p. 158). In the study, analytical coding loosely followed the process described by Merriam (1998). The process began with carefully reflecting on the data by rereading the transcripts, memos, field notes, and the definitions of the topic codes. After the

review, more notations were made on how individual observations, queries, and intriguing pieces of information melded and answered specific supplemental research questions.

Consequently, after this process, groups of topic codes were created for each supplemental research question. The first category included topic codes about student challenges. The second category included all the topic codes that referred to the available social support. All the codes relating to relationships were included in the third category, while the topic codes related to academic persistence and holistic health made up the fourth and fifth categories. In the end, one group of codes existed for each supplemental research question and presented a category system reflecting the recurring regularities in the study (Merriam, 1998). According to Merriam (1998), the categories should “reflect the purpose of the research; be exhaustive; be mutually exclusive; be sensitizing and conceptually congruent” (p.184). The topic codes that did not fit into a category were moved to a suitable emergent category. I shared samples of the categories and subcategories in a chart format with my supervisor, and the resulting discussions confirmed that my understanding of the categorical aggregation was appropriate.

Following the completion of the analytical coding, I met with my advisory group, to review the preliminary categories and emerging ideas. As the members of my advisory group were also participants in the focus group interviews, they were able to provide valuable insight as to whether my preliminary analysis accurately represented the experiences and meanings of the participants. The advisory group was supportive of the initial categories and provided valuable insight into the emerging ideas. They encouraged me to explore further the data that I identified as outliers as they felt they were important and needed further unpacking. Also, at the beginning of each face-to-face interview, I reiterated the preliminary findings from the focus group interviews with each of the interview participants. I supported the participants to seek clarification and contribute comments and suggestions for an accurate interpretation of the participants' experiences.

The next step in categorical aggregation involved understanding and moving from categories to themes. I reconsidered the data in each category and combined, regrouped and restructured the categories and subcategories for an integrated and holistic explanation of the data. Through this process, which included reviewing the memos and field notes, I concluded that one of the categories was misrepresented. The student challenges category was defined to

include all the barriers that originated from being an Indigenous student. On further examination, it was realized that this category also identified challenges that were linked to university structure and funding.

Consequently, the category was redefined to include all challenges faced by Indigenous students. After careful consideration of all the data and refining the categories for both the focus group interviews and face-to-face interviews, I ended up with the following themes and subthemes: challenges (*personal challenges, family challenges, community challenges, campus challenges*); social supports (*peer, family and community support, staff and faculty member support*) authentic relationships (*displaying genuine interest, building trust, crafting a supportive environment, establishing a connection*); effects of social support on Indigenous students' academic persistence (*direct, meta, side effects*); and effects of social support on Indigenous students' health (*direct, meta and side effects*). The clarification of the themes and subthemes ensured the data in each theme went beyond description.

Developing and assessing interpretations. The next step in the data analysis spiral involves “making sense of the data” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 195). The transition requires a higher level of interpretation in order to understand the broader meanings or the “lessons learned” from the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Themes are the essential building blocks for analysis; interpretation is required to understand the whole situation.

I moved from merely paraphrasing the data to interacting with the data by identifying patterns between ideas and meanings and within the themes. I also engaged in the literature by comparing, contrasting and connecting the data to key concepts from the conceptual framework to develop interpretations that were relevant to the meanings constructed by the participants. The interpretation included an account of the collective challenges affecting Indigenous students, an exploration of culturally responsive social support, and an understanding of the importance of family-like relationships. These explanations were developed to further the reader's understanding of how social support affected the academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students. The interpretation also revealed considerations about the broader implications and recommendations of this research to Indigenous PSE.

I met with two members of my advisory group after I completed the interpretation procedures. During our encounters, I presented my interpretation and provided explanations as to

how I arrived at the conclusions. The members supported the interpretation and conclusions and appreciated how the findings were balanced with institutional strengths and areas for improvement.

Representing and visualizing the data. It is recommended that the detailed analysis and interpretation of the case study be presented in a concise report that converts the case into a format that is readily understood. As Baxter and Jack (2008) noted, the goal of such a report is as follows:

to describe the study in such a comprehensive manner as to enable the reader to feel as if they had been an active participant in the research and can determine whether or not the study findings could be applied to their own situation (p. 555).

This case study is presented as my dissertation and organized according to the guidelines set out by the College of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies at the University of Saskatchewan. The organization of my dissertation was described at the end of Chapter One.

Qualitative Validity and Reliability

“Validity” and “reliability” are not synonymous terms in quantitative and qualitative research. In quantitative research, validity and reliability are associated with the rigorous adherence to procedural rules and standards to derive factual findings that can be replicated (Hayes & Singh, 2012; Merriam, 2009). In qualitative research, validity focuses on determining if the findings are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher and participants and reliability is based on ensuring the findings are consistent with the collected data (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative validity and reliability fit into the constructivist paradigm by supporting multiple perspectives and embracing subjectivity to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomena through the perceptions of the participants and the interpretation of the researcher (Patton, 2015). Within a case study, qualitative validity and reliability ensure the findings are analyzed within the particular context to confirm consistency with the collected data rather than recommending generalizations and replication (Patton, 2015). The qualitative validity and reliability of the study were assessed by the strategies of triangulation, peer review, member checking, and thick descriptions.

Triangulation

Triangulation was vital for this study because, as Patton (2015) noted, “the logic of triangulation is based on the premise that no single method ever adequately solves the problem of rival explanations” (p. 661). In this study, triangulation was used throughout the data analysis process, mainly through investigator triangulation and the triangulation of multiple methods and multiple sources.

Investigator triangulation involves other researchers examining the data to clarify or determine alternate interpretations (Stake, 1995). Throughout the data collection and preliminary data analysis, my supervisor and I met to review the coding process and my initial interpretation of the topic codes. As data analysis progressed, we met regularly to discuss the categories and emerging themes. Through our discussions, my supervisor offered alternative perspectives and stretched me to uncover deeper meanings from the participants’ responses. I also often met with a colleague, who was a member of my advisory group, to discuss the emerging themes. She also encouraged me to look beyond the participants’ spoken words to gain a deeper understanding of their lived experiences.

Triangulation of methods focuses on the use of multiple methods in data making (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). In the study, multiple methods were used for making the data. Four focus group interviews and three face-to-face interviews with corresponding field notes and memos were used. Combining these methods helped generate a holistic picture of how social support affected the academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students.

The purpose of source triangulation is to test if the case remains consistent under different circumstances (Stake, 1995).

Triangulation using multiple sources of data means comparing and cross checking data collected through observations at different times or in different places, or interview data collected from people with different perspectives or from follow-up interviews with the same people (Merriam, 2009, p. 216).

In the study, the three main data sources that informed the study included the original research data provided by the participants, the literature reviewed, and my own experiences. Data were made through multiple methods with different participants at different times. Focus group interviews were held during the spring of 2016 with each group of participants: Indigenous post-

secondary students, and staff and faculty members from FNUUniv. Follow-up interviews were held in the winter of 2017 with a representative from each of the participant groups. As data was made, it was compared independently against each other and against the literature to determine the data's consistency. Examining the data through multiple perspectives strengthened the validity of the case and "overcome skepticism that greets single methods, lone analysts and single-perspective interpretations" (Patton, 2015, p. 661).

Peer Review

Peer review involves using colleagues to review the data and assess the believability of the findings (Merriam, 2009). My advisory group, supervisor and dissertation committee were my peer reviewers. Once the preliminary findings were summarized, a meeting was arranged with the advisory group. At this meeting, I presented the preliminary findings, and the advisory group had the opportunity to question the themes and seek justification for my interpretations. Also, my supervisor provided comments on various drafts of my findings and interpretations, and my dissertation committee commented on my final draft of my dissertation. The process of peer review provides an external check and adds validity because it involves interpretation beyond the researcher (Creswell, 2014).

Thick Descriptions

Thick descriptions also added validity to the findings. Thick descriptions involve a complete and literal description of all the variables and their interactions, which leads to a detailed interpretation of the findings (Merriam, 2009). Thick descriptions were used to portray the participants and provide a detailed description and interpretation of their experiences, which were supported by quotations from the participants. In addition, field notes and memos were used to link the patterns between the social, cultural and physical contexts that were essential to understand how social support affects the health and academic persistence of Indigenous students at the case institution. These thick descriptions provided essential information so the readers could determine if they would have arrived at the same conclusions.

Member Checking

Member checking involves "taking data and tentative interpretations back to the participants from whom they were derived and asking them if the results are plausible" (Merriam, 1998, p. 204). Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified member checking as "the most

crucial technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314). In the constructivist paradigm, interpretations are co-constructed, so the aim is not to determine if the researcher’s interpretation is correct, but rather if further exploration into the interpretation is needed (Charmaz, 2006). During data analysis, I emailed the interview participants their transcripts and provided them with the opportunity to ensure the correctness of their responses. In order to reduce the possibility of the participants self-editing transcripts, guidelines were provided outlining what constituted essential feedback and the time frame in which responses needed to be returned. Once the analytical coding was completed, I met with my advisory group and presented the preliminary themes. We examined the credibility of the interpretations and addressed misinterpretations and inaccuracies before I began the final stages of analysis. After I completed the interpretation procedures, I met with two members of my advisory group. During our encounters, I presented my interpretation and provided explanations as to how I arrived at the conclusions. The members supported the interpretation and conclusions and appreciated how the findings were balanced with institutional strengths and areas for improvement.

Ethical Considerations

There are many ethical considerations involved when implementing case study research and conducting research with Indigenous people. Participants often share passionate personal views and experiences that can cause them to be at risk of exposure and distress (Stake, 2005). To lessen these risks, I followed the TCPS2 with particular focus on the chapter involving research with Indigenous people and the Ownership, Control, Access and Possession (OCAP) principles (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2018; Schnarch, 2004).

I obtained ethical approval from the Behavioural Research Ethics Board at the University of Saskatchewan. As a harmonized process, this ethical approval was sufficient for the participants associated with FNUniv, as an affiliated college of the University of Regina. I also received letters of support from the Vice President of Academics at FNUniv and Aboriginal Student Association at FNUniv, Northern campus. My decisions and actions were guided by the core principles of respect, justice, and concern for the participants’ welfare and ensured that fairness and protection existed for all the participants.

Respect

Respect for the participants is imperative for ethical research and being respectful begins with the researcher accepting that each participant is an autonomous, self-determined being who is free to make choices and is not merely a means to an end (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Within the study, showing respect involved acknowledging the diverse values and practices of the Indigenous groups at FNUniv, Northern campus and consulting with my advisory group to determine the most acceptable recruitment approaches and data collection methods to meet the participants' diverse values and beliefs and support the sharing of knowledge with future generations. As a result, three recruitment approaches were implemented: informal meetings, presentations and posters. Informal meetings and presentations offered details about the study to potential participants: the intent and benefits of the research, the time commitment, the assurance of confidentiality on the part of the researcher, the compensation, and the option to withdraw from the study. The purpose of these preliminary events was to ensure potential participants had enough information to choose to participate in the associated focus group and face-to-face interviews voluntarily. These informal meeting were also an opportunity to begin establishing a relationship with the potential participants; taking time to establish this relationship promoted mutual trust and communication and ensured the conduct of the research adhered to the core principles of respect, justice and concern for individual welfare (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2018).

After a discussion with the advisory group, it was determined that field notes, memos, focus group interviews and face-to-face interviews would be used to collect the data. The participants desiring to attend the focus group interviews and face-to-face interviews were then required to sign an informed consent form. Informed consent verified a participant's commitment to a study based on a thorough understanding of its purpose, activities, and outcomes (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2018). The informed consent for the study provided information about the study's purpose and activities; the involvement and time requirements; a description of the risks and discomforts; a description of benefits; confidentiality measures and the option to withdraw from the study at any time. The informed consent forms for the focus group interviews and interviews are located in Appendix B and E.

Justice

The principle of justice holds that each participant should be treated fairly during the study. As in the sampling process, participants should be “selected for reasons directly related to the problem being studied and not for their easy availability; their compromised position or their manipulability” (Burns & Grove, 2001, p. 203). Fairness was demonstrated through the purposive sampling, as participants were selected on desirable traits and characteristics.

As previously stated, I was a faculty member at FNUniv, Northern campus, which was the chosen setting for the study. The position of a faculty member is often seen as being one of authority, and Indigenous post-secondary students, at this site, may have felt diminished in their abilities to exercise autonomy concerning this study for fear of being alienated if they chose not to participate. Therefore, participants from other courses, where I did not have a direct teaching relationship, were targeted. Those students enrolled in my courses who wanted to participate did so voluntarily. The student's academic standing or grades were not affected by his or her participation decision.

Fair treatment extends from sampling to data collection, where informed consent ensures fairness through the disclosure of the reasonable benefits and burdens associated with the research (Creswell, 2014). Informed consent summarized the equitable distribution of the risks and benefits to ensure the participants were not "unduly burdened by the harms of the research or denied the benefits of the knowledge generated from it" (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2018, p. 8). In this study, this was particularly important to address, considering Indigenous people have experienced great injustices stemming from unequal power relationships between themselves and researchers. Historically, Indigenous people were either forced to participate in research or else be studied without their consent while their worldviews were either ignored or interpreted from a non-Indigenous perspective, which led to misrepresentation, marginalization and the development of biased knowledge (Ball & Janyst, 2008; Ermine, Sinclair & Jeffery, 2004).

All participants were treated with fairness and respect. A reasonable allocation of potential risks and benefits was drawn and explicitly explained to each participant. All participants were treated as people with distinct cultures, values, and beliefs to indicate significance for the person and for the Indigenous worldviews and knowledge that a person possessed. The participants included Indigenous people identifying as Cree, Salteaux, Dene,

Lakota, Nakota, and Métis. It was in the best interest of the research to acknowledge the diversity in how experiences were interpreted, and knowledge was constructed. Just treatment of the participants was integrated throughout the research process, where many actions also coincided with maintaining concern for the participant's welfare.

Concern for Welfare

“The welfare of a person is the quality of that person's experiences of life in all its aspects” (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2018, p. 7). The potential for physical, mental, spiritual, social and economic harm exists within qualitative research. Personal constructs of realities create negative consequences and harm arises even against the researcher's best intentions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Temporary levels of discomfort are associated with minimal risk studies and anticipate that "the discomfort encountered is similar to what the subject would experience in his or her daily life and ceases with the termination of the study" (Burns & Grove, 2001, p. 204). There was a minimal risk anticipated in this study: some participants were subjected to temporary levels of discomfort, including but not limited to headaches, fatigue, muscle tension, anxiety, embarrassment, and travel and parking costs. Participating in the study caused inconvenience, but other foreseeable risks or harms were not expected. The potential risks and benefits were identified within the informed consent found in Appendix B and E.

In order to further protect the participants, their privacy was maintained. Burns and Grove (2001) stated, “privacy is the right an individual has to determine the time, extent and general circumstances under which personal information will be shared with or withheld from others” (p. 200). The protection of privacy was addressed within the informed consent and included how confidentiality was applied to manage and protect the participant's private information.

Confidentiality is “about the data and refers to the agreement with persons about what may be done with their data” (Sieber & Tolich, 2013, p. 155). The confidentiality measures used for this study included obtaining consent for audio recording, password protecting electronic files, using codes on data documents, using pseudonyms when reporting data, ensuring identifiable information was kept in a separate locked location, storing data documents (audio recordings, transcripts) securely, and disposing study data properly once the appropriate time has

elapsed. These measures are further detailed in the informed consent forms found in Appendix B and E.

However, confidentiality may not always be feasible when employing other data collection methods (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2018). For instance, confidentiality cannot be secured within small sample sizes and in focus group interviews. Because the participants for this research project were selected from a small group of people, all of whom may be known to each other, it was possible participants were identifiable to other people based on what they have said. I safeguarded the confidentiality of the participants by limiting the length of quotes used in the final report. As identified on the consent form, each participant was encouraged not to share what was said in the focus group, but, because of the nature of the sample and setting of the research, it was not feasible to guarantee participant confidentiality. As the researcher, I assured confidentiality on my part, but could not guarantee the other participants within the focus group interviews, maintained confidentiality.

I extended my concern for the welfare of my participants by ensuring I followed the OCAP principles. As previously identified, I created and maintained authentic relationships with my advisory group and research participants. The relationships with the research participants were formalized after each participant signed the informed consent that defined the study's purpose, potential risks and benefits of participation, and the means for reporting of the findings. I made every effort to be responsible and follow appropriate cultural protocols and not offend the participants. The data co-constructed by the research participants, and I was shared. I have ensured the presentation of the findings is respectful of the participants' experiences by obtaining support from my advisory group on recruitment strategies and data making methods and from both the advisory group and interview participants on the analysis and interpretation of the findings. I also acknowledged and received consensus from the research participants that these findings will be shared in this dissertation followed by a presentation to the research participants and further presentations and publications with the aim of benefitting the research participants and the greater Indigenous community.

Summary

The assumptions of constructivism guided the case study to understand how social support affected the academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students. This chapter

outlined the case and its boundaries related to the participants and the setting. The participant sample was made up of twenty-four purposefully selected individuals. Field notes, memos, focus group interviews and face-to-face interviews were used to make data and reach theoretical sufficiency. The steps within the data analysis spiral were followed, and through consultation with my advisory group and comparison with the literature, conclusions were drawn. This chapter also described my ethical responsibility to the participants and the efforts used to achieve qualitative validity and reliability.

CHAPTER FOUR

Presentation of Data and Findings

The purpose of this descriptive, interpretative study was to explore with Indigenous students and faculty and staff members at FNUniv, Northern campus their perceptions of how social support influenced Indigenous students' academic persistence and health. An intrinsic case study, rooted in constructivism, was employed, and twenty-four participants from the case institution, shared their experiences and perspectives in focus group interviews and face-to-face interviews. All the participants' data were analyzed and organized into the following themes that answered the supplemental research questions: challenges, social support; authentic relationships; the effects of social support on Indigenous students' academic persistence; and the effects of social support on Indigenous students' health. This chapter aims to describe the data gathering and analysis process, the study's setting, and present the themes as answers to the supplemental research questions.

Summary of Research Methodology

Constructivism provided theoretical guidance for exploring the effects of social support on the academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students at FNUniv, Northern campus. Ontologically, in this case study, it was perceived that reality was socially constructed, and the participants and I brought forth different perceptions along with our assumptions and beliefs into data gathering and analysis. Using the constructivist lens the diverse experiences of participants were captured through four focus group interviews and three face-to-face interviews and then interpreted through the data analysis. Data analysis followed Creswell and Poth's (2018) Data Analysis Spiral. The transcripts were organized in data collection logs and reviewed holistically. Data was then coded by topic, where clusters appeared, and patterns began to form. Clusters and patterns were further analyzed and revealed emerging categories and

subcategories. The categories were regrouped, and themes emerged that answered the supplemental research questions. The themes will be presented in the following sections.

Throughout the data collection and analysis, I also referred back to the field notes and memos to link ideas, uncover relationships, and delineate codes. I was able to compare my initial thoughts with new questions and tied together fragments of data into themes and subthemes. More intentional interpretation followed, where, through an in-depth exchange with the participants' data, I constructed some consensus from the multiple realities they expressed to me, to establish how social support affected the academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students. At different times throughout this process, my advisory group and interview participants supported my interpretations. Although the findings may not apply to every Indigenous student, the findings represent the collective experiences of Indigenous post-secondary students at FNUniv, Northern campus.

Description of the Setting

In case study research, it is important to provide detailed information about the setting surrounding the case so the reader can develop a sense of "being there" and a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon (Stake, 1995). According to Stake (1995), each case study will have several influential contexts within the setting where some contexts will be more critical than others. In this intrinsic case study, the field notes guided the thick description of the social, physical, and cultural contexts of the case institution. I strived to give an honest account of the contexts by depicting the presence of Indigenous culture and the ways in which the participants interacted within them. In the following sections, a contextual picture is provided so the reader can begin to make meaning of how social support affected the academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students at the case institution.

Social Context

The study occurred at FNUniv, Northern campus located in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. The city of Prince Albert is the third-largest city in Saskatchewan and is located geographically in the center of the province. According to Statistics Canada (2016), the city of Prince Albert is home to 35 926 residents, 45.3% identifying as male and 54.7% as female, with 63% of the total population falling within the 15-64 year-old-age range. The Indigenous population accounted for 31% of the total population of Prince Albert, with 8240 people identifying as First Nations

people, 6420 as Métis and ten people as Inuit (Statistics Canada, 2016). It is notable that these population statistics may be skewed, as census data on First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people have often not been separated accurately (Smylie et al., 2011).

The City of Prince Albert is home to several higher learning institutes that offer programs ranging from educational upgrading to undergraduate university degrees. The setting that provoked this study was the FNUniv, Northern campus. The campus was established in the early 1990s and continues to be First Nations controlled and a leader in providing education to First Nations and non-First Nations people (First Nations University of Canada, n.d.).

Many of the undergraduate programs offered at the Northern campus originated from the requests of First Nations communities and the necessity to sustain and share Indigenous culture. Indigenous social work, Indigenous education, business, and public administration and environmental health and science programs teach professionals to specifically address issues affecting the quality of life of Indigenous people. Indigenous language and Indigenous studies programs focus on interpreting and safeguarding Indigenous traditions. The Indigenous health studies program educates future health care providers about the health disparities and the Indigenous beliefs influencing individual and community health. The Certificate of Reconciliation Studies addresses the TRC Calls to Action (2015b) and concentrates on healing and building equity and respect between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people of Canada. Subsequently, all these programs are culturally responsive and integrate Indigenous knowledge, incorporate traditional teaching practices, and use prior experiences to make learning relevant for Indigenous students.

As a First Nations controlled institution, FNUniv, Northern campus had a unique student, staff, and faculty population that was different from what was seen at mainstream institutions. At the time of the study, the student enrolment at Northern campus was 281 students with 228 students self-declaring Indigenous heritage (First Nations University of Canada, 2018). Of the Indigenous student population, 37 identified as male, two as non-binary, and 189 as female (First Nations University of Canada, 2018). Consequently, 67% of the total student population at the Northern campus was comprised of female Indigenous students. This trend was not surprising because, as previously noted in the literature review, Indigenous women account for a more significant portion of undergraduate post-secondary students when compared to their male

counterparts (Statistics Canada, 2018; Hull 2015). There were nine tenure track faculty members in full time or part-time assignments. Of the nine faculty members, four were of Indigenous heritage. As for staff members, there were twenty-four employees and eighteen identified as being of Indigenous descent. At Northern campus, Indigenous people were the majority, and for many Indigenous students, the opportunity to be taught, counselled and recognized by other Indigenous people created a sense of security and self-determination.

Physical Context

There were a variety of spaces, at Northern campus that contained animated aspects of the Indigenous culture. Classrooms, Elders' workspaces, the student lounge and study area were arranged in a manner that facilitated gathering and communication. In these spaces, couches, chairs, desks, and round tables were organized in a circular configuration to encourage face-to-face interaction for teaching, learning, and socializing. On the main floor, the proximity of the offices allowed staff and faculty members to communicate easily with each other as such academic advisors often asked faculty members to join student meetings. This shared environment was beneficial because it enabled students to form connections with faculty and staff members in one central location. The organization of the spaces and collegiality between staff and faculty members simulated a familial setting that created a safe environment for Indigenous post-secondary students.

Cultural Context

FNUUniv, Northern campus was guided by Indigenous values and traditions where cultural artifacts were embedded within the environment and endorsed by the faculty and staff members. According to Schein (2010), artifacts are all the "phenomena that you would see, hear and feel ... [and] include the visible products of the group, such as architecture... its language; ... its artistic creations; ...its observable rituals and ceremonies" (p. 23). The most evident artifact at the Northern campus was the ceremonial room. The ceremonial room was open to everyone. In the ceremonial room, there was a rug on the floor displaying the directions and spirit animals, pillows surrounding the rug, a container of skirts and a cabinet that held sweet grass, sage, matches, and a smudging pan. The furnishings did not define the room; instead the energy, it emanated defined its purpose. The ceremonial room was a place for individuals to participate in smudging, pipe ceremonies, and talking circles. Consequently, the smell of sage and sweetgrass

often emanated from the ceremonial room, representing a more profound symbolism of the connection between mind, body, and spirit. The exposure to the experiences inside the ceremonial room helped some Indigenous students to form a deeper connection to their culture and themselves.

Throughout the main floor, traditional artwork, created by staff and faculty members, lined the hallway. The images were created under the guidance of a faculty member, who was also an Indigenous artist and depicted personal interpretations and stories. The process of creating and displaying the images represented the values of sharing, respect, and kinship. In the basement, photos of the staff and faculty members lined the hallways. The organization of these photos recognized the existing kinship between staff and faculty members and demonstrated humility in the sense that everyone was necessary, and no one was above or below the other.

In most places at the Northern campus, laughter and joking were heard. Mainly, students, staff, and faculty members gathered in and around the Elders' offices and the student lounge to share stories and jokes. The atmosphere was relaxed, and laughter was often sparked as more joined in the cajoling. It was evident that humour created an outlet to share and form family-like connections with students, staff, and faculty members.

The description of the social, physical, and cultural context demonstrated how I observed the Northern campus as being culturally responsive. This description intended to provide a picture of how the setting focused on Indigenous student's cultural identity, strengths, and background.

Description of the Participants

The sample for this study consisted of twenty-four participants. Within the faculty members' sample group, there were a total of six participants: one male and five females. During the study, the faculty members taught face-to-face in a variety of programs: Indigenous health studies, Indigenous education, Indigenous social work, and environmental health and science. The educational level of the faculty members consisted of three members being master prepared and three having achieved their Ph.D. The research participants within the staff members sample group included three males and eight females. During the study, the staff members supported students through full-time, part-time, and contractual assignments. The level of education from the non-teaching staff varied from no certification to being master prepared. The third sample

group included seven female self-declared Indigenous students whose ages ranged from 18-53 years. This information has been provided to present background demographic data.

Presentation of the Data and Results of the Analysis

The data presented represents the participants' multiple meanings. Following is a "thick description" (Merriam, 2009) and a detailed discussion of the themes coupled with illustrative quotes used to reveal the richness of multiple perspectives. The quotes from the focus group interviews are referenced as followed: student focus group (SFG), staff focus group one (STFG1), staff focus group two (STFG2), and faculty focus group (FFG). Quotes from the face-to-face interviews are referenced under the following pseudonyms: student interview (Jane), staff interview (Margo) and faculty interview (Sidney) to ensure participant confidentiality.

Theme 1: Challenges

The theme of challenges was evident in the collective responses of the participants. The Indigenous student participants began by acknowledging the challenges that affected their academic persistence and health. In the subsequent focus group interviews and interviews, staff and faculty participants reaffirmed the challenges and added nuance by highlighting accompanying challenges specific to the setting. The second level data analysis further delineated the challenges into four sub-themes: personal challenges, family challenges, social challenges, and campus challenges.

Personal challenges. The subtheme of personal challenges concentrated on the students' level of academic self-concept and educational preparedness. Academic self-concept engages the personal beliefs students have about their academic ability or skill (Henderson et al., 2017).

In the study, the Indigenous student participants mistrusted their academic ability to the extent they felt unworthy of attending university. One student participant said, "I saw university as something out there, but something that I could never be involved with ... I never thought I would be good enough or smart enough" (SFG, p. 8). Another student participant stated, "when I think of university, I think, wow, I never thought I'd see myself here" (SFG, p. 7). Furthermore, Indigenous students were anxious about the possibility of not being accepted in the university setting. One student participant commented, "I find myself just always like do I fit in here? Is this where I belong?" (SFG, p. 39). Another student displayed her nervousness by stating, "it was a really, really big scary thing because out of high school and into university, that was nerve-

racking" (SFG, p. 7). A staff participant also confirmed that some students were intimidated to attend university because they did not know what to expect.

One faculty participant articulated that the doubt in academic self-concept descended from the generational effects of colonization that marginalized Indigenous students. Her perspective validated the following student's declaration:

trauma affects our self-esteem and what we believe we can accomplish in our lives, and what we can become. The very act of attending university is political and is resisting the stereotype that has been perpetuated since before Canada was even a country. Each of us who attend university are battling not only the challenges of our studies, we're battling the negative messages that we may have received from our parents and grandparents, community members who attended residential schools and absorbed the belief that we were inferior people. (Jane, p. 28)

The history of colonization continues to bring forth a feeling of academic inadequacy, which is demonstrated through Indigenous students' mistrust in their academic self-concept and doubt in their ability to academically persist.

Concerns also surfaced about students' academic capabilities. One student participant questioned her ability to write papers while another student grappled with comprehension by stating, "I struggle a lot with understanding and trying to comprehend stuff. So, I will ask a million times over on how to get it" (SFG, p. 21).

Staff participants acknowledged specific academic inabilities related to academic writing and technology. The first staff member found

that high school really doesn't prepare for university, and [when] we get a brand-new high school student, or a mature readmission student, the academic part of it is a learning curve... when you use the words APA or MLA, talk about panic and anxieties. (STFG1, p. 26)

Another staff participant was more concerned with the students' limited technological skills. He identified "computers are like modern age to a lot of the students, and ... I don't think they have the chance that other kids do in other schools, to be brought up digitally" (STGF1, p. 16).

Faculty members also voiced concerns about students' academic abilities. One faculty participant was concerned about students who possessed English as a second language. She

stated, "a lot of our students come from the northern communities ... they are second-language speakers. So, they find English sometimes very difficult, especially in the concepts, so I have to work through that with them" (FFG, p. 9). Apprehension about students' general academic abilities was also expressed as one faculty member stated: "I wonder if some of our students when they come to university ... if they're really prepared for the rigours of academic life?" (FFG, p. 11).

The comments about personal challenges addressed the concerns regarding Indigenous students' academic self-concept and educational preparedness. Academic self-concept was examined to display the mistrust some Indigenous post-secondary students had in their academic abilities while the exploration of educational preparedness revealed deficits in pertinent or overall academic skills. It was identified that personal challenges stemmed from the legacies of colonization, and when coupled with meagre secondary education, many Indigenous students were inadequately prepared to persist in undergraduate programs. The challenges moved beyond the personal level, and the participants expressed additional insight into how family and social issues can be perceived as challenges to Indigenous post-secondary students.

Family challenges. Participants' consideration of the perceived challenges broadened when they engaged further into the discussion about the outside sources adversely impacting Indigenous post-secondary students. Overall, the participants focused on family stresses and absent family support as being of particular importance.

Family stresses arose from difficult circumstances within diverse family compositions. Accordingly, the family composition for many Indigenous students consisted of either being single and living with extended family, being a single parent with biological and extended children, or living in a common-law or married relationship. One student participant shared how she must take care of her familial obligations, often with limited support, which took a toll on her health and education. She said,

I have three kids at home, and one has ADHD, and the other one just lost her mom like a year ago. And her mom was like brutally murdered, so she doesn't really understand why and stuff. So, when he's [her spouse] not there, it's hard for me to focus on my schooling and try and do the everyday things at home and then trying to keep them from falling apart and then literally myself from falling apart. (SFG, p. 13)

Another student shared she was a single mother to seven children and relied on strangers to be her family support while she attended university. She said,

my family, my adopted sister and my adopted mom, which they're strangers. I adopted them as family, but as for family support, I don't really have anybody. So, I'm a single mother of seven kids, so it's really stressful, and it's really hard. (SFG, p. 15)

Subsequently, the lack of familial support negatively influenced this student's mental and emotional health.

Staff and faculty participants confirmed that family composition had adversely affected the academic persistence and health of Indigenous students. One staff member shared an experience of how strong academic students fail to persist academically when their family composition is altered. She said,

it's true because we've seen...really intelligent students accessing all the support, but chaos going on at home for whatever reason, and that just drags them... and they end up failing out, not because they can't do the work but because ... all of a sudden there's a missing parent or [they are] kicked out of their house or a child dies. (STFG2, p. 31)

A faculty participant mirrored the same thoughts and verified that when family composition changed many students ended up quitting or delaying their studying to address their familial obligations. She stated,

I was thinking ... about why do we lose our students? Most of the time is when the family unit kind of breaks apart, that's when we lose them. If their babysitter takes off on them, and then they can't find anybody to work with them, they end up quitting and going home. (FFG, p. 13)

Therefore, when family composition changed, or when familial support was not readily available, many Indigenous post-secondary students were faced with emotional and mental health burdens that impacted their capability to persist academically.

Social challenges. The following challenges originated at the community level and focused on the social issues of funding and discrimination. The financial challenges stemmed from limited financial options available to Indigenous students and the discriminatory acts that occurred in the community against Indigenous students attending the Northern campus. These social challenges posed threats to students' academic persistence and health.

For many Indigenous students, funding challenges resulted from inadequate federal resources. Restricted Indigenous PSE funding has left many First Nation communities and Métis groups with inadequate resources to fund the PSE of eligible Indigenous students. Consequently, several Indigenous students had to access Canadian and provincial student loan programs to finance their education. One student's experience with mental health issues hampered her eligibility with band funding, and subsequently, she was required to apply for student loan funding. She said,

I was previously band funded so when I had a mental breakdown 2 years ago, the lady didn't instruct me to provide a doctor's note. Otherwise, I would have been funded again. So now I have to do a student loan. But just the financial part of it is pretty stressful.

(SFG, p. 8)

Another student figured out, within her first year of studies, that the funds from her provincial student loan did not meet her daily needs. Therefore, to continue with her education, she needed to obtain part-time employment to supplement her student loan funding. She said

I'm really looking forward for the summer break, and I know in the fall...what to expect financially, and I need to have a part-time job... It's just like with a student loan, it was unexpected. I didn't know how much I was getting. I get more or less what welfare people get, but I have to travel to come here. Financially coming here, getting a student loan, I'm still struggling. Like I've never had to struggle so hard physically and mentally. You know I went to bed at 6 o'clock this morning. I can't really sleep. But I know what I need to do. (SFG, p.16 & 37)

Her experience exemplifies how the lack of funding adversely affected her mental and physical health.

Because many of the staff participants interact with students regularly about social challenges, they were often more aware of the current funding issues experienced by Indigenous students. One staff member shared experience about how limited finances could affect the health of Indigenous students. She described a situation where one particular student required emergency funding because Revenue Canada froze her benefits, and she was unable to support her children financially.

We had a student apply for an emergency student retention bursary. [She was audited by] the Canada Revenue Agency ... [regarding her] Universal Childcare Benefit [because she had] children under [the age of] 11. From the time they started her audit until they finish it, several months later, [the student didn't] get any of those benefits. We were able to give her a bursary to cover her rent and some of her utilities. And that affected her...in all four areas [physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually]. Like what am I going to do, I don't have money to pay my rent, my bills are behind. And then, we were able to provide that financial support, which in turn supported her in all those four areas and helped to stabilize her health until she could get other supports. (STFG2, p. 26)

This experience demonstrates how the lack of funding adversely affected one student's physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health.

Faculty participants were cognizant of the circumstances stemming from financial constraints plaguing some students. Faculty members identified some students struggle with living arrangements as a result of a lack of funding. One faculty member said, "We have students that are couch-surfing just trying to get through the term. Like, they've lost their house, and their kids had to move back home so that somebody could watch them and so they're living from couch to couch" (FFG, p. 13). There is a profound inequity of finances experienced by some Indigenous students attending Northern campus, and not being able to meet basic needs such as shelter, and food can contribute to feelings of hopelessness that manifest as poor self-concept and wariness regarding academic abilities.

The second social challenge focused on Indigenous student experiences with discrimination in Prince Albert, SK. It is essential to note that the research participants did not indicate acts discrimination occurring within the Northern campus setting; instead, discrimination was experienced in the wider community setting. Students identified the location of the campus contributed to the act of discrimination. The Northern campus is located on Central Avenue in Prince Albert, generally referred to as the downtown core. This area of town is known for its transient residents and prostitution. As a result, many female Indigenous students were assumed to be prostitutes and were subjected to derogatory actions. One student described a time when she was walking in the downtown area and her associated disbelief when someone tossed money at her. She said, "I was walking down the street, and somebody threw a penny out

of the window. I was like, "Oh my gosh, did that just happen?" (SFG, p. 42). Another student shared how she had to overcome people's biased thoughts and actions in order to meet her daughter's needs. She explained that her daughter's daycare was located several blocks away from the campus, and she had to walk through the downtown core after dropping her daughter at daycare to attend classes. Often as she walked through the downtown area, others assumed she was a prostitute. She shared, "that stereotype is kind of something I have to overcome, especially when I take the bus and walk around. So, when I walk through the door [to Northern campus], I want them to see me walking through the doors and ask them what you think I am?" (SFG, p. 42). Although the student participants shared their experiences, they did not identify how these discriminatory actions affected their academic persistence and health. Staff and faculty members did not acknowledge any acts of discrimination against Indigenous post-secondary students in the community or at the Northern campus.

Campus challenges. The majority of the campus challenges were identified during the staff and faculty conversations. These distinct challenges were divided into administrative challenges and academic tensions. The administrative challenges were linked to the campus's regulated funding, which presented challenges for the appropriate upkeep of the campus and restricted the number of supportive services for the Indigenous student population attending the Northern campus. When comparing the physical setting of FNUniv, Northern campus to the FNUniv, Regina campus, there were some glaring differences. The Regina campus, located at the University of Regina, is situated on a large piece of open land with ample parking and green space. Douglas Cardinal designed the campus building with a noted glass tipi gracing the front of the building. One student participant compared the Northern campus to the Regina campus. She said,

when you think of the Regina campus and how it looks so magnificent on their website and ... looks fresh and painted, and just new designs. We're in an old department store ... it does look sad, and old, and tired. (Jane, p. 14)

This student's comparison demonstrated how different the physical spaces were between the Regina and Northern campus.

Staff and faculty members spoke to the budgetary constraints and how it has impacted the delivery of additional resources. A staff member declared, "we deal with the negatives: the

cutbacks, the budgets, where we have to ... nickel and dime our way through some of the supports we need to offer “(STFG1, p. 28). A faculty member reconfirmed that the limited resources only cover the day-to-day operations of campus by stating that “because we [at Northern campus] are not getting the funding like other institutions, we're just trying to meet the needs of making sure the doors are open, making sure the floors are swept, making sure the TVs work for students” (Sidney, p. 11). The limited resources caused stress and anxiety for staff and faculty members, which, in some cases, indirectly affected the academic persistence and emotional health of some students.

The limited funding restricted the number of resources available for students, and consequently, staff and faculty members tended to use local Cree cultural resources for the convenience of access and to curtail costs. One faculty member confessed that "even our Elders at this point right now, one is Anishinaabe but follows Cree teachings as well, the other one is Cree, our Elder's helper is Cree. So, their teachings and their activities will be Cree based (Sidney, p. 4). A staff member shared similar views and stated, "We practice very Cree here, and we have to be very cognizant” (STFG1, p. 24). Cree focused cultural resources did not meet the needs of Indigenous students who were guided by other Indigenous traditions such as Dene, Saulteaux, or Métis. One student recounted her reaction when she participated in a pipe ceremony led by a Cree male pipe carrier. She stated,

he had a man's pipe so we couldn't all smoke it...I felt quite alarmed at the way that occurred because, in my tradition, men and women can both sit up there with their pipes and do pipe ceremonies at the same time. And so, I felt quite excluded. (Jane, p. 6)

The feelings of exclusion contributed to feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness and impacted students' emotional and mental health.

Even though many of the research participants were strong advocates for a daycare and fitness area, these additional resources were not present because of the limited financial resources. A staff member identified a fitness area was needed so students could release stress by participating in physical activity. Consequently, the lack of a fitness area hindered students' physical and mental health. Other research participants acknowledged the lack of a university daycare also disadvantaged many students. Some students, who had children, missed classes, attended late or left early because their current daycare was not flexible to their course schedules.

This constant juggle between academic and familial responsibilities created emotional stress and impeded academic persistence.

Staff and faculty participants acknowledged the presence of academic tensions stemming from the perception that FNUiv, Northern campus, as an Indigenous-affiliate institution, was less credible than other mainstream institutions. Faculty confirmed that some non-Indigenous students or students with a Western perspective perceived FNUiv, Northern campus as being marginalized, less rigorous, and having lower academic standards when compared to other mainstream institutions. One faculty member shared that “as an Indigenous institution, we’re not seen as credible ... there is a perception of lack of credibility” (Sidney, p. 11). It is assumed this notion was derived from the misconception that using a culturally responsive approach to teach essential knowledge and skills made for a less rigorous educational experience. One faculty member described her actions to address the misconception in the following,

as a faculty member, I know I'm fighting against people's opinions that our institution doesn't have the same rigour as other institutions. And so I need to make sure my students are not only meeting the minimum, they're meeting the maximum and then they're going 10% over the maximum. Because they're going to be questioned about what they know and if they're not doing it to 110%, then they are again falling into that perspective that they don't know what they're doing. (Sidney, p.16)

Subsequently, this faculty member assumed the responsibility to help her Indigenous students excel so that when they graduated, they were viewed as exceeding academic standards and being well prepared for their profession.

Overall the comments about the challenges portrayed an environment where Indigenous students were faced with a variety of personal, familial, social and campus-level issues that derived from the generational effects of colonization, poor preparation from secondary schooling, lack of familial support, insufficient funding, campus location, and academic misconceptions. For some Indigenous students, these challenges have hampered their academic persistence and health. The subsequent findings will demonstrate how social support has positively affected health and reinforced academic persistence in Indigenous post-secondary students at the Northern campus.

Theme 2: Social Support

In the focus group interviews and face-to-face interviews, participants were asked to identify who provided social support to Indigenous post-secondary students at FNUniv, Northern campus. Conceptions of social support were framed by House's (1981) question of "*who* gives what to *whom* regarding *which* problems?" (p. 22). It was determined peers, families, communities and the staff and faculty members, at Northern campus, provided emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal support to address the academic and health needs of Indigenous post-secondary students.

Peer support. There was strong peer support shown between students. One student mentioned that peer support provided camaraderie and academic encouragement. She said, her biggest support for sure would definitely be the students. Just the closeness that you just gain with everybody whether you have one class with them, or you meet them in the hallway. Everybody wants to say hi, and everybody has each other's back. I don't mind helping somebody else if I'm not in the same class. If I can give advice or even spell-check an essay. (SFG, p. 26)

Another student shared how her peers provided her strength in order to address her daily challenges. She said, "I have a lot going on in my life and...the students... they are very good positive reinforcements" (SFG, p. 35). Consequently, peers provided emotional and informational support through face-to-face interactions that addressed the mental and emotional necessities of the students.

Staff and faculty participants reconfirmed that peers provided supportive behaviours that addressed more than the academic needs of the students. One staff member shared that students voiced sincere emotional concerns for other students. She stated,

I noticed that if they're supposed to have a little study group, and if one of them isn't there, they're searching, they're phoning, like what's going on, how come she's not here? She's supposed to be here. They're very concerned. (STFG1, p. 16)

A faculty member described the peer support between Indigenous students as being similar to the emotional and instrumental support found within families. In her class, she encouraged the development of a classroom family where students connected as family members to encourage

and assist each other. She shared the following instance that exemplified students supporting each other.

That classroom family does the same kinds of things we hope that their family-family can also do. They take notes for them, or they get handouts if they're not there. They phone each other if they're not there. We sort of brainstorm that first day, how can you help your family members? They name their families; they have some fun with sort of those kinds of things. [There]...was a very quiet woman...they had to do a presentation, just a short talk, and it was her turn and I could see her getting...sweaty and scared, and she got her way to the front where everybody else had been speaking from, and she wouldn't turn around. She did her presentation with her back to us. But I knew that was the bravest possible thing, and that was success. And one by one her family members came and just stood beside her at the front. (FFG, p. 13-14)

The peer support displayed between the Indigenous students at FNUUniv, Northern campus had a considerable impact on the students' academic persistence and health. The responses confirmed the peer support Indigenous students received provided academic assistance, friendship, and inspiration that encouraged academic persistence and addressed the emotional and mental pressures derived from challenges.

Family support. Although in the first theme family was identified as a barrier for many Indigenous post-secondary students, family was also seen as significant support. Student participants defined family as both immediate and extended familial members who provided assistance that helped students academically persist and work towards balancing their health. One student acknowledged,

I think for family, my stepdad and my mom are like my most support because, like when I need someone to watch my daughter when I'm stressing out, they take care of my girl really well. So when I need a break, they're there for me. (SFG, p. 17)

For this student, her immediate family provided instrumental support through safe and reliable childcare for her daughter, which allowed the student to focus on her studies or take some personal time with a sense of security.

Staff participants endorsed the emotional and instrumental support that families provided to students. A staff member shared that a student with a newborn was being told to suspend her

courses. The student was adamant; she could continue with her courses because she had support from her family and partner. In the end, with her familial support, the student persisted and completed her courses.

A faculty member recognized that family was one of the most influential supports for Indigenous students. She said,

I think the biggest thing I see in our program in terms of supports...is family. So when they move with their family, they bring like their sister who's going to babysit for them, or you know, her husband is supportive and wants to see them get through. (FFG, p. 11)

Family provided the necessary assistance, specifically with childcare and meeting students' emotional and mental needs. It was evident that when childcare was secured, mental stress was reduced, and students were able to focus on their academic work. The familial strength also provided emotional encouragement for students that contributed to balancing their health.

Community support. The community support was dependent on the challenges faced by individual students. The support from the communities followed Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) and provided resources that met students' physiological, safety, sense of belonging, and self-esteem necessities.

Primarily, communities met students' physiological and safety needs by providing instrumental resources. Student participants identified that the post-secondary funding they received from their communities provided them with a living allowance for rent, food, clothing, and tuition.

Staff participants explained that communities also provided a sense of belonging for many students. As one staff member said, "so when we find that they need support, there's all the kinds of supports in the community, depending on what their need is... there's addiction support, AA and NA, there's counselling support ... there's mental health support" (STFG2, p. 12). Community agencies offered a place of acceptance, friendship, and informational support.

The participants acknowledged that for many students, the appraisal support they received from their home communities contributed to their self-esteem. A faculty member shared how students returned to their home communities to reconnect and confirm their reasons for attending PSE. She said, "I think the ability to go back to the community is really important for our students... So going back to the community just to get grounded again and remind them why

they're doing this" (FFG, p. 11). The respectful response students received from their communities strengthened and motivated Indigenous students to persist.

Staff and faculty member support. The staff and faculty members at FNUniv, Northern campus provided emotional, informational, instrumental, and appraisal support to Indigenous students. The participants particularly noted staff members who provided academic tutoring, writing assistance, personal and academic counselling, library, and accessibility services. Students described the support they received from staff members in the following quotes.

- One of the first people that I met at the university was XXX [student advisor]. So she's been one of my biggest supports. She helped me pick my classes and went through that whole process" (SFG, p. 20).
- Another one that stands out is the librarian. There have been a couple of them, but each of them knows their jobs. Just finding the right time to get her to come help you is good. She helps me with papers, reads through them (SFG, p. 20).
- XXX, the [personal] counsellor, she's amazing (SFG, p. 25).

The majority of the staff and faculty members participating in the data gathering agreed with the students' statements and also mentioned how other staff and faculty members provided social support in the following responses:

- I heard a mature woman say if she didn't access...the writing clinic in the fall, she wouldn't be where she was today, successful in her first year of university. (STFG1, p. 27)
- The professors ... like being here, because the students seem to really appreciate them and ... respect them. (STFG1, p. 16)
- Security gives a tremendous amount of support for our students and ... they get to know the students. They know who they are, and they know who shouldn't be here. (STFG2, p. 20)

The respondents revealed a particular appreciation for the social support provided by the academic advisors. The academic advisors were the main point of contact for Indigenous students and initiated access to many of the other services. As one staff member stated, "I see the advisor as a primary support, not necessarily a tangible as in writing clinic or tutoring, because the impetus for those supports come into place with the advisors" (STFG2, p. 30). A

faculty member also praised the work of the academic advisors at the Northern campus by comparing their work to those at other universities. He stated, "I would like to ... mention about the advisors' help. I have taught in different universities, and my children went to different universities, and advisor services [at Northern campus] ... is really phenomenal" (FFG, p. 18).

The research participants perceived that staff and faculty members provided emotional, informational, instrumental, and appraisal support to the Indigenous students at FNUniv, Northern campus. Working with academic advisors, using tutoring and writing services and consulting with the personal counsellor provided Indigenous students with emotional, informational, and instrumental support that encouraged academic persistence and contributed to their holistic health. Overall, peers, families, communities, staff, and faculty members provided the four types of social support to Indigenous students.

Theme 3: Authentic Relationships

The participants described that staff and faculty members delivered social support through creating authentic relationships with Indigenous students. As the discussions evolved, it was recognized that staff and faculty members created authentic relationships with Indigenous students by showing genuine interest, building trust, creating a supportive environment, and establishing connections. Therefore, the theme of authentic relationships was separated into the following subthemes to highlight these qualities.

Displaying genuine interest. Part of creating authentic relationships involved staff and faculty members, demonstrating a sincere interest in Indigenous students. The participants perceived that staff and faculty members displayed this interest by showing love for the students. Love was demonstrated by being open and available to meet students' needs. One staff member shared how she often probed unsuccessful students about their situations and devoted time to get to know them. She said,

when I see a fail [I know] that there's a reason for that fail ... there's a story, and I'm willing to listen to that and [ask]... so how can we help? What's changed since that happened? Is there anything that we can do with you, alongside you, to guide you?
(STFG1, p. 27)

Other staff and faculty participants referred to showing love by encouraging and comforting students. A faculty member identified that she showed love to inspire students while another faculty member spoke of how displaying love consoled her student. She said,

I took the extra time to spend with her, helping her through, but it wasn't just helping her through the academics, we talked a lot about personal stuff that she was going through, and so it goes back to reflect the love. (FFG, p. 33)

It was perceived that, in many situations, the staff and faculty members displayed love to Indigenous students that reflected the emotional support traditionally provided by students' families.

Although the staff and faculty members shared many experiences of how genuine interest was displayed to students, it was essential to find out if Indigenous students had similar views. Student participants confirmed that staff and faculty members displayed a sincere interest in them. Their sentiments were demonstrated through the following quotes:

- It's just the love and support you get from here just makes you want to keep coming here. (SFG, p. 16)
- It was such a warm welcome, too, by the staff. That was the first time I ever felt really warmly welcomed. (SFG, p. 41)
- I thought it would be more like coming to jail like it's just like when you say something, you're not just a number. You're treated and respected. They care about you. (SFG, p. 23)

For these students, the attentiveness shown by staff and faculty members was reassuring. The remark "it's just the love and support you get from here just makes you want to keep coming here," reflected the positive reinforcement the student received from the staff and faculty members. Furthermore, the last comment revealed that staff and faculty members were caring and respectful. Indigenous students valued those relationships where they felt appreciated.

It was perceived that staff and faculty members went above and beyond to demonstrate a genuine interest to their Indigenous students. Their professional boundaries were not crossed, but rather the level of interest extended to address students' holistic needs rather than focusing primarily on their mental and emotional aspects, which are often seen within student, staff and

faculty relationships in mainstream institutions. Consequently, when staff and faculty members displayed a familial quality of genuine interest, they were able to bond with Indigenous students.

Building trust. Building trust was the second essential characteristic of creating an authentic relationship. Data from the focus group interviews and face-to-face interviews indicated rapport was necessary to build trust, and when the trust was present, it created security and feeling of home for Indigenous post-secondary students.

Two student participants shared how their rapport with staff and faculty members evolved from building trust to create a sense of security. The first student expressed, "I came [to see the academic advisor] at the beginning when I had some doubts... XXX [the academic advisor] was just like home" (SFG, p. 25). This quotation demonstrated that when this student was able to link with a staff member, it fostered trust and created a sense of security. The second student described the following:

XXX [faculty member] talked about when you leave home, and you get beat up and ... I've been beaten up.... So, it's been really hard for me, and it is really lovely to feel that connection, sense of belonging, to feel valued, to feel validated, to feel heard." (SFG, p. 25)

This student reinforced that receiving validation from a faculty member helped her build trust and a sense of belonging.

Also, staff and faculty participants acknowledged that developing rapport was a focal point to building trust between Indigenous students, staff, and faculty members. Consequently, staff and faculty members worked diligently to communicate openly and show respect to Indigenous students. One faculty member admitted, "we need to go that extra [distance] to create that bridge of trust ... to get more of a trusting relationship with our students" (Sidney, p. 8). Subsequently, when rapport and shared trust were apparent between Indigenous students, staff and faculty members, the Northern campus was viewed as "a place that allows them [Indigenous students] to be more ... willing to address issues and concepts that they might not otherwise get to in a larger university" (FFG, p. 7).

Participants identified that the Northern campus was more than an academic platform; it was a safe place for students. One participant said, "I think on the whole they [students] perceive Northern Campus as...a safe place where they can come and learn and a place where they can

get help if they need it” (STFG2, p. 7). Other participants expanded on the essence of a safe place and recognized that staff and faculty members fulfilled the supportive roles usually associated with students’ families or communities. One staff member said,

our students perceive Northern Campus to be one of their home fires, a safe place ... and a home away from home. Because what I perceive is that many of our students who come here have left behind their familial and community supports and network. (STFG2, p. 8)

Therefore, staff and faculty members took on a familial role to create a sense of security for Indigenous students.

Through the co-construction of meanings, the trust built between Indigenous students, staff, and faculty members was essential to create a sense of security. The sense of security evolved from staff and faculty members, providing a safe learning environment to fulfilling the roles of the students’ families and communities. Subsequently, this interaction revealed that when trust and a sense of security were present, relationships between Indigenous students, staff and faculty members were formed.

Crafting a supportive environment. The third element required for creating authentic relationships consisted of crafting a supportive environment for Indigenous post-secondary students. The supportive environment involved developing a sense of place where Indigenous students were exposed to culturally responsive approaches and treated with equity and fairness by staff and faculty members.

Respondents acknowledged that the staff and faculty members created a supportive environment by using culturally responsive approaches to share Indigenous knowledge, values, and strengths. The majority of the respondents spoke to how staff and faculty members incorporated aspects of the Indigenous culture into their daily interactions with Indigenous students. In particular, Indigenous students were provided with opportunities to learn about First Nations and Métis history and language through an Indigenous lens and provided with opportunities to participate in traditional practices and ceremonies.

During the data gathering, the student participants were cognizant of being immersed in an institution that adhered to an Indigenous worldview. One student commented about taking an Indigenous studies class and learning new knowledge about her First Nations history. She said,

I am a First Nations person, but there's stuff that I didn't know until I took that class [Indigenous studies] ... I'm so glad that I took the class because I have all that knowledge now. But I was also angry at the end of it. (STFG2, p. 19)

Even though Indigenous studies classes are commonly offered in post-secondary programs, the student's response to this course was clear. The student was supported through learning new knowledge from an instructor who used an Indigenous lens. Although her discovery about the colonial history of First Nations peoples created cultural dissonance, the faculty member created a safe environment where her new knowledge could be explored.

A staff member reinforced that teaching through an Indigenous worldview challenged students' prior knowledge. She noted:

learning their culture, that's a big help, but sometimes it can also really affect their sense of identity because they're learning a lot of things that they never knew about before. Like if they're very Christian, then they come here, and they hear about the role that the church had in residential schools and colonization like sometimes it really shakes them up and makes them question everything they ever learned about religion and church and stuff like that. It happened to one student in my class; she just said, "everything I learned in church was a lie." (STFG2, p. 12)

This example demonstrated that when some Indigenous students were taught about their history and culture through an Indigenous worldview, it led to questioning their own beliefs and values. Even though cultural dissonance was created, the environment supported the student to challenge previously held beliefs.

One faculty member shared how teaching with an Indigenous worldview focused on sharing practical, cultural knowledge that was applicable to students' academic studies and future careers. She stated:

you know, like look at teaching, we don't focus on Western theories, we do cover them, but [what] we really cover in our program is what is effective teaching for First Nations kids? How does language and culture affect learning? ... They're not just learning for the sake of passing an exam, they're learning something that's going to be really worthwhile and valuable to them. (FFG, p. 18)

In this sense, faculty members who taught within an Indigenous lens provided students with meaningful and respected knowledge that was fundamental to teaching other Indigenous people.

The use of an Indigenous lens provided students with an alternate perspective to the Eurocentric view characteristically provided at post-secondary institutions. For some students, the Indigenous lens provided a new perspective, which led to questioning the value of previously learned knowledge. For other students, the Indigenous lens provided opportunities to learn relevant cultural knowledge that was indispensable for their future careers.

Other culturally responsive approaches were interwoven throughout programs and courses. Student participants acknowledged that exposure to Indigenous ceremonies and traditional teaching methods added significance to their education and personal life. As one student shared,

I also know that being here...is about building relationships, but it's also experiential learning, and there are some classes where we're required to go to like to moon ceremonies, to a lake water ceremony, to a sweat lodge ceremony, and then the cultural camp...and those have value and you cannot teach that in a classroom setting, you need to experience it, absolutely. (Jane, p. 23)

This student perceived it was essential for her to participate in traditional ceremonies and valued having a supportive environment where this could be achieved.

Staff members also acknowledged that many students appreciated being exposed to other cultural ceremonies and traditional teaching practices.

I've had a lot of comments on what the students really enjoy here at First Nations. They really enjoyed going to ceremonies...going to... talking circles, and sweats. And they really enjoyed that...because they're just learning ... about their culture, they're learning about ceremonies and their identity. (STFG2, p. 9)

For many students, the opportunity to share in a talking circle or to participate in a traditional sweat created a safe environment to learn Indigenous culture and how it fits with their identity.

Faculty members spoke about the importance of being respectful when creating a supportive environment for Indigenous students. One faculty member told a story about how she emphasized the need for inclusivity as a means to connect with students. She noted:

it's not just a culturally inclusive curriculum; it's a culturally inclusive environment where people really care about you and respect you. I think it's evident in our relationships with our students that we teach. I think that they know that we really care about them not just as students, but as people and as cultural people, too. (FFG, p. 18)

Therefore, showing respect and connecting with students went beyond teaching students about their chosen career and focused on recognizing the value of Indigenous students and Indigenous cultures.

Although the staff and faculty members used culturally responsive approaches, they were cognizant that the environment might be deemed as unfair or unjust for other Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Staff and faculty members acknowledged the influence of First Nations knowledge and practices but stressed anyone could achieve holistic learning. One staff member revealed,

we have to acknowledge and recognize other belief systems, but remind them, you're here for this purpose, and the First Nations culture isn't necessarily saying you have to come to class and you have to go to the pipe ceremony; it's going to say, you're coming here to learn about yourself – physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually – and that's part of our teaching processes, and we want to share that with you, instead of saying this is what you have to do. (STFG1, p. 25)

Consequently, staff and faculty members worked together to ensure that all students were treated fairly and justly. As one staff member said,

so, you help them. It's not about fixing it for them but helping them see what they feel needs to happen in order to get back in balance, right, and then supporting them in that choice. We see that a lot and it's not just the advisors, I would say it's a combination of a little bit of support from a lot of different people. (STFG2, p. 27)

The staff and faculty participants also perceived that all students were treated justly, even when they were unsuccessful. A faculty member noted,

we forgive the students for stumbling, and we support them in moving forward and being successful instead of punishing them. I know some of our policies are punitive, and we need to meet certain standards, but we're an open door when they come back and say okay, let's move forward. (FFG, p. 22)

The culturally responsive approaches created a supportive environment that was unique to this case institution. The sharing of Indigenous knowledge through an Indigenous lens and the evidence of respect, cooperation, and fairness created a level of comfort and acceptance for Indigenous students that encouraged bonding with staff and faculty members. This supportive environment was a stark contrast to the individuality and competitiveness found in some mainstream institutions.

Establishing connections. The fourth element necessary in creating relationships involved establishing connections between Indigenous students, staff and faculty members. The participants described how the supportive roles took on by the staff and faculty members, the presence of Elders, and transcendent energy helped establish connections with Indigenous students.

A staff participant expressed why she felt students desired to form connections with staff and faculty members. She referred to her own Indigenous beliefs and shared the importance of family connections. She said,

I was just thinking, why is it that the students want to make such an intimate connection with us as faculty and staff? If we think about the way indigenous people relate to each other, we always want to find that family connection. ... When these students come from their communities, they're disconnected from that family connection. So, as staff and faculty, we're filling that family role, we're filling the role of the aunts and uncles and the grandmas and the grandpas for them. ... It's kind of like an unspoken common knowledge that we're supporting them in that way, as we would if we were family (STFG2, p.29)

She conceived that when students were detached from their families, staff and faculty members were often seen as familial supports.

Staff and faculty members filled familial roles by spending time listening and talking with Indigenous students. One staff member shared that faculty and staff members introduced them [students] to the culture. And when they learn here, it opens up their memory, and they can hear their ancestors talking to them; they're great-grandmother or great-grandfather ... It's so nice for them to be able to get this information, for it tweaks their memory, and they have a sense of belonging. (STFG1, p.7)

Other Indigenous students used staff and faculty members to become more knowledgeable about Indigenous history and the generational effects of colonization. One staff member shared the following example:

some of the students are disconnected from their culture, never had the opportunity to learn the culture, they now get that opportunity at First Nations University, to learn about residential schools, to maybe connect the dots. Now they understand why their parents raised them the way they are, now they can start to understand, accept, move forward and build a new foundation with their education, to be prosperous and functional people in society (STFG1, p.20)

Subsequently, when staff and faculty members were able to fulfill the familial roles through sharing the Indigenous culture and being a cultural resource, they were able to connect with Indigenous students.

The participants also shared how the presence of Elders at FNUniv. Northern campus helped form connections between Indigenous students and the staff and faculty members. There was a deep respect for the Elders at FNUniv, Northern campus. The research participants shared experiences about receiving guidance from Elders. One staff member said

I'm grateful for the Elders that we do have, who are open to say this is what I believe, this is what I'll share with you and this is what you can learn from me, but I can learn from you too. And I think if we go into it with our students with that perspective, they [students] are more apt to learn and they're more apt to say this is my history; this is my culture, this is what I'm open to. But to come in and say this is who you are, and this is what you're going to do, that shuts the door for a lot of students. (STFG1, p. 24)

This staff member reinforced how Elders taught by example. She identified how the Elders did not impose the Indigenous culture and were willing to teach and listen to those who were open to learning. The Elders also understood that students possessed valuable knowledge, and their knowledge should be respected because if students felt disrespected, they would not be receptive to learning. Therefore, being receptive and recognizing reciprocity helped form connections with Indigenous students.

The faculty respondents identified that Elders also encouraged collaboration to address students' needs. One faculty member shared that the consistent presence of Elders on campus

supported faculty and staff members to work together. The Elders' wisdom guided the integration of traditional Indigenous cultural values and practices into daily activities, as a way to connect with students to meet their physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual needs.

Other participants went further and described the connection between Indigenous students, staff, and faculty members as being energy or spirit that emanated within the Northern campus. To one participant, the energy was palpable, but yet unexplainable. He explained, "Here I really feel that spirit. I don't know even how to describe it. ... It's kind of like harmony" (FFG, p. 19). To another participant, the energy was made up of aspects of Indigenous culture and beliefs that guided how students, staff, and faculty members related and interacted with each other. This faculty member shared her understanding of the energy and said,

I think when we walk in the door, we do feel it; I think it's energy. There's a different energy and that energy is part of traditional belief, that knowing, that spiritual energy is part of what we help to keep creating by how we act and treat people. (FFG, p. 23)

To the participants, the energy encompassed Indigenous beliefs and values, which guided the thoughts and actions of those students, staff, and faculty members who could feel its presence. Therefore, the combination of staff and faculty members providing familial support, the presence of Elders, and the transcendent energy were essential to establishing connections and creating authentic relationships between Indigenous students, staff, and faculty members.

The research participants perceived that staff and faculty members displayed a genuine interest, built trust, crafted a supportive environment, and established connections and formed authentic relationships with Indigenous students. Indigenous students who were part of authentic relationships received emotional, informational, instrumental, and appraisal support.

Theme 4: Effects of Social Supports on Students' Academic Persistence

The theme that addressed the positive effects of social support on students' academic persistence was constructed from the participants' responses and categorized as being direct, Meta, or side effects. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), direct effects are the first consequences of an intervention; "Meta-effects are those outcomes that go considerably beyond the immediate effects of an innovation" (p.149), and side effects are outcomes distant from the original intent.

Direct effect: Motivation. The social support received from families, communities, and the staff and faculty members motivated many Indigenous students to academic persistence. Concerning family, several research participants acknowledged that children motivated Indigenous students to persist. In the words of one faculty participant:

a lot of our students are female students who have children; those children are their motivators. ... and often our students come in and they'll say, I'm doing this for my child, or my children. (FFG, p. 16)

A staff participant also confirmed that Indigenous students were motivated to persist so they could provide a better life for their children. She said, "they want their children to experience a different childhood ... their children become the emphasis for moving them forward and to ... prove to themselves ... they can make a difference" (STFG2, p.16).

The respondents also mentioned that communities were motivating factors for Indigenous students. Students who received instrumental and emotional support from their communities identified a need to give back. As one faculty participant mentioned,

they talk about ... giving back to the community. They want to contribute something to their community, and they want to have those skills or the knowledge ... those things that will help them contribute to their community. (FFG, p.16)

The participants explained how staff and faculty members motivated Indigenous students to persist academically. Notably, they identified that when authentic relationships existed between Indigenous students and staff and faculty members, Indigenous students were mindful and motivated to persist academically. As one staff participant expressed

this is why I love everybody here because they back the students 100%... I see that in each and every person here, how they really care for the students, and how they try and encourage them and help them find ways to be successful. And I hear that from the students, and they're so determined; when they hear that support from everybody here, they're more determined to be successful. (STFG1, p.30)

Another staff participant described how authentic relationships between faculty members and Indigenous students motivated students to meet or exceed academic expectations. She said, if you've got faculty member[s] who has a vested interest in students and they have a relationship built with those students, the expectations on academic rigour are going to be

much more favourable from the student's perspective, ... they [students] are going to ... take a better ownership and want to please or meet the expectations of that faculty member ... They have a vested interest as a result of that relationship, so it's a trust, and ... a respect. (Margo, p.21)

Motivation was the direct effect of social support on Indigenous students' academic persistence. Students' children and their desire to give back to their community were inspiring factors, while relationships with staff and faculty members motivated Indigenous students to take responsibility and reach or surpass academic expectations.

Meta-effect: Building resilience. Direct effects differ from the Meta-effects in that “Meta-effects are the outcomes that go considerably beyond the immediate effects of the innovation” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 149). The Meta-effects social support had on academic persistence focused on building resiliency in Indigenous students. Social support facilitated students through the process of building resiliency by helping them uncover their sense of purpose and recognizing their abilities.

The respondents discussed how social support assisted Indigenous students to find their sense of purpose. As one faculty participant explained, some students revealed their sense of purpose when they had the opportunity to experience the social support at FNUniv, Northern campus. She identified,

that sense of finding their purpose... is one of the things the university helps students to have and reinforce. ... they come ... for their children, for their community, but [once here] it [a sense of purpose] gets shaped, and it gets validated, and it becomes clear. (FFG, p. 23)

Consequently, it was perceived that for some Indigenous students being immersed in culturally responsive approaches, such as learning about the history of Indigenous peoples and having the opportunity to connect with cultural people, uncovered a sense of purpose and level of determination to meet their goals.

The respondents expressed that goal setting was important in determining a student's sense of purpose. Staff and faculty members used social support to help students identify and set a variety of goals that were associated with students' expectations. One faculty member voiced

it wasn't just achieving the certificate at the end... that defined success, but the students identifying what their goals were, what their limitations were, what their vision was. And once they tapped into that, and then came the persistence. (FFG, p. 14)

Indigenous students did not always view completion of their academic program as their primary goal, but rather staff and faculty members used social support to help Indigenous students identify other goals, based on their expectations, that fostered academic persistence.

Using social support to highlight students' positive attributes was also crucial to building resiliency. Even though some Indigenous students were not successful in completing their undergraduate program, the acknowledgement of their progress focused on their positive attributes. In the following quote, a faculty participant interpreted how social support was used to identify the student's positive attributes. She said,

not all ... students finish [their undergraduate program], yet we felt that the majority of them were successful. [Even] if they identified that this wasn't for them at this time, to us that was a success. ... [or if] they were doing well in the other classes, and they identified where they want[ed] to go from there, that was a success to us. (FFG, p. 14)

When social support highlighted students' positive attributes, students acknowledged their sense of purpose and gained confidence in their abilities to meet their own goals.

The research participants also shared how some Indigenous students had to separate from discouraging peers and family members and find new social support that aligned with their sense of purpose and goals. One staff participant said,

what I see with students is that when they make the transition to university, what they think were supportive friends and family are no longer supports that are deemed feasible within university. They separate from the dysfunction, and they're trying to lead or walk down this new path to have a better support, they have to then seek other personal supports to help them persist through. (STFG2, p. 16)

Subsequently, the participants perceived that staff and faculty members provided the necessary emotional and informational support to these students by offering suggestions on how to disband from the dysfunction and work towards meeting their personal goals. The information helped Indigenous students problem solve and provided them with the necessary tools to deal with future academic and personal challenges.

The Meta-effects evolved from social support, promoting resiliency in Indigenous students. Through finding a sense of purpose, establishing goals, and highlighting positive attributes, social support helped Indigenous students build personal insight into their academic experiences and personal journeys.

Side effect: Shaping identity. Side effects “are those outcomes quite far away from the original intention” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 139). The side effects of social support on the academic persistence of Indigenous post-secondary students were directed towards shaping students’ identities. The participants perceived that social support affected the students’ character either through a defining moment or collective interactions.

Participants perceived that even though social support may appear trifling, it could still have a tremendous effect on building a student’s character. A faculty member continued by sharing the following story to illustrate how social support was significant in the development of one Indigenous student’s personal and professional identity. She said,

our students, when they come to this university, they have a defining moment in their life that changes their perspective... And it could be a big moment, it could be a little moment, it could be just a look or a feel or a feeling or a touch or something, and that's where I've seen some magnificent changes in students.

I think about one student who was frightened about going in front of a class to do some public speaking...Because of her fear, she withdrew from the course, went and took toastmasters and came back to complete the course and the rest of her program. That was a defining moment for this individual like she knew that she had to somehow understand her own voice and how important it was. (FFG, p. 16-17)

Even though the student discontinued the course, she was driven to seek additional social support to overcome her fears. Consequently, the additional social support encouraged her to surmount her fear, which contributed to her personal and professional identity.

A second participant shared that defining moments surfaced when different viewpoints were presented to students. She said,

we present social work in an Indigenous way. Previously social work has been harmful; it has been controlling...Our students come with a beautiful authenticity and feel... it's

good to challenge that mainstream social work system... we're really impacting how people think and act in their lives. (FFG, p. 23)

Therefore, the approaches used by Indigenous social work faculty created a defining moment that motivated students to uncover and use their values and beliefs to challenge and offer solutions to address the inadequacies within the current social work system.

The student participants also shared their thoughts about how mutual social support helped to shape their identity. The first student participant said

it's [social support] connecting me to my identity and my home and who I am, that foundation. The foundation that was there that I didn't recognize or the foundation that wasn't there at all that I'm building on. (SFG, p.10)

The second student confirmed the shared social support had a positive effect on her identity. She said,

a positive would be finding yourself here and your identity. I deal with identity issues. So, I'm kind of finding where I belong and what kind of path that's for me, not what people expect of me or what my band expects of me. (SFG, p.9)

These quotes demonstrated that the shared social support Indigenous students received encouraged and supported many students to discover and develop their identity.

The research participants focused on the positive effects social support had on the academic persistence of Indigenous students. Their response indicated that the direct, Meta, and side effects were interconnected and revealed that motivation contributed to building resilience and developing an identity in many Indigenous students. Not all Indigenous students were motivated or resilient. For many Indigenous students, social support was scarce, and consequently, some students struggled with meeting their academic requirements and caring for the needs of their children and families. Also, not all students found attending FNUniv, Northern campus, as a meaningful experience. Each Indigenous student assigned their worth to their educational experience, and for some, attending Northern campus did not contribute to their identity in any significant way.

Theme 5: Effects of Social Support on Students' Health

The participants in the study contributed to the data by speaking about the positive effects social support had on Indigenous students' health. This discussion was likewise categorized into direct, Meta, and side effects.

Direct effect: Physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health. The research participants identified many direct effects when asked, "What effects do social support have on the health of Indigenous post-secondary students?" The direct effects were the outcomes social support had on the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual elements of students' health.

Student participants shared that they were eating healthier and engaging in more physical activity through encouragement from peers, family, and staff members. Others identified that their self-confidence had improved since meeting academic advisors and receiving faculty encouragement. Writing and tutoring services also improved students' academic abilities enhancing their mental health. One student shared how being exposed to Indigenous ceremonies at the Northern campus had encouraged her to explore her spirituality and participate in ceremonies with her family. Even though the student participants provided personal examples as to how social support affected individual aspects of their health, there was an overall agreement when one student said, "all of those supports have affected my physical, emotional, mental and spiritual health in a positive way" (SFG, p. 4).

The majority of staff and faculty members acknowledged the direct effects social support had on the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual elements of students' health. One staff member explained how the previous campus nurse provided services that contributed positively to students' physical health. The nurse offered community kitchen classes that focused on learning how to cook and healthy eating, and she was also the link to public health services and provided childhood and adult immunizations. Another staff member shared how the use of an Indigenous worldview affected students' mental health. She claimed to learn through an Indigenous worldview challenged the frame of reference held by many Indigenous students and, "students need[ed] to think differently about where they are coming [from]" (STFG2, p. 28). Both staff and faculty members referred to the health benefits of culturally responsive approaches and ceremonies. One faculty member shared how culturally responsive approaches affected both the emotional and spiritual health of students.

Well, I think most universities look at providing support for student's physical, and mental, and possibly emotional health ... I think our university dares to look at the spiritual health, we bring in those cultural activities ... and help them find their meaning and purpose, and so I think without us even knowing it, our supports are geared towards addressing their spiritual needs and when they find that sense of purpose, I suspect that's sort of the link to what makes academic success more possible is because they're moving towards what they should be moving towards. (FFG, p.31)

Consequently, the culturally responsive approaches and traditional ceremonies lent to the development of the students' academic persistence and positively affected students' emotional and spiritual health.

For descriptive purposes, individual examples were provided to demonstrate the direct effects of social support on the different elements of health. The following section will explore how social support was used to help students recognize their strengths as contributors to their health.

Meta-effect: Recognized strengths. The Meta-effect, for this study, arose from staff and faculty members using social support to teach Indigenous students about their strengths. At times this meant, starting from the beginning with students who had little direction. As one staff member mentioned, "this school helps break down a person to build them back up" (STFG1, p. 20), and social support helps students "create a good foundation to live a prosperous, healthy life" (STFG1, p. 20).

The social support provided by the staff and faculty members at the Northern campus created a sense of safety for many Indigenous students. As one faculty member mentioned, the Northern campus was "an Indigenous place where you don't have to fight against the Western push of racism and colonization on a daily basis. It's a strength-based approach that looks at your culture as being a strength rather than a liability" (FFG, p. 24). This culturally responsive approach reinforced the positive aspects of the Indigenous culture and provided a sense of safety where Indigenous students could learn without fear of judgment.

One staff member shared how social support uncovered the strengths possessed by some of the Indigenous students. She stated, "Some of our students come, and they already have some knowledge ...[and] a lot of gifts that they don't really necessarily recognize until it's pointed out

to them” (STFG2, p. 14). This staff member understood that although Indigenous students had different beliefs and values, many of them carried strengths that contributed to their health, but at times, students needed support for their strengths to be recognized.

Another faculty member acknowledged that some Indigenous students had difficulty expressing the gifts that contributed to their health. She said,

for a lot of them, it's very hard to put themselves out there and ... to know what are the strengths of my community, what are the strengths of my people, what are the strengths of myself? And when we talk about holistic health, just knowing your strengths, knowing your contributions you can make, developing your skills... [supports] that perseverance. (FFG, p. 32)

This faculty member acknowledged that social support encouraged students to appreciate the strengths they received from their culture, family, and community and recognize the value these strengths brought to their health.

As evident from the quotes provided by the research participants, staff, and faculty members worked with students to acknowledge their strengths that contributed to their health. It is important to remember that the elements of health are interconnected. Consequently, the following section includes an exploration of how staff and faculty members used the Medicine Wheel framework to provide social support that encouraged students to examine the connections between their elements of health and work towards balance.

Side Effect: Using the Medicine Wheel framework. The side effects originated from the staff and faculty members’ use of the Medicine Wheel framework to deliver social support. The Medicine Wheel framework focused on the foundational concepts of balance and harmony (Hart, 2002). Subsequently, it was perceived that social support provided through the Medicine Wheel framework was directed towards helping students recognize connections and balance their health.

One of the Elders shared how she used the Medicine Wheel framework to describe the aspects of health and identify the connections between the aspects.

I usually teach the Medicine Wheel ...[and] we talk about the balance and the four aspects of self... I talk about the mental, the emotional and the physical and spiritual

part[s] ... So, they better understand how to work on the parts that they have issues [with].
(STFG2, p. 28)

Her approach to using the Medicine Wheel framework demonstrated the connections between the aspects of health and the need for students to foster the connections in order to achieve balance.

The Medicine Wheel framework used by staff and faculty members also helped students determine an imbalance within their health. A staff member said,

a lot of times it's just helping them; you want to figure out what's going on with their medicine wheel, why are things happening, why are they feeling that way, why are things going wrong, right... It's not about fixing it for them but helping them see what they feel needs to happen in order to get back in balance and then supporting them in that choice.
(STFG2, p. 27)

Staff and faculty members helped students acknowledge their imbalances and supported students to adjust the other aspects in order to achieve balance.

When staff and faculty members provided social support through the Medicine Wheel framework, it encouraged harmony between themselves and the students. According to Hart (2002), harmony “requires people to ... find a fit between the components of life through collaboration, sharing what is available, cooperation and respect ...” (p. 43). A staff member said,

I think that ... when you bring up those four areas of the medicine wheel ... the supports have a stabilizing effect ... it's stabilizing enough that they can kind of get their bearings, figure out ... what areas are out of balance and what they need to do to bring it back into balance. We're there to support them while they do that ... that's what these personal supports are for, to support them until they can get their wheel back in balance. (STFG2, p.27)

The side effects focused on balance and harmony. Staff and faculty members used the Medicine Wheel framework to display the four elements of health, to assist students in determining imbalance, and to assist students as they worked towards balancing their health.

Primarily, the effects of social support on the health of Indigenous students were distinct and positive. The direct effects were the outcomes social support had on students' elements of

health, whereas the Meta and side effects addressed how social support was used to draw out strengths and support Indigenous students towards balancing their health. Not all Indigenous students experienced positive effects of social support on their health. Some Indigenous students experienced problems sleeping and increased levels of stress when social support was limited or non-existent, and these effects caused imbalance and consequently negatively impacted their health.

Summary

This chapter began with a review of the data gathering and analysis processes. The study sample included twenty-four participants, purposefully selected from Indigenous students, staff, and faculty members from FNUniv, Northern campus. All student participants were Indigenous, undergraduate students, and the staff and faculty members were employed to provide direct service to Indigenous students.

From the field notes, memos, four focus group interviews and three face-to-face interviews, data emerged to describe the contexts and as themes that answered the five supplemental research questions. The themes were identified as: challenges, social support, authentic relationships, and the effects of social support on academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students. Each theme had additional subthemes, which deepened the understanding of each answer. Chapter Five will present the discussion and relevant conclusions in light of the related literature and conceptual framework. Chapter Six will explore the implications for policy, practice, and theory, provide recommendations for further study and conclude with my final thoughts.

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the study, followed by a summary of the study's themes. In the subsequent sections, I will align and compare the themes with the literature presented in Chapter Two, leading to the delineation of findings. The conceptual framework will then be reconsidered, and a summary will conclude the chapter.

Overview of the Study

The PSE gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians continues to widen. Consequently, there is a need to understand how post-secondary institutions can support academic persistence in Indigenous undergraduate students. A review of the literature in Chapter Two pointed to gaps in knowledge about the effects social support had on Indigenous post-secondary students who attended an Indigenous-affiliated post-secondary institution. I proposed to examine the different types of social supports available to Indigenous post-secondary students who attend an Indigenous-affiliated post-secondary institution to understand how these supports influence Indigenous students' academic persistence and health. Based on this background information, the following supplemental questions guided my study:

1. What challenges do Indigenous post-secondary students face?
2. Who provides social support to Indigenous post-secondary students?
3. How is social support delivered to Indigenous post-secondary students?
4. What effect does social support have on the academic persistence of Indigenous post-secondary students?
5. What effect does social support have on the health of Indigenous post-secondary students?

An intrinsic case study was chosen as the method for this study, and purposeful sampling was used. The criteria for the purposeful sample included: Indigenous students enrolled in and

attending undergraduate post-secondary courses, designated undergraduate teaching faculty, and support staff currently working with Indigenous undergraduate students. The perspectives of Indigenous post-secondary students, faculty and staff members employed at FNUniv, Northern campus were gathered through field notes, memos, focus group interviews, and face-to-face interviews after ethics approval was granted by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural and Biomedical Research Ethics Boards.

My background and professional experiences working with Indigenous people permitted me to assume an insider role in this study. As an insider, I was acquainted with the culture, values, and beliefs that were embraced at Northern campus. The participants brought forth their own culturally specific knowledge which was different from my own. During the data collection, analysis and interpretation, I was curious to see how our cultural knowledge intersected. Consequently, I was flexible and attentive to the participants' unique experiences and I reflected on the similarities and differences between the participants' multiple realities and my own with the aim of revealing an authentic account of how social support affected the academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students at Northern campus.

Data analysis followed Creswell and Poth's (2018) data analysis spiral and included a synchronized process of: managing the data, reading and writing memos, describing and classifying codes, interpreting, representing the data. Data from the four focus group interviews and three face-to-face interviews were recorded and listened to several times and once transcribed, data was organized, read, and compared numerous times in order to gain an overall impression. Also, memos and field notes were written, read, and rewritten throughout the holistic, topic, and analytical coding phases to record nuances, categories, and potential themes. After careful analysis within and across the data, themes emerged and were confirmed by the advisory group and interview participants.

The data from the study answered the five supplemental research questions and revealed five themes pertinent to understanding how social support affected the academic persistence and health of Indigenous students: challenges, social support, authentic relationships, the effects of social support on academic persistence and the effects of social support on health. The first theme revealed that many Indigenous students face several personal, familial, social, and campus centred challenges. The second theme denoted that Indigenous students receive social support

from their peers, family, community, staff, and faculty members from FNUUniv, Northern campus. The third theme signified how staff and faculty members delivered social support through forming authentic relationships that involved displaying genuine interest, building trust, creating a supportive environment, and establishing connections with Indigenous students. The fourth theme revealed that social support improves academic persistence by providing motivation, building resilience, and shaping identity among Indigenous post-secondary students attending the case institution. The fifth theme stipulated that social support provided through the Medicine Wheel framework enhanced Indigenous students' health. The next section will discuss the five co-constructed themes and connect and compare the themes to similar findings from the literature found in Chapter Two.

Theme 1: Challenges

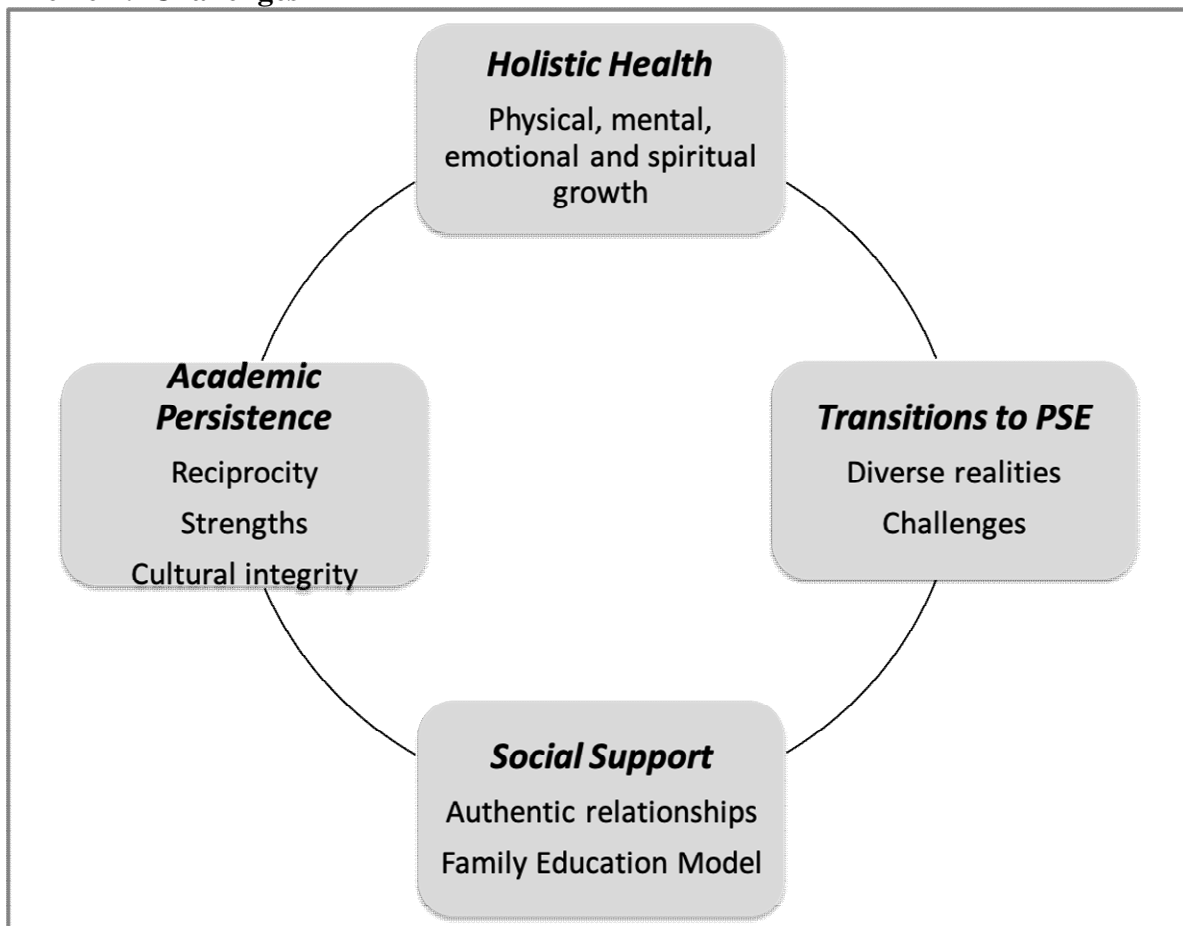


Figure 5.1 Conceptual framework: Social support aligning with academic persistence and health

Following the conceptual framework and starting at the right-hand side of the circle is where Indigenous students entered PSE with a variety of life experiences and may face

challenges depending on personal circumstances. Participants in this study indicated many challenges stemmed from students' struggles, familial dissonance, social preconceptions, and institutional strains that arose from the legacies of colonization. The participants' perceptions of the challenges corresponded with the literature as other researchers concluded that Indigenous students had been subjected to historical, social, geographical, demographic, cultural and personal barriers in PSE (Hardes, 2006; Holmes, 2006; Indspire, 2018). The participants' perception of the challenges acknowledged the heterogeneity among Indigenous students but also revealed the commonalities. The commonalities provided a shared understanding of how challenges and potential outcomes may affect Indigenous students. The data did not allow me to dig deeper and understand why the differences in challenges existed.

Personal challenges. Participants reflected on their perceptions of students' academic self-concept. Participants shared the skepticism Indigenous students portrayed in their sense of confidence in meeting university expectations. Several student participants questioned their place at university and their ability to perform at a university-level academically. Bodkin-Andrews et al. (2017) confirmed that Aboriginal students had lower self-concept concerning education aspirations and performance, which contributed to stress and feelings of academic inadequacy when compared to non-Indigenous students. Although Bodkin-Andrews et al. (2017) did not endorse a specific reason for low academic self-concept in Aboriginal students, the participants identified that it was the result of many students being ill-equipped to deal with the rigours of academic life and acknowledged, "that high school really didn't prepare [Indigenous students] for university ..." (STFG1, p. 26). Consequently, this finding coincides with the researchers who have indicated that secondary schooling traditionally has not adequately prepared Aboriginal students for the rigours of PSE (Hardes, 2006; Rodriguez, 2003; Shankar et al., 2013). Finnie et al., (2010) also determined the lack of academic preparedness in Indigenous post-secondary students originated from being a first-generation student, but for this study, data regarding familial, educational experiences were not collected; therefore it could not be assumed that inadequate academic skills resulted from the Indigenous students being first-generation students.

Participants also perceived that the generational effects of residential schools contributed to Indigenous students' low academic self-concept. It was identified that students continue to be influenced by their parents' and grandparents' experiences at residential schools and the often-

debilitating beliefs that were forced upon them. Consequently, many Indigenous students felt personally and academically inferior to students who did not have relatives who attended residential schools. The literature detailing the generational effects of residential schools on the academic self-concept of Indigenous post-secondary students is limited; however, Stout and Peters (2011) found that professional First Nations women, whom mothers attended residential schools, were more likely to battle with feelings of self-hate and low self-esteem. This study is a worthwhile comparison because both sample groups include Indigenous females with diverse economic and educational experiences.

Familial challenges. Bingham et al. (2014) suggested that female Aboriginal students struggled to academically persist when faced with multiple family responsibilities and limited family support. In the study, it was perceived that for many Indigenous students, familial challenges derived from the lack of family support and having numerous familial responsibilities. Once Indigenous students relocated, they were often disconnected or disengaged from their familial support. Consequently, with limited familial support, some struggled to adequately care for their families and meet their academic demands, which challenged their academic persistence and mental health. Holmes (2005, 2006) also found that when Aboriginal students were separated from their families, they experienced isolation. Therefore, Bingham et al. (2014) suggested that for female Aboriginal students to fulfill their familial and academic responsibilities, family support was needed to provide motivation, childcare, and cultural connection.

Social challenges. Insufficient financial resources have been identified in the literature as one of the most pertinent challenges faced by Aboriginal post-secondary students (Archibald et al., 1995; Assembly of First Nations, 2012; Indspire, 2018; Shankar et al., 2013; Thompson & Hill-MacDonald, 2018; Timmons & Stoicheff, 2016; Usher, 2009). The participants confirmed that funding concerns were significant for the Indigenous students at FNUniv, Northern campus. In particular, one student referred to her internal struggle with financing her education and said, "It's stressful dealing with student loans, and all I think about is, am I going to get the money? Is it going to be enough?" (SFG, p. 8). In the study, other Indigenous students dealt with extreme financial hardship when it came to financing their PSE. Whether or not they were funded through PSSSP or other financial programs, the funds received were often insufficient to meet the

individual physiological and safety needs of housing, food, clothing, transportation, and tuition. This finding confirmed what Bingham et al. (2014) found that inadequate financial support caused stress and despair, which negatively impacted the academic persistence and health of Aboriginal students. Stress was compounded for the Aboriginal students who were female and had dependents since the additional costs associated with supporting dependents were often not covered. One participant referred to the hardships Indigenous students endured because of financial insecurity. She frequently heard other students saying, "I can't take it anymore, I need to quit ... I can't stand it ... I've no food in my cupboard... [to feed my family]" (Jane, p. 23). This finding confirms with Iwasaki et al. (2005), who found that insufficient funding created a lack of control over one's life, which resulted in feelings of anxiety, insecurity, low self-esteem, and hopelessness.

Bailey (2016) and Clark et al. (2014) concluded that Aboriginal post-secondary students experience discrimination in mainstream post-secondary institutions. Bailey (2016) found that at McMaster University, discrimination stemmed from a lack of awareness and knowledge about the history and current issues affecting Aboriginal students. Similarly, Clark et al. (2014), whose study took place in an urban Canadian university, found that insensitive professors who overlooked or misrepresented Aboriginal people or redefined the role of Aboriginal students as cultural experts to suit their own needs fuelled discrimination. Both studies noted that discrimination alienated Aboriginal students from the rest of the post-secondary institution (Bailey, 2016; Clark et al., 2014). The participants, in the current study, did not identify any acts of discrimination occurring between Indigenous students, staff, and faculty members at the Northern campus. Instead, it was perceived that because Northern campus was an Indigenous-affiliated post-secondary institution that used culturally responsive approaches and had roots in Indigenous worldviews, traditions, language and values that insensitivity towards Indigenous students and lack of knowledge about Indigenous cultures were unfounded.

Campus challenges. Participants revealed some specific campus challenges arose from structural inequality. As previously stated, the Northern campus is one of the three campuses of FNUniv. The Northern campus is located in the downtown core of Prince Albert, SK. At the time of the study, the campus consisted of two buildings, one of which was a previous department store, and the other was a bowling alley. While each of the buildings was renovated, there was no

designated green space, and the participants identified the buildings required repair. Although the participants did not identify how the location and condition of the building affect students' academic persistence and health, Lee, Jordon and Horsely (2015) identified that reserved maintenance, lack of green space and the undesirable location of a campus reduces students' physical activity and social interactions resulting in higher levels of stress and anxiety. Higher levels of stress and anxiety can adversely affect health and contribute to poor academic persistence.

The lack of building maintenance was blamed on limited financial resources. One staff member shared, "[it is] because we don't have the resources to put those resources in place...we don't have the funds... there's a lot of budgetary kind of restraints that don't allow us to have those resources in place" (Margo, p. 4). The Aboriginal Institutes' Consortium (2005) found that Aboriginal institutions of higher education are continuously challenged by the lack of stable, adequate funding. While FNUiv received federal and provincial grants for its operations, the institution continued to struggle to provide appropriate building maintenance due to a lack of financial resources.

According to the data provided by the participants, a campus daycare was a pertinent service missing from the Northern campus. The participants shared many Indigenous students at the Northern campus were caregivers and had to juggle their program schedules and miss classes to meet the demands of off-campus childcare. Bonnycastle and Prentice (2011) recognized that "post-secondary education institutions fail all students - and particularly Aboriginal women students – when they position campus and community childcare services as peripheral to the educational mandate and fail to accommodate the caregiving needs of their students" (p.13).

The participants shared that due to availability and convenience, many of the cultural activities at Northern campus were based on local Cree beliefs and practices and consequently excluded students who belonged to other Indigenous groups. One student, who was Anishinaabe, shared that when she attended a Cree pipe ceremony, she felt ignored because she was not allowed to participate. She said, "I felt quite excluded ... I don't even know why I was there because I ... felt like wallpaper or a plant ..." (Jane, p.6). Consequently, according to Galabuzi (2016), the feeling of exclusion leads to educational underachievement.

There is a gap in the literature examining the impact specific cultural activities have on Indigenous students. Guillory and Wolverton (2008) indicated that Native American post-secondary students who engaged in Pan-Indian cultural activities, such as powwows and potlucks, experienced an increase in their confidence to persist academically. It was presumed that if Cree-centric cultural resources alienated students from other Indigenous heritages, Pan-Indian resources would also distance some Indigenous students. Accordingly, the absence of nation-specific cultural resources isolated some Indigenous students.

Paquette and Fallon (2014) concluded that a society that sees little value in Aboriginal knowledge and culture is less supportive of Aboriginal PSE. The data from the participants revealed that academic tensions stemmed from the belief that programs and courses offered at the Northern campus were substandard when compared to mainstream institutions. It was perceived that undergraduate programs infused with culturally responsive approaches were less rigorous and had less credibility, confirming the presence of a parity paradox as described by Paquette and Fallon (2010). For the staff and faculty members, at the Northern campus, it was an ongoing challenge to ensure culturally responsive approaches were integrated effectively while meeting academic expectations within the different undergraduate programs. Consequently, to improve the credibility of the institution, there is a need for a more equitable distribution of culturally responsive resources and for public sharing of how culturally responsive social supports improve the academic persistence of Indigenous post-secondary students.

Research studies have shown that a multitude of challenges often plagues Aboriginal students (Bingham et al., 2014; Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2017; Hards, 2006; Holmes, 2006; Inspire, 2018; Ottman, 2017; Timmons et al., 2009). The participants recognized that the challenges were interconnected, and some students experienced a ripple effect stemming from one challenge. For example, a staff member recalled a conversation she had with a student about the challenges she faced. The student revealed she was struggling in one of her courses because she was dealing with her partner, who recently lost his job. As a result of this, the student had to obtain full-time employment to support her spouse, children, and education. Soon after she obtained full-time employment, her spouse started drinking alcohol, which led to him becoming abusive towards her and her children, so she had to find alternative housing and childcare. During the conversation, she questioned her ability to continue with her program, seeing that she

was having difficulty finding time to study and complete her assignments. This short description provides evidence that personal, familial, and social challenges were interconnected and, when compounded, caused a ripple effect that made it extremely difficult for affected students to be healthy and persist academically.

In summary, the participants shared that Indigenous students experienced collective personal, familial, and social challenges and many of these challenges resulted from unjust historical and contemporary policies that continue to contribute to the general sense of deprivation felt by Indigenous people (Indspire, 2018). Notably, historical policies such as the *Indian Act (1867)* and residential schools and more contemporary issues such as the inadequate funding of PSE and the ongoing battle with systemic and pervasive racism have contributed to Indigenous peoples' PSE inequities. It could be argued that these challenges exist because of a colonial presence, which must be acknowledged to understand the experiences of Indigenous post-secondary students fully.

Theme 2: Social Support

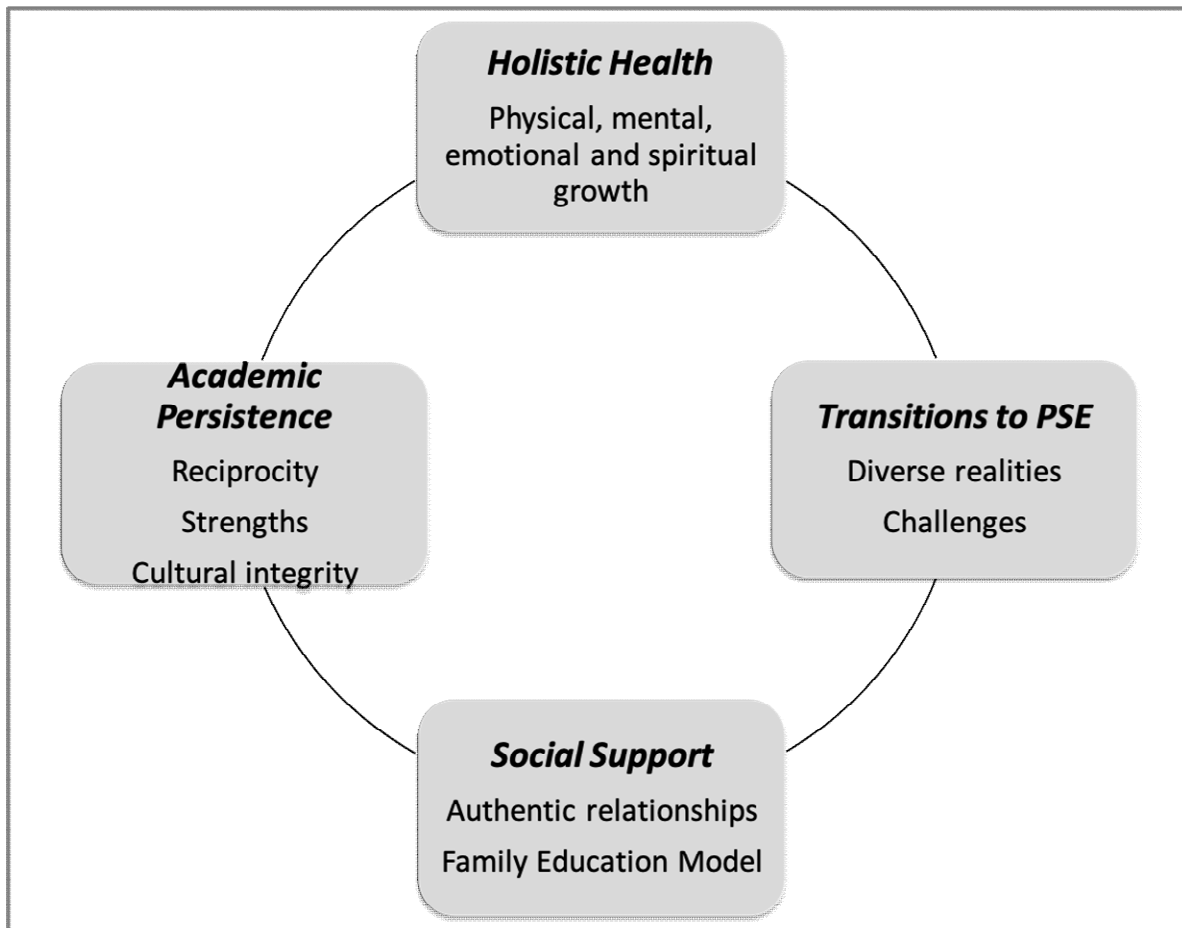


Figure 5.2 Conceptual framework: Social support aligning with academic persistence and health.

The next two themes, social support and authentic relationships, move us to the bottom of the conceptual framework. In Chapter One, social support was defined as “a flow of emotional concern, instrumental aid, information and/or appraisal...” by informal and formal sources (House, 1981, p. 26). Participants revealed a common understanding that peers, family, and communities, as well as staff and faculty members at Northern campus, provided emotional, instrumental, informational and appraisal support to Indigenous post-secondary students.

Peer support. Participants understood that Indigenous students provided support to each other. One staff member said, “[they] support each other and help each other through the whole thing [undergraduate courses]. And if someone doesn't understand a concept, then they all try to help one another” (STFG2, p.15). This was evident throughout the data, as several participants identified how Indigenous peers demonstrated emotional and informational support through

cooperation, attentiveness, and an eagerness to help each other. Similarly, Ragoonaden and Mueller (2017) found that peer mentoring provided an outlet for students to share their experiences and offered social, emotional, and academic support to each other. Gallop and Bastien (2016) also identified that “being around other Aboriginal students who shared many of their experiences had a positive impact on their individual motivation” (p. 216).

It is important to note that in the studies by Ragoonaden and Mueller (2017) and Gallop and Bastien (2016), the Aboriginal students they studied attended mainstream institutions, and their connections with other Aboriginal peers occurred primarily in designated spaces that housed Aboriginal integrated programs. These spaces honoured Aboriginal beliefs and values and subsequently supported Aboriginal students to form peer networks with each other (Gallop & Bastien, 2016; Ragoonaden & Mueller, 2017). However, in the study, the culturally responsive approach infused Indigenous knowledge, practices, and ways of knowing throughout the campus, and Indigenous students were supported to connect with peers in all places. As well, with the majority of the student population being of Indigenous ancestry with similar life experiences, they could network with other Indigenous students anywhere on campus. Consequently, the culturally responsive approaches played a critical role in fostering Indigenous student enrolment and the formation of Indigenous peer networks at the case institution.

Family support. For the participants of this study, the support students received from their families were indispensable. For many Indigenous students, their families were multilayered and consisted of members of their immediate, extended, community, clan, and cultural families. One student identified her family as her parents and children while another student identified her family as consisting of her children and “adopted sister and my adopted mom, who are strangers” (SFG, p.15).

The participants in the study found that Indigenous students were connected to their multifaceted family and depended on them for guidance and reassurance. Notably, family members provided instrumental support through childcare and financial help and emotional support through showing consideration, encouragement, and motivation. These findings confirm Freeman's (2008) findings, which identified that for Aboriginal students, "family members were integral in helping raise and care for children, provide beneficial home environments, maintain

and transmit culture and knowledge and provide motivation to complete degree programs" (p.132).

HeavyRunner and DeCelles (2002) acknowledged the importance of family to Native American students and developed the FEM as an intervention approach to incorporate family-based cultural support for Native American students attending tribal colleges and mainstream post-secondary institutions. The premise of the FEM was “establishing and maintaining a sense of family” to help students, “identify and develop their strengths, rather than passively receiving services designed and delivered by professionals” (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002, p. 3-4). The guiding principle of the FEM involved faculty and staff members, students and their families, working together to strengthen the academic persistence of Native American students.

Similar to the FEM, this study also found that family was significant support for Indigenous students and the inclusion of family at Northern campus supported Indigenous students' engagement and built cultural connections. At the Northern campus, students and their family members were encouraged to participate in full moon and pipe ceremonies and attend sweat lodges to connect with their culture. One student shared that when her family decided to reacquaint themselves with traditional practices, they chose to attend the ceremonies at the Northern campus because of its open and hospitable setting. Another student said that she appreciated being able to bring her children on campus outside of scheduled class times. The acceptance of children on campus recognized the value of family as an integral component in the student's educational process and subsequently strengthened the connection between herself, her family and the Northern campus community. Although other researchers have concluded that family support is essential for Aboriginal post-secondary students, there is a gap in the literature examining how other post-secondary institutions integrate family into the campus community and culturally responsive services (Archibald et al., 1995; Guillory & Wolverson, 2008; Jackson et al., 2003).

Support from staff and faculty members. Participants revealed the commonly held view that staff and faculty members provided emotional, informational, instrumental and appraisal social support to Indigenous post-secondary students attending FNUniv, Northern campus. The participants shared their understanding of the roles staff and faculty members had

in delivering social support. Consequently, acknowledging the roles of staff and faculty members was necessary to understand the level of social support they contributed.

Simpkins and Bonnycastle (2015) highlighted that the leadership, guidance, structure, and supervision provided by staff and faculty members in the delivery of conventional academic services were factors that contributed to the academic success of Aboriginal post-secondary students. The authors found that Aboriginal post-secondary students expressed great satisfaction with the different conventional services they received and appreciated how these amenities helped strengthen their academic and personal skills and provide motivation for persistence (Simpkins & Bonnycastle, 2015). In the study, the participants also established that staff and faculty members provided Indigenous students with the four types of social support through different conventional services such as academic advising, tutoring and writing assistance, academic and personal counselling, library and facilities services. Subsequently, these services helped students with their academic writing, formulating boundaries, and fostering their physical and mental health. A student spoke of her experience of being supported by one particular academic advisor throughout her academic program. She shared how the academic advisor provided informational support while she registered for her first-year courses. The same academic advisor supported her emotionally while she made the decision to leave her studies due to a medical challenge and provided her with empathetic feedback when she returned to finish off her academic program — concluding that for some Indigenous students, the social support they received from staff and faculty members fostered their academic persistence and health.

Participants identified several culturally responsive approaches that offered emotional, informational, instrumental, and appraisal social support. The first approach was the integration of Indigenous knowledge, values, and teaching practices throughout curricula and campus. In the FEM, HeavyRunner and DeCelles (2002) highlighted the importance of incorporating Native values and cultural beliefs into college programs because “a failure to recognize the unique cultural background of Native students will inevitably lead to ineffective educational efforts” (Huffman, 2010, p. 221). Ragoonaden and Mueller (2017) emphasized that Aboriginal students who learned within a curriculum that was based on their cultural frame of reference received holistic support while learning essential academic skills. The participants in the study identified that faculty members provided informational and instrumental social support as they

incorporated Indigenous worldviews and used traditional teaching styles to facilitate student learning. It was perceived that the integration of Indigenous pedagogy built on Indigenous students' cultural strengths and connected their new learning to their personal and professional journeys. Embleton (2012) found comparable results in faculty members who used talking circles, experiential learning experiences, and personal stories. Faculty members who used these teaching techniques were able to connect their teachings to the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of the student (Embleton, 2012).

Guillory and Wolverton (2008) identified the significance of on-campus social support in the academic journey of Native American students. The social support Native American students received from college staff members were not explicitly identified, but the authors acknowledged that they "fostered an environment where students could adjust psychologically and flourish academically" (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008, p. 75). Similarly, in the study, the participants identified how staff and faculty members provided social support through culturally responsive approaches that created a sense of belonging and encouraged academic persistence in Indigenous students. The similarities are explained by the fact that Indigenous students share some commonalities with Native American students concerning experiences in PSE. The differences are possibly explained by the fact that the Native American students in Guillory and Wolverton's (2008) study responded to the social support provided at the Native Student's Center, while in the study, the Indigenous students received social support through culturally responsive approaches immersed throughout the campus. Perhaps the participants were more aware of the influence of culturally responsive approaches versus Native American students who attended a mainstream institution.

In summary, the findings show that Indigenous students received emotional, informational, instrumental, and appraisal support primarily from peers, family and staff and faculty members at FNUniv, Northern campus. The social support provided by these individuals affected Indigenous students differently but demonstrated that culturally responsive social support benefitted Indigenous students at an Indigenous-affiliated institution. Subsequently, this finding adds to the debate on whether Indigenous students are better served by social support in integrated programs offered by mainstream institutions or by culturally responsive approaches provided at Indigenous-affiliated institutions.

Theme 3: Authentic Relationships

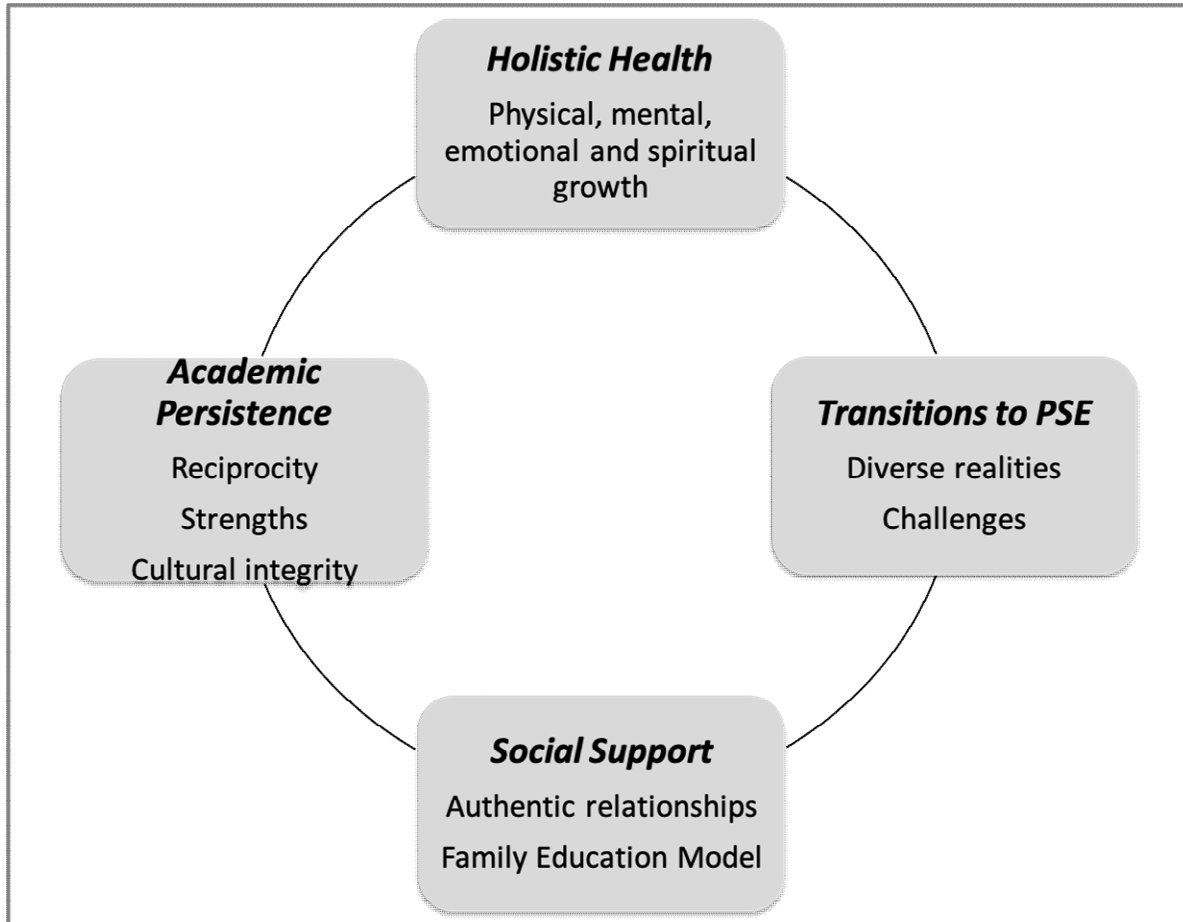


Figure 5.3 Conceptual framework: Social support aligning with academic persistence and health.

Continuing to focus on the bottom of the conceptual framework, we now look at how the creation of authentic relationships with peers, families, communities and staff and faculty members were foundational to the delivery of social support. The majority of the participants articulated how social support was delivered through creating authentic relationships with Indigenous students by showing genuine interest, building trust, crafting a supportive environment, and establishing connections. The participants recognized that staff and faculty members went above and beyond their professional boundaries to create authentic relationships with Indigenous students.

Displaying a genuine interest. Several researchers have highlighted different approaches to showing genuine interest to Indigenous students. The recommendations were rooted in the belief that when Indigenous students were acknowledged, they were better able to relate to others. Embleton (2012) and Jackson et al. (2003) found that when faculty and staff members were approachable and allowed Aboriginal students to share ideas, struggles, and successes, students perceived that faculty and staff members were interested in them. Hampton and Roy (2002) revealed similar findings and found that Aboriginal students were appreciative when faculty and staff members reached out and became aware of students' personal and familial obligations. The findings from the study were similar to those acknowledged by Embleton (2012), Jackson et al. (2003) and Hampton and Roy (2002). In the study, the participants provided detailed interactions as to how staff and faculty members demonstrated genuine interest by being open and available, displaying empathy, providing comfort and console, and being encouraging. These actions were used as a means to address students' physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual elements and to make students feel significant. Consequently, these findings indicated that faculty and staff members valued Indigenous students as holistic beings as they demonstrated pure feelings and actions for the good of the students.

Building trust. As the generational effects of colonization continue to impact Indigenous post-secondary students, it is essential to recognize that many Indigenous students enter PSE with some degree of suspicion. In particular, the experiences at residential schools have created distrust in educational institutions and educators for survivors and their descendants. Hampton and Roy (2002) established that faculty members must show Aboriginal students that they can be trusted. Embleton (2012) recognized that Aboriginal students trusted faculty members who were willing to work with them towards academic achievement. Mainly, students trusted faculty members who believed in their abilities and provided realistic expectations (Gallop & Bastien, 2016). Low or no expectations translated into doubt and discouraged Aboriginal students from persisting (Gallop & Bastien, 2016).

Participants in the study shared that early interactions and the ability to form rapport were essential to building trust with Indigenous students and staff and faculty members. The opportunities for students to be heard and validated were acknowledged as a type of familial support that most students lacked due to being displaced from their families and communities.

Consequently, when staff and faculty members took on a familial role, trust was built. This finding coincides with one of the four assertions of the FEM by HeavyRunner and DeCelles (2002). The model asserted that institutions must replicate some of the functions traditionally performed by the extended family, in order to meet students' needs and establish trust. HeavyRunner and DeCelles (2002) highlighted that when Native American students were separated from their familial supports, it may be necessary for staff and faculty members to replicate some of the functions typically performed by family members such as assisting in securing childcare and sharing cultural values and traditions. The authors believed that this additional familial support would help form trust with Indigenous students (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002). In the study, it was indicated that staff and faculty members went beyond their professional roles of meeting students' academic needs. Through the use of conventional supports and culturally responsive approaches, they shared cultural knowledge and ceremonies to support students' holistic health. They acted as extended family members by assisting with familial responsibilities and social circumstances in order to build trust with Indigenous students.

Crafting a supportive environment. Researchers identified that a designated physical space was imperative to creating a supportive environment for Aboriginal students (Embleton, 2012; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Hinds, 2014). In these studies, the designated space was identified as a resource center specifically for Aboriginal students. For the most part, these resource centers housed academic, personal, social, and cultural services for Aboriginal students and provided a space for staff and Elders to connect with students. Guillory and Wolverton (2008) highlighted that the Native American Student Center "countered the effects of leaving home and the feelings of isolation that many of the Native American students encountered during their stay at the university" (p.76). According to Hinds (2014), her participants "found comfort, community and a second home in their center" (p.149). In these two studies, the Aboriginal resource centers evolved. Initially, the centers housed necessary services, but once students became comfortable and familiar with space, students were able to connect and form relationships with one another and the staff (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Hinds, 2014).

Similar to the findings in the study, Hampton and Roy (2002) identified that creating an atmosphere of equality and cooperation was key to establishing a supportive environment for Aboriginal students. The authors described how faculty members facilitated fairness and

collaboration through the use of holistic and experiential strategies. The goal was to reduce competition and integrate traditional Aboriginal epistemology into the classroom to connect students to faculty and their cultural heritage (Hampton & Roy, 2002). In the study, participants emphasized how staff and faculty members established a culturally responsive campus where Indigenous history, traditions, and practices were integrated throughout the campus setting. As one faculty member said, “it is that spirit, environment, that helps build the rich relationships” (FFG, p. 19). The goal was to create a collective environment where Indigenous students felt safe and were treated fairly and justly regardless of the social or academic standings. Many mainstream institutions predominantly convey Eurocentric knowledge and practices, which overwhelm many of the Aboriginal students who attend. Particularly, Aboriginal students struggled to find a connection between their cultural knowledge and mainstream ideologies (Hampton & Roy, 2002). In the study, when Indigenous students were provided with the opportunity to learn in an environment integrated with Indigenous pedagogy and epistemology, it felt like home and strengthened the connection between their learned knowledge and the Indigenous culture.

Establishing connections. Embleton (2012) highlighted that when Aboriginal students did not form connections with faculty or staff members, they struggled, and the limited interaction with staff and faculty members often made students feel devalued and unworthy. In the study, one staff member agreed and said, “students who aren’t successful, are the ones who have a hard time connecting with other people” (STFG1, p.12). When staff and faculty members took on family roles, shared Indigenous knowledge and practices, demonstrated genuine interest, and built trust, they were able to form connections with Indigenous students. The commitment staff and faculty members had to form connections supported the academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students.

Theme 4: Fostering Motivation, Building Resilience and Shaping Identity

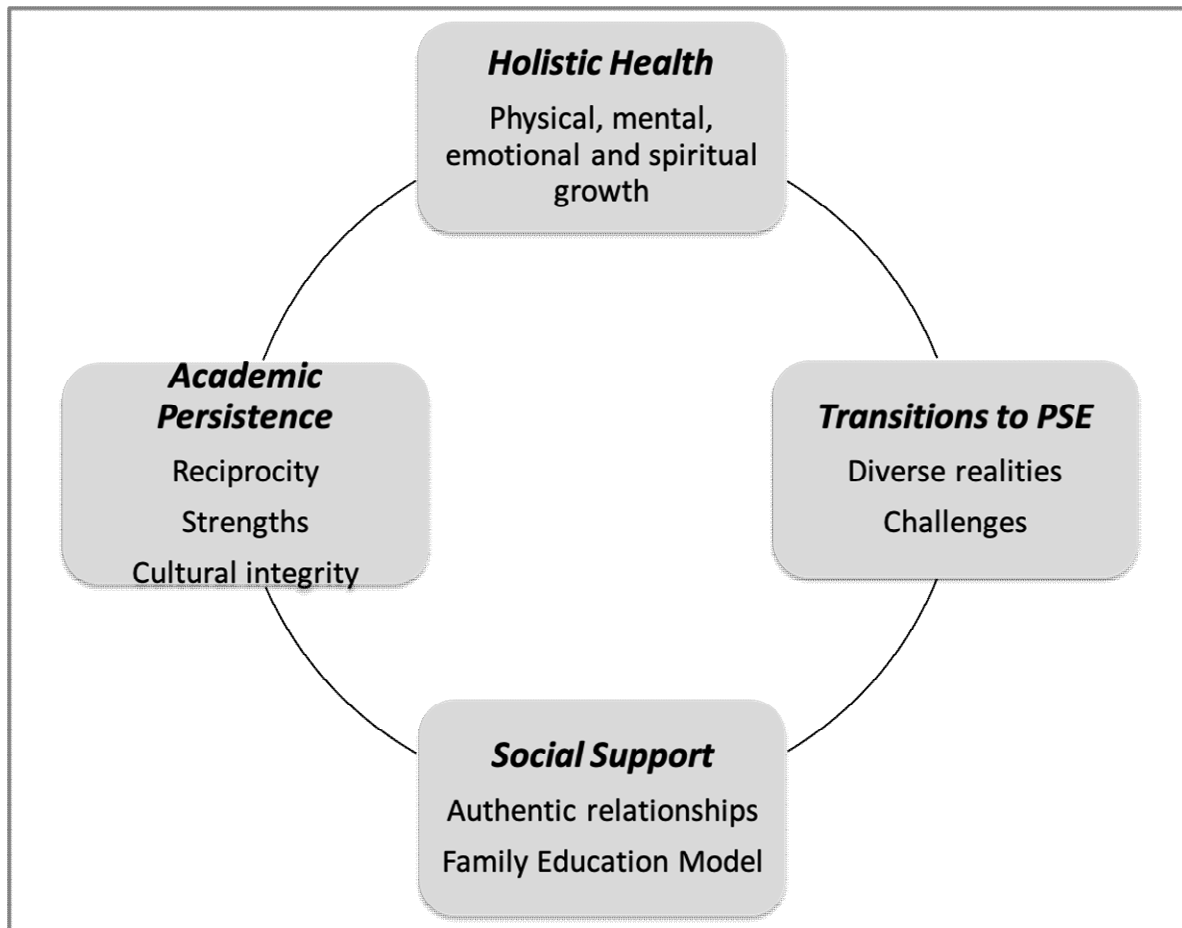


Figure 5.4 Conceptual framework: Social support aligning with academic persistence and health.

On the left side of the conceptual framework, we now look at the effects social support had on Indigenous students' academic persistence. Participants in the study identified three distinct effects social support had on Indigenous students' academic persistence: fostering motivation, building resilience and shaping identity. In Chapter One academic persistence was defined as going beyond meeting certain intellectual benchmarks and rather encouraged Aboriginal students to work towards balancing their four elements: physical, mental, emotional and spiritual while sustaining cultural knowledge, meeting personal goals and giving back to their families and communities (Pidgeon, 2008).

Fostering motivation. Pidgeon (2008) asserted that Aboriginal students had a responsibility of reciprocity and were judged as successful by their motivation to give back to their families and larger Aboriginal communities. The findings of this study highlighted that

motivation was an important factor when examining the effects of social support on Indigenous students' academic persistence. The participants agreed that many students were motivated by the desire to better their lives and the lives of their children, who often provided social support. One staff member said,

In the western society, motivation to go to university is ... to get employment, and for a good number of our students, motivation to come to university is to change the path that they are on and to make a difference in their lives and their children become the motivators. (STFG2, p. 16)

Simpkins and Bonnycastle (2015) also highlighted how support from children and family motivated Aboriginal students to academic persistence. The authors revealed that the support female Aboriginal students received from family and children provided a sense of purpose and motivation to succeed in their educational endeavours and other aspects of their lives. Similarly, the participants in the study also highlighted that the social support students received from their children provided them with the determination to make different life choices that would benefit themselves and their children.

The participants highlighted that many Indigenous students desired to give back to their communities as they aspired to share their new knowledge and skills to show appreciation for the support they had received. Guillory and Wolverton (2008) confirmed that Native American students were motivated to academically persist so they could provide expertise and leadership to benefit their home communities. In the study by Guillory and Wolverton (2008), Native American students believed that their education would provide them with more than a job; "it was an instrument to combat deleterious conditions" in their communities (p. 75). The knowledge students gained from PSE contributes to building nations as the learned culturally appropriate rules, norms and goals and practical leadership skills are central to bringing Indigenous communities together to build promising economic and political futures (Begay, 2016; Cornell & Kalt, 1998).

Building resiliency. In the study, the participants identified that social support assisted in building resiliency in Indigenous students by helping them define their sense of purpose and recognizing their abilities. Particularly the social support Indigenous students received taught them how to adapt by focusing on their goals and building on their strengths. Similar to the

study, Embleton (2012), Gallop and Bastien (2016), Guillory and Wolverton (2008) highlighted that providing different types of social support built resiliency in Aboriginal students by improving their confidence, self-worth and sense of belonging.

In the study, there was also a link between the process of building resiliency and exposure to Indigenous culture. The participants perceived that when Indigenous students were able to determine their sense of purpose through exposure to culturally responsive approaches and authentic relationships, they felt supported to persist academically. Similar to the findings from the study, Pidgeon (2008) highlighted that Aboriginal students who were deemed academically successful were those who worked towards goals and aspirations that were determined by their beliefs, values, and experiences and were “often linked to their relationships with family, community and nation” (p.149). It is important to note that cultural strategies need to reflect the diversity of the Indigenous people and assuming that Pan-Indian strategies will help build resiliency in all Indigenous students is, in fact, discriminatory.

Shaping identity. The findings indicated that social support and engagement in culturally responsive approaches shaped Indigenous students' identities. Participants highlighted that the Indigenous post-secondary students attending Northern campus were unique in their socioeconomic backgrounds, cultures, linguistics, lifestyles, and beliefs, and subsequently, they were not a uniform group with a single identity. The exposure to traditional knowledge, Elders, languages, cultural practices, and ceremonies, through culturally responsive social support, provided students with opportunities to learn who they were through an exploration of their four elements of life: physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. Consequently, participants spoke of how culturally responsive social support encouraged students to explore cultural knowledge and shape their identity through their insights.

According to Tierney and Jun (2001), cultural integrity is defined as knowing oneself while honouring Indigenous understanding. Pidgeon (2008) found that Aboriginal students who were deemed successful were those who maintained their cultural integrity by taking pride in their cultural heritage and incorporating their culture into their learning. In the study, the participants shared that students' identity evolved when they were exposed to culturally responsive approaches such as Indigenous culture within their courses and through cultural practices as the exposure to a positive representation of Indigenous people and their culture

elicited a sense of pride and connected their cultural, professional and personal identities. This mirrors the findings from Smith and Varghese (2016) who found that Indigenous post-secondary students were more likely to discover their identity in "a particular place that housed a stable and supportive community of shared tradition and perspectives" (p. 464).

Participants reflected that for some Indigenous students, the opportunities to explore their culture through an Indigenous lens caused cultural dissonance. Brayboy (2004) established that Native American students from rural and remote communities were more likely to experience cultural dissonance because of their secure connections to their culture and community, which were starkly different from the Western epistemology found in mainstream institutions. Although in the study, the students who experienced cultural dissonance were from rural and remote communities, their cultural dissonance stemmed from a contradiction between their previous knowledge and the new information they received about the church's role in colonization. According to the participants, the social support helped these students overcome their cultural dissonance and shape a more fluid and nuanced identity.

Theme 5: Uncovering Holistic Health Effects through the Medicine Wheel

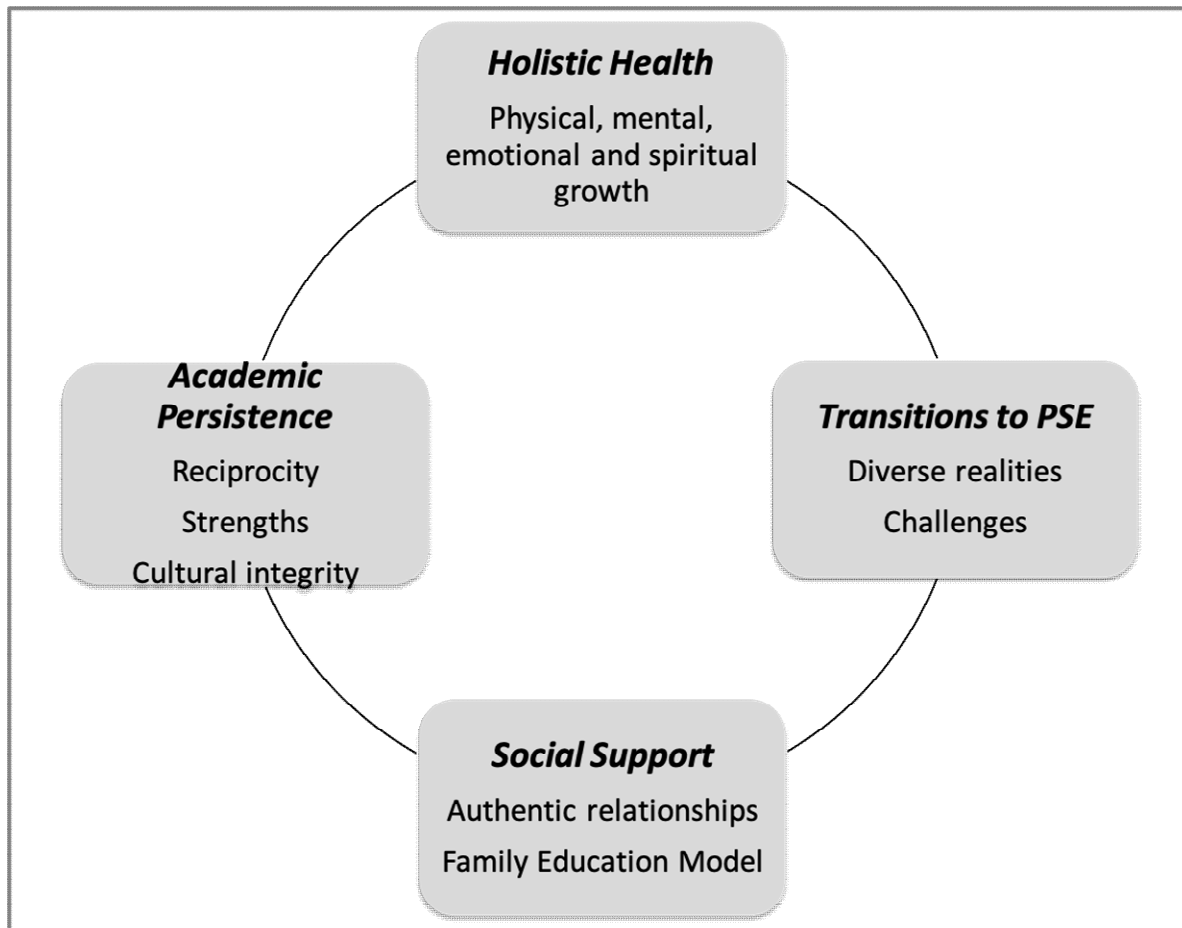


Figure 5.5 Conceptual framework: Social support aligning with academic persistence and health.

The top of the conceptual framework revealed how social support influenced the holistic health of the students. The participants identified that staff and faculty members followed a Medicine Wheel framework to provide social support and uncover the effects on the health of Indigenous students. In Chapter One, health was defined according to the Indigenous worldview and was perceived as a gift from the Creator that required nurturing and caring at a personal, community and spiritual level to maintain balance between the four elements of life: the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual (Howell et al., 2016).

In this study, the Medicine Wheel framework was used to reveal how social support affected Indigenous students' four elements of holistic health: physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. As one staff member elaborated, the Medicine Wheel framework

gives them [students] the realization of working towards a full circle, a complete circle ... [Telling the students] you can do as much as you can and work to your best ability in each quadrant ... and to be aware when something else is happening, it is going to affect the other parts. (STFG1, p.43)

Similar to this finding, Kemppainen, Kopera-Frye, and Woodard (2008) used a version of the Anishinaabek Medicine Wheel with students to “break down complex life situations into small manageable pieces with the goal to understand the situation and live effectively within the understanding” (p. 81). The Medicine Wheel framework used by Keppainen et al. (2008) was used similarly in the study as it was used as a guide for students to reflect on their current struggles and identify strengths rather than accentuate problems and deficits.

Physical element. In the study, the physical element of the Medicine Wheel framework was described as anything associated with the physical body. Primarily, nutrition, sleep, and physical activity were identified as the core components of physical health. Umberson and Karas Montez (2010) found that social support provided information and created a sense of responsibility that led individuals to participate in an exercise, eat nutritious foods, and engage in healthy sleep patterns. Consequently, this was exemplified in the study, where one student participant said she followed the information she received from the university’s public health nurse and incorporated healthy foods into her family’s diet.

According to Uchino (2006), individuals who engage in unhealthy behaviours, such as overeating or excessive drinking, often normalized their activities and encouraged others to participate in similar habits, which are potentially detrimental to those they influenced. There were similar findings revealed in the study as one student participant shared how she started working at a gym because her peers said it was a friendly environment and would motivate her to exercise. Instead, she ended up quitting due to the gossip and negative interactions of her co-workers; her social support harmed her physical health.

The literature also identified that individuals who were lonely and isolated were at an increased risk of experiencing harmful cardiovascular, endocrine and immune events (Uchino, 2004; 2006). A comparison of the study’s findings to this literature could not be completed because the sample groups did not identify Indigenous post-secondary students as being lonely, isolated, or having experienced harmful health events. Instead, the study’s findings corroborated

Hale, Hannum and Espelage's (2005) conclusions, which acknowledged that the relationship between social support and physical health was difficult to determine in a healthy group of college students.

Mental element. Bartlett (2005) and Spector (2002) recognized that the mental element within the Medicine Wheel framework encompassed cognitive functions that include intellectual ability and reasoning skills. Social support encourages curiosity and acts as a stress buffer. Cohen (2004) highlighted that social "support may alleviate the impact of stress by providing a solution to the problem, by reducing the perceived importance of the problem or by providing a distraction from the problem" (p. 678). Within the study, the participants emphasized how staff and faculty members took the time to provide students with emotional and informational support to alleviate the stress associated with personal, social, and familial challenges.

In the study, the social support students received also facilitated behaviours that protected their mental health. For example, one student shared that the social support she received encouraged her to begin meditating, exercising, and eating foods that reduced her stress and helped her avoid depression. This finding was consistent with research by Hefner and Eisenberg (2009), who found that social support was strongly associated with safeguarding against the effects of depression, anxiety, and symptoms of eating disorders.

The opposite held for individuals who did not have adequate social support. In the study, one participant mentioned how she struggled with her mental and physical health because of her lack of social support. She previously identified that she had limited social support and as a result, said, "I have never had to struggle so hard physically and mentally. I went to bed at 6 o'clock this morning and I can't really sleep. ... As well, my studies haven't been the greatest because my mind is not here" (SFG, p. 37). This finding is comparable to the findings of Hefner and Eisenberg (2009), who found that individuals with low-level social support were more likely to experience mental health problems. A further comparison could not be made because there is a gap in the literature comparing the effects of limited social support to specific mental health concerns.

Emotional element. The emotional element of health focused on fostering self-confidence and improving the ability to cope with life's challenges. According to Cohen (2004) and Thoits (2006), social support enhanced individuals' poise and enriched their sense of

purpose. The participants in the study revealed that emotional, informational, and instrumental support was essential to nurturing students' abilities to function and meet demands. As one staff member alluded, she used emotional support to seek feedback from students and provided informational and instrumental support to meet the students' mental and physical needs. She said,

looking at personal support, I think that has been a big thing with my job in the past year, trying to provide the appropriate supports for these students and questioning them in terms of what they need and what they think they need. I provide academic seminars, but the students are asking for more specific things like time management and stress relief practices, which are very real issues for students. (STGF1, p. 22)

Subsequently, exposure to different types of social support helped Indigenous students strengthen their emotional element and influenced their mental and physical elements. This finding supported the research conducted by Thoits (2006), who concluded that social support improved personal control, which benefitted mental and physical health.

Spiritual element. Spirituality varies for Indigenous people and may include elements of Christianity, organized religion and Indigenous spiritual practices. The Indigenous worldview of spirituality is often based on experiences of self-reflection and dependent on cultural beliefs, life experience and personal values; spirituality offers a sense of interconnectedness with oneself, with others and with the unseen (Berry, 1999). There is a gap in the literature connecting social support to spirituality. Although Alorani and Alradaydeh (2017) found a positive relationship between social support and spirituality in international post-secondary students, no literature was identified that demonstrated a relationship between social support and the spirituality of Indigenous post-secondary students.

Within the study, the participants acknowledged that social support offered opportunities for Indigenous students to strengthen their spirituality. Notably, they shared how Indigenous students were provided with opportunities to participate in traditional ceremonies such as pipe ceremonies, sweat lodges, and moon ceremonies and to converse with Elders. These traditional ceremonies provided students with the opportunity to enrich their spirituality. That connection was evident for one student, who said,

I was always a spiritual person before, but I didn't really have the right connection to whatever I wanted to do and so since starting here at First Nations University, attending ceremonies and doing smudging, it's like exactly where I want to be in my life. (SFG, p.35)

Consequently, from the perception of the participants, social support had a positive influence on spirituality for Indigenous post-secondary students.

In summary, the participants noticed that social support delivered through the Medicine Wheel framework, for the most part, highlighted students' strengths and had a positive impact on the students' four elements: physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. This finding coincided with Howell et al. (2016) who found that urban Aboriginal adults who had social support engaged in behaviours that led to wellness in body, mind, and spirit.

Revisiting the Conceptual Framework

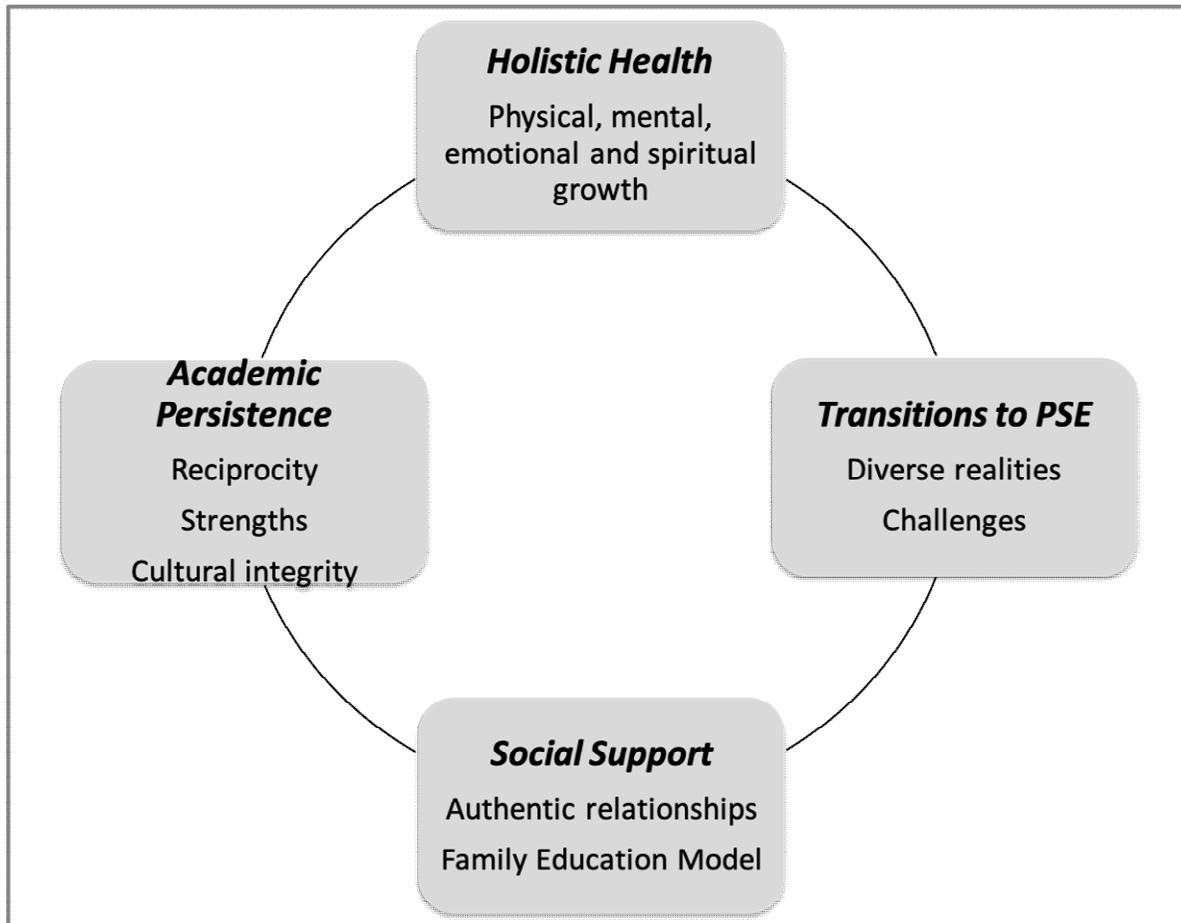


Figure 5.6 Conceptual framework: Social support aligning with academic persistence and health.

The study confirms the conceptual framework, as discussed in Chapter Two. Indigenous students enter PSE with different life experiences and many experience challenges that stem from personal academic struggles, generational effects of colonization, family composition, socio-economic insufficiencies, geographic location, and cultural values and beliefs. When Indigenous students enter PSE, they typically must overcome their challenges, and in order to do so successfully, specific criteria were necessary. First, social support needed to be available to them. In the study, peers, families, communities, and the staff and faculty members at the Northern campus were identified as providing social support to Indigenous students. It was also perceived that through the delivery of social support, authentic relationships were created between Indigenous students, and faculty and staff members. As indicated in the FEM by

HeavyRunner and DeCelles (2002), familial type relationships were foundational to how social support was delivered to Indigenous students. Authentic relationships created through displaying genuine interest, building trust, crafting a supportive environment, and establishing connections created a sense of belonging and sense of place for Indigenous students. The resulting academic persistence represented more than achieving academic goals. It identified Indigenous post-secondary students as motivated to reciprocate their new knowledge and skills with their families and the larger Indigenous nations, share their gifts based on their goals, values and strengths and shape and grow their cultural, professional and personal identities. Subsequently, social support also influenced students holistically and led to physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual growth.

Conclusions

From this study of social support and its effect on the academic persistence and health of Indigenous students, my interpretation of the findings and their relationship to the literature revealed four broad conclusions. These four conclusions relate to the collective challenges of Indigenous students, the impact of culturally responsive approaches, the elaboration of the FEM in the case study, and the connection between academic persistence and the development of self and community. These are elaborated below.

Conclusion 1

Data and findings from this research delineate Indigenous students in this institution as a heterogeneous population, who nevertheless shared collective challenges. The population of Indigenous students at Northern campus claimed membership in a variety of Indigenous groups. There were First Nations students who came from several different tribal affiliations such as Cree, Dene, Sauteaux, and Dakota and students of Métis descent. No self-identified Inuit students attended the Northern campus at the time of the study. The data did not allow me to identify the specific challenges affecting different Indigenous cultural and linguistic groups. It was evident that within this context, challenges typically affected the majority of Indigenous students. A conclusion to be drawn from this finding is that although there is heterogeneity among Indigenous students, they can face many similar challenges. It is not to say that there is a universal acceptance that all Indigenous students experienced all challenges, but rather indicates that challenges affect a substantial portion of Indigenous students.

The data also reveals that the challenges faced by Indigenous students stemmed from personal struggles, familial differences, social obstacles and structural inadequacies and resulted from the reality of a colonial present. In this regard, it can be concluded that the continued colonial present creates situations where Indigenous students are displaced and confronted with personal, familial, and social insufficiencies that impact their educational experiences. Consequently, FNUniv, Northern campus, has positioned itself to respond to these realities by providing culturally responsive social support and accentuating an Indigenous presence in PSE. Although the culturally responsive social support met the needs of some Indigenous students, it was ineffective in meeting the holistic needs of students from different Indigenous affiliations. In this regard, it can also be concluded that culturally responsive social support must be expanded to meet the needs of the heterogeneous group of Indigenous students at FNUniv, Northern campus.

Conclusion 2

The data and findings revealed that culturally responsive approaches to PSE had an overwhelmingly positive influence on the Indigenous students, staff, and faculty members at Northern campus. Discussions with participants revealed that culturally responsive approaches were a significant influence and provided the cultural foundation for the mission, curricula, and social support services at the Northern campus. The mission at FNUniv identified a clear expectation to share quality bi-lingual and bi-cultural education to all "Indigenous and non-Indigenous students within a culturally supportive environment" (First Nations University of Canada, n.d.). The curricula were infused with Indigenous history, language, culture, and artistic heritage that supported the use of cultural teaching strategies, which served as vehicles for bridging traditional teaching with conventional academic learning. Indigenous values and beliefs were instilled in social support services, which transformed the environment and connected students, staff, and faculty members to each other. Traditional ceremonies and cultural events such as full moon ceremonies, sweat lodges, and round dances provided students with opportunities to gain guidance and develop their identities as an Indigenous person. It was primarily through these mechanisms that the culturally responsive approach exerted a pervasive influence on the overall campus. A conclusion that can be drawn from this finding confirms that

the use of culturally responsive approaches successfully fosters academic persistence in Indigenous post-secondary students.

Conclusion 3

Most of the participants confirmed that aspects of the FEM contributed to the academic persistence of Indigenous post-secondary students at Northern campus. Through the perceptions of the participants, it appeared that certain features of the FEM were evident within the Northern campus. The first assertion from the FEM identified that educational institutions that replicate the functions traditionally held by family members serve students in a more holistic fashion (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002). At Northern campus, staff and faculty members were engaged in providing family-like support and acting as extended family by showing care and compassion, assisting with securing holistic resources and sharing cultural knowledge and spiritual practices. Faculty and staff members went beyond providing standardized support and formed authentic relationships with students as they helped students academically persist by meeting their holistic needs. Consequently, stressing the importance of family-like interactions and deepening the understanding of authentic relationships. A conclusion to be drawn from this finding is that moving towards a relational family approach by forming authentic relationships with Indigenous students is likely to support academic persistence.

The second assertion from the FEM involved the incorporation of culture into the students' academic life as a means of supporting academic persistence (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002). At the Northern campus, traditional knowledge and cultural activities and practices were incorporated throughout the campus environment, which provided an opportunity for students to connect with their culture and integrate it into their learning as a support for their academic persistence. The last assertion of FEM included the involvement of the family and extended family to strengthen the overall support for students (HeavyRunner & DeCelles, 2002). Staff and faculty members acted as extended family members, while students' families were welcomed at Northern campus, and their interactions provided opportunities to build connections between family, staff, and faculty members so they could form a web of support for the student to academically persist. A related conclusion to these findings is that FEM can be used as an intervention approach to promote the use of culturally responsive approaches at FNUniv, Northern campus. The FEM as an intervention approach would provide meaning and direction to

the delivery of culturally responsive social support. Using FEM's five essential components: assessment, commitment, collaboration, communication and evaluation to offer culturally responsive social support would help meet Indigenous students' holistic needs that not traditionally met by mainstream services, address the lack of family support received by some Indigenous students, and integrate faculty and staff members as extended family to support academic persistence in Indigenous students (HeavyRunner and DeCelles, 2002; Mainor, 2001).

Conclusion 4

Social support affected more than intellectual benchmarks in Indigenous students at the Northern campus. Academic persistence for the participants in this study went beyond meeting academic goals and was viewed with the student improving holistically and contributing to their families and the broader Indigenous community. Concerning academic persistence, participants discussed how social support helped build resilience through goal setting and focusing on students' strengths, shaped their identity and holistic health and created motivation to reciprocate learning with the larger Indigenous community. It was evident that the participants recognized a deeper connection between social support, academic persistence, and the effect of PSE on a broader societal scale. The primary conclusion that can be drawn is that culturally responsive social support influenced more than Indigenous students' academic abilities. For many Indigenous students, culturally responsive social support is a crucial factor in individual success and to the future of the Indigenous nation. To maintain relevancy, cultural responsiveness must evolve towards being culturally sustaining by “perpetuating and fostering – to sustain – linguistic, literate and cultural pluralism” within the educational context (Paris & Alim, 2014, p. 88). Consequently, educational leaders, faculty and staff members need to acknowledge that culture is dynamic and portray a fluidity between past and contemporary Indigenous cultural contexts to further support individual and nation success.

In summary, my analysis of participants' comments concerning the effects social support had on the academic persistence and health of Indigenous students revealed that: collectively Indigenous students experienced different challenges when they enter PSE; a culturally responsive approach that incorporated assertions of the FEM significantly influenced the educational environment and delivery of social support; and social support for Indigenous

students extended beyond individualistic benefits and encompassed rebuilding Indigenous families and nations.

Summary

This chapter analyses the multifaceted relationships between social support and Indigenous post-secondary students while attending the Indigenous affiliated institution, FNUniv, Northern campus. The discussion revealed various challenges that many Indigenous students encounter and offered an explanation as to whom Indigenous students rely on to address their challenges, what social support is needed, and how social support affected students' academic persistence and health.

The goal of the interpretation was to produce a holistic and integrated synthesis. The challenges throughout the data gathering and analysis were to understand the large amount of data, organize it into meaningful categories based on the research questions and then delve deeper to identify the lessons learned from the study. The interpretation of this intrinsic case study brought forth context-dependent knowledge pertinent to Indigenous post-secondary students attending an Indigenous affiliated institution in North central Saskatchewan during the time of the study and highlighted ways in which a culturally responsive approach at an Indigenous-affiliated institution contributed to the academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students.

CHAPTER SIX

Implications, Recommendations, and Final Thoughts

As addressed in the last chapter, social support enhanced the academic persistence and health of Indigenous students at the case site. The data suggested that culturally responsive social support helped balance students' health and acted as a motivator to build resilience and individual identity. The following elaborates on the potential implications of the findings as they relate to policy, practice, and theory and presents recommendations for future research, and closing thoughts.

Implications for Policy and Practice

A review of the literature in Chapter Two revealed that social support positively contributed to the academic persistence and health of Indigenous students at mainstream post-secondary institutions. However, there was limited literature that provided evidence about how social support affected the academic persistence and health of Indigenous students at an Indigenous-affiliated post-secondary institution. The findings of this study are significant in that they provide robust evidence about how an Indigenous-affiliated institution engaged with culturally responsive social support and used them purposefully to improve academic persistence and health among Indigenous post-secondary students. Accordingly, these findings contain implications for policy and practice.

The first theme emerging from this study is that, collectively, Indigenous post-secondary students experience personal, familial, social, and institutional challenges while attending a culturally responsive Indigenous-affiliated institution. In this case study, the participants' understanding of the challenges revealed that Indigenous students come with radically different experiences from "typical" PSE students, and many are faced with a multitude of challenges, some of which arise from intergenerational effects of colonization requiring additional support resources and services. As previously indicated, these findings supported the existing literature

however the interconnection between these challenges arose as a new insight from this study. As such some Indigenous students, who experienced one challenge, often experienced a ripple effect of other challenges when attending post-secondary education, consequently intensifying their need for social support.

These findings inform the argument for the need for more significant investment in Indigenous PSE to close the PSE gap and improve the social and economic outcomes for Indigenous people. As indicated in Chapter One, Indigenous people with PSE reap many social and economic benefits, including monetary profits, improved job satisfaction, and gaining the tools to support self-determination (Assembly of First Nations, 2010; Begay, 2016; Cornell & Kalt, 1998; Howe, 2011). Accordingly, the implications for policy lies with the federal and provincial governments who need to enhance funding so all post-secondary institutions can offer ongoing, culturally responsive services and resources to address the unique and persistent challenges of Indigenous students. As in the case of FNUniv, the federal and provincial governments provide core funding, but from these research findings, the institute continues to struggle to provide all the necessary culturally responsive services to support its students to persist academically. Conceivably, a more equitable funding structure could enable consistent funding for on-campus daycare, updated infrastructure, and additional culturally responsive resources and programs that would subsequently address many of the challenges faced by Indigenous students at FNUniv, Northern campus.

The Canadian government must also accept responsibility to provide funding for the education of Indigenous people. As previously identified, there are inequities within the present funding system and a backlog of eligible Indigenous post-secondary students. Consequently, a change to the present funding system is required to be able to support past and present Indigenous post-secondary students to enrol and persist in undergraduate programs. Institutional leadership, from Indigenous and non-Indigenous institutions, must also continue to form strategic partnerships with governments to ensure sufficient funding is received. If the federal government is serious about meeting the TRC (2015b) Calls to Actions, adequate financial support for Indigenous PSE is urgently needed to help close the PSE gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians.

The second theme addressed who provided social support to Indigenous post-secondary students attending the case institution. The participants shared a common understanding that peers, families, communities, and staff and faculty members provided emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal social support. These findings support the literature that identified comparable types of social support available to Indigenous students in other post-secondary institutions. However culturally responsive social support was distinctive to the case institution. The study's findings on culturally responsive social support was an innovative insight and contributes to the literature on supporting Indigenous students who are experiencing intergenerational effects of colonization and ongoing marginalization.

Consequently, this finding can inform Indigenization discourses within mainstream institutions. As mainstream institutions consider their roles in Indigenization, this research can help identify why a culturally responsive approach better serves to address and mediate the generational effects of colonization. Deliberate discussions centered on this recognition are also necessary to bring to light the issue of parity paradox that is associated with the credibility of the case institution. There is a strong need for mainstream institutions to recognize the value of Indigenous-affiliated institutions and their culturally responsive approaches, so they can make appropriate adaptations in academic strategies and student services to better serve their Indigenous post-secondary students.

Mainstream institutions need to be informed about the benefits of culturally responsive post-secondary education. Consequently, FNUniv should share their data about their expenditures concerning student outcomes. Traditional measures of academic success (persistence and graduation rates) would demonstrate the fiscal effects. Still, it would also be necessary to share the stories behind the numbers to accentuate the personal impact of culturally responsive education. Mainstream institutions should evolve their relationships with Indigenous communities by working together to develop standards for culturally responsive post-secondary education. Consequently, the standards would identify the mutually agreed-upon expectations and guide the implementation of culturally responsive education that could extend to all levels within the institution and Indigenous community. Finally, mainstream institutions should be encouraged to be proactive in supporting culturally responsive education and developing certification programs for their employees, that focus on the understanding and integration of

cultural foundations, the extended family, and Indigenous pedagogy within all interactions with Indigenous students.

The third theme suggests that the creation of authentic relationships played a pivotal role in the delivery of social support that the students in the case institute valued so highly, and to which they attributed much of their academic success. The characteristics that enhanced authentic relationships included displaying a genuine interest, building trust, crafting a supportive environment, and establishing connections. These characteristics aligned with existing findings of Embleton (2012), Hampton and Roy (2002), and Jackson et al. (2003) and added a new insight into the need to share Indigenous knowledge, interact with Elders and bond with Indigenous-centered values as a means to connect and form authentic relationships with Indigenous students.

At the case institution, the authentic relationships between Indigenous students and faculty and staff members were much more profound and required building trust and holistic connections, which required significantly more effort by faculty and staff members to meet students' needs. Because of the amount of time and effort needed, mainstream staff and faculty members may not see the value in forming authentic relationships, which can subsequently impact student's academic persistence.

Institutional leadership wishing to encourage academic persistence among Indigenous students, need to consider if the process of forming authentic relationships with Indigenous students is similar to the process of building research relationships with Indigenous communities. As indicated in the data, staff and faculty members went beyond their traditional academic roles to assume a family-like relationship with Indigenous students. Similar means are necessary to establish a research relationship with an Indigenous community. According to TCPS2 (2018), researchers are required to build mutual trust through collaboration and community engagement, which requires learning about the community and its customs and codes, establishing partnerships, and encouraging participation. As mainstream institutions begin to acknowledge the process of developing research relationships with Indigenous communities, different ways for evaluating faculty performance will need to be found that include recognition of the substantial effort that some staff and faculty members extend to connect with Indigenous students.

Furthermore, once institutions establish an evaluative process, staff and faculty members will be more aware of the significance of authentic relationships with Indigenous students. The opportunity to be rewarded for the behaviour may motivate some staff and faculty members to form family-like relationships with Indigenous students. Building authentic relationships with Indigenous students requires all staff and faculty members to understand the generational impacts of colonization, integrate Indigenous knowledge and the correct portrayal of Indigenous people, encourage cooperation and become acquainted and engaged with Indigenous students. Staff and faculty members have a responsibility to be able to accept, incorporate, and improve their knowledge to support their Indigenous students (Paquette & Fallon, 2014).

The findings from the fourth theme indicate a connection between Indigenous students' persistence and the broader success of the Indigenous community. It is evident from this study that Indigenous students face many challenges. Still, with authentic relationships and culturally responsive social support, they were motivated to better themselves, their families and their communities and contribute towards building nations. The consideration for policy is to note structures that promote academic persistence in Indigenous students. In the context of this study, policies could be developed to expand the traditional meaning of academic persistence and enhance the culturally responsive support available to Indigenous students. Governments, institutional leaders, staff, and faculty members wishing to encourage the use of culturally responsive social support need to recognize champion institutions such as FNUniv, Northern campus, as a shining example of how to support Indigenous students for balanced academic persistence and health. Subsequently, acknowledgment and sustained investment in FNUniv would open opportunities for other institutions to work with and learn from FNUniv to better serve Indigenous post-secondary students across a range of institutions.

The fifth theme explores the effects social support had on the health of Indigenous post-secondary students. The evidence indicates that when culturally responsive social support is delivered through a Medicine Wheel framework, it positively impacts the holistic health of Indigenous students, including physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual elements. Although the majority of the health outcomes were supported by the existing literature, the findings extended the literature pertaining to the outcomes on spiritual health. The findings supported the positive

relationship between social support and spirituality and revealed that culturally responsive social support fostered spiritual growth in some Indigenous students.

In the study, the Medicine Wheel framework was a catalyst for implementing culturally responsive social support at the case institution. In the context of practice, staff and faculty members wanting to use a Medicine Wheel framework to deliver social support must gain Indigenous knowledge and understand the interconnectedness associated with Medicine Wheel, which may include spending time learning from Elders and working with others to create common student-centred goals.

Implications for Theory

This descriptive, interpretive qualitative intrinsic case study was an investigation to understand how social support affects the academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students at FNUiv, Northern campus, which is an Indigenous-affiliated post-secondary institution. The case for this study was purposefully selected and consisted of the following subjects and analytical frame: Indigenous post-secondary students at FNUiv, Northern campus and the effects social support had on students' academic persistence and health. An intrinsic case study was used to understand the case from the participants' personal experiences and to recognize the complexities and trends to gain a better understanding of how and why things happen (Stake, 2005). This method proved to be successful in that I gained concrete, context-dependent knowledge regarding how social support, particularly culturally responsive social support, affected the academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students who attended an Indigenous-affiliated institution.

The constructivist paradigm guided every aspect of this study and was deemed an appropriate theoretical paradigm. The qualitative design and case study approach valued the multiple perspectives of the participants; the data *making* methods allowed the making of various perspectives of the participants' understandings and data analysis and synthesis supported the co-construction of themes and findings. Consequently, the participants came to the study from a multitude of experiences, and we worked together to construct a number of subjective meanings of their experiences. The findings are not intended to be generalizable, but rather provide insight into how social support affected the academic persistence and health of a group of Indigenous

students at FNUniv, Northern campus at a specific time. The findings are provided so the reader can learn from the case and draw his/her conclusions, as these may be applied to other contexts.

HeavyRunner and DeCelles' (2002) FEM provided a conceptual model for this case study. Accordingly, the findings confirmed that culturally responsive supports, family, and staff and faculty members played a vital role in supporting the academic persistence of Indigenous post-secondary students at the case institution. Given the population of Indigenous students attending PSE, these findings underscore the importance of further understanding how culturally responsive supports, family and notions of kinship can be integrated into mainstream institutions to support Indigenous students to persist academically.

It was also evident that using a culturally responsive approach to social support also supported academic persistence in Indigenous post-secondary students at the Northern campus. These findings pointed to the tremendous importance of culturally responsive approaches, especially for those centred on Indigenous culture, values, and beliefs. The findings also indicate that it may not be enough to intervene with only conventional student services. Specific attention must be given to understanding the dynamics of Indigenous culturally responsive approaches and then in the development of appropriate services for all Indigenous post-secondary students.

Considerations for Future Study

This study aimed to understand how social support affects the academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students at a case institution and the findings, research methodology, and design revealed many possibilities for further investigation.

This study found that culturally responsive social support embedded in Indigenous culture improved the academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students. Although the majority of Canadian universities have Indigenous-specific services, the extent to which Indigenous students are being supported in this capacity is unclear. Consequently, further study on culturally responsive social support is required to determine essential resources and best practices for supporting Indigenous post-secondary students.

This study revealed that families provided social support, which in turn affected the academic persistence and health of Indigenous students. Although this study revealed the role of students' families at the case institution, further investigation is needed to determine how families are engaged in mainstream institutions to support Indigenous students to persist

academically. This research should be undertaken to uncover similarities and differences in perspectives.

The formation of authentic relationships was proposed to be foundational to social support for Indigenous students. If post-secondary institutions want to support Indigenous students academically, there needs to be a new understanding of what constitutes an authentic relationship with Indigenous students. Consequently, further investigation into understanding the process of creating these relationships should be undertaken.

This study discovered the need to understand academic persistence as it relates to Indigenous post-secondary students. Because the findings from this study identified that the notion of academic persistence for Indigenous post-secondary students was different from the traditional definition, there would be significant value in completing a study that would examine the meaning of academic persistence in a larger group of Indigenous students and to compare and contrast the findings between the different Indigenous student groups such as with specific First Nation affiliation or rural versus urban, or male versus female Indigenous students.

This research was conducted through a Western research paradigm, and although I attempted to integrate Indigenous teachings, protocols and practices in a respectful, ethical, and beneficial manner, further investigation using an Indigenous methodology would ensure the research process involved “ethically correct and culturally appropriate ... acquisition and dissemination of knowledge about Indigenous peoples” (Porsanger, 2004, p. 109). The Western research paradigm of constructivism followed the assumption that there are multiple realities based on individual meanings (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). However, Indigenous methodologies fit better with Indigenous peoples' beliefs, and values and consequently, contributions from Indigenous methodologies are more easily integrated into the lives of Indigenous peoples because they meet their interests and needs (Crazy Bull, 1997).

An intrinsic case study was used to gain understanding into the effects of social support on the academic persistence and health of post-secondary students at an Indigenous affiliated institution. The case was used to look for context-dependent knowledge and gain new insights into the phenomenon (Stake, 2000). Future investigations could replicate this study using different cases. Using a different case such as Indigenous students' families or integrated

programs could lead to a more in-depth exploration of how social support affects the academic persistence and health of Indigenous post-secondary students in other educational institutions.

These recommendations for research were derived from the data, methodology and research design. They are proposed to broaden and deepen the body of knowledge associated with Indigenous PSE. Further contributions will help academic leaders, staff, and faculty members develop innovations in PSE to accommodate Indigenous post-secondary students better.

Final Thoughts

Even before the onset of this journey, I had a personal interest in the health and education of Indigenous people. I have moved towards a more nuanced position and trust that my background and experiences were influential in this study. My cultural knowledge and familiarities offered an opportunity to connect with the data and capture the layers of culturally responsive knowledge through the co-construction of the participants' realities. I realize that the data derived from this study supports the criticality of Indigenous-affiliated institutions still, mainstream institutions must also heed the findings and implement evidence-based social supports to serve the Indigenous student population. Higher PSE completion rates will only result from a combined effort between institutions, staff and faculty members, students, families, and communities working together to help Indigenous students persist academically and to build and strengthen the Indigenous nation. It is only through such respectful and culturally responsive approaches that the PSE gap for Indigenous people can be eliminated.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Invitation Letter

Dear potential participant,

I am a graduate student who is currently working towards a PhD in Educational Administration through the College of Education at the University of Saskatchewan.

You are being invited to participate in a research study about the experiences of Aboriginal post-secondary students. In particular, I am interested in how individual, family and community social supports affect health and academic persistence of Aboriginal post-secondary students.

You will be first asked to participate in a focus group that will take 1.5-2 hours. After the focus groups are completed, you may be asked to participate in an individual interview that will take another hour of your time. All participants will participate in a focus group, but only some will be interviewed individually. Both the focus groups and interview will be conducted in a mutually agreed upon location and will be tape-recorded.

Several steps will be taken to protect your confidentiality. While the focus groups and interviews will be tape-recorded, the tapes will be destroyed once they have been typed up. The typed focus groups and interviews will NOT contain any mention of your name, and any identifying information will be removed. During the focus groups, the researcher will maintain your confidentiality, but because focus groups are group conversations it is difficult to ensure the other participants will maintain your confidentiality. Only my researcher supervisor and myself (sworn to confidentiality) will have access to the focus group and interview transcripts.

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. If you chose to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time for any reason. If you chose to withdraw, your information from your interview will be destroyed, but it may not be possible to remove your contributions from the discussion given that the focus group is a group conversation.

If you would like more information about the study, please call Tania Kristoff at 306-765-3333 ext. 7511 at First Nations University of Canada.

Many thanks,

Tania Kristoff,
Student Investigator
Connecting academic persistence and health in Aboriginal post-secondary students: A study of the social supports

Appendix B: Focus Group Interview Consent Form



✦ **Department of Educational Administration**

28 Campus Drive Saskatoon SK S7N 0X1 Canada
Telephone: (306) 966-7614 Facsimile: (306) 966-7549
email: eadm.enquiries@usask.ca web: education.usask.ca/eadm

Project Title: Connecting health and academic persistence in Aboriginal post-secondary students: A case study of the social supports.

Researcher: Tania Kristoff, graduate student,
Department of Educational Administration,
College of Education, University of Saskatchewan
phone: 306-765-3333 extension 7511
Email: tmb129@mail.usask.ca

Supervisor: Dr. Michael Cottrell
Department of Educational Administration
College of Education, University of Saskatchewan
Phone: 306-966-7690
Email: Michael.cottrell@usask.ca

Purpose of the research: The primary purpose of this interpretive, naturalistic study is to understand how social supports affect the health and academic persistence of Aboriginal post-secondary students.

Procedures: You will be asked to participate in a focus group with up to 6 other participants. The focus group will take approximately one and a half to two hours of your time; will be audio-recorded and will take place at a mutually agreed upon location. During this focus group you will be asked a series of questions. **These questions are designed to allow you to share your experiences on how social supports affect Aboriginal students' health and academic persistence.**

Potential Risks: There are foreseeable risks and discomforts associated with this study. The foreseeable risks include the potential for the breach in confidentiality by participants in the focus group. The researcher will undertake to safeguard the confidentiality of the discussion, but cannot guarantee that other participants of the focus group will do so. Please respect the confidentiality of the other participants of the group by not disclosing the contents of the discussion outside the focus group, and be aware that others may not respect your confidentiality. The foreseeable discomforts include anxiety, despair or guilty feelings resulting from the disclosure of sensitive or embarrassing information. If these feeling arise and you require further support, student success services can be contacted at 306-765-3333 ext. 7501 to arrange for counseling and Elders' support or by contacting employee counseling services through Manulife at 1-888-384-1152.

Potential Benefits: There are possible benefits of the study to both the participants and to others. There is an opportunity for undergraduate students to be research participants and gain hands-on

knowledge of the data gathering and analysis process associated with qualitative research. The participants in the study will be providing a service by contributing to the knowledge of Aboriginal post-secondary education and the discovery of new knowledge may help improve the social welfare, academic persistence and health of Aboriginal post-secondary students. The new insights and understandings deriving from the study may inform other researchers, First Nations communities and post-secondary institutions by providing the information needed to address the social supports limiting academic persistence in Aboriginal post-secondary students. These benefits are not guaranteed.

Confidentiality and anonymity: Your participation in this study is voluntary. The information provided in the focus groups will be kept in strict confidence by the researcher who will ensure not to disclose identifiable information. Because the participants for this research project have been selected from a small group of people, all of whom maybe known to each other, it is possible that you may be identifiable to other people on the basis of what you have said.

The researcher will maintain your confidentiality if you choose to participate in the focus group, but the nature of focus groups does not guarantee other participants will maintain confidentiality. There is possibility participants may disclose the content of the session to others outside of the focus group. Please respect the confidentiality of the other members of the group by not disclosing the contents of this discussion outside the group, and be aware that others may not respect your confidentiality.

The focus groups will be audio recorded. Audiotapes will only be used to transcribe the focus groups.

The data from this study will be reported in my dissertation, published and presented at conferences and presented to the research participants once the research is completed; however your identity will be kept confidential.

The consent forms that include any identifiable information will be stored separately from the transcripts and audio recordings, so that it will not be possible to associate a name with any given set of responses. Your name will not put on the transcripts or audio recordings. The consent forms will be safeguarded and securely stored for a minimum of five years post publication in a separate locked cabinet at the University of Saskatchewan in the office of the Dr. Michael Cottrell, my PhD supervisor. He and I will only have access to them. After five years, post-publication, have lapsed, the participant consent forms will be properly destroyed.

Please put a check mark on the corresponding lines that grants me your permission to:
You can choose all, one or none of them.

I grant permission to participate in the focus groups Yes: __ No: __

I grant permission to be audio taped: Yes: __ No: __

Right to Withdrawal: You are free to decide not to enroll in this study. You can answer only those questions that you are comfortable with. You are free to withdraw from the focus group at any time and that this withdrawal will not affect how you are treated. Please understand that if you withdraw from this study, it may not be possible to remove your contributions from the discussion given that the focus group is a group conversation.

The researcher will solicit participants through flyers and announcements in courses. Students currently enrolled in courses instructed by the researcher can participate in the study. The researcher acknowledges that students may feel coerced to participate in the study. To eliminate these problematic concerns, students currently enrolled in a course instructed by the researcher are able to participate in the study voluntarily and without undue influence on their decision. The student's academic standing or grades will not be affected by their participation decision.

Follow-up: To obtain results for the study, please contact Tania Kristoff at 306-765-3333 ext. 7511 or email tmb129@mail.usask.ca

Questions or concerns: You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate or during the study; please **contact the research supervisor, Dr. Michael Cottrell at (306)-966-7690 or by email Michael.cottrell@usask.ca or the researcher, Tania Kristoff at (306)-765-3333 ext. 7511 or by email tmb129@mail.usask.ca**

This project has been approved on ethical grounds by the UofR Research Ethics Board on February 22, 2016. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to the committee at (585-4775 or research.ethics@uregina.ca). Out of town participants may call collect.

This research project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Board. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Research Ethics Office ethics.office@usask.ca (306) 966-2975. Out of town participants may call toll free (888) 966-2975.

SIGNED CONSENT:

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the description provided; I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my/our questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

Researcher's Signature

Date

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.

Appendix C: Questions for Student Focus Group Interviews

1. Please introduce yourself, program of study and what you like to do when you are not attending classes?
2. When you think about university – what goes through your mind (both positive and negative)?
3. What are some of the personal supports that have affected you at university? Please provide an example of a personal support and how it affected you.
4. What are some of the university supports that have affected you at university? Please provide an example of a university support and how it affected you.
5. What are some of the community supports that have affected you at university? Please provide an example of a community support and how it affected you.
6. Have any of these supports affected your physical, emotional, mental or spiritual health? Please share an example.
7. Out of all the supports that we have mentioned, which one have affected you the most in relation to your health and your university studies?
8. Summarize: Is this an adequate summary of our discussion? Is there anything else anyone would like to add?
9. Concluding remarks

Appendix D: Questions for Staff and Faculty Focus Group Interviews

1. Identify your name and your responsibilities at the university. Also can you identify something you like to do outside of work?
2. From your experiences with students, how do students perceive our university? (both positive and negative)
3. What are some of the personal supports that affect Aboriginal students at Northern campus?
4. What are some of the university supports that affect Aboriginal students at Northern campus?
5. What are some of the community supports that affect Aboriginal students at Northern campus?
6. How do these supports affect the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health of Aboriginal students at Northern campus?
7. Out of all the supports that have been mentioned, which ones affect Aboriginal students the most in relation to holistic health and academic persistence?
8. Summarize - Is this an adequate summary of our discussion? Is there anything else anyone would like to add?
9. Concluding remarks

Appendix E: Consent Form for Interview



Department of Educational Administration

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Telephone: (306) 966-7614 Facsimile: (306) 966-7549

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Project Title: Connecting health and academic persistence in Aboriginal post-secondary students: A case study of the social supports.

Researcher: Tania Kristoff, graduate student,
Department of Educational Administration,
College of Education, University of Saskatchewan
phone: 306-765-3333 extension 7511
Email: tmb129@mail.usask.ca

Supervisor: Dr. Michael Cottrell
Department of Educational Administration
College of Education, University of Saskatchewan
Phone: 306-966-7690
Email: Michael.cottrell@usask.ca

Purpose of the research: The primary purpose of this interpretive, naturalistic study is to understand how the social supports affect the health and academic persistence of Aboriginal post-secondary students.

Procedures: You will be asked to participate in an interview with the researcher. The interview will take approximately 90 minutes of your time; will be audio-recorded and will take place at a mutually agreed upon time and location. During this interview you will be asked a series of questions. These questions are designed to allow you to share your experiences on how social supports affect the health and academic persistence of Aboriginal post-secondary students.

Potential Risks: There are foreseeable risks and discomforts associated with this study. The foreseeable risks include the potential for the breach in confidentiality. Because the participants for this research project have been selected from a small group of people, all of whom maybe known to each other, it is possible that you may be identifiable to other people on the basis of what you have said. The researcher will undertake to safeguard the confidentiality of the discussion by limiting the length of quotes used in the final report.

The foreseeable discomforts include anxiety, despair or guilty feelings resulting from the disclosure of sensitive or embarrassing information. If these feeling arise and you require further support, personal counseling services can be accessed by contacting employee counseling services through Manulife at 1-888-384-1152 or by contacting student success services can be contacted at 306-765-3333 ext. 7501 to arrange for counseling and Elders' support.

Potential Benefits: There are possible benefits of the study to both the participants and to others. There is an opportunity for undergraduate students to be research participants and gain hands-on knowledge of the data gathering and analysis process associated with qualitative research. The participants in the study will be providing a service by contributing to the knowledge of Aboriginal post-secondary education and the discovery of new knowledge may help improve the social welfare, academic persistence and health of the participants. The new insights and understandings deriving from the study may inform other researchers, First Nations communities and post-secondary institutions by providing the information needed to address the social supports limiting academic persistence in Aboriginal post-secondary students. These benefits are not guaranteed.

Confidentiality and anonymity: Your participation in this study is voluntary. The information provided in the interview will be kept in strict confidence and the researcher will ensure not to disclose identifiable information.

The interview will be audio recorded. You may request the audio recorded to be turned off at any time during the interview. Audiotapes will only be used to transcribe the interview. After the interview, and prior to data being included in the final report, you will be given the opportunity to review the interview transcript to add, alter or delete information as you deem fit.

The data from this study will be reported in my dissertation, published and presented at conferences and presented to the research participants once the research is complete; however your identity will be kept confidential.

The transcripts and research results will be password protected and coded with no identified information. The audiotapes, transcripts and research results will be safeguarded and securely stored for a minimum of five years post publication in a locked cabinet at the University of Saskatchewan in the office of the Dr. Michael Cottrell, my PhD supervisor. He and I will only have access to them. After five years, post-publication, have lapsed, the audiotapes and interview transcripts will be properly destroyed.

The consent forms that include any identifiable information will be stored separately from the transcripts and audio recordings, so that it will not be possible to associate a name with any given set of responses. Your name will not put on the transcripts or audio recordings. The consent forms will be safeguarded and securely stored for a minimum of five years post publication in a separate locked cabinet at the University of Saskatchewan in the office of the Dr. Michael Cottrell, my PhD supervisor. He and I will only have access to them. After five years, post-publication, have lapsed, the participant consent forms will be properly destroyed.

Please put a check mark on the corresponding lines that grants me your permission to: You can choose all, one or none of them.

I grant permission to participate in an interview Yes: ___ No: ___

I grant permission to be audio taped: Yes:___ No:___

Right to Withdrawal: You are free to decide not to enroll in this study. You can answer only those questions that you are comfortable with. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time. Interview participants who withdraw from the study before the identification of preliminary findings will have their associated data deleted and destroyed. It may not be possible to remove the participant's contributions after the preliminary findings have been identified because the preliminary findings may reveal data from the participant's interview.

The researcher will solicit participants through flyers and announcements in courses. Students currently enrolled in courses instructed by the researcher can participate in the study. The researcher acknowledges that students may feel coerced to participate in the study. To eliminate these problematic concerns, students currently enrolled in a course instructed by the researcher are able to participate in the study voluntarily and without undue influence on their decision. The student's academic standing or grades will not be affected by their participation decision.

Follow-up: To obtain results for the study, please contact Tania Kristoff at 306-765-3333 ext. 7511 or email tmb129@mail.usask.ca

Questions or concerns: You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate or during the study; please contact the researcher, Tania Kristoff (306)-765-3333 ext. 7511 or email tmb129@mail.usask.ca

This project has been approved on ethical grounds by the UofR Research Ethics Board on February 22, 2016. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to the committee at (585-4775 or research.ethics@uregina.ca). Out of town participants may call collect.

This research project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Board. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Research Ethics Office ethics.office@usask.ca (306) 966-2975. Out of town participants may call toll free (888) 966-2975.

SIGNED CONSENT:

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the description provided; I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my/our questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

Name of Participant *Signature* *Date*

Researcher's Signature *Date*

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher

Appendix F: Questions for Face-to-Face Interviews

Through the focus group interviews it was evident Aboriginal students who attend FNUUniv, Northern campus are heterogeneous:

- Aboriginal groups (Cree, Dene, Métis, Dakota) with different traditional and cultural knowledge and practices
 - Family units (singles, single parents; married/partnered)
 - Variety of ages (ranging from 18 years to over 40 years)
 - different stories
1. Do you believe the provided social support is directed towards the academic and health needs of a homogenous group of Aboriginal students? (female, single parent, Cree ancestry – disrespecting complexity)
 2. How does the social support provided by FNUUniv, Northern campus meet the academic and health needs of the heterogeneous group of Aboriginal students?
 3. What social supports are needed to address the needs of heterogeneous Aboriginal students?

From the focus group interviews it was evident there were some social support not available to the Aboriginal student attending FNUUniv, Northern campus for example Northern campus does not have a daycare, it has limited class offering, video conferencing inconsistencies, and inadequate physical space.

1. Why are these inconsistencies present at Northern campus?
2. How does being an Aboriginal institution contribute to these inconsistencies?

From the focus group interviews there were indications, some participants felt FNUUniv, Northern campus was less academically challenging or easier than U of R and U of S programs.

1. What are the tensions that exist relevant to academic standards?
2. How do we maintain the commitment to continuous improvement in academic outcomes while maintaining cultural values?

Appendix G: Transcript Release Form

Title: Connecting health and academic persistence in Aboriginal post-secondary students: A case study of the social supports

I, _____, have reviewed the complete transcript of my personal interview in this study, and have been provided with the opportunity to add, alter, and delete information from the transcript as appropriate. I acknowledge that the transcript accurately reflects what I said in my personal interview with Tania Kristoff. I hereby authorize the release of this transcript to Tania Kristoff to be used in the manner described in the Consent Form. I have received a copy of this Data/Transcript Release Form for my own records.

Name of Participant

Date

Signature of Participant

Signature of researcher